A Light in the Fog
by turtle_wexler

Summary

The last thing Severus can remember is overhearing a prophecy in a dingy, goat-scented pub. Now there’s a James Potter clone with Lily’s eyes, a much aged Minerva McGonagall, and an infuriatingly familiar woman with wild hair all saying he is not a loyal Death Eater. Looking in a mirror proves that he is, indeed, suddenly pushing fifty. All in all, not his best day.
There was a time when Harry wouldn't have been surprised to hear Severus Snape declare himself to be the next Dark Lord. He would have felt vindicated—would have taken every syllable as the absolute truth. Now, Harry chuckled to himself as he listened to Snape lob threats at the guardian of his private quarters. The portrait in question was a snake named Sophia who spoke English, French, and Mermish, but not a word of Parseltongue. Having found neither Sophia nor Snape where they should have been, Harry had gone searching for the latter, led by the portraits whose frames Sophia had slithered through in her pursuit of the Potions Master.

"If you don't stop following me, I swear to you that I will become another Dark Lord," Snape said. "I'll start a campaign against stubborn, meddlesome portraits. My followers will call themselves the Canvas Eaters, and you will be their first meal."

Maybe Sophia had used a certain slur for Muggle-borns one too many times. Harry certainly wouldn't start weeping if Snape chose to break out the magical white spirits and do away with the snake. Plus, Snape deserved to get his revenge on reptile-kind after Neville stole his thunder.

Rounding the corner to offer his assistance in portrait destruction, Harry greeted his former professor with a grin. Snape stopped cold and pointed his wand straight at Harry's chest. This was not at all alarming or new; Snape tended to react badly to being taken by surprise. The way Snape didn't lower his wand upon seeing Harry's face… that was new.

"Sir?" Harry said, feeling faintly ridiculous. He hadn't been the man's student for over a decade. It was well past time he started using Snape's first name. Now didn't seem quite the right moment to try it on for size. Not unless Harry wanted to get hexed.

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Snape asked with a scoff. "And… Sir? What are you playing at?"

"What are you talking about? I've always called you sir. Err, almost always. Are you feeling all right?"

The wand didn't move. "Since… What?" Pausing, Snape pressed his free hand to his narrow chest. "I don't feel it anymore."

"Feel what?"

"The Life Debt." Snape leaned closer. "Oh. Are you a relative of James Potter? The resemblance is… but the eyes. Who are you?"

Oh, hell. That couldn't be good. What had happened to him? Snape looked fine. Just as surly and pale as when they'd met for tea the previous month. But speaking of eyes, there was a strange, unsettling light in Snape's. It reminded Harry of that night Snape had confronted Sirius in the Shrieking Shack: all hunger and desperation and malevolence.

"It's me," Harry said. "Harry Potter."

Snape looked blank, as if the name meant nothing to him. Had someone Oblivated him? Surely not. Even after so many years of peace, Snape's instincts were honed to the point of paranoia.

"You know him," Sophia said. "Everyone knows The Boy Who Lived. I don't think you know yourself right now. You're acting very peculiar. Too much time around the Mudblood, no doubt."
Snape didn't snap at the portrait to never say that word. Beyond the slight tightening of his jaw, there was no sign that the slur bothered Snape at all. This, more than anything else, sent chills up Harry's neck. Something was horribly wrong.

As Snape's left hand rose in a familiar gesture to pinch the bridge of his nose, his sleeve drooped down to his elbow. Staring at the faded grey Dark Mark with wide eyes, Snape gasped.

"What has happened?" Snape asked.

"The Dark Lord is dead, you silly boy," Sophia said. "And good riddance. Never did like him. All the finesse of a bludger."

"It's true, sir," Harry said when Snape looked as though he didn't believe it. "Not about the finesse—although, yeah, Sophia has a point. I meant it's true that he's dead. It happened years ago."

Finally, Snape's wand moved. It wasn't the relief it should have been; he aimed it at Harry's temple.

"Legilimens!"

Harry didn't resist. He could, now. He still wasn't great, but he did pass Auror training. Letting Snape see the truth of his claims seemed like the best option. It had absolutely nothing to do with instinctive panic at feeling Snape in his mind for the first time since his fifth year. Nothing at all.

The first memory Snape found was one from a few days before: Ginny holding Albus on her hip. Snape lingered there until Ginny turned around and looked up at Harry with her warm brown eyes. Her hand rested on her rounded belly. Harry felt Snape pulling back and almost flicking the memory aside until Hermione chased James into it, laughing and tickling him as they both collapsed on the daisy-spotted grass. Focusing on Hermione, Snape chased down other memories of her. They flipped past so quickly, Harry wasn't sure he had the ability to redirect Snape to the more relevant Voldemort-based memories.

He saw Hermione tearing up and smiling so, so wide when she'd held James for the first time. That led to her crying over Crookshanks's death, which led to Crookshanks protecting Sirius, which led to Snape protecting Harry and his friends from Remus. Snape paused there, black eyes boring into Harry's, before moving on to a memory of Snape and Hermione reading quietly together at an Order reunion while others zipped around in a pick-up Quidditch game. Then Harry was beneath the blue skies of his wedding day. Hermione whirled around the dance floor with George, and—

Yanking away from Harry's mind, Snape stumbled back. Blood dripped from his nose as he collapsed to the ground. Harry started to approach, wand drawn, but stopped at the sound of familiar, sensible boots clicking towards him.

"Severus?" Hermione said, kneeling next to Snape. "Are you okay?"

Snape blinked up at her.

"He's gone barmy," Sophia said.

Hermione ignored this. Leaning closer, she brushed the long, lank hair out of Snape's face and looked into his eyes. To Harry's complete astonishment, Snape blushed. Harry filed that under things to think about at a later date. Preferably when he was drunk.

"What happened?" Hermione asked.
"I hardly know," Snape said. He squinted at her, looking more confused than ever. "I know you."

"Of course you know me." Fluttering worriedly around him, Hermione cast a barrage of diagnostic spells. "I'm going to call Poppy."

She'd improved since their DA days. Harry had received plenty of messages via Patronus from Hermione over the years, but it had been ages since he'd seen her cast the charm in person. The otter flowed effortlessly from her wand and swam through the air towards the Hospital Wing. It was a bizarre thing to notice, given the circumstances, but Harry would take silver linings where he could find them. Hermione having more happy memories was definitely a silver lining.

"Hermione," Harry whispered, tugging at her sleeve. "He thought I was my dad."

"What?"

Harry ran a hand through his messy hair. "He didn't seem to realise the war was over, either."

Hermione looked as if all of those happy memories had just vanished. "Severus," she said, her voice quivering. "What year is it?"

Harry recognised the sneer that transformed Snape's face. He'd been on the receiving end of it often enough in his school days, whenever Snape had thought Harry was being particularly thick. So basically every day, then.

"1980," Snape said.

Harry groaned. "Oh, hell."

The Healer had something green stuck between her front teeth. Parsley? Spinach? Severus was so distracted by it, he nearly missed her ridiculous diagnosis.

"Well, it's not a curse," the Healer said. Her voice rose to the sing-song, high-pitched sort of tone that imbeciles used when speaking to toddlers. "I think we had an accident while brewing something with Ashwinder eggs, didn't we?"

A potions accident. The incompetent woman was claiming he'd had a potions accident? The last time he'd so much as melted a cauldron was when he'd crafted his first experimental potion during his first year at Hogwarts.

"I beg your pardon?" Severus said.

"Are you certain?" Hermione asked. "That seems… unlikely."

Hermione. Severus knew her name now. The James Potter lookalike—Harry—had said it. And it had been in some of those memories. The name didn't seem right for her. It was like a potion that needed a few more stirs or a dash of fluxweed or something he couldn't quite pin down.

Severus remembered her, this Hermione who shouldn't have been called Hermione. No details or even what her face looked like, but she felt familiar. When she'd approached him back at Hogwarts, he'd felt a tug in his abdomen, like a Portkey aimed at a person instead of a place. He knew that feeling well enough. Severus was intimately acquainted with the pull of a Life Debt.

He couldn't yet untangle the emotions he'd felt in Potter's memories. Hatred and love, admiration and disdain. Some belonged to Potter, some belonged to Severus. He didn't know which was
which. It hurt his head to think about it too much. The last thing he remembered that made any
sense was being chucked out of the Hog's Head by Aberforth Dumbledore. He'd been trying to
work out how he'd ended up at Hogwarts when Potter had found him. The sooner he could get
away from these people and either prove or disprove their claims about his inactive Dark Mark, the
better.

Oh, the Healer was talking again.

"I would say it was the result of a memory charm," she said, "except he has traces of Ashwinder
eggs in his system. The good news is I have every reason to believe the effects will not be
permanent. The bad news is it will take some time to restore all of your memories. Do you have
access to a Pensieve?"

She didn't use that babyish voice when speaking to the others. Only Severus received that special
treatment.

"I have one," McGonagall said.

Severus marvelled over so many people crowding around his hospital bed. Hermione, Potter,
McGonagall, Madame Pomfrey. He would have thought only Madam Pomfrey would have
accompanied him to St Mungo's, and that she would have done so only to see that whichever
Healer took over for her was briefed on what she knew. Leaning back against the pillow, Severus
turned over his emotions towards McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey in his sore head. They seemed
different. He couldn't quite work out how—couldn't put a name to the feelings. He thought he
might trust the two witches, but that couldn't be right.

Severus knew the cure for memory loss from accidents involving Ashwinder eggs, but the Healer
prattled on as if she believed him to be a moron. To save himself the additional headache of
explaining it to everyone else, he let her babble. Not that he believed he'd actually had an accident
while brewing, of course. Someone must have dosed him with something. Potter, if he was
anything like his relations, was a likely suspect.

"I want you to view one or two memories per day, taken from those who know you," the Healer
said. "If you start getting headaches, give yourself a rest. Some people find it best to start at the
beginning and work their way forward. Others jump around. The order doesn't matter. Legilimency
works, as you discovered today, but a Pensieve is better. It's less tainted by the emotions of the
person who gives you the memory. Your emotions will be confusing enough without that added
difficulty." She directed her next question towards the others. "I'm to understand he's changed
significantly since he was twenty years old?"

The assembled crowd huffed out a chorus of laughs.

"Very much so," McGonagall said.

The Healer gave a brusque nod. "Right. I thought as much, but you never can believe everything
you read. Well, Mr Snape, you will almost certainly feel things that don't make sense. Your
emotions will belong to your current self, not your younger self. Your mind may have forgotten,
but your heart still knows who you have become."

What sentimental rubbish. Severus rolled his eyes. The Healer was as oblivious to his disdain as
she was to the greenery between her teeth.

"Once you've accumulated enough memories, you will create a bridge that will fill in all of the
holes and make the memories truly yours again," the Healer continued. "The formation of that
bridge can sometimes cause an involuntary eruption of magic that can be upsetting to some people, I must warn you. What constitutes enough memories varies from person to person. Given how much time you've lost, I imagine it will take at least a year, maybe two, to get you back to normal. The memories aren't gone; they're just buried."

During this speech, Hermione tensed for some reason. Potter wrapped an arm around her shoulders in a consoling half-embrace. Hmm. Severus had thought the redhead he'd seen in those memories was Potter's wife. Well, until she'd turned around, he'd thought she was Lily. What were Potter and Hermione to each other?

McGonagall did look very old. She'd never been young in all the time Severus had known her, but now she was so grey and frail. If they were telling the truth and the war had ended eleven years ago, where was Lily now? All Harry had said was that he was the son of Lily and James Potter.

Pause for intense nausea.

If Severus spoke with her son on a semi-regular basis, were he and Lily friends again? And how had Severus avoided Azkaban if the Dark Lord really had fallen? If he owed Lucius a mountain of Galleons for paying his way out, Severus was going to be very cross.

The Healer continued to yammer on.

"You can talk about multiple memories all you like, but only view one or two per day. It's the viewing that causes the healing, and you need to take it slowly. Sometimes, particularly powerful memories might come to you as dreams or nightmares. If that happens, I would encourage you to find someone who was present and view the actual memory in a Pensieve. Dreams exaggerate everything. Also, no Apparating for you, Mr Snape. Not to places you haven't visited since your little accident. You cannot trust your memories of places to be accurate. Side-Along, Floo, broom, or Muggle means of travel only. I mean it."

Severus scowled. He'd been the first in his class to manage Apparition. He had never splinched himself.

"And, most important of all, maintain a positive attitude," the Healer said in a chirpy voice. "Now, I'll go fetch you a few headache potions, and you can be on your way."

Severus would be tipping said headache potions down the drain in favour of brewing his own. As soon as the Healer was out of earshot, Hermione snorted.

"A positive attitude," Hermione said. "She must have meant it when she said she doesn't believe everything she reads."

Dumbledore's portrait stared at Severus. He tried to ignore its painted gaze, focusing instead on the mirror he'd conjured. Trying to wrap his mind around his age was proving difficult. Forty-nine. Survived two wars, apparently, and turned spy. At least he didn't owe Lucius a debt for keeping him out of prison. Never married (hardly surprising). He could verify all of this in back issues of the Daily Prophet, allegedly, though McGonagall claimed that during the final year of the war the paper had been full of lies.

Lily was dead. Dead, and it was Severus's fault. The information he'd heard at the Hog's Head had killed her. His first friend. It should have hurt more. The Healer had warned about emotions that belonged to the version of him who possessed all of his memories, but what he felt now made no sense. It was a softened sort of grief, like a photograph that had been taken out too many times.
Something sun-bleached and curled up around the edges. The fact that nearly 30 years had passed shouldn't have mattered. His older self's emotions should have matched up with what his younger self would have felt. This forty-nine-year-old Severus Snape should have wanted to rage and scream and resurrect the Dark Lord just so he could kill him all over again. Healing from such a blow shouldn't have been an option.

And then there was Dumbledore, dead by Severus's hand. Glancing up at the portrait, Severus had a go at working out his emotions on that topic. He quickly decided he didn't want to feel whatever it was that scrap of canvas made him feel. He shoved it back down and buried it under a layer of denial. It was too much.

"Why was Potter here?" Severus asked, needing to focus on something—anything—else. "Is he a teacher?"

If he had to put up with another Potter at Hogwarts, so help him—

"No," McGonagall—Minerva, she had insisted he call her—said. "He's an Auror. Head Auror now, actually. He comes round to see you sometimes. You tolerate him for as long as it takes you to drink a cup of tea, and then you banish him for the next month or so." She paused to laugh heartily at his disgusted expression. "Don't worry; you don't enjoy it."

"I cannot imagine what would make me suffer the presence of James Potter's son."

"He admires you. Quite a lot, actually. And he's not only James Potter's son."

Severus's hand itched with the urge to hex her. Good. At least some reactions were still predictable.

"Hermione, however, is a teacher," Minerva said. "History of Magic. Binns lectures to an empty classroom these days. He hardly notices the difference." The way she cleared her throat, Severus knew something she didn't want to say was coming. "The board of governors have been notified of your condition, and they have decided that while you certainly had the knowledge and ability at age twenty to teach Potions, parents would react badly if it got out that someone who believed himself to be a loyal Death Eater was teaching their children unsupervised. Well, most parents. Some would still be thrilled, no doubt."

"I don't feel a shred of loyalty towards them. Not if what you said about… Not if it's true."

How quickly he became a turncoat. Severus wondered if it had gone that way the first time around, or if he'd agonised over the decision. He guessed the former.

"I know," Minerva said, her expression softening. "Nevertheless, as a precautionary measure, they've arranged for an Auror to be on hand to monitor your actions. The Auror will stand guard outside your quarters and be present during your lectures until you are returned to yourself." She winced. "I'm sorry, Severus. It's temporary. They're rather desperate for you to stay on once you're well, or I doubt they would have consented to allow you around the students at all. If you ever wanted to demand a pay rise…"

It wasn't just the board of governors. Severus was certain. Minerva was the one who had contacted them. She didn't trust Severus. Not the twenty-year-old him, at any rate. What memories he still possessed said he should snap at her, tell her she could just find some other Potions Master, and he'd be on his way. For some reason, he did none of this. He found he didn't give a damn about the lack of trust. Whether he was genuinely not offended or whether he was just too exhausted to care, he couldn't say. Either way, he probably wouldn't trust himself, had he been in their shoes.
He would be asking for that pay rise. Just as soon as he knew what he was making now.

Severus descended the spiral staircase from the Headmistress's office. At the bottom, Potter stood waiting for him with an elderly man in Auror's robes who had more hair sprouting from his ears than his head.

Before any introductions could be made, Hermione marched up to them with a purring armful of comfort. Severus was far more interested in being introduced to what looked like a grey and black half-Kneazle. He didn't understand why until he held out his arms and Hermione passed the animal to him.

"This is Lois," Hermione said. "She's yours."

Oh. So she was. Severus had never had a familiar before. His emotions where Lois were concerned were blessedly unambiguous. Only the presence of other people prevented him from actually cuddling her. He settled for an indifferent pat on Lois's head. She didn't seem to mind. And now he had an explanation for the grey hair he'd noticed on his robes. At least he'd been able to solve one mystery, if not the more pressing ones.

"And this is Ernie," Potter said. "He's one of the Aurors assigned to your case."

His case. Charming way to put it. Severus gave a curt nod to his new babysitter.

"They're really going through with this?" Hermione's wild hair whipped around her head as she seemed to summon up all of the rage Severus had been lacking. "Do you really think that Severus, of all people, couldn't give Ernie the slip if he wanted to? No offence, Ernie."

"None taken."

"I'm sure you're a fine Auror…"

Potter gave Ernie a pat on the back. "Ernie's an excellent Auror. Caught hundreds of Dark Wizards in his time, and there's no one better when it comes to doing paperwork. He and his partner, Bert, are both gearing up for retirement in a few years. Longest serving Aurors we have."

"Wait," Hermione said. "Bert and Ernie? You paired them together on purpose, didn't you?"

"No. That was a happy coincidence." Potter grinned at her. "It's going to be a real pain in the arse to have to do my own paperwork while they're on this assignment. You'll meet Bert tomorrow, sir; they're going to take it in shifts. I'm hardly going to sacrifice any of my active field agents to watch a man who doesn't need watching, but if anyone gives you any trouble, Bert or Ernie will be there to give you backup. They're more than capable."

"You seem very certain that I'm going to behave myself," Severus said.

Potter gave a boyish shrug of one shoulder. "I don't exactly trust you when you're without your memories, but I sincerely doubt you're a danger to anyone associated with the Order now that Professor McGonagall has filled you in on why you defected to our side."

Severus almost wanted to fire a dark spell at Potter just to prove that he didn't know Severus as well as he seemed to think he did. Maybe when he wasn't in the presence of an Auror—no matter how aged—and a Hogwarts professor.

While Potter left Severus in Ernie's questionable care, Hermione opted to accompany him and Lois on their path to the dungeons. They found another half-Kneazle waiting in the corridor to his
quarters. It looked almost identical to Lois, save a few slight variations in the markings around its face.

"This is Boudica," Hermione said, scooping the animal into her arms and snuggling it shamelessly. "She's Lois's sister. We got them together."

Severus's eyebrows jumped up towards his hairline.

"You took me to see Mrs Figg after my cat died," Hermione said. "She breeds half-Kneazles. You got fed up with me moping around the castle. You said it was impossible to discuss the latest issue of Potions Quarterly with someone intent on sobbing into their porridge, and although I possessed little skill in Potions, I was at least capable of comprehending the latest research, which was more than could be said for the rest of the staff, so I was getting another beast whether I liked it or not." Stepping closer to him, she gave Lois a scratch under her fuzzy chin. "You didn't intend to come away with a familiar of your own, but then your beast chose you. I'll show you the memory once you're feeling up to it."

Ernie conjured a chair that resembled a Muggle recliner and settled in with a stack of paperwork. Severus doubted Potter would actually be doing any of his own paperwork after all.

"I don't know where we're going to start with these memories," Hermione said. "So much has happened."

"So I've heard."

"Trust me, that's only the beginning."

The snake was back in its own frame. It sniffed haughtily as Hermione approached. Severus loathed the thing, as well as all other snakes. He had known it earlier, even before he'd heard the story about the method of his near-demise. He used to feel ambivalent about them. His temples throbbed.

"Oh," the portrait said with as close to a sneer as a snake's mouth could manage. "It's you again."

"Good evening to you too, Sophia," Hermione said in a syrupy voice. "Don't worry; I'm not staying."

It hissed when she patted its frame. Hermione went up in Severus's estimation, since the portrait disliked her.

"Well," Hermione said. "Goodnight."

The tug in his gut followed her as she turned away. The blasted Life Debt. He needed to find a way to get rid of it.

"Hermione?"

At the sound of her name, Hermione jerked in surprise.

"What?" Severus asked, his question about the Life Debt momentarily forgotten.

"Nothing, really. You just never call me by my first name."

"What do I call you?"

"Miss Granger when I was a schoolgirl. Granger since we became colleagues. In nearly twenty
years of knowing me, you've only called me by my first name once, and that was when we were in
the middle of a war and you thought you were going to die."

Ah. Granger. That fit her so much better than Hermione. It was the extra pinch of fluxweed that
made the potion simmer into its proper form.

"But you call me Severus?" he asked.

"I do. The closest you came to giving me permission was to say you supposed I would do whatever
I pleased, the same way I always had. I don't think you really mind, though."

Severus doubted this. "I see. I was your teacher?"

"Yeah. Potions for the first five years, then Defence and Occlumency in my sixth year, then
Potions again in my seventh."

"And now? Are we friends?"

"I think so?" She gave a self-deprecating laugh. "We meet up outside of work. I consider you a
friend. You seem to think of me as a friend as well, but who can tell with you? You might
just see me as one of your less bothersome colleagues. But I trust you. I would trust you with my
life. I have, on more than one occasion."

Severus thought she was likely a fool for doing so.

His chambers consisted of a bookshelf-lined sitting room that reminded him of the Slytherin
Common Room with its underwater windows, a bedroom with the biggest four poster bed he'd ever
seen, and a bathroom with a bathtub to rival the stories he'd heard of the Prefects' Bathroom. As he
explored, Severus decided he would sneak away from the Auror as soon as possible. He needed to
get the other side of the story and verify what he'd been told, as well as obtaining whatever
information they might have tried to conceal from him. Narcissa would be a good choice. Last he
remembered, she'd been pregnant. Severus had apparently saved that baby's life by taking
Dumbledore's. Narcissa had to be grateful for that.

And he would Apparate there on his own, no matter what the Healer said. He could trust his
memories of Malfoy Manor. It hadn't changed in centuries.
Narcissa delivered a lecture as her son reattached Severus's splinched left thumb. The son—Draco—was a Healer, but mercifully free of the condescending talk Severus had encountered on his trip to St Mungo's. Draco's healing was accompanied by quick, efficient movements and minimal speaking. Severus thought he should teach a seminar on bedside manner to other Healers.

"Honestly, Severus," Narcissa said with her pointed nose in the air. "You're lucky it was only a thumb. Rushing in like that when you knew better, and when a far less reckless option was readily available. I suppose I should have expected it, given the company you keep these days."

Severus was reminded irresistibly of seeing Fabian and Gideon Prewett's sister (what was her name? Mandy? Molly?) in Diagon Alley a few months before. A few months according to his memory, at any rate. She'd been with her passel of ginger boys, panicking because the two youngest had managed to slip away and nearly made it to Knockturn Alley. The twins couldn't have been more than two years old, but Severus had come away from the scene with the impression that the freckle-faced menaces had somehow known exactly what they were doing. Narcissa's tone and words couldn't have been more different, but the motherly, protective fury in her eyes was the same.

Severus didn't think Narcissa would react favourably to the comparison. He was tempted to tell her anyway. She was only five years older than Severus. Far too young for her to attempt to mother him. And he wouldn't have splinched himself if the Malfoys hadn't decided to add those sodding outbuildings. As if their manor hadn't already been enormous enough.

"If you think you can manage to keep yourself in one piece for the next ten minutes, I'll get us some tea," Narcissa said. "Lucius should be home soon. He'll be pleased to see you."

Severus stared at her tense shoulders as she departed. Since when had Narcissa fetched anything instead of ordering a house elf to do it for her?

"The elves have the day off," Draco said when Severus asked him about it. "The second Saturday of every month, though they've been ordered to tell people that they get every weekend, when asked. The second Saturday is when they make a big show of visiting Potter's elf and talking about their new lot in life. It's semi-fair working hours, no punishments, and the cosiest tea towels for the Malfoy elves these days."

"Why on earth would a house elf want a day off?"

"Oh, they don't. It annoys them no end. They'll spend all of tomorrow grumbling about eternal shame being brought down upon their ears for allowing their masters to brew their own tea, but Mother is determined to get on Granger's good side. Thinks it will help rehabilitate our family's image if Potter's pet Muggle-born is seen being friendly to us in public. Pureblood supremacy has rather gone out of fashion, so she insists that we give the appearance of having turned over a new leaf. Personally, I think if Mother saving Potter's arse didn't manage to fix our image, nothing will."

Severus frowned. "What does Granger have to do with the treatment of house elves? She's a teacher."
"It's so surreal that you don't know," Draco said with a laughing shake of his head. "In our fourth year, she... No, you know what? I'll let that be a fun surprise for you. Ask someone for their memory of S.P.E.W. the next time you need a laugh."

Thumb firmly reattached, Severus flexed the stiff, freshly healed knuckle as he studied the younger man. Draco had blond hair that was just starting to vanish on top and thin lips bracketed by lines that looked as if they'd been put there by scowling rather than smiling. Severus thought he might be fond of Draco, but something dark and unpleasant crept over his emotions when Draco spoke of Granger.

"You were in Granger's year at Hogwarts?" Severus asked. When this was confirmed with a nod, he added, "How well do you know her?"

"Ah." Draco coughed. "Not well since we left school. Not that well when we were in school, either. We never got on, for obvious reasons. She hit me once. I maintain I didn't deserve it. I saw her tortured on that carpet over there. She definitely didn't deserve it."

Tortured. Severus's lungs refused to draw air for a few moments. There was no mistaking the sudden flood of helpless anger that swept through him, though it felt like a muted echo of what it might once have been. He didn't look at the carpet.

"How well do I know Granger?" Severus asked.

Draco's smirk reminded him of the one Lucius always dawned upon hearing particularly salacious gossip. "Fairly well, I think. For a while I wondered if you were fucking her, but I guess not. She would have told you already if that was the case."

"Your language is surprisingly coarse for a Malfoy."

"Hazard of my profession." Draco gave an airy wave. "Sometimes it's the best way to get one's point across. I'm not sure it's possible to treat a victim of the Entrail-Expelling Curse without resorting to profanity. I manage to rein it in around Mother and Scorpius."

Perhaps Draco shouldn't be the one to give that seminar after all.

"Scorpius?" Severus asked.

"My grandson," a familiar voice said.

Severus pivoted on his heel to see what looked like Abraxas Malfoy wearing Lucius's smile. Lucius strode towards him, his walking stick tapping against the stone floor.

"Narcissa told me what happened," Lucius said. "I must say, I've missed the twenty-year-old Severus. The newer model is depressingly noble."

"I see I never managed to talk you out of your ostentatious taste in accessories," Severus said. "How unfortunate."

Lucius's white teeth gleamed as his smile tipped up into a full-on grin. "Nor did I ever convince you to stop dressing like a Muggle holy man. Shame I'm such a reformed character, or we could go out and have fun like the old days."

"Yes, because that worked out so well for us last time," Draco said under his breath.

A storm cloud passed over Lucius's face. He held his hand out to his son, palm facing up.
"Draco," Lucius said. "I believe you owe me something."

Muttering, Draco withdrew a jangling pouch full of Galleons and dropped it into Lucius's hand. Lucius tested the weight with a bounce of his arm, seeming satisfied with the result.

"I told you there was no way he'd bedded the Granger woman," Lucius said. "As I said: depressingly noble."

"Or I worried that I'd be strangled to death by her hair. In other news, you've been expanding," Severus said, motioning towards the view through the diamond paned windows. "Do your pampered elves have their own miniature manor as well as a pension and holidays?"

"You see more than one building?" Lucius asked.

"I see two. One that looks like a smaller, slightly less garish version of the manor and one bungalow."

"Ah! That one on the left is Draco's house. The other is under a Fidelius Charm; Draco is the Secret Keeper. It seems you don't need to be able to remember the secret in order to see through the spell. Fascinating."

"It makes sense," Draco said. "The memories are still in there somewhere. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you to your reminiscing."

The bungalow—which was at least three times larger than Severus's house—was affectionately called the "garden shed" by the Malfoys. Lucius was all too happy to take Severus on a tour. Built just after the Dark Lord's return, it held every dark object Lucius had wanted to hide from the Aurors in case the side of the light triumphed in the war.

It also had an entire room for Lucius's shoes.

"Oh, I ran out of room in the main house," Lucius said.

"Yes," Severus said in a dry voice. "I can see how you would run out of wardrobe space in a building large enough to comfortably house half of the current population of Hogwarts."

More likely, Lucius had wanted to safeguard his shoes as much as his dark treasures. Good gods.

"I suppose you want to hear about our side of the war," Lucius said. "Or my side, I should say. It wasn't exactly yours, was it?"

"That's what I came here to find out."

"Come on, then. Back to the main house with you, turncoat." Lucius said the word as if it was his favoured nickname for Severus. "We'll need tea for this."

Lucius's story matched up disappointingly well with Minerva's. Severus had hoped for there to be holes to leap through that led somewhere his actions hadn't resulted in the death of his friend. No such luck. Oh, the wording was different. Instead of, "Dumbledore sent you back to Voldemort on the night he returned," it was, "You showed up hours late when the rat finally managed to raise the Dark Lord. I thought you'd bite your tongue off from all the Crucios." But the result was the same.

Lucius didn't mention—and Severus didn't ask about—Granger's torture at Malfoy Manor.

As they lingered over hot tea that did nothing to settle Severus's nerves, Harry Potter's face
appeared in the fireplace, requesting permission to come through. Oh, bollocks. Severus should have known this was coming. He sank down in his chair.

"Mister Potter," Narcissa said, turning to thin air as if to order a house elf to pour another cup of tea before she remembered herself. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, fine, sorry for the intrusion," Potter said. He vanished the ash from his clothes and the floor as he spoke. "Draco owled me. He said he had something of mine, and asked that I retrieve him before anyone decided to get into trouble reliving old times."

*Something of Potter's?* Severus had known Draco for all of two hours, and already he regretted saving his life.

"Thanks ever so much for not mentioning that last part, Potter," Draco said with a glare.

"Anytime."

Lucius tutted. "As if we would do such a thing."

"I know, I know." Turning to Severus, Potter gave him the Auror head shake. The one—if Severus's run-ins with Muggle police officers in his youth were any indication—that everyone in law enforcement mastered on their first day on the job. "You aren't in any trouble, sir. You're free to leave Hogwarts whenever you please. But next time, could you tell Bert or Ernie that you're going out? It'll save them the hassle of following you when you try to sneak off to the Apparition Point. Also, I thought the Healer said you weren't supposed to be Apparating. At least you didn't splinch yourself."

If Narcissa or Draco said a word, Severus would find a way to make Silencio permanent. Bad enough Potter had revealed that one of the elderly Muppets had managed to trail Severus without him realising. That, on top of being caught eavesdropping by that goaty old barman. If Severus didn't know he'd made it through two wars as a spy, he would question his ability to do anything with stealth.

"If you don't want to be there, you could probably take a leave of absence," Potter said. "I'm sure Hermione could manage your classes, and they could just put Binns back in charge of History of Magic while you recover."

"I don't think so," Severus said. "I'd rather be doing something instead of sitting around and waiting to heal. I suppose I'll decide for certain once I find out how I like teaching."

Potter laughed. "Good one, sir. You, liking teaching."

Draco chuckled along with him.

At Severus's request, each of the Malfoys extracted memories for him to view later, with the promise that they would owl more. Severus decided that once he was back at Hogwarts, he would go to the library to find those back issues of the Daily Prophet. He had a lot of research to do.

Severus was still half asleep by the time he reached the lake. He went to the lake automatically after brushing his teeth, lacking the caffeine to jolt him into questioning his actions. The whole time, his mind lingered somewhere back in his bizarre dreams. It was only when he found himself at the water's edge that he began to wake up and wonder what he was doing.

Had swimming become part of his morning routine? He'd enjoyed swimming as a child the few
times he'd gone with Lily and her family. Well, he'd enjoyed the actual swimming part. Putting up with Petunia, less so.

Deciding a dip in the lake might help him approach something resembling alertness, Severus transfigured his clothes into a swimming costume and jumped in. The cold, dark water sent a goosebump-prickled shock through his body and make him suck in a startled breath. Definitely awake.

As he windmilled his arms in a freestyle stroke, he thought about all he'd read in the library the night before. It was a miracle he hadn't murdered Harry right after the war, given how the boy had apparently shouted Severus's private business to the entire wizarding world. It was likely only the fact that Harry was Lily's son that had saved him. Well, that, and the fact that he appeared to have played an instrumental role in keeping Severus out of Azkaban.

The Giant Squid made waves rock against Severus as it splashed a tentacle down on the mirror-smooth surface of the lake. Severus realised he'd gone hours upon hours the previous day without thinking once about Lily. That knowledge felt a little bit like loss. He wondered if he'd gone weeks or even months in recent days.

The memories of his childhood with her that had been so vivid and raw in the aftermath of her marriage to James Potter were now fuzzy and indistinct. Most of what remained was just a general sensation of the warmth of companionship, the weight of unrequited love and the jagged slice of guilt. Perhaps the feelings of this 49-year-old him would make more sense once he'd viewed more memories.

The sound of trainers slapping against muddy ground drew him out of his thoughts. Granger was there, running around the lake and not looking as if she enjoyed one second of it. Her shoulders were hunched, her mouth set in a grimace. She had been a soldier in the second war; maybe she forced herself through this exercise because she still wanted to be able to run for her life. Severus treaded water, half-resenting himself for staring at the way her tight Muggle shorts hugged her arse. Her legs were far longer than he would have guessed when he'd seen her all covered up in robes. The bare skin looked smooth and soft.

"What?" Hermione asked, slowing her stride when she noticed him watching her.

Damn.

"You should mind your posture," Severus said. "Relaxing your shoulders will make it easier to breathe."

She stopped and turned fully towards him, hands on her curvy hips. "Have you always been such an insufferable know-it-all?"

For some reason, she found her own question immensely funny. She took off (shoulders more relaxed, Severus noted) in a giggling jog before Severus could reply. He glowered at her. It didn't seem to have much effect.

Draco was right. Severus definitely hadn't slept with Granger.

Back in his quarters after his swim, Severus stripped down and studied his older body in the mirror. His hair was as greasy at the roots as ever. No amount of shampoo had ever seemed to help. New scars mapped out a landscape he didn't recognise: ropey red marks beneath the fine smattering of black hair on his chest, a white slash over a bicep that bulged ever so slightly more than it previously had, faded scratches on strong legs. He seemed to be in better shape than he'd
been at age twenty. Lean, rather than skinny and underfed. Interesting. But there… oh, Merlin. He'd been almost prepared for the few threads of silver hair he'd found on his head. A strand of grey in the base of the short curls leading down from his navel was another story entirely. Unacceptable. Severus plucked it.

"You look fine, dear," the mirror said. "Not a day over sixty."

Severus wondered if Muggles were right about smashing a mirror bringing seven years of bad luck.

Drawing a dressing gown around himself, he flounced away from the mirror before he embraced the temptation to test the theory. A potted yellow zinnia that was perched on the chest of drawers drew his attention. Since when had he kept plants that had no use as potions ingredients? Next to the zinnia was a plain wooden box, stained the colour of dark honey. It opened at his touch. Inside, Severus found dozens upon dozens of letters. Almost all were signed with the same flowery signature.

Charity? Who was that? Severus's suspicions that he had a lover somewhere were dashed within the first few pages. This Charity appeared to be nothing more than a friend. She had been in love with a Muggle whom Severus had apparently tried to dissuade her from marrying, using his mother's experience of being bound to a Muggle man as a cautionary tale.

Edward isn't like that, Severus, one of Charity's letters said. He's not afraid of powerful women. His last girlfriend was an MP (but I like him anyway). And he's absolutely enchanted (pardon the pun) by magic. Almost as much as I am by everything Muggle. I know him. I trust him. He won't grow to resent me. He's already talking about how exciting it will be if our children are magical (though he will of course love them every bit as much if they aren't). I am sorry that your father wasn't more like him. He should have been. All children should have parents who are so enthusiastic about their natural gifts.

A faded wedding invitation revealed their full names: Charity Doge and Edward Burbage. Hmm. Severus had known a Charity Doge back when he'd been a student at Hogwarts. Hufflepuff. Talked to him in Ancient Runes, but she had been one of those people who talked to everyone. Because it hadn't seemed to come from a place of pity (and because she'd had some brilliant techniques for remembering translations), he'd tolerated her chatter. It seemed as if they'd become friends at some point. Maybe they still were, unless he'd managed to drive her off.

A magical photograph followed the invitation. An older, slightly rounder version of the Charity of his school days stood in a lacy white Muggle wedding dress, her arms looped around the shoulders of a younger Severus and a man with light brown hair and freckled skin. The bride and groom grinned and waved as if everything was perfect and war would never intrude on their happy little bubble. Charity tapped the younger Severus's shoulder until he offered up a smile that wasn't nearly as grudging as he tried to make it seem.

Reading through the remaining letters, Severus came across several from the Muggle husband. He laughed. Edward had apparently delighted in tricking Charity into believing the most ridiculous things about Muggles. More than once, Charity had scolded Severus for confirming Edward's "facts" when she'd asked Severus about some particularly outlandish claims. For almost a week, they'd had her believing that Muggles were born with a tail that their doctors amputated.

I think you're right, one of Edward's letters said. If I'd been born magical, you and I could have had great fun in Slytherin together. Then again, I might not have been able to convince Char that I knew much about Muggles if that had been the case, and that would spoil it. Did she tell you she has an interview to be the new Muggle Studies professor?
Edward and Severus’s mischief didn’t immediately cease when Charity took the post at Hogwarts. It drifted off gradually, until Edward’s communication consisted of occasional missives inviting Severus to tea at theirs or thanking him for a birthday or Christmas present. The darkness that was ushered in when Severus had been forced to resume his spying duties had likely left him with little energy for such bright frivolity. Charity kept writing faithfully, even though she and Severus worked in the same place and saw each other almost daily. The penultimate letter from her made the smile melt completely from his face.

Severus,

I forgive you. What you did was an enormous violation of my trust, but I know your heart was in the right place. I had no idea my will was strong enough to fight it. I never had the opportunity to try before. Never, ever give me reason to try it again. I won’t be so forgiving next time, no matter if you’re only trying to protect me.

I meant what I said. Edward will leave if things become too dangerous for him, but I’m not running. I can be brave like you. I can stay and fight. Hogwarts will need all the defenders it can get in the coming months, I fear. Maybe I should trust your instincts, given who you are and what you do, but you said before that You-Know-Who was barely aware of my existence. I’m no one important. Writing an article that contains what we both know to be the truth won’t change that. I doubt I’ll even manage to get it published. And I have to try to help save our world, Severus. I have to speak up for the Muggles who can’t speak up for themselves—for my husband and his family and millions like them. If I convince even one wizard or witch that Muggles are not the enemy, the risks will be worth it. I will not be silent and complacent in the face of hatred just to save my own skin.

Just in case I do gain enough attention that your dire predictions come true, know this: I already forgive you for anything you need to do. I love you, my dear, infuriating friend. I can already sense you sneering in discomfort, but I do, and no action you are forced to take in this war will change that. I promise.

Your friend,

Charity

What had he done? Her will had been strong enough to fight it… the Imperius Curse? Tear stains smudged the ink here and there. Severus had a sneaking suspicion the tears hadn’t come from Charity. A lump formed in his throat as he reread her forgiveness of whatever his crime had been. Something far worse than an ugly word said in a moment of pain and panic, no doubt. Emotions surfaced, as easy and quiet as floating on the lake: guilt, sorrow, fondness—so much fondness, not eroded by time. He loved her, too. As dearly as if she was his flesh and blood sister.

The very last letter wasn’t long enough to count as a letter, but it felt more monumental than anything else he’d read. Its brief message made his hands inexplicably tremble.

S,

I still believe in you.

Love always,

C

The parchment bearing those final words felt like cloth from being unfolded and refolded so many times. A dark stain marred one corner. Not ink; it looked more like blood. Perhaps he had carried
Charity's belief with him into battle.

Severus wondered what had happened to her. Someone else held the Muggle Studies position now: an older witch with unnaturally vibrant red hair whose name he hadn't bothered to commit to memory. He would have to ask Minerva or Granger about Charity.

One of the Muppets, as Severus had taken to calling his pair of Auror guards, was in Hermione's seat at breakfast. She had been sitting in the chair next to Severus at the end of the table since she'd joined the faculty. As she approached, the Muppet in question shuffled down to the next chair. Either Hermione's expression or a warning from Harry must have informed him of her ownership of the seat.

Severus acknowledged Hermione with a nod over the top of his book. The gesture was the same greeting he'd given her almost every morning for the past decade. She wondered if, come autumn, he would run with her when the weather became too cold to swim. He'd done so over the past couple of years, though he always groused about how much he preferred swimming. The Severus she knew would have held up his coffee cup to show how much progress he'd made in caffeinating himself. Hermione was only allowed to engage him in conversation once the cup was half empty. This Severus simply kept reading.

It was strange, observing the differences in the version of Severus with only twenty years of memories. His ever-inscrutable face was more open. It didn't betray his every thought, but there were more hints to what he might be thinking. Not that Hermione knew how to interpret them.

Lowering his book, Severus swallowed what remained of his coffee. Probably safe to talk to him, then. The book, Hermione noticed, was a collection of essays on Occlumency by Thaddeus Thackeray that he'd assigned to her in her sixth year. He stared out at the horde of students. Tomorrow would be his first day of teaching. Hermione hid her smile by taking a sip of her own coffee. At least his sneer was still the same.

"What am I like as a teacher?" he asked.

"Oh, goodness me." Hermione chuckled. "There's a question. Here." Bringing her wand to her temple, she withdrew the silvery strands that held her memory of her first day in his classroom and placed them in a conjured jar. "Watch that when you get a chance. That's what you were like in my day."

He labelled the jar and placed it in his pocket, where it rattled against similar containers. Everyone had been forthcoming with memories for him, it seemed. Good. She didn't want to see him suffer the same fate as her parents. Even the thought of it made her heart clench.

Owls swooped into the Great Hall bearing letters and rolled up copies of that morning's Daily Prophet. A haughty looking screech owl alighted onto the table in front of Severus and offered him a thick parcel. The brown wrapping paper fell away under his long fingers to reveal the cover of an all-too familiar, loathed book. Snape: Scoundrel or Saint.

"Sevvy," he read the accompanying note aloud to Hermione. "I hear you've been having some memory issues. That means you get a second chance to read this for the first time, you lucky thing. Maybe it will jog some memories for you. Rita." The twist of his lips proved that his sneer was definitely still the same. "Sevvy? And who the devil is Rita?"

Severus's eyes grew wider and wider as he thumbed through the book. "How much of this is true?"

"Almost none of it. Certainly nothing in the chapter on me."

"You got a whole chapter in my biography?"

They were almost the same words as he'd used the first time around, spoken in the same incredulous tone. Back when the book had first been published, he'd followed the statement up with, "Why anyone would think you merit more than a footnote in a book that claims to be about my life is beyond me, Miss Granger."

She'd felt so small, sitting there in his hospital room. She'd wondered, then—and many times since—if he'd resented her for saving his life. If the Life Debt had twined around them until it had become a physical thing that pulled and strangled and smothered. If he'd wanted to die when he'd poured out his heart for Harry to see on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

"Ugh, don't call it your biography," she said with a shudder to banish the ghosts of their past. "That gives it too much legitimacy. It's rubbish. Published while you were recovering in hospital without a word of input from you." She gave one of her hash browns a vicious stab. "The chapter about me speculates about why I might have chosen to save your life, since I did so before your true loyalties were widely known."

"Dare I ask what conclusion she reached?" His smirk—all wickedness and dark delight—suggested he'd already guessed.

"Not the right one, that's for sure. It couldn't be because I'd worked it out. It couldn't be because I would have tried to save anyone in that situation. I'd already seen enough death. It couldn't even be because I thought it might be useful to interrogate you if the war continued. Nope. It had to be because I'd seduced you. Or you'd seduced me; she never seemed to decide which way round it must have been."

Hermione glanced up at him. Two spots of pink appeared high on his cheekbones, contradicting the confidence of that infernal smirk. Almost as soon as she noticed, the colour leached away and his face went back to its usual impassive pallor.

"It's a shame Rita registered her Animagus form," she said. "Don't worry. No one who matters believes it. I was still your student for a year after I saved you, and they know you'd never... Oh, that reminds me. The anniversary of the end of the war is coming up next week."

"Yes, I'd gathered that. I've been perusing back issues of the Daily Prophet."

"Well, I just want you to be prepared."

"For?"

Hermione hesitated, a weary sigh chasing the words out of her mouth. "The goddamn lilies."

"Pardon?" Severus asked with a familiar arch of one eyebrow.

"Every year, the more unimaginative of your hero worshippers owl you bouquets of lilies. Sending back the charred remains doesn't seem to dissuade them."

She always had an urge to blast the lilies to confetti, like he'd done with the roses at the Yule Ball. So many people had been swept up in the romance of his one, true, tragic love. She knew better. She knew there had been another. That one had seemed far more requited—though Hermione was
not supposed to have that knowledge, exactly. And since the war there had been Raffaella Zabini, but that hadn't seemed at all like love.

"I... see," Severus said, his mouth pressing into a thin line. "And this has something to do with Potter announcing the motivation behind my actions during the war to a battlefield full of people, I assume?"

"It does. You redirected the lilies to him one year. Ginny—that's his wife—hit you with a Bat Bogey Hex in retaliation when it made her allergies act up. She was pregnant at the time, so you just gave her a lot of menacing looks. And then they went and named the baby after you."

"Ah. I read about that. Albus Severus Potter. That poor child. Not only does he have Potter as a father, he's been saddled with that moniker."

A smile turned up one corner of Hermione's lips. "That's exactly what you said when he was born."

The clink of cutlery on plates and the chatter of the students seemed all the louder without Severus's voice layered over the top. He leafed through Skeeter's book in silence, his scowl deepening with every page.

"Nothing in here about her," he murmured at last. "I suppose there wouldn't be, if it's all lies. Granger? Do you know Charity Burbage? Or Charity Doge, maybe. I'm not sure whether she changed her name when she got married."

Present tense. He didn't know yet. Shards of ice lanced through Hermione's stomach. It was like being plunged back into the aftermath of the Battle of Hogwarts, being pressed down by the weight of desperate voices pleading for information about their loved ones.

"I did know her," Hermione said. "She was my professor for one year."

"But I thought she taught Muggle studies. Draco Malfoy said you're Muggle-born."

"She did. I am. I thought it would be interesting to get a wizarding perspective. I was very, very ambitious with my course load in my third year." To play for time, she readjusted her napkin on her lap. "Professor Burbage didn't survive the war, Severus."

His reaction surprised her. At most, she'd expected a barely audible sigh and the slight drooping of his shoulders. His usual stony-faced silence would have been the more likely outcome. Those reactions both belonged to the older Severus. Instead, hatred and anger flickered in his black eyes. The expression that shadowed his face was the one Harry had described from that night on the Astronomy Tower.

What had Charity Burbage been to him? Had she been the woman in that snippet of memory Hermione had seen during her sixth year? Given what Hermione knew of Professor Burbage's death, she didn't think so. At Severus's trial, he had spoken of it in a robotic voice. Even the barest trace of emotion had been absent as he'd quoted Professor Burbage's final words.

*Severus, please. We're friends.*

"Who?" Severus asked. "Who killed her?"

"Voldemort. You were there. So were the Malfoys. If you need the memory, one of them can..."

She let her voice trail off. Not all of the memories he collected could be pleasant ones. A great many would have to be as bleak as his days had been during the war. Nausea roiled through her.
"Yes. I'll send them an owl." Severus swiped the last of his toast through a bright yellow smear of egg yolk. "Granger, what is S.P.E.W?"

She blinked at the sudden subject change. "Why?"

"Draco said to ask for the memory of it when I needed a laugh."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she once again brought her wand to her temple to extract a memory. "I bet he did."

Chapter End Notes

The line "Severus, please. We're friends." is from DH.
War Wounds

The woman stared at him with pleading eyes that shone with unshed tears. Suspended upside-down over the long table, her breaths came in pained, wheezing gasps. Severus knew right away it was a dream. A nightmare. The scene was silver around the edges, like the first breath after diving into a Pensieve. And he knew, with the sort of certainty he'd felt upon picking up his wand for the first time, that the woman was Charity.

Everyone seated around the table was hazy and indistinct, as if he'd already woken up and the details of the dream were starting to fade. The man he'd met—Draco—was there, but younger. Just a pale-faced boy who shrank back from the sight in front of him. Far from their usual delight at Death Eater gatherings, Lucius and Narcissa looked as if they longed to be anywhere else. Hosting the Dark Lord in their home had apparently taken the shine off of such things.

Severus couldn't make out what the Dark Lord said. His reedy voice sounded like it was muffled and distorted by water. All Severus could hear was Charity begging him to save her, calling upon their friendship. All he could feel was his own body remaining frozen in his chair.

When the sickening flash of green came, Severus swore he could feel it rip through him as surely as if he'd cast the Killing Curse himself.

He woke up to tears on his cheeks and an inquisitive familiar perched on his chest. Lois rasped her sandpapery tongue along his jaw. Whether it was to offer him comfort or because she liked the taste of salt, he couldn't tell. He guessed the latter. Severus nudged her away, but made up for it by offering a good scratch under her chin. Her rumbly purrs were soothing.

The Healer had told him to get the real memory for anything he saw in his sleep. Dreams exaggerated everything, she'd claimed. Owling the Malfoys, the way he'd told Granger he would, was the obvious solution. Not yet, though. He wasn't ready to see that again.

Lois offered solace and acted the part of a good familiar up until Severus slid out of the sheets. At that point, she stretched out and claimed as much of the bed as possible. Ernie followed Severus to the kitchens, but had the decency to neither attempt conversation nor follow him past the ticklish pear painting. The elves flocked around Severus, eager to whip up anything from a glass of water to a seven course meal. Severus opted for tea and a chair next to the large fireplace. He had tea making facilities in his quarters, but tea brewed by the elves was always better.

He didn't remain alone for long. His cuppa had barely cooled enough to sip when Granger walked into the room.

"I thought I might find you here," she said with a gentle smile.

"Oh?"

"We used to meet up here and drink tea in the middle of the night during my final year as a student, after the war ended. Only, then it was my magic calling out to you when I had a nightmare, not the other way around."

Granger accepted a cup of her own from a little elf who squinted at her as if she might offer him clothes. Severus suspected they'd never trust the badge-toting elf freedom fanatic he'd seen in Granger's memory.

"I find it hard to believe that my magic would call to you," Severus said. "You weren't in the
dream."

It was a type of unconscious magic that was usually performed by small children. The thought of doing it himself made Severus squirm. Adults did sometimes, he knew from experience, but not him. His mother's magic had called to him once when he was a boy. It had been on one of the weekends his father had vanished. Severus remembered the feel of it, like the familiarity of her voice taking physical form and shaking him from sleep.

"You weren't always in my nightmares, either," Granger said. "I told you at the time I thought my magic called to you because you made me feel safe. You threatened to give me detention for that." She shrugged and shot him a grin over the rim of her cup. "Maybe I make you feel safe."

"Maybe my dream self was in a battle and wanted someone to use as a human shield."

"That wouldn't surprise me," Granger chuckled. "Have you viewed any more memories since you looked at the ones the Malfoys and I gave you?" she asked.

"Just one, earlier today. Minerva told me she was going to show me her favourite memory of me. She subjected me to seeing the House Cup snatched away from Slytherin by Gryffindor at the last moment during your first year."

"Ah. Not your favourite, then."

"Hardly." Severus took a slow sip of tea. "Seeing you as a young child is always entertaining, though. You were half hair."

"Not much has changed."

She tugged on one of her unruly curls and let it spring back. Watching her, Severus marvelled at how much longer her hair was when pulled taught. It fell halfway down her back as it was. Had the whole mop been straight, she probably could have sat on it.

"Quite," he said.

Leaning back in her chair, she studied his face as if looking for an answer to a question he didn't remember asking. "I don't know what my favourite memory of you would be."

"I can see how there would be so many stellar ones that you'd have trouble choosing among them. I'm such a delight."

"Think you can manage another one? It's not my favourite, but it is a fond memory, at least."

"What is it?"

"The time you called me Hermione. Come on. Watch it now. It might make you feel better."

"Oh, indeed. A memory in which I think I'm going to die. That promises to be pleasant."

Minerva had loaned him the Pensieve to keep in his quarters, rather than subject herself to him—as she put it—skulking in and out of her office every day. Severus led Hermione back to the dungeons, shadowed by Ernie. The snake portrait hissed at their approach.

"You know, I've never seen you out of your Animagus form, Sophia," Hermione said. "You stay like this just to annoy Severus, don't you?"

Sophia flicked her forked tongue at them. "I have to make my own fun."
"I hadn't realised she wasn't just a talking snake," Severus said.

Granger lowered her voice to a stage whisper and tilted her body towards him. "Apparently, Sophia used to stay in her witch form all the time and flirt quite shamelessly with you when you were a young professor."

"Don't be too flattered, lad," Sophia said. "I was bored."

Fond of irritating him or not, Sophia obediently swung open to allow them into his sitting room. Though the bedroom door was shut, Severus knew Lois was still doing an admirable job of taking up the entire bed. Hermione crossed to the stone basin and tugged strands of silver from her temple. A flick of her wand later, the memory waited for him.

Severus dipped his face into the shimmering cloud and found himself in an abandoned classroom. He turned around in a circle. No, it was only nearly abandoned. A tiny body huddled on a long bench. Granger, but not as he'd ever seen her before. A fragile skeleton of a girl and so, so young. Someone had bound her arms behind her back.

Yes, very cheerful so far, Granger.

The door opened with a bang. Granger jumped. The tension that held her rigid drained away with a sigh when she saw Severus's younger self march into the room alone. Something like a tendril of irritation teased at the back of Severus's mind. Memory Severus shut and warded the door before wrapping the two of them in a Muffliato.

In the buzzing quiet, Severus examined this version of himself. He looked haggard and worn out—even older than his current body. Severus could practically see the brittle threads holding him together.

"Hello, sir," Granger said.

"Miss Granger."

"What subjects did you teach me in my sixth year?"

Memory Severus crossed his arms and looked down his large nose at her. "I should think you would rather I was an impostor, all things considered."

Granger tilted her head to one side. She said nothing.

"Very well." Memory Severus let out a long-suffering sigh. "I taught you Defence and Occlumency. What promise did I make to you during your first Occlumency lesson?"

"You said you wouldn't hurt me. Does that promise still stand?"

"I can't imagine why it would."

Her brown eyes looked bigger and more mournful against the gaunt angles of her face. "Can't you?"

"No." Memory Severus ground his teeth together. "And what of your companions? Was Potter idiotic enough to accompany you here?"

"They're safe," Granger said. "I've been thinking."
"I'm shocked. About what?"

"Draco Malfoy. His mission last year. What Dumbledore might have done to protect him. What he might have ordered other people to do. Dumbledore's cursed hand. The way you didn't fight back against Harry, even though you had plenty of opportunities and he kept trying to hex you. The way you made sure Luna and I weren't anywhere near the Death Eaters who invaded Hogwarts."

Severus scoffed. Of course a Potter would have hexed him when he hadn't fought back. Some things never changed.

The stony indifference of Memory Severus's expression betrayed no emotion, but Severus felt a strange lightning bolt of that earlier annoyance twined together with… reluctant pride?

"Hmm," Memory Severus said. "And have you shared these foolish notions with others?"

"No. Even if they would agree with me, which we both know is unlikely, you don't need ideas like that bouncing around the heads of people who can't master even basic Occlumency."

"Indeed." Seeming to come to a decision, Memory Severus sank down next to her on the bench and released the binding on her hands. "You're very pleased with yourself for working it out, aren't you?"

"Insufferably so." The smirk that flitted across Granger's mouth vanished with her next words. "Your aren't going to Obliviate me, are you, sir? You know I can keep a secret."

"You'd only end up back here if I did, I've no doubt. What are you doing here? Surely you didn't risk entering Hogwarts just to wave your hand in the air and show off your powers of deduction."

"...I needed a book."

Memory Severus barked out a laugh that found its twin in Severus's own chest as amusement rippled over him. Granger looked startled, like it was the first time she'd heard him make such a sound.

"My own powers of deduction must be getting rusty," Memory Severus said. "I should have known."

Drawing her legs up against her chest, Granger shivered and shifted ever-so-slightly closer to the warmth of Memory Severus's body. Unseen by her, he sneered, but he allowed her to remain millimeters from him. His hand twitched where it rested on the bench.

"Do you have evidence?" Granger whispered as if the question was the deepest of secrets. "Anything to keep you out of Azkaban when it's all over? If I can help—"

"Oh, Miss Granger." Memory Severus shook his head. "Just when I thought you might have finally learnt to think for yourself. Surely it doesn't need to be written in a book for you to understand that I will almost certainly not survive the coming battle? At some point, I'm sure both sides will try to kill me. I don't fancy those odds."

Granger's face crumpled. She looked like she did understand but was trying her best to deny it to herself. She made a valiant effort to compose her expression before looking up at him.

"You never know," she said, those big eyes shimmering with tears. "You did once promise to teach me how to put a stopper in death."
If there was such a thing as fond annoyance, that was the name Severus would give to the sensation bouncing around behind his ribs.

"I believe I said I could do so only if you weren't a dunderhead," Memory Severus said. "I am not one of your causes. Stop trying to think of dreadful acronyms for whatever Snape salvation society you want to establish and focus on getting Potter through this. There are two people I am unwilling to sacrifice in this war: Potter and you. Potter, because he is supposedly the one who can defeat the Dark Lord, and you, because I despair of Potter's chances of surviving long enough to complete his task without you to do his thinking for him. Do me a favour, and try to survive."

"I will if you will."

"I intend to do my best."

"Good."

Memory Severus withdrew a slip of parchment from his pocket, scribbled something on it, and handed it to Granger. When Severus peaked over her shoulder, he saw that it said, "Severus Snape's hideout is located at Hawthorn Cottage." The words landed somewhere in his wand hand, tingling like his own magic.

"It's not much," Memory Severus said, plucking the parchment back out of her hand and destroying it in a wandless puff of flame, "but there's a bathtub and food and potions. Do not clear me out, Miss Granger. Leave at least one of everything. And under no circumstances are you to breathe a word of what we have discussed here to anyone. The outcome of the war may well depend on you being able to keep your mouth shut for a change."

Granger's lips clamped together as if holding in a smart retort. "Like I said before, I can keep a secret."

"See that you do. Now, take my arm. I'll Apparate you to the cottage."

The classroom whirled away at the touch of her fingers on his sleeve. In its place was a tiny stone house nestled into a frozen forest. The pitch of its thatched roof was steep; a blanket of snow had slid halfway down and draped over the gutters. The whole building looked small enough for Severus to walk across it in four strides.

Memory Severus plucked at a stray thread on his robes. "Well. I suppose I'll see you at a battle fairly soon."

Granger grabbed his hand as he turned to leave.

"I hope you're wrong, just for the record," she said. "I really hope you survive. Goodbye, sir."

Memory Severus gave her hand a brief squeeze before tugging his fingers from her grasp. Coming from him, the gesture looked as affectionate as a kiss on the forehead.

"Goodbye, Hermione," he said.

Coming out of the Pensieve, Severus stared at Granger. His own feelings billowed around and grew louder in the wake of the end of the memory. He examined the most prominent ones: the distant echoes of fear, concern for her, and crushing loneliness. There was a different flavour of fear as well—one he couldn't quite pin down. Like fear blended with… anticipation? Something nervous and jittery and unsure. That one felt sharper than the others. He waited until she put her
memory back where it belonged before he spoke.

"We looked almost… friendly towards the end," he said.

Granger waved the comment away. "I assure you, that was a one-off. We were both in a very dark place at that time. Comfort was in short supply, as were allies we could trust with really, really big secrets."

"And you think I trusted you, do you?"

She seemed to turn this over in her mind, as if she'd never considered the question in all the years they'd known each other.

"You never said so," she said. "I like to think you did. As much as you could trust anyone at that point. That's not why I showed you that memory, though. There was a time when everyone else thought you had turned from the Light, as I'm sure you know. You'll see some of those memories before too much longer. But at least one person on our side believed in you. I just had no way of telling you until everything was almost over."

Severus considered himself the portrait of restraint when he waited for her to glance away before he rolled his eyes at her earnest expression and maudlin tone. Granger really was far too proud of herself for working it out. Unless he was mistaken, Charity had always believed in him as well, but she hadn't felt the need to boast about it. Not that Charity's belief had done her much good.

Severus thought he must have trusted Charity. He couldn't decide whether he'd ever trusted Granger.

Severus might have enjoyed teaching the students with an aptitude for Potions if their classmates didn't seem so intent on causing themselves grievous injury. He was going to make the first year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws brew an Earwax Removing Solution during their next class, since something was obviously interfering with their ability to hear his clear instructions. Storming into his quarters, Severus decided to dive into a memory from Potter. He had been in a foul mood all day; it was as good a time as any to watch his near-death. It seemed appropriate, just hours from the anniversary of the event.

His first thought upon dipping into the Pensieve was that the Dark Lord had really let himself go. Severus hadn't got a good look during his nightmare. It was something to behold. Gone was the charismatic man with effortless good looks. That this noseless thing had managed to convince people to follow him was, frankly, astonishing.

Severus swallowed hard against the surge of fear and panic that didn't feel eleven minutes old, much less eleven years. Then, the snake lunged, and he nearly forgot how to breathe.

Despair and hopelessness simmered together with anger until Potter appeared, flanked by Granger and Ronald Weasley. Memory Severus leaked out fragments of his past, begging Potter to take them, to look at him.

Granger knelt in front of Memory Severus as Potter backed away. She was as small as she'd been in the abandoned classroom, all battle-worn and so determined she looked like she might shatter. Severus could feel the phantom raindrops of her tears on his own hands as he watched them fall in the memory. Ignoring the Weasley boy's pleas to get out of there, she let out a little cry of elation when she felt the faint kick of Memory Severus's pulse beneath her fingers. She set about
manufacturing a Life Debt: sewing up his wounds with Muggle needle and thread, slipping a Bezoar past his lips, dumping Blood Replenishing Potion down his throat.

"That's all I have," she said. "I hope it's enough. I'll send an elf when I get back to the school." Holding Memory Severus's face between her hands, she sobbed out, "Goodbye Severus," before she and her baffled companions ran back into the fight.

There was no chance Severus could sleep after that. Going back to his classroom to brew something distracting was the only option, really. Bert accompanied him, agreeing with a smile when Severus asked if he'd like to grade his second year essays. The Muppets were every bit as talented at paperwork as Potter had claimed. Bert, in particular, had a knack for Potions and an ability to copy Severus's handwriting that almost made Severus want him to stay on permanently. Almost.

The quiet peace that came with brewing didn't last. Two steps into an attempted improvement of Pepperup, and Granger appeared. Of course she did. She was always there.

"Five extra anti-clockwise stirs at the end," she said once he'd added the Mandrake root. "You perfected that variant last year."

Severus resisted growling at her, but it was a very near thing. He was beginning to doubt her claim that they might have been friends. Surely he wouldn't have wanted to spend this much time with her. More likely, Granger still viewed herself as the patron saint of lost causes. More likely, she thought Severus needed saving.

"What do you want, Granger?" he asked.

"To brew something, if that's all right. I can't sleep. When I can't sleep, brewing helps."

No, he thought. Leave me in peace for a change.

What came out instead was, "Make yourself useful and brew something for the Hospital Wing, then." He gave a lazy wave in the direction of one of the student benches. "Save me the bother."

For some reason, she looked back and forth between him and the seat he'd indicated before she began to gather the ingredients for Skele-Gro. He wondered if it had been where she'd sat when she'd been his student.

With half of his attention on her and half on his potion, Severus tried to decide if he thought Granger was pretty. That she would never be a great beauty was plain. She didn't have the kind of obvious good looks that made strangers catch their breath and turn their heads. If he closed his eyes, he found he could picture the exact constellation of freckles on her collarbone. So damned familiar. But of course she would be. He saw her every day, and she seemed to have turned inflicting herself on his free time into a favourite hobby. It occurred to him how absurd it was, trying to determine a woman's attractiveness with his eyes shut.

Her hair was mad, but Severus thought he liked that about her. Always spiralling and frizzing out of control when she kept everything else so tightly wound. The idea that the curls might frustrate her brought him a tiny glow of joy. Her face was unremarkable, except when she was absorbed in reading or, apparently, brewing. When her mind was engaged, she looked all lit up inside. It made it harder to look away.

And she did have bloody nice legs.
No closer to a decision on the prettiness question, Severus watched her brewing technique. That he had been her teacher was obvious. He saw his influence in her precise chopping and stirring and in the ways she deviated from the standard instructions. Had he mentored her? The memory he'd viewed of her first day in his classroom gave a resounding no to that question. Since she had been in Gryffindor, it seemed doubly unlikely. Especially not once the Dark Lord had risen again, given her parentage and her friendship with Potter. Severus had been surprised to see a Gryffindor tie on Granger in various memories. The old articles he'd read hadn't prepared him for that, though those had mostly been the All Potter Show.

"I'm not sure I would place you in Gryffindor," he said

That maybePRETTY light brought on by brewing grew brighter, tinging her voice with nostalgia.
"You once told me you thought I belonged there."

"My deepest apologies."

"You tried to tell me it wasn't a compliment then, too." Granger looked at him as if he was one of her students, late to class and missing his homework. "Where would you put me instead?"

"I don't know you well enough to say for certain, though I can safely say not Slytherin."

"Why couldn't I be in Slytherin? Because I'm a Muggle-born?"

"No, because even the first years would have eaten you alive."

Granger snorted. "Tell that to Dolores Umbridge."

Because she so obviously wanted him to ask about that statement, he didn't.

Five final anti-clockwise stirs of his potion later (she was right, damn her; it was perfect), Granger asked, "Do you need any memories tonight?"

Severus now had a tidy little stack of memories that—for all of the emotions they inspired—felt like something that had happened to someone else. Like Muggle films he'd watched, starring himself in the role of Severus Snape: double agent. He kept waiting for that moment when he could truly imagine himself as a soldier for the Light. So far, it hadn't happened. For all that he hated the Dark Lord for killing Lily—for all that he didn't give a damn about blood status—he couldn't get to that place where he thought of himself a true member of the Order. Maybe he never had.

If he didn't need these people to get his memories back, Severus thought he would leave them all behind. Including dammably familiar, possibly pretty, omnipresent Granger.

"No, I had one from Filius earlier, and I just watched one from Potter," he said.

"Oh? What did they show you?"

"Filius gave me the Welcome Feast when Dumbledore introduced me as the new Potions professor. Potter gave me my near-death."

"No wonder you couldn't sleep." Granger grimaced. "Teaching and that snake. Poor you."

Severus wondered if that scene in the Shrieking Shack was what her nightmares had been about, back in those days when her magic had called to him. If she'd woken up gasping and crying and thinking his blood was still on her hands.
Throwing a Stasis Charm over her potion, Granger checked her watch. The shifting of her sleeve revealed a raised, whitish scar that looked almost like the letter “D.”

"Past midnight," she said. "Brace yourself. The lilies are coming." Hopping to her feet, she dusted her hands together. "Do you want to come out to the memorial with me? We usually go late at night or early in the morning. You like to visit on the anniversary, but you hate going there when there's any sort of crowd."

Even though he resented being told what he liked, Severus decided to accompany her. He had nothing better to do. She led him out of the castle and across the silent grounds. Only the weak glow of the waxing crescent moon lit their path. She didn't bother to cast Lumos; her feet knew the way. Severus stumbled a couple of times, but he refused to need the assistance of a spell if Granger didn't.

The grey stone memorial jutted out of the ground near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Finally, Granger cast a Lumos. Her white wandlight revealed likenesses of the fallen that had been painted on the outer wall of the circular memorial. Everyone had been captured doing something they'd loved in life. Someone Granger introduced as Colin Creevey photographed passersby. Fred Weasley—one of those twins Severus had seen trying to sneak into Knockturn Alley—set off fireworks. Remus Lupin stood back to back with his definitely pretty, much younger wife and duelled unseen assailants.

How on earth had the wolf ended up with a witch like that?

Severus passed by faces known and unknown until he found her. Charity piped icing onto a tray of lopsided cupcakes. Her face lit up with a smile as Severus approached. Though she was as flat as a portrait, she held her rocky treats out to him as if expecting him to chip a tooth by eating one out of politeness. If they'd been friends as long as the letters suggested, she should have known better.

Passing through the stone felt like a warmer version of a Disillusionment Charm—like stepping under a heated waterfall. Inside, names decorated the walls. The sky above the circle was always blue, always bright, always hopeful. Lumos wasn't needed there. Trinkets for lost loved ones decorated the ground: bouquets, letters, photos, cuddly toys. Had Severus not acquired a brand new Life Debt, he wondered whether those whom Granger called "the bloody lily-bearers" would have left their offerings for him at this place. He hoped Granger would have had the decency to vanish the flowers for him, if they had.

With a precise flourish, Granger conjured bunch after bunch of yellow zinnias. She placed her offerings beneath the names of those she'd loved, To Severus's consternation, this included Remus Lupin.

At least Sirius Black didn't warrant flowers. Severus wasn't sure what he would have done if Granger had offered up one of her posies to Black's memory.

"Are you responsible for the potted zinnia in my room?" he asked.

Granger shook her head. "I wasn't aware you had one. I've only been as far as your sitting room."

"Have you now? That's good. I'd hate to think I've been viewing memories of painful near-death experiences and teaching when I could have been viewing memories of a witch in my bedroom."

"No memories of that sort will be forthcoming from me," she said with a hushed laugh and roll of her eyes towards that blue, blue charmed sky. "I can promise you that."
As she was apparently so keen on poking her nose into his life, did she know who *was* in possession of such memories? Surely there must have been someone. He was nearly fifty.

"Lucius will be pleased," Severus said.

Her hands went to her hips in a gesture he thought he could have recognised without the aid of a Pensieve. "Why?" she asked. "Because you haven't sullied yourself with me?"

"No, because he bet Draco that I hadn't been, in Draco's words, fucking you."

Shifting closer, Granger swatted his arm with the back of her hand. "At least have the decency to stand near Fred's name if you're going to use language like that in a war memorial. He'd appreciate it the most." Curiosity—so obvious it nearly sparkled in the air between them—softened her voice. "Draco thought you had been?"

"Apparently, though I can't imagine why."

Her silence felt louder than his. When Granger went quiet, Severus could hear her thinking, if not the actual thoughts themselves. Tilting his head back, he read every name on the surrounding walls. So many people lost in one battle. So many who had died while Severus survived.

"Why me?" he asked without really meaning to.

"What do you mean?"

"I know why that Skeeter woman thinks you saved me, but why did you, really?" Severus waved his arms at the names. "Why me instead of any of these people?"

"Apart from the fact that I knew no one else would realise you deserved saving?"

"Apart from that, yes."

Granger gave a sort of half-smiling cringe. "Honestly, I think a big part of it was to prove to you that you were wrong and I could do it."

Severus wasn't sure whether laughing in a war memorial was any better than using profanity. He did it anyway.
The lack of any unusual emotions was Severus's first clue that the memory didn't actually involve him. The whole scene was hollow, completely barren of any forgotten feelings waiting to leap out and take him by surprise.

The second clue was the cheap, rumpled black wig stuck to the head of the figure beneath the writhing woman.

Granger had warned him about a deluge of lilies. She had not sufficiently prepared him for the delivery of a wisp of Pensieve memory that featured a stranger doing unspeakable things to what was blatantly a life-sized Severus Snape doll. The enormous nose (half as big as the damned thing's head) and sloppily painted-on scowl were, frankly, insulting.

After yanking himself out of the memory, Severus waved his wand over it in the most furious Evanesco he'd ever cast. He would not be returning that to his mystery fake paramour. Stalking out of his quarters, he aimed his rapid steps towards the Great Hall. He really should have had some caffeine before viewing any memories. The flowery letter with its proclamations about wild summers together would have tipped him off if he'd first pried himself from sleep with enough coffee.

Minerva glanced up from her breakfast as he approached the head table. "Severus? Is something wrong?"

"From now on, you are going to verify whether people are trustworthy and known to me before I view their memories."

"Oh, dear." She had the temerity to smirk. "It sounds like there's a story there."

"Not one you want to hear, believe me."

Ignoring the platters of food, Severus focused on pouring as much black coffee down his throat as possible. The front page of the Prophet didn't improve his mood. That odious Skeeter woman had written about his accident, announcing to the entire Wizarding World that he was an easy target. She'd also heavily implied that he'd either been up to something Dark or he had been successfully hiding his incompetence at Potions for the past thirty years. The accident was, of course, all his fault according to Skeeter. Severus made it through less than half a cup of coffee before Granger plopped down next to him and started yammering.

"So, I was thinking we should come back down here around two, if you want to swing by my quarters at ten to," she said. "Oh, wait. You haven't been to my quarters yet, have you? Never mind. I'll come to you, then."

"I thought people were supposed to arrive at half past one. And why would I need your assistance to find my way to the Great Hall? Are you also going to tie my shoes and cut up my food for me? Even at age twenty, I was an adult. I don't need you to micro-manage my life."

"Oh. Sorry." Staring down at her hands, Granger fiddled with the silver bracelet that always rested on her right wrist. The attached charms made a quiet jangling sound, like miniature windchimes. "We usually sneak in together right before it starts. You hate sitting there for too long. I think it's because—"

"Stop telling me what I like, Granger. I can decide for myself." Severus let the ugly words trapped
behind his teeth spring free, ignoring the feeble inner voice that whispered for him to wait, to think before he spoke. "I'm starting to wonder if my memories were simply crowded out of my brain by your incessant chatter and your apparent inability to leave me alone for more than two seconds at a time. It's quite possible that my mind shut down in an attempt to escape the dubious pleasure of your company."

He knew the expression that flickered over her face: the glassy sheen of hurt in her eyes and the slight tremble of her lips that was quickly pushed away by something hard and unyielding.

"Right," she said. The single, icy syllable sounded walled in by her Occlumency shields—the ones a different Severus had taught her to use. "I'll let you be, then. When you need more memories, you know where to find me."

With that, she picked up her giant mug of coffee and shuffled down the table to sit next to Longbottom. Something both foreign and familiar carved a hole in Severus's chest: a regret that somehow belonged to both his 20-year-old and his 49-year-old selves. One of Longbottom's large, callused hands squeezed Granger's shoulder. Longbottom pressed a whiskery kiss to her cheek in that easy way that spoke of decades of friendship.

Longbottom really needed to shave his beard, Severus thought. It looked ridiculous on his too-round, too-friendly face. Like trying to make a unicorn or a marshmallow look rough.

Ernie tutted and gave Severus a look of grandfatherly disappointment. Severus ignored him.

Granger didn't look back at Severus. She heaped fruit and yogurt into a bowl, sprinkled it with granola, and chatted and smiled with Longbottom as if it was how she spent every morning. Severus picked at a plate of eggs and toast and vanished the expected lilies when a flurry of owl wings delivered them.

He told himself that the unpleasant tug he felt was just the Life Debt.

Granger was right. Severus should have arrived later. There was nowhere to sit with his back to the wall, for one thing. He hadn't realised it would be something he wanted, but as soon as he sat out in the open he felt twitchy and anxious—like his inability to see in all directions at once made him itch all over. For another thing, people kept turning in what they probably thought was a subtle way to look at him. Whispers buzzed back and forth. Apparently, Severus showing up this early was something of a novelty. Scaring them off with a glare was easy enough, but more swiveled and gawked. It was a hydra with a penchant for idiotic stares.

Without Severus in tow, Granger didn't bother with tardiness. She appeared not long after him, as suddenly as if she'd Apparated, and motioned for a surprised Ronald Weasley and Potter to make space for her on their bench at the front. At first, the gap they created was too large. They left room for Severus, not realising he was already glowering from the back row.

Weasley draped an arm over Granger's shoulders and leaned closer to say something. Whatever her response was, it made him frown. He surveyed the surrounding benches, but Longbottom placed a placating hand on his shoulder and murmured something that made Weasley relax again—albeit reluctantly.

On Potter's other side sat the newest redheaded Mrs Potter. Their younger boy played on the floor at her feet, ramming a toy Muggle tractor into her ankles and then scrambling up onto his knees to pat her pregnant belly in apology. The older son abandoned his father's lap to climb straight onto Granger's. Severus couldn't imagine why she grinned as she accepted the boy's sticky kiss on her
cheek.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Severus examined his feelings towards the row of people. There was just a sliver of irritation when he focused on Longbottom, Weasley, and Mrs Potter. Like the lingering spectre of what he'd thought of them when they'd been children. Now, he thought he mostly felt neutral towards them. Potter was best not contemplated. Granger was still… whatever she was. Severus thought he might not entirely loathe the two little boys—Lily's grandchildren. *Grandchildren.* Many of his peers were now *grandparents.* How unsettling.

At the start of the ceremony, the Minister for Magic held up his arms and asked the crowd to join him in two minutes of silence. The heavy quiet made Severus's mind wander; he struggled to focus appropriately on the passing of people he couldn't even remember. Again and again, his gaze returned to Granger. The little boy in her lap had as much tendency to be silent as most little boys of Severus's acquaintance. He squirmed and murmured in Granger's ear and blithely ignored her attempts to shush him.

Catching sight of Severus, the boy beamed at him and tried to wriggle out of Granger's grasp. Potter had to catch his spawn to keep him from running off. One of Severus's time-tested sneers only made the boy giggle. What a bizarre child.

"We are here not only to honour those who gave their lives in the Second Wizarding War," the Minister for Magic said in his deep, rumbling voice, "but all wars. As we remember the fallen, we also hope for peace in our world and the Muggle world. It is up to all of us to teach our children about the mistakes of the past. We are responsible to see to it that blood prejudice is eradicated so that such mistakes never happen again."

Over fifty wizards and witches approached the front of the hall by some unspoken cue. As one, they conjured red poppies and sent the flowers floating up to join together in a wreath behind where the head table usually sat. Granger was among them, Lily's eldest grandson balanced on her hip. She let the boy raise the flower in the air and let it go.

Strange, that they used such a Muggle symbol of remembrance. Apart from the use of magic, the whole thing reminded Severus of the way Cokeworth had observed the Muggle Remembrance Day when he was a child.

Once the wreath was in place, people began to circulate. Prefects from each House had been charged with collecting for charities such as the funds for war orphans and displaced Muggle-borns. There was no basket for S.P.E.W. Perhaps Granger had given it up. Severus found the bit of wall with the best view of the whole hall and rested his back against it.

A few brave souls attempted to engage him in conversation. Severus would have rebuffed them, but they had memories to offer. After glancing at Minerva (who nodded in approval of each potential memory donor), Severus placed the mist into conjured vials and labelled them with the name of the owner.

Every last person, it seemed, wanted to show him a moment from the war. Did these people not appreciate that he had lost nearly three decades of memories? The war had lasted for three years. There was much more that needed to be put back than skirmishes and subterfuge.

And far too many people asked Severus where Granger was. That answered the question about whether he'd spent much time with her when he was fully himself, at least.

"Let me guess," a stocky man with flaming-red hair said as he sidled up to Severus. "Everyone keeps giving you memories from the war and depressing the hell out of you?"
Whatever exasperation Severus had felt towards this man when he had been one of Severus's students had not been dulled by time. Severus felt instantly on guard at the sight of him, as if the man's mere presence could cause any cauldrons in the vicinity to explode.

"Something like that," Severus said.

The man grinned. "Thought so. I'm George Weasley, by the way. And don't worry." He shifted the veil of his bright hair aside to reveal a missing ear. "I won't be subjecting you to the memory of when you did this. I have a much better one for you."

Severus looked to Minerva for confirmation of George's trustworthiness. Narrowing her eyes, Minerva hesitated for what seemed like a very long time before she nodded. Hmm.

"What memory is it?" Severus asked as George presented the vial to him with a theatrical flourish.

"Something happy." He looked around as if he'd misplaced something. "Hey, where's Hermione?"

At that moment, Granger stood talking with the Minister for Magic and the Potters. She seemed fine without Severus's company. Not that he was looking.

"No idea," Severus lied. "I'm not her keeper. If you'll excuse me."

Abandoning his perfect spot on the wall, Severus headed towards the opposite side of the room from Granger and the Potters. His new leaning spot inadvertently placed him within earshot of a conversation between Ronald Weasley and Longbottom.

"I was talking to Kingsley earlier," Ronald said. "He reckons Percy is going to win."

"Wow." Longbottom's teeth flashed white through his absurd beard as he smiled. "Really?"

"Mhm. Sometimes I wonder if he should have been in Slytherin. Have you seen him? I don't think a single member of the Wizengamot has escaped being cornered by him today. Only Perce would see a memorial service as an opportunity to advance his career goals. I swear he'll be Minister for Magic when Kingsley retires. Especially if he accomplishes what everyone else thought was impossible."

Longbottom's voice softened and warmed. "You know that's not why he's doing it."

"I know," Ronald whispered. "So, assuming he does win… Were you serious?"

"Of course I was."

What, exactly, Longbottom was serious about, Severus didn't get to hear. Ronald noticed Severus's presence. His face twisted as if he'd taken a bite of Gurdyroot.

"Snape," Ronald said.

"Weasley."

Longbottom groaned in that long-suffering way people had of doing when they knew their friend was about to do something stupid. Severus suspected Longbottom had many occasions for such a groan.

"Has Hermione told you about her parents yet?" Ronald asked.

"Ron," Longbottom hissed.
"What about Granger's parents?" Severus asked.

"Let's just say you have more in common with them than you might think, given that they're Muggles. Here." He jerked a strand of memory from his head and crammed it into a vial. "You can see for yourself."

"Oh, look, there's Seamus," Longbottom said in a falsely bright voice. He hooked his arm through Ronald's. "Let's go say hello, Ron. See you later, Snape."

Severus wasn't left in peace for very long after their departure. Mere seconds later, a woman with long, dark hair approached and flashed him an enigmatic smile.

"Hello, Professor," she said.

Severus couldn't decide how he felt about her. His emotions switched back and forth between aggravation and the barest hint of approval, like she was two different people.

"Hello."

He'd given up asking people for their names. Either they volunteered the information themselves or they carried on talking as if they thought he knew. Being bombarded with so many names at once left him with little hope of remembering all of them, even if he'd cared enough to try.

"Parvati Patil," the woman said. She tilted to one side to look at the empty space next to him, and Severus knew what was coming next. "Where's Hermione?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Hmm. Well, anyway, I hear you're in need of memories. I have one for you, if you'd like it."

"That depends. Is it about the war?"

"Nope. Not at all. It did happen during the war, but it's about something else entirely. It's just something that has always puzzled me. I've never been able to make sense of it. I wondered if giving it to you now might inspire you to finally explain it to me when you get your memories back."

"I doubt it."

She chuckled and brought her wand to the side of her head. "It was worth a try."

Hermione let herself be swept up in Kingsley's story about Tonks's first day on the job as an Auror. Fond smiles dawned without effort in spite of the occasional glance she could feel from a pair of dark eyes. She refused to cry or mope around. It wasn't Severus pushing her away. Not really. It was a near-stranger with Severus's face. And yet, he'd known exactly which buttons to press.

Peeking at Severus out of the corner of her eye, Hermione chewed on the inside of her cheek. How she wished he was his older self. The one she had sat almost knee-to-knee with in his office during her sixth year, his eyes locked on hers. The one who had told her in that deep voice that he would not hurt her. The one she'd had long, rambling conversations with about Memory Charms and ethics and Muggle literature and protection spells and wards and she didn't even remember what else. The one who had been inside her head and knew her.

It was a strange feeling, missing someone who was technically right in front of her. A bit like
Harry's description of looking into the Mirror of Erised. Like that vision of Harry's parents, Severus seemed close enough to touch, but it was an illusion.

Well, this simulacrum of Severus could shove her away all he wanted. The real Severus would be back to himself eventually. It would happen even if Hermione had to hold him face-down in the Pensieve until he'd seen enough memories to build that bridge. She wouldn't let him forget everything forever. She'd had quite enough of being forgotten.

George broke her out of her thoughts as his arms wrapped tight around her in one of those Weasley hugs that felt like summers at the Burrow.

"So," George said. "I have to warn you. Neville says that Ron gave Snape a memory of your parents."

She sighed. "Of course he did."

George gave her that look he'd given her years ago—the one she'd seen through the muddling haze of alcohol. Pity still looked all wrong on his face.

"It's weird, isn't it?" he said in a too-airy tone.

"What is?"

"Ron getting all stroppy with Snape because Snape is giving you the cold shoulder."

Hermione laughed. "It is. How times have changed."

Severus emptied his pockets of the vials of memories he'd collected during the service. Choosing two for that day's viewing wasn't difficult. The ones about the war did not appeal. Ronald Weasley's had vague threats of guilt attached to it. George Weasley had promised something joyful for a change. Parvati Patil had provided a mystery. He decided to start with George.

Diving into George's memory brought him to a grand room with a bright blue ceiling, a row of fireplaces, and a shiny wooden floor. The Ministry Atrium. Twinkling fairy lights draped over the gilt fireplace mantles and floated near the tall fountain. The fountain had changed design since the last time he'd seen it. Now, all of the statue's figures were on the same level. The centaur, goblin and house elf no longer gazed adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Not at all representative of the current status of other magical beings in the wizarding world, but Severus thought Granger likely approved of the gesture.

George paced back and forth, patting a pocket on his formal robes every few steps. On his eighth or ninth turn, a younger Granger tumbled from one of the fireplaces. Her masses of curls had been smoothed into tame spirals with some sort of magic that made Severus inexplicably want to cast Finite Incantatum. The silver sparkles dotted over her deep blue dress robes gave her the appearance of being clothed in the night sky. Severus estimated her to be in her early twenties. This Granger had a softer, fuller figure than the one Severus knew.

"Hey," George said, his face shifting from nervous grimace to welcoming grin. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm Harry's date, since Ginny is playing that charity match." Balancing on her tiptoes, Granger kissed his cheek. "Where's Angelina?"
"Already in the ballroom. I was, too, but—"

George's words cut off as another fireplace flared green and spat out Severus's younger self, clad in black dress robes. Instead of hiding his face behind his hair, he'd pulled it back for a change. At the sight of George and Granger, Memory Severus looked ready to dart back into the fireplace and spin away to anywhere else. Severus felt something nervous and not entirely pleased curl around him.

"Severus!" Granger said. He couldn't work out whether she was dismayed or delighted. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Evening, Granger." Memory Severus greeted her with a nod. "Likewise."

"This is perfect," George said, rubbing his hands together in the manner of a classic Muggle film villain. "I need your help—both of you. No one will ever suspect the two of you."

Memory Severus scoffed. "I'm quite certain many people suspect me of some nefarious deed or other most of the time."

This only made George laugh.

"What do you want, George?" Granger asked. "It's not something that's going to force me to tell your mother on you, is it?"

George's grin was like a secret held between the two of them.

"Nope," George said. "Though she'll find out soon enough. It won't get me into any trouble with her. Quite the opposite. You two are going to help me propose to Angelina."

Granger beamed at him in a way that almost settled Severus's opinion on whether or not she was pretty.

"Why on earth would you need my assistance for that?" Memory Severus asked. "Surely getting on bended knee is simple enough that even you can manage it, Weasley. It doesn't even require a speech. Four words will do the job." Raising a hand, he counted the words off on his fingers. "Will. You. Marry. Me."

"No, thank you, Professor. I'm sorry to break your heart, but I'm in love with someone else."

George happily ignored the darkening expression on Memory Severus's face. "I need help sneaking into position to set up the fireworks, obviously."

Memory Severus and Granger spoke in unison.

"Predictably flashy and vulgar," he said.

"Is it really a good idea to play a prank at Angelina's work party?" she asked.

Patting that pocket again, George shrugged. "Would you expect anything less from me? And don't worry, Hermione, it'll be great. They'll love it. If Angelina hopes to survive married life with me, she'll have to expect things like this."

"I guess that's true enough," Granger said. "All right. I'll help, but if we get caught, I have never met you before and am in no way a part of your schemes."

"Excellent. Snape?"
At first, Severus was certain he would refuse. Then Granger brushed her fingers against his sleeve.

"Come on, Severus," she said. "What hope do two Gryffindors have of being stealthy without you there to help?"

"Says the woman who broke into Gringotts."

"With Harry and Ron in tow, no less, but I doubt we'll have a dragon to help us make our escape this time."

Gringotts? Dragons? Severus would have to find out the story behind that.

In spite of Memory Severus's words, the furrows in his brow smoothed out ever-so-slightly. His gaze shifted back and forth between Granger and the nearby bank of lifts.

"Very well," he said. "I suspect even Hogwarts isn't large enough for me to have any sort of peace for the foreseeable future if I refuse. I'll help, but Weasley, you should bear in mind that I am very much capable of performing all three Unforgivable Curses. Should your actions result in us getting caught, there will be consequences."

"Noted. And hey, if you ever want to genuinely propose to anyone yourself, make sure you work that bit about the Unforgivables into your speech. Gives you a real mysterious, dangerous air. Plus, who would dare refuse you? I'd steal it for myself if I thought Angelina would believe me." George motioned towards the golden security gate. "Right. Let's go."

After passing through the gate and having their wands registered by the guard, George led them past the bank of lifts to a concealed door. A wave of a badge from his pocket opened it, revealing a dark, narrow corridor.

"Percy," George said, though neither Memory Severus nor Granger asked for an explanation. They all marched inside as if they believed they had every right to be there. "He doesn't exactly realise that he's helping with this. I reckoned he'd panic halfway through and confess all to his boss. Here we are."

The service lift at the end of the hall was almost big enough for two people to stand comfortably. There was much shifting around and bickering before Memory Severus, Granger, and George ended up squeezed in together with Granger sandwiched between the two men.

"This is cosy," George said. "It's just as well I'm not married yet, isn't it? I'm fairly certain this would violate my wedding vows in some way. I hope you both still respect me in the morning."

"Unforgivables, Weasley," Memory Severus said with a growl. "Unforgivables."

Granger had her back to George, her front pressed up against Memory Severus. Even though he could pass through the forms of the three of them, Severus found it difficult to get a good angle to see her face. He thought she might be blushing. She stared straight ahead at Memory Severus's chest while he looked up at the ceiling as if attempting to wandlessly cast one of the aforementioned Unforgivable Curses on it.

Severus struggled to determine the reasons behind what he felt. Aggravation was present, but nowhere near as much as Memory Severus pretended. There was also curiosity; he wanted to see how George's plan worked out, whether he would admit it or not. Both of those things made sense; the causes were plain. But beneath it all was a peculiar twist of conflict and a flutter of guilt-tinged expectation. He couldn't work out why.
The lift released them with a ding into a space that was shrouded in black curtains. It looked very similar to a theatre's backstage area.

"Hmm," George said, tapping his lower lip with his index finger. "I can't decide which one of you would be the better choice to stay here as lookout. Who would be more likely to succeed at distracting any nosy passersby with seduction? My gut instinct is Hermione, but that might just be my personal preferences talking."

This time, Severus was certain. Granger blushed.

Memory Severus rolled his eyes. "I did not come along on this preposterous mission just to be relegated to being the bloody lookout. Granger, you stay here." He paused. "Don't feel you need to resort to Weasley's suggestion if anyone shows up. Just channel Sybil and tell them that story she told us the other day about her holiday to Cornwall. They'll soon lose the will to live and leave you alone."

George and Memory Severus cast Disillusionment Charms on themselves and crept up a ladder and onto a balcony that overlooked a ballroom. Wizards and witches twirled around the dance floor, drank sparkling punch, and chatted in groups next to towering evergreen trees.

Setting up the fireworks near the edge of the balcony was the work of a moment—a silent moment, to avoid attracting attention. The whole thing seemed, to Severus, like something George could have easily accomplished on his own. Or he could have cast the Disillusionment Charm on the fireworks themselves and levitated them into place from within the ballroom with little chance of being caught.

Severus wondered if George, having lived most of his life as a twin, struggled to do the important things without a partner in crime.

"I suppose I should congratulate you, Weasley," Memory Severus said as they descended the ladder towards Granger. "I'm not going to, mind."

"I haven't got a yes yet."

"If Miss Johnson had any sense, she'd say no. As she's very much a Gryffindor, I think you'll be safe on that count."

George chuckled. "Thanks."

Granger waited for them with no seduction victims scattered at her feet.

"Well, that should do it," George said with yet another pat of his pocket. "Thanks, you two. Wish me luck."

The memory faded as George bounded off to find the woman Severus assumed had become his wife. He didn't get to hear what Granger said to Memory Severus as she stepped closer to him.

Severus didn't give himself time to ruminate over George's memory. Swishing it back into its vial, he dumped Parvati's offering into the Pensieve and rushed in.

He recognised the surroundings right away: a corridor near the Prefects' bathroom. A teenage Parvati strolled down the hall, in no apparent hurry to be anywhere.
As soon as the muffled sound of singing reached Severus's ears, the back of his neck prickled as if he was being watched. There was no one there when he whirled around. His lungs refused to draw a full breath; they were reduced to panicked, rapid gasps. All-consuming, inexplicable dread swarmed through him and set his pulse careening out of control. Memory Severus seemed similarly afflicted; he stood next to the statue of Boris the Bewildered, hands clenched into fists, looking torn between fight and flight.

The voice was off-key, but it didn't otherwise sound malicious. It was light and girlish. The thunder of pouring bathwater provided the background vocals. The song itself seemed innocuous. Almost certainly Muggle, but not one Severus could remember hearing before. Nothing about the situation should have been frightening.

Noticing Parvati's approach, Memory Severus drew himself up to his full height and marched away with muttered threats about a deduction in House points if she kept gawping at him.

And that was it. The Pensieve kicked him out. Memory over. Severus stared at the misty substance as if it might offer an explanation. He certainly didn't have one of his own.

What the hell had been so terrifying about that?
Warm Memories

It was the Life Debt. It had to be. That was why Severus felt this way. That was why everything seemed too silent, why things like the sound of his own breathing and the rustle of pages turning under his thumb annoyed him without the company of Granger's chatter.

The purple swirl of Dreamless Sleep tempted him from the bottle on his bedside table. Ignoring it, Severus turned his pillow over to the cool side and shut his eyes. If he had another nightmare, that was more information about his life up to this point. He'd already survived all of it once before. He could handle it… unless his magic had been calling out to Granger as he slept. That would be far less tolerable.

He wondered if she'd felt the nightmares that had plagued his sleep all week. Going to the kitchens to find out if she waited there with tired eyes and a cup of tea had crossed his mind more often than he wanted to admit.

Bit by bit, exhaustion won out over Severus's whirring thoughts. He slipped into the sort of light sleep that could be frightened away by a whisper.

The usual silver edge framed his dream, but instead of Dumbledore pleading for his own death or children being taught to torture one another, Severus saw a woman with curly brown hair standing next to him in the Hogwarts staff room. Her face was blurred, as if the laughter that flowed back and forth between them had made his eyes well up with tears of mirth. She brought a glass full of a pink, sparkling drink to her mouth. Severus couldn't identify the liquid, but he remembered the honey-sweet, lightly floral taste of it.

"She did not!" the woman said.

"Oh, she did. I watched it happen in this very room."

"I never thought Sybil had it in her."

"You underestimate how much she loathed the toad. Frankly, I'm amazed that all she did was slip laxatives into Umbridge's coffee."

"It's too bad I didn't draw Sybil's name in the gift exchange. I could have given her a Pensieve memory of Umbridge being dragged away by the centaurs."

"Ah, yes." Severus chuckled. "Seeing that was a shining moment in the otherwise tedious process of teaching you Occlumency."

Her retort died before it reached her lips. In the air above them, green leaves and distinctive white berries formed out of thin air. Mistletoe. Both of them groaned.

There was something Severus knew he was supposed to do at this point. Unlike the words that had flowed from his lips without any thought on his part, the dream didn't provide an answer. It was a dance he'd repeated with this woman many times, but he'd forgotten the steps. Was he supposed to kiss her? Banish the interfering plant life? Both options seemed equally likely.

Raising her wand, she said, "Do you want to do the honours this time, or shall I?"

Severus looked down at her face. Everything shifted into focus all at once. Of course she was Granger. The hair and the location should have given it away.
"I'll do it," Severus croaked out. "Reducto!"

Severus's eyes fluttered open. No exploding mistletoe. No Granger. Just the stone ceiling of his bedroom and a half-Kneazle with a knack for stealing bed space. He wondered, as he dragged himself through the routine of brushing his teeth and preparing for his swim, whether he would feel the same sense of warm contentment that had permeated most of the dream if he viewed the Pensieve memory of the real event.

Granger didn't run around the lake that morning. Whether she had on previous mornings since their falling out, Severus didn't know; he'd skipped every swim except this one. Upon entering the Great Hall for breakfast, he paused. Telling himself that he was only doing it to ask her for the memory he'd dreamed about, he sat in Longbottom's customary seat and waited for Granger.

"Good lad," Ernie dared to say, patting Severus's shoulder. Once again, Severus ignored him.

The chair next to Severus scraped against the flagstones. He suddenly found his porridge very interesting.

"Hermione won't be in this morning," a very masculine, very not-Granger voice said. Longbottom. "She's having a breakfast meeting in her chambers."

A meeting? What sort of meeting did a History of Magic teacher need to have? Well, she was Head of Gryffindor. It was possible that a student in her House was struggling enough to merit a conference with the parents. More than possible. That any of the miscreants passed their NEWTs was something of a miracle.

"I don't recall asking," Severus said, infusing his voice with just the right amount of indifference.

"Who's she meeting with?" Ernie asked.

Longbottom's beard twitched in a way that might have indicated a smirk. "A friend."

Severus pushed the remainder of his porridge away. Since Granger was apparently otherwise occupied, he supposed he would have to resort to one of the vials that sat next to his potted zinnia. Ronald Weasley's memory would do.

Granger sat sandwiched between Potter and Weasley on a squashy green sofa. Both men wore red Auror robes and a semi-panicked expression that spoke of being far out of their depth. It wasn't hard to see why. Granger sniffled into a tissue, her words barely discernible through her heaving sobs.

"Th-they said it was time to g-give up," she said.

"The Healers?" Potter asked.

"Yeah. There ar-aren't enough memories. I don't know if my p-parents are going to want to talk to me at all anymore. It was hard enough t-to convince them of their true identities and to view the m-memories."

Potter and Weasley shared a helpless look over the top of Granger's head. They both had an arm around her, and they'd swaddled her in a thick quilt, as if the patchwork could act as armour against her emotional trauma.
"I'll make you a cup of tea," Weasley said with the conviction of someone who believed tea to be the cure for everything. Pressing a kiss to the top of Granger's head, he extricated himself from the three person tangle and padded on bare feet to the kitchen area. A ginger cat with fur almost as mad as Granger's hair stalked after Weasley in a decidedly creaky way.

The space was tiny. Weasley reached the kettle in three of his long strides. It was all open, the only clear boundary between sitting room, kitchen, and bedroom being a wooden screen that partially hid her bed. Two dark wooden doors stood closed on the far wall. Not her quarters at Hogwarts, Severus thought as he turned to look through the leaded glass windows. The view was all wrong. Outside was a dense green forest that appeared to be determined to invade the little house. Tendrils of flowering vine had crept through a crack in a window frame and climbed up the whitewashed wall towards the beamed ceiling. A Pensieve—the same Pensieve Severus was using now, unless he was mistaken—sat in one corner.

Bizarrely, there was only one small bookshelf in the whole place, next to the bed. Severus almost wondered if it was Weasley's home, not Granger's, when he noticed that detail.

"You know you did the right thing, Hermione," Potter said softly. "Snape even said so." He sighed. "I wish I would have thought to ask the Order to send them into hiding with my family. I should have. I'm so sorry."

Family? Oh. Of course. Petunia. Severus thought most fates would be preferable to hiding anywhere with her.

Granger let out a wet, gurgling laugh. "They definitely wouldn't talk to me if I'd subjected them to a y-year with the Dursleys."

Pulling her knees up to her chest beneath the quilt, she rested her head on Potter's shoulder. Why were they always so physically demonstrative with each other? Surely that wasn't appropriate behaviour between a married man and his single female friend.

Wait, was Granger single? Severus hadn't attempted to find out.

"They wouldn't have gone, or I'd have suggested it myself," Granger said. "They n-ever would have gone without me."

"And I needed you with me."

"Harry James Potter, don't you dare start that. I couldn't have been anywhere else."

A fist rapped against the door three times. The cat lumbered towards the noise, but Potter beat him to answering it. With the appearance of Severus's slightly younger self, the memory became textured with new emotions. He'd worked out by now that while the emotions he felt in his day-to-day life were how 49-year-old Severus would react, what he felt when immersed in the Pensieve was what had cours ed through him in that moment, when the memories had been created. This time, there was unhappy surprise (presumably at being greeted by Potter) that was pushed aside by the sharpness of concern as Memory Severus took in Granger's tear-soaked state.

In one hand, Memory Severus held an enormous jar full of silvery clouds. A vat of memories.

Granger stood up, the quilt pooling at her feet. She was wearing lilac pyjamas that were decorated with little pots of ink and quills from various birds. In spite of the baggy pyjamas, Severus could tell that this was the early-20s, fuller-figured Granger from George's memory.

"Severus!" she said. "Hello. I, um…" Her gaze zeroed in on the jar. "What's that?"
Memory Severus stared first at Potter, then—for much longer—at Weasley. Seeming to come to a decision, he stepped into the house and extended the jar to Granger.

"It's for your parents," he said. The cat sniffed the cuff of his trousers and gnawed on one of his shoelaces. For some reason, he allowed it.

"But I thought you only had the one memory of them," Granger said.

"I found more."

Cradling the jar like a newborn baby, she crossed to the Pensieve. Alarm jabbed at Severus's gut as she withdrew a strand of memory from the jar with her wand. Memory Severus remained unruffled, even as she lowered her face towards the Pensieve. She emerged a few minutes later, fresh tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Muffliato," she breathed.

Her spell only encompassed Memory Severus and herself. Severus was left out in the uninformed cold with Potter and Weasley, since the memory belonged to the redhead. Leaning closer, Severus tried to read Granger's lips. The only thing he caught with any degree of certainty was "memories," which didn't help at all.

"I'm guessing he didn't get those in a way that he'd want to discuss in front of a couple of Aurors," Weasley said.

"No, probably not. If she hadn't cast Muffliato, I would have been tempted to suffer from sudden temporary deafness."

"Yeah, me too." Weasley wiggled a finger in his ear for emphasis. Disgusting. "I'd hate to have to lock him up."

Potter looked askance at his friend. "You feeling all right, mate?"

"Oh, I feel fine. And I'd like to continue to feel fine. I don't reckon Hermione would allow that for very long if I arrested Snape." Weasley paused. "She'd turn him in if he did anything too bad, right?"

"Erm."

Granger's spell dissolved. Pivoting on her heel, she launched herself at Potter and clamped her arms around him in a fierce hug. Again with the physical contact. From where he was standing, Severus couldn't see Potter's face beyond the frizzy cloud of Granger's hair.

Potter laughed. "Not that I'm complaining, but what was that for?"

"I desperately wanted to hug Severus, but I didn't think he'd appreciate it, so I'm getting it out of my system on you."

A cocktail of amusement, disappointment, and the barest hint of self-loathing ricocheted against Severus's sternum. Something else followed, smothering the rest: a nervous jitter that felt strangely like a question.

"Of all the people to act as a stand-in for me, Potter is probably the least suitable," Memory Severus said in a flat voice that revealed nothing.
"Next time I'll hug Ron, then," Granger said. Biting her lower lip, she stepped close enough to give Memory Severus's arm a quick squeeze. "Thank you, Severus. I can't tell you what it means that you… This is another Patronus-worthy memory."

A bubble of fondness rose up and popped so quickly, Severus almost missed it. Weasley looked gobsmacked that their former professor had provided Hermione with multiple memories that were happy enough to conjure a Patronus. Potter studied Memory Severus with those green eyes of Lily's that could always see right through him.

"It likely won't work, but I had to try," Memory Severus said. "It seemed a relatively painless way to rid myself of the Life Debt."

The Pensieve pushed Severus back into the real world. Staring down at the vapour of the memory, he wondered whether his attempt had helped Granger's parents. Weasley would have been less irate with Severus if it had. And now she was faced with the memory loss of another person who was clearly close to her. Someone who had pushed her away.

More importantly, it seemed that when Severus was in possession of all of his memories, he valued Granger's friendship. One thing about him that he was certain hadn't changed was the fact that he had few real friends. Losing one because he'd blundered about with insufficient knowledge would be unacceptable.

There was still a bit of time left before the first class of the day. He could go to Granger's classroom, tell her about the mistletoe dream, ask her for the associated memory, and try to sneak back into her good graces.

A few recalcitrant moving staircases and several corridors full of students requiring a deduction in House points later, Severus stood in the doorway of the History of Magic classroom. Seeing Granger bent over a stack of parchment with her ink-stained fingers pushing her hair out of her face and her eyebrows drawn together in concentration felt like one of those foreign memories clicking into place and becoming his. It was like seeing her in her natural habitat.

"Granger," he said.

The smile she offered him was too civil, too distant. It belonged to Sinistra or Trelawney or another colleague who was just a colleague and had never broken any laws for her.

Maybe not Trelawney. There was no eye-roll at the end.

"Can I help you with something, Severus?" she asked.

"I watched a memory from Ronald Weasley." To hell with asking about the mistletoe dream.
"What happened to your parents?"

The question came out softer than he'd anticipated. Like he was revealing a secret instead of requesting information. One of her fingertips traced over her forehead, leaving a smudge of ink.

"I made them forget they ever had a daughter and sent them away, in case Voldemort decided to use them to get to me," she said, walking around her desk and perching on the edge of it. "There was a counter-spell to the charm I used, but it took too long for the war to end and for me to find them in Australia." She shrugged as if it didn't matter a fraction as much as it did. "I knew it was a risk. You even warned me that it would probably happen that way when I asked your advice during an Occlumency lesson. The Healers recommended the same treatment they gave to you: viewing Pensieve memories. The only problem was that Muggles can view the memories, but they can't
Severus winced internally. Being Muggles, he doubted her parents knew many wizards and witches beyond Granger, her friends, the shopkeepers in Diagon Alley, and perhaps one or two professors. Hardly enough to cobble together the lost pieces of two lives.

"I had plenty of early childhood, pre-Hogwarts memories, but not many after I left for school," Granger continued. "None from the time when I was a baby, obviously. And they interacted with other witches and wizards maybe once a year. Everyone was very helpful, giving whatever memories they could. You eventually tried using Legilimency on Muggles who knew them, and then you extracted your memories of seeing their memories."

"That sounds highly illegal."

"Yep. So was Obliviating those Muggles, but you did it anyway." This time, her smile was meant for Severus—for a dear friend. It just wasn't aimed at the Severus who stood front of her. "It didn't work. It might have, if they'd had their own magic to help heal their minds. I don't know." She sighed. "Their memories never formed a bridge. We're on Christmas card terms now. It's better than nothing."

Severus wasn't so sure about that.

"Given your past experiences," he said slowly, weighing each word before he released it, "dealing with my memory loss must be unpleasant."

Shrugging again, Granger avoided his eyes.

Severus's feet took a few steps closer without consulting him on the matter. "You told me on my first day without my memories that you only suspect that we're friends. I find that surprising, considering I apparently risked Azkaban for you."

"Well, you're very inscrutable, you know. You claimed you did it because of the Life Debt."

*And I'm famous for always saying what I mean, am I?* Severus thought.

"Hmm," he said. "I suppose if I'm going to have anyone micromanage my life, it may as well be someone who is *obviously* my friend."

She tilted her head to one side in mock confusion. "You're going to have Lucius do it?"

"Gods, no. Do you have any idea how he'd try to dress me?"

Granger laughed. Hearing the sound on the heels of such a morose topic made a weight lift from Severus's shoulders.

"Are you going to let me dress you, then?" she asked.

"You've already had at least one Patronus-worthy memory from me. I hardly see the need to provide you with another."

"Oh, I've had several." She pinched her lips between her teeth as if trying to hold in a grin. "But I've also had a couple that I might relive if I found myself in the presence of a Dementor, so it balances out."

Severus was absolutely not going to ask her about the memories a Dementor would dredge up for
She checked her watch. "You should probably head to the dungeons. It's almost time for classes to start."

"Right. I'll see you at lunch?" For all that he meant to say it as a statement, the words insisted on coming out as a question. Narcissa was right. He was keeping company with too many Gryffindors.

Crossing her arms, Granger hopped down from her desk. "Is that your way of requesting the dubious pleasure of my company?"

Yes, Severus thought. What he said was, "I would not object to things going back to the way they were. It would, at least, stop people from constantly pestering me with questions about where you are when they see me on my own."

Her answer took far too long to arrive. She stared him down in a way he thought she must have picked up from him. He stared right back, keeping his expression blank.

"All right," she said at last, "but don't think this means you can lash out at me whenever you like. It's understandable that you're a bit overwhelmed with all that's going on, but if you need space, just say so. I generally expect my friends to treat me like... well, like a friend, rather than a nuisance."

Severus allowed a small smile. "As long as you don't try to dress me in pastels or make me carry a ridiculous walking stick, I will."

She squinted. "The walking stick, I'll grant you, but I can't imagine Lucius dressing you in pastels."

"All colours that are not black are pastels."

Granger snorted. "Go to your dungeon, Severus. I'll see you at lunch."

He didn't tell her about the ink smear on her forehead.

His magic always called her Hermione. It crept into her sleep, beckoning to her in his voice, forming impossible words. Blinking her bleary eyes, Hermione stared up at the gauzy canopy of her bed and tried to imagine Severus saying, "Hermione. Hermione. I need you," in his waking hours. Not bloody likely.

Boudica tagged along on the breathless trip to the kitchens. The cat had discovered that Severus's babysitters were easy targets with soft laps and pockets full of treats. Sure enough, Hermione's familiar was settled on Bert's knee and nudging her nose against his palm before Hermione even extended a hand to tickle the pear.

Past the portrait, Hermione found Severus with his usual cup of tea. Everything about his appearance was all sharp angles. He always had been able to cut her.

A cup of tea with no sugar and just a splash of milk sat waiting at her preferred seat. Hermione wondered if he'd noticed how she liked her tea or if it had been something he knew how to do thanks to the muscle memory of performing the action so many times.

Back when their war wounds were still fresh and they'd met here during her seventh year, they had mostly sat without speaking at first. She'd been shocked he'd never given her a detention for showing up after curfew. Eventually, the conversations had started—first a slow trickle, and then a
deluge, until they'd come to the kitchens even when nightmares hadn't made her magic shout at him across the castle. He'd always had her tea ready and waiting for her in those days, too. Maybe the elves had done it.

"Thanks," Hermione said, taking a drink as she sank into her chair. Perfect.

Picking up the teapot to pour himself a second cup, Severus gave a little nod of acknowledgment. She wondered if he'd viewed any of the memories that went along with these nightmares he'd been having.

"Have you seen any interesting memories lately?" she asked.

"Not particularly. George Weasley did give me a somewhat amusing memory from a Ministry Christmas party. You made an appearance."

Hermione's mouth went dry. "I know the one. Which bit did he show you?"

The end of that evening had been when she'd discovered that Severus had attended the party as Raffaella Zabini's date. Since Harry had been waylaid by the usual hangers-on, a constantly grinning, newly engaged George had insisted upon escorting a tipsy Hermione to the Floo. The Atrium had been empty, save for two figures near one of the fireplaces. One had been Severus. His companion had been a woman with dark, curly hair and a seductive smirk. Hermione and George had watched Severus tilt the woman's face up and kiss her slowly, expertly, before he'd Floo'd away with her.

She could still remember that Bludger-to-the-gut feeling that had knocked the air out of her. While she'd stood there with her mouth open, George had chuckled and said, "Snape, you dark horse." One glance at Hermione and his expression had clouded over with sympathy.

"I'm sorry, love," George had said.

"For what?" Her voice had sounded shrill and splintered by the lightness she'd tried to force into it. "Your dancing? It's fine. I'm used to it by now."

It had been a pathetic attempt at a joke, but George had let her get away with it for a change. She'd gone home to Hogwarts, curled up with an elderly Crookshanks, and tried not to examine her reaction too closely. The next morning—and every morning since—she'd put it down to too much drink. A week after that evening, she'd snogged Terry Boot at a different party and had stumbled into her longest, most serious relationship to date.

Severus had never flirted with her. All he'd done was chat with her late into the night and make a few huge, heart-stoppingly beautiful gestures that he'd attributed to his Life Debt. He had no interest in her, and she had no interest in pining after someone again. She had simply been caught off-guard when she'd seen him with Raffaella. That was all.

She dreaded to think how Severus would interpret it, viewing that memory as edited by George.

"The part where we helped him set up for his proposal," Severus said, pulling her out of her thoughts of the past. "Why? What are you afraid he showed me?"

"Oh, nothing. I just drank too much and made a fool of myself on the dance floor with George's help."

The dancing part was true, at least. Severus stared at her in that intense, silent way he had long ago perfected into an art form. Hermione toyed with the otter charm on her bracelet until he finally
looked away.

"Potter sent me a memory via the Muppets." Severus said, twirling a vial between his long fingers. "He said it was his favourite memory of me. Any idea what it might be?"

"Hmm. I have a few suspicions."

"Would you like to find out?"

Severus looked as if he didn't know why he offered. Given the way Hermione's suspicions ran, she didn't know why she accepted.

The drawing room of Grimmauld Place materialised before them. Memory Severus and Harry sat across from each other on the dusty brocade sofas, nursing cups of tea in silence. Harry looked like he was still in the middle of his transformation from the scrawny little boy she'd met on the Hogwarts Express to the man who commanded all of the Aurors in Britain. This memory had happened not long after the war, Hermione guessed. Definitely before Severus had started offering a few answers to Harry's questions about his mother.

A streak of silver light shot through one of the large windows. Hermione's otter Patronus flipped playfully onto its back and swam in circles around Memory Severus. It kissed the end of his hooked nose—she had never told it to do that!—and squealed, "Thank you!" in Hermione's voice before it vanished.

Severus—the one who had entered the Pensieve with her—turned towards Hermione with an eyebrow raised. She motioned for him to pay attention to the memory.

Harry blinked owlishly behind his glasses. "What did you do?"

Shifting in his seat, Memory Severus added more milk to his tea. "I gave her a library."

"Oh. Right." Harry grinned. "That'd do it."

The memory ended there. Hermione sagged with relief. She'd half expected it to be the time when she had seen Severus in his underwear during his post-Nagini convalescence. He'd been so loopy from pain potions that he'd stripped down in that same drawing room and passed out cold on one of the sofas. Harry had found her squeaking and blushing hilarious, and his judgment was highly suspect at times.

"That was barely anything," Severus said. "What did I mean, I gave her a library? Was that your Patronus? It sounded like you."

"It was mine, yes. Erm. I can show you what you meant, if you like. There are three relevant memories, but you're only present in one of them, so it shouldn't break the more than one or two memories per day rule." The same glow of affection that had powered that overly-friendly Patronus turned her lips up into a smile. "It's one of my favourites, too, even if you weren't technically there for the best bit."

After decanting the memories, Hermione joined Severus in the Pensieve again without giving him a chance to object.

"This is my hideout," Severus said as Hawthorn Cottage shimmered into view.
"It is," Hermione said.

It was a continuation of another memory she'd given him. Her younger self scurried up the steps, wand drawn, and opened the front door. God, Hermione had almost forgotten how starved and dirty she'd been.

"Just have a good look around," Hermione said to Severus while Memory Hermione searched every corner for danger. "It'll be different the next time you see it. We're only here so you can spot the difference."

The wintry glow of the moon gave way to yellow firelight as Memory Hermione shakily cast an Incendio at the fireplace and crouched in front of it to thaw her hands. Rifling through the cupboards, she sobbed upon finding them crammed full of potions and tinned food.

"Right, this one should end any second now," Hermione said. "I stopped it before I took a very long bath."

Severus smirked. "Spoilsport."

Hermione was thrown so off-kilter by his teasing murmur that she missed the moment when the scene wavered and shifted into the Hogwarts kitchens. His 49-year-old self would have declared Harry to be his best friend forever before he would've implied that seeing Hermione bathe would be at all appealing. She couldn't imagine him ever making a joke like that. When she shook the surprise away, she saw the two of them sitting in their usual spots, hands wrapped around the comfort of their usual mugs.

"I feel old," Memory Hermione said.

Even though she had been there and knew what was coming, Hermione still expected Memory Severus to make a snarky comment about her being a child. Instead, he nodded.

"You will get used to it," he said. "Eventually."

"I hope not." She dropped her hands to the table. The thump sounded empty to Hermione's ears without the familiar clink of her bracelet. "I don't want to get used to anything I've been dreaming about. I hate it so much. All of it. The blood, the... I hate that the first time I used your first name, it was because I thought you were dying."

"I'd hardly have given you leave to say it otherwise."

"Really? What about after we become colleagues in the autumn? Or if we meet by chance years and years from now? Will you expect me to still call you Professor Snape when I'm 120 and you're 140?"

Memory Severus rolled his eyes. "I expect you will do whatever you please. You always have."

"Severus it is, then." Her smile, weak as it was, was all impertinence.

"I'm still your professor for now, Miss Granger."

"I know, Professor Snape."

"Hmm. Should I expect your dreams to continue to be so inconsiderately noisy when you join the faculty?"
The smile fell. "I don't know." Memory Hermione squirmed and looked down at the polished table. "If I knew how to stop my magic calling out to you, I would."

He hadn't once suggested Dreamless Sleep. When she'd brought it up, he'd told her it was a temporary measure, at best. At worst, it was habit forming. The nightmares would eventually become less frequent, he'd claimed. He'd been right.

"I hope you aren't expecting comfort from me," he said. "My policy when it comes to nightmares among the Slytherins is to send them straight to whichever Prefect I suspect most likely to have heard whispered threats of Hufflepuff from the Sorting Hat."

She laughed. "I'll remember that when I'm a teacher. Speaking of which, I've been thinking about where I'll spend my summers. I was wondering if you'd be willing to sell Hawthorn Cottage to me. I don't want to stay in my parents' house. Not while they're still healing."

Memory Severus frowned at her. "It's not a home. It's a hideout."

"No, I think it's perfect for a home. I don't need much room. I've been keeping my books in a trunk with an undetectable extension charm for ages. Someday I'd like to have a place with a library, but the cottage will do when I'm just starting out. Now, about a price…"

The third memory found them back at the cottage. Memory Hermione Apparated directly into it for the first time as the owner.

"Here we are, Crooks," she said, releasing him from his travelling basket. His beloved, grumpy little face turned up towards her as if he thought he could imprison her in a similar device with the power of his glare. "This is home now. Go on, look around."

Everything was much the same as when Severus and Hermione had seen it last, with one exception: a new door. Severus spotted the difference right away. He wandered over to it and watched Memory Hermione cast all manner of detection spells.

It was an ordinary door. Not even warded. Practically Muggle. Hermione's stomach did a flip as her younger self cautiously turned the handle. The room behind the door was anything but ordinary to Hermione. Constructed from the sort of charms that had been used to enlarge the Burrow, it had empty shelves stretching up to the vaulted ceiling. A library of her very own.

Memory Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God," she whispered through her fingers. Jumping up and down on the spot, she swung her wand in a wide, joyful arc. "Expecto Patronum!"

With the appearance of her otter, bright and instant, the Pensieve ejected them.

"That was one of the nicest, most thoughtful things anyone has ever done for me," Hermione said. "When I tried to thank you in person, you just said something about being compelled by the Life Debt, of course."

Severus huffed out an approximation of a laugh. "Naturally."

Straightening his sleeves on his wrists, he looked a bit discomfited for a few seconds before he levelled her with another one of those stares. Beneath his scrutiny, she felt seventeen again, reciting textbooks and babbling and trying to keep him out of her mind.

"I should try to get some more sleep before it's time to get up," she said. "Goodnight."

"I hope you aren't expecting comfort from me," he said. "My policy when it comes to nightmares among the Slytherins is to send them straight to whichever Prefect I suspect most likely to have heard whispered threats of Hufflepuff from the Sorting Hat."

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He looked away. "Night, Granger."
Two bands of silver wrapped around the edges of his dream instead of the usual one. Severus didn't know what that meant. He wasn't inclined to examine it too extensively when he felt so happy and safe and... loved. The surface beneath him was his bed at Hogwarts, but he was certain the sheets had never felt so soft during his waking hours. Perhaps it was because he couldn't remember ever having a woman in that bed when he was awake. The dream, however, featured a sleep-warmed body snuggled up behind him that smelled like citrus.

A feminine hand slipped around his waist, the skin even smoother than the sheets. His companion feathered a kiss between his shoulder blades as her fingers tripped down past his belly to wrap around him. Her breasts were pressed against his back, her other arm trapped between their naked bodies. Something metallic—a ring?—jabbed slightly into his lower back, but he didn't care. He didn't give a damn about anything as long as she kept touching him.

"Good morning," she whispered. Her voice, raspy and sweet, was a shy contrast to the movement of her hand.

He made a pleased hum of agreement. It was, indeed, a good morning.

It was one of life's real cruelties, Severus thought, that he woke up just as the woman nudged him to roll over so she could straddle him. The only clue to her identity he received was a fleeting glimpse of dark hair before the dream evaporated. He woke to less soft, more empty sheets that were decidedly tented. The glow of love that had been present in the dream continued to tingle through him.

Who was she?

Was she still alive?

---

Granger was absent from breakfast again. Another "meeting" in her chambers, according to Longbottom. Not that Severus asked. Ernie did, and Severus rewarded him by demonstrating a spell to vanish the bits of peel from marmalade, since Ernie had complained about hating them before.

The last staff meeting of the year was scheduled for that morning. Granger rushed in with seconds remaining before the start, her cheeks flushed pink and her hair in even more disarray than normal. Flopping down in the chair next to Severus, she pulled a scroll of parchment out of her bag and sat poised to take notes. If Severus tried to determine whether she looked simply harried rather than post coital, no one could prove it.

"The leaving do for Althea will be next Saturday afternoon at the Three Broomsticks," Minerva was saying around the time Severus ended his (inconclusive) analysis of Granger and tuned back in.

Who the devil was Althea? Granger smiled insincerely at the Muggle Studies professor. Oh. Her.

"I'd like you all to meet Althea's replacement." Minerva gestured to a man with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. "Rupert Smith will be joining us as the new Muggle Studies professor next September."

Smith beamed at the assembled crowd of teachers. When his gaze landed on Granger, he paused
for far longer than necessary, lingering on the neckline of her robes. How nauseatingly obvious. What was he even looking at? She was as buttoned up as usual.

Granger leaned close to Severus and spoke in a whisper that tickled his ear. "I hope he's not as fond of mistletoe at Christmas as his predecessor. Althea always charmed it to follow people around. And her Valentine's Day decorations were sickeningly twee."

That explained the mistletoe dream.

"If he is inclined to send mistletoe after either of us," Severus whispered back, "then I am more capable of casting all three Unforgivable Curses, you'll recall."

She ducked her head to hide her grin. "Then why haven't you used any on Althea?"

"How am I supposed to know? Memory loss, Granger. Do try to keep up."

Minerva shot them a censorious look. She was banging on about something to do with the Leaving Feast now. Granger snapped to attention like a chastened first year and resumed her copious note taking.

As the meeting broke up, Minerva approached the two of them.

"I think we should hold a few Order meetings over the summer," she said. "We need to be more organised about your recovery, Severus. We'll work out which years are lacking in donated memories and proceed from there."

Granger lit up like she did when she was brewing. Severus knew she was imagining a colour coded chart of some description.

"Hermione, it's so nice to finally meet you," Smith said, shoehorning himself between Severus and Granger. "I was wondering if I might pick your brain over dinner sometime. I'd love to get the perspective of Britain's most famous Muggle-born for my class."

Taking a step back, Granger shook her head in feigned regret. "I have quite a full summer planned, but I gave Althea plenty of notes over the years. I'm sure she'd be more than happy to share them with you."

Smith scratched at something tickling him under his collar. Severus tuned out Smith's attempts to persuade her (inept) and Granger's refusals (far too polite) in favour of revisiting the question of why he had built a library for her. His younger self's claims that she should look elsewhere for comfort didn't hold up under the swell of protectiveness he'd felt in the depths of that memory. There had been something both expectant and reluctant about that feeling. It had made his heart stutter as he'd waited for...

"Mistletoe aside, I might miss Althea," Granger muttered as she finally escaped Smith's attentions. "At least she doesn't wear enough cologne to choke a dragon."
"Nor did she ever attempt, however clumsily, to chat you up," Severus said. "Well, not so that I noticed, anyway."

"He's not even really interested in me. He's interested in who my friends are. I know the type."

Severus shrugged. "There are a number of poisons that can be absorbed through the skin. Replacing his cologne with one of them would be easy enough."

"It's a comfort that some things about you haven't changed." With a laugh, Granger patted his shoulder. "You're still a font of useful information."

Hagrid's baking hadn't improved with time. Once, in Severus's third year, Hagrid had discovered Lily attempting to nurse Severus's latest wounds from the Marauders. Hagrid had tried, in his ham-fisted way, to offer solace in the form of tea and rock cakes—neither of which had been fit for human consumption. Severus had accepted only because Lily had wanted him to do so. He'd nearly added a chipped tooth to his list of injuries.

Now, Severus wondered if it would count as animal cruelty if he fed the boulder on his plate to the slobbering hound at his feet. Eating it himself certainly wasn't worth the unicorn hairs and doxy eggs that Hagrid had promised to procure over the summer.

A frantic knock sounded on the front door of the hut. Hagrid and Severus exchanged a frown. The students had all been whisked away by the Hogwarts Express an hour before. When Hagrid swung the door open, Granger stood there with her trunk and her familiar's travelling basket, looking near tears.

"Hippogriffs!" she said, storming in before either man could greet her. "My cottage is full of HIPPOGRIFFS, Hagrid. I tried that bowing nonsense, but they weren't having—oh! Hello, Severus. Sorry, I didn't realise you were here."

"Clearly."

"We were jus' discussin' Potions ingredients from th' forest," Hagrid said. "Hippogriffs? Yeh, if they get settled in somewhere an' claim it as their nest, they can be hard ter shift. I can try ter convince 'em, but it might take a while."

"I'll get you as many ferrets as you need," Granger said. "I'll get you Draco Malfoy if that will lure them out."

Hagrid let out a quiet guffaw. "Not ter worry. I'll sort it."

"Thank you. You're a lifesaver. Hmm." Granger wrinkled her nose. "I guess I'll Floo-call Harry and ask if I can stay at theirs for a bit."

Staying with the Potters would likely get her hexed by Mrs Potter, given how absurdly affectionate Granger and Potter tended to be with each other. Severus thought he ought to let her learn her lesson the hard way, but long acquaintance with Gryfindors had demonstrated time and again that the lesson would just as likely be ignored. And if she landed herself in St Mungo's too near the next school term, Severus would be forced to talk to other members of staff at meals. Perhaps even Longbottom again. That would not do.

"You may stay with me," Severus said before he could think better of it. "I have the space, and there are no small children underfoot to get in the way and wipe their noses on your books."
That Granger and Hagrid's expressions of surprise were so identical was impressive, given that he was a good six feet taller than her and his face was half obscured by his bushy beard.

"Are you sure?" Granger asked.

Severus placed his untouched rock cake on a side table (Fang II did not take the opportunity to snatch it) and stood up.

"Of course. You have been to my house before?" he asked, waiting for her nod of confirmation before he continued. "Then you can save me the trouble of using the Floo in Minerva's office by Side-Along Apparating me there."

"All right. Well. Thanks." After shooting Severus a tremulous smile, she took one of Hagrid's shovel-sized hands between both of hers. "Hagrid, you are one of the most dedicated men I've ever known. I truly admire how much you adore the creatures in your care."

Hagrid blushed. "Aww, yeh don' have ter say that. I'm happy ter help."

"It's the truth. But Hagrid. Hagrid. Listen to me. If those overgrown turkeys make it past the anti-animal wards on my library, I want you to forget how much you love hippogriffs. You pick up your pink umbrella and shoot to kill."

"Erm." Hagrid shuffled away from her. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Yer great at wards. They won' get past 'em."

"They'd better not."

"You have anti-animal wards on your library?" Severus asked as he and Granger left the castle after retrieving his trunk and Lois from his quarters.

She nodded. "Boudica is very dear to me, but so are my books. I also have person-specific wards against Harry and Ginny's kids, as well as George and Ron, but don't tell them that."

Magpies hopped in the grass near the gravel path, pecking at the ground and taunting the imprisoned cats. Granger tilted her face up towards the sun as she walked. For all of her hippogriff woes, she seemed content.

"Bye, Argus," she called out, waving at the Caretaker, who sort of waved and didn't sneer too much in response. "See you in August."

"August?" Severus asked, offering Filch a subdued nod of farewell.

"Argus, Mrs Figg and I teach a two week course every summer. Have done for the past few years now. It's for Squibs and their families, all about surviving in the Muggle world and what job opportunities are available to Squibs in the wizarding world. I think this year is going to go really well. We just finalised our lesson plans the other morning."

"Wait. Your breakfast meetings have been with Argus?"

"And Mrs Figg, yes. I thought about teaching it on my own, since neither of them are particularly fun to work with, to be honest, but I thought having the input of actual Squibs would help it be more… I don't know. Culturally sensitive, I suppose. That's where I went wrong with the elves."

An almost irresistible laugh tickled at the back of Severus's throat. If only she knew what
Longbottom had been implying about her meetings.

"Do many people attend your course?" he asked.

"A few. It's in its infancy, but I'm hoping it'll give the Squibs a support system among themselves. I think it must be very isolating for a lot of them, growing up the way they do."

Severus couldn't have stopped his amused smile if he'd tried. "Still trying to rescue all of the downtrodden creatures of the world?"

Granger chuckled. "That's what you said when I first told you I wanted to teach the course."

Upon reaching the Apparition Point, she held out her hand. Severus hesitated for a beat before lacing his fingers together with hers. Her skin was soft and smooth.

A crack and a squeeze found them landing without a stumble behind a shed that still tilted to one side in a garden that remained bare of any decorative plants. The grass was mostly choked out by moss and dandelions. Granger let their cats out of their travelling baskets to explore and chase gnomes. Over the fence, Severus could see the same old dirty river winding its way past in the distance.

Severus led Granger through the back door of the dirty terraced house and into the narrow galley kitchen. There was that scorch mark on the yellow laminate worktop. A hot cauldron had been knocked over when a young Severus had thought he'd heard his father arriving home. Mum had taken the blame.

Why had he stayed here all these years without repairing it?

The threadbare sofas in the front room had been replaced by models from the current century, at least. Severus was somewhat astonished to see his mother's collection of classic Muggle novels taking up space on the shelves. Eileen Prince had shared Arthur Weasley's fascination with Muggles… until she'd married one. After her death, Severus had stowed the unpleasant reminders away in the loft. He wondered when he and the books had reconciled.

"You can raid my library later," he said as Granger gravitated predictably towards the temptation of unread words. "Come on. I'll show you where you'll be staying."

In truth, Severus didn't know where to put her. His childhood bedroom, where the miasma of teenage angst probably still hung in the air and embarrassing relics of his past waited to be discovered? As far as he could remember, his parents' old room had remained hermetically sealed since his mother's death. He must have opened it and sorted it out by now.

Lois provided the answer. Trailed by Boudica, she shoved past Severus and Granger on the stairs and nudged the door of his parents' room open with her forehead. Instead of the sagging double bed with its tatty '70s orange and brown duvet, there was what looked like a new queen sized bed with plain white bedding. Someone had knitted a lumpy, dark green blanket that sat folded over the foot of the mattress. The bookcases downstairs must have proved insufficient for his needs, because this room, too, was lined with books. Severus wondered if he'd switched to sleeping in here at some point.

It was only when the cats jumped up onto the bed that Severus realised both Lois and Boudica had dragged in half-dead gnomes from the garden. They deposited their macabre gifts in the middle of the duvet. How kind.

"This is your room," Severus said to Granger. "Bathroom is just there. I'll let you get settled."
Leaving her to scold the cats and deal with the gnome entrails, he crossed the landing to his bedroom. It had been altered as well. No more narrow single bed with creaky springs. No more Slytherin banners adorning every wall. Both the walls and the duvet on the double bed were a stark white. A Slytherin crest next to the door was the only nod towards House affiliation. This, far more than his parents' room, looked like a guest room. He should have stuck Granger in here.

When Severus went back down to place the borrowed Pensieve in the front room, Granger followed. She curled up on one of the unfamiliar sofas, picked up a book from a side table, and opened to a bookmarked page in the middle. The cats perched behind her as if reading along. He wondered how she'd come to be so ensconced in his life that she had books on the go at his house. Had it started with the talks in the kitchens during her final year as a student, as he'd suspected, or had it been earlier? Perhaps when she'd received extra instruction during her sixth year?

"How is it that I ended up teaching you Occlumency?" Severus asked. "Was it part of the war effort? Did you approach me with a request for even more classes to take?"

"The former, though I didn't end up doing much with it. I had no more luck teaching Harry than you did. Still, it's a useful skill to have. Here." She tugged a memory from her temple. "Have a look."

Within the memory, Severus found himself in the Defence classroom at Hogwarts. Unlike the current teacher, who was inclined to display diagrams of the wand movements for protective spells, Severus had apparently chosen pictures of curse victims to decorate the room. Nice. He bet that had suitably frightened the little dimwits.

"Miss Granger," Memory Severus said as the class full of students moved to depart. "A word."

Her friends offered the expected commiserations. Approaching his desk with her school books clutched to her chest, she waited for the door to close behind her classmates.

"Yes, sir?"

Severus felt something like fear streaked with anger simmering, low and constant.

"I am to teach you Occlumency," Memory Severus said. "The Headmaster, in his unending optimism, has taken it into his head that you will, in turn, be able to teach Potter. I will be amazed if you manage to learn even the most rudimentary forms of Occlumency, much less master it well enough to keep out the Dark Lord. Teaching Potter how to do so is impossible. Nevertheless, I seem destined to waste my time tutoring Gryffindors. You are to report to my office after dinner this evening. Should anyone ask, it is because Professor Dumbledore has arranged for you to receive extra tuition in Defence. You got an Exceeds Expectations on your Defence O.W.L, I believe?"

Granger gritted her teeth. "Yes, sir. I did."

"Very well. I will see you this evening. You may go."

The Dark Lord had never been able to read Severus, but Severus could read himself. He didn't need his lost memories or the unexpected surges of emotion to tell him what was plain. Not this time. It was obvious. Every word about his reasons for teaching Occlumency to Granger had been a lie.

Severus knew evil. He'd been a bloody Death Eater. Even minus thirty years of memories, he could
recall significant chunks of time spent in the presence of the Dark Lord. He had seen darkness and betrayal and murder and torture.

Granger surpassed all of that.

She was a morning person.

First, she stomped around getting ready for a run at an hour that, as far as Severus was concerned, should not even exist on days off. Just as he managed to drift back to sleep, she came clomping back into the house, interrupting his tedious dream of preparing beetle eyes as she chatted away to the cats and dished out their breakfasts. Severus slammed a pillow over his ear when the water pipes groaned and the shower sputtered to life. A muffled, off-key voice on the other side of the wall made him sit bolt upright.

He knew that voice. He knew that song.

Swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat, Severus crept out onto the landing. Boudica and Lois gave him much the same befuddled look Parvati Patil had shot his way in her memory.

He wasn't afraid this time. His stomach did a few anxious somersaults, but he didn't want to hide from whatever the hell that song meant. So, it had been Granger singing in the Prefects' Bathroom, and for some reason that had been far more frightening than an adult Granger singing in his limescale farm of a shower.

Severus had no clue. Retreating to his room, he pulled on Muggle jeans and a t-shirt with the vague notion of escaping the house to explore the differences in Cokeworth's town centre at some point that day.

Perhaps he did want to hide. Just a little.

When he descended the stairs, he found Granger sitting at the cramped little dining table, reading one of his mum's novels and crunching her way through a bowl of muesli. Her hair was pulled back into a damp plait, making it look a darker shade of brown than usual.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee lured him past her. The first mouthful of bitter, almost scalding liquid was like heaven. Padding back towards the table, he studied Granger as he drank. He wanted to ignore the Healer's advice and his own better judgment and dip into her mind with Legilimency. He wanted to push past the inevitable throbbing headache and scour her memories for the meaning behind that song. He wanted to find out why, when he'd gone searching for proof of the Dark Lord's fall in Potter's mind, he'd spent the whole time chasing after images of Granger.

Shame she'd had such a good Occlumency teacher, or he'd do it.

"Good morning," she said, smiling up at him after he'd downed half the cup of coffee.

"It's certainly morning. Whether that is good is a matter of opinion."

She shifted to pour herself another glass of orange juice, her top gaping open just enough to reveal a purple scar. It was branching and familiar, running beneath the skin like veins. Severus's breath hitched.

"Can I see…"

Granger clapped a hand over her chest when she caught the direction of his stare. "See what?"
"Not your breasts." He rolled his eyes. Honestly. If he wanted to see her naked, he wouldn't just blurt it out over his morning coffee. What did she take him for? "If I wanted a cheap thrill, there are plenty of tawdry Muggle magazines available. I meant the scar."

"Oh." Rubbing at the spot where the scar began, she cleared her throat. "All right. I suppose."

Severus slid into the chair next to her and tilted closer to verify what he already knew he'd find: his creation, branding her. His stomach sank.

"Did I do this to you?" he asked, his voice tight.

Granger looked affronted on his behalf. "Of course you didn't. Why would you think you had?"

"Because I invented the spell that caused it."

"Oh. You never told me." Shaking her head as if to clear it, she dragged her spoon through the soggy remains of her breakfast. "I should have known. I had to take ten potions a day when I was recovering. You're the one who brewed them."

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to bring his fingers up to skate along the purple lines on her collarbone. The closest he would come to an apology for what he'd created. If he closed his eyes, he wouldn't know the marks were there. The scar wasn't bumpy or raised; it felt like the rest of her smooth skin. Granger shivered.

"Who used one of my curses against one of my allies?" Severus asked. "I hope I punished them for it."

"Dolohov cast the curse, but he was dealt with. Don't worry about it."

"Dealt with by me?"

"By Filius, actually."

"Hm. Disappointing." One finger rose to trace a straight white line that marred her neck. "And this one?"

Another shiver. "From Bellatrix Lestrange's knife, not one of your many, many spells. And she's been dealt with as well—by Molly Weasley."

"Really? That's… unexpected." His gentle touch moved to a mark on her cheek that was shaped like a backwards seven. "What about this one?"

"Caused by debris from a Reducto cast by one of the last Death Eaters to be caught. Also dealt with. By Neville."

"As in Longbottom? The Herbology professor?"

Granger giggled at his flabbergasted expression. With his fingertips still grazing her face, he felt her cheek move as her mouth rose into a grin.

"He used to be an Auror," she said.

Severus couldn't imagine such a thing. Longbottom had presented him with several memories from his time in Severus's classroom. In those days, Longbottom had seemed as if he would have cowered in fear from a Pygmy Puff if it had spoken to him in a stern enough voice.
"I hear he vanquished my would-be murderer," Severus said. Longbottom slaying that snake was even more difficult to picture.

"He did. I wish you could have been there to see it in person." Granger twisted her fingers in the hem of her shirt. "There's another scar, but you can't see it right now."

Severus let his smirk dawn slowly, giving her time to register the implications of what she'd said. When that realisation arrived, she huffed indignant and swatted his chest.

"It's on my arm," she said. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I have it covered by a glamour. It's an ugly word, carved into me by Bellatrix."

"What word?"

He knew what word. The ugliest word. After a brief hesitation, she removed the glamour. Severus's hand hovered over it, like he felt unworthy of touching this one.

"I suddenly have an intense desire to send Molly Weasley a gift basket from Honeydukes to thank her for ridding the world of that bitch," he said.

Granger let out a humourless laugh. "That's what Molly called her, right before she killed her. A bitch. It was the only time I've ever heard her swear. It was magnificent. I don't hide this one, usually. I'm not ashamed of it."

"But you decided to hide it here? In my house?"

She shrugged and looked at the floor, and he knew that she'd hidden it because she was aware of his history with that word. His fingers made contact. Even though it was jagged and puckered, the skin was still soft. His thumb swiped at the M as if trying to wipe it away.

Tap tap tap.

Jerking away from Granger, Severus swivelled to see a tawny owl waiting at the window. The letter it offered him was written in a large, flamboyant hand and signed with an unfamiliar name. Severus scowled.

"Who is Raffaella Zabini?"
Hermione watched Severus bound up the stairs two at a time. *Stubble*. He'd appeared at breakfast that morning with black stubble roughening his cheeks and chin. Somehow, she'd always believed facial hair wouldn't dare to inconvenience him by growing. Harry or the Healers must have dealt with it during his recovery from the Battle of Hogwarts. She'd seen Severus stripped down to his swimming costume countless times and his underwear once, but him being unshaven felt closer to nudity, somehow. It was like a secret she'd overheard by eavesdropping.

Curling up on one of the sofas she'd helped him choose the year before, Hermione reread the same paragraph of her manuscript for the fifth or sixth time. There wasn't much more she could do on that particular project without Severus. Summer extended out in front of her, blank and lacking in purpose until the Squib Life Skills course in August. She was supposed to be using the time to finish up the textbook she'd been writing about the two wizarding wars, but those plans had been scuppered.

The last time she'd seen Severus before his memories had been hidden away, she'd asked if he would consent to being interviewed for her book. The question had been delivered in a nervous rush, punctuated by a held breath. She'd been so sure he would refuse. Such a private man would never want to reveal so much.

"Of course," he'd said, as if there had never been any doubt. "What time is convenient for you?"

Surprise had held her locked in place for a few seconds. Once his words had settled over her, sunshine-warm, she'd attacked him with a hug before her survival instinct could overpower her excitement. In nearly two decades of knowing each other, they'd never hugged before that moment. Not once. The scant encouragement of his arms tentatively returning the embrace had made her squeeze him tighter. His rumbling, mocking chuckle had seemed even deeper and richer with her ear pressed up against his chest. It was like his personality transfigured into a sound.

He always smelled good. Like books and clean clothes and the herbal, somewhat smoky scent of the Potions classroom. Like the fresh start of a new school year. That time had been no exception. She'd taken full advantage of the opportunity to breathe him in. There had been *something* in the way he'd rested his chin on top of her head for just a second. Something trembling and golden and a tiny bit miraculous.

Balancing on her tiptoes and babbling something about letting him see the final copy before publication, she'd kissed his cheek in thanks. The kiss had been a step too far. That nebulous something had collapsed. With his posture suddenly rigid, Severus's eyes had searched hers as if trying to perform wandless Legilimency, though she'd felt no attempt at invasion.

Then he'd excused himself, and she hadn't seen that Severus again.

The sound of quick, booted feet on the stairs heralded the reappearance of the current version of Severus. In contrast to how he'd looked earlier, he was clean-shaven and all buttoned up in his customary black robes. Ready to meet the sender of that letter.

Hermione's stomach churned. The muesli must have been off.
Setting her manuscript aside, she glanced up and caught Severus's eyes focused on the bare expanse of legs revealed by her Muggle shorts. It was an appreciative stare. He didn't leer, as some other men might have done. He savoured.

Hermione didn't know what to think when he did things like that. It wasn't something she'd ever witnessed him doing before he'd lost his memories. There was the possibility that he'd simply possessed more subtlety when he was fully himself, but most of the time he'd barely seemed to recognise her as being female. A common theme among her male friends.

"I'm not sure when I'll be back," Severus said. "I would say make yourself at home, but you seem to have already accomplished that quite thoroughly."

Hermione gave a noncommittal hum. "See you later."

As soon as he Floo'd away to Diagon Alley, Hermione climbed back up the stairs to her room. She knew it had to be his room when he was unencumbered by house guests. On the shopping trip that had resulted in him purchasing the sofas, she had bounced around on every mattress on display (including the ones in the race car beds and the bunk beds, just to wind him up) and pestered him to lie down next to her.

"You can't choose a mattress without trying it out," she'd said on that day, flopping onto a queen sized bed. "It'd be like buying a car without a test drive. Come here, Severus. I'll let you be the big spoon."

She'd said it only to get a reaction out of him. It'd had the desired effect. He hadn't scowled at her so impressively since her hand-waving school days.

"I will do no such thing."

She had giggled and tugged on the sleeve of his jumper. "Fine, then. I promise I won't invade your side of the bed. It will all be completely proper and above board."

After casting his gaze around as if to make sure no one was watching, he'd stretched out beside her, his limbs stiff.

"Well?" she'd said.

"This one will be sufficient for my needs. Any mattress is as good as another."

"Says the man who has never attempted to sleep on Ron and Neville's sofa bed."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"It was when I was having the floors done at the cottage. I should have gone to Harry and Ginny's."

"Oh, yes." Rolling over to face her, he'd pitched his voice into a falsetto impersonation of hers. "Honestly, Severus, Muggles could have done it faster. I swear I'm not even going to offer them cups of tea when I give them my daily recitation of complaints tomorrow."

"I did offer them tea, in the end. But I gave it to them in the tiny mugs and added too much milk."

"You monster." He'd splayed one hand over the mattress between them, his little finger grazing her arm. "If you encounter a similar problem in the future, you may stay with me. I'm purchasing a spare bed today as well."
"Really? I wouldn't get in your way?"

"I have become accustomed to you getting in my way."

Now, standing at the foot of what she was sure was the larger of the beds she'd helped him select, Hermione brushed her fingertips over the misshapen dark green blanket. She'd knitted it for him during his extended recovery at Grimmauld Place, working a few Warming Charms into the yarn as she went. Even though it had been summer at the time, he'd always seemed cold. It felt well-used and fuzzy under her touch. The spells had long-since worn off, but she was warmed by the unexpected knowledge that he'd kept it all these years.

Grabbing a pair of sandals from her trunk, she Disapparated to a stone house on the coast of Devon. The garden overflowed with plants of both magical and Muggle origin; snargaluff vines tried to out-thorn the roses, puffapods swayed as if gossiping with the frilly peonies. Like always, Hermione let herself in through the bright orange door of the house.

Ron and Neville's place looked like it had been decorated by a joint effort from Molly Weasley and Augusta Longbottom. It probably had been. And plants lived on every available surface. In their bedroom, the walls (dark blue, not Chudley Cannons orange, but not for lack of trying on Ron's part) were hardly visible through all of the greenery. Hermione had once nearly set her hair on fire in their bathroom thanks to a small fire seed bush that had been temporarily left on top of the toilet cistern.

"Hey!" Ron said as she entered the kitchen. "Come on in. We're celebrating."

Another guest sat with Ron and Neville at the round oak table. Her blonde head was barely visible over the flower arrangement in the centre, but Hermione knew her instantly.

"Luna, I didn't know you were back," Hermione said, circling around the table to give her a long hug. "What are we celebrating?"

"Haven't you seen the Prophet?" Ron asked. "Perce has only gone and done it."

"I always knew he would," Neville said.

Neville passed Hermione a copy from a stack of newspapers. They had bought at least ten, like proud parents whose child had made the front page. Percy's face beamed at her from amid a throng of embracing couples, victorious. It hadn't been only him who deserved the credit, Hermione knew, but she'd let Ron place his brother on a pedestal for probably the first time in their lives. As the one who had argued the case before the Wizengamot, Percy had played an instrumental role. Years of effort from him and from dozens of other wizards and witches had resulted in the legalisation of same sex marriage in Wizarding Britain.

Hermione grinned back at Percy as Ron and Neville crowded into the frame of the photograph. She wondered if Percy had joined the fight the instant Ron had stood up in front of his family and announced in a matter-of-fact, unwavering voice that he was in love with Neville.

"We're getting married," Ron said. "You'll stand up for me with Harry, won't you? I want two best people instead of one best man. I couldn't choose between you."

"Of course I will," Hermione said. "I'd be honoured."

They fell into discussion about which one of them had done the proposing (Neville, two years before), whether a Chudley Cannons themed wedding cake was tacky (yes from Hermione and Neville, no from Luna and Ron), and what sort of wedding Molly and Augusta might plan together.
"How is Severus?" Luna asked Hermione when Ron and Neville got up to fetch tea and biscuits. "Neville told me about his memory loss. I met a wizard in Uruguay who makes a memory regenerating tonic from Splenkers—they're a distant relative of Nargles. Half the time it causes the patient to lose their sense of smell, though, so I don't imagine Severus would want to risk it. It'd be a shame for such an impressive nose to be merely decorative."

Ron snorted.

Luna was the only one of Hermione's friends who dared to use Severus's first name. Even Neville, who had been his colleague for years, still called him Snape. Luna also sent Severus Potions ingredients of dubious origin from her travels—all of which Hermione was sure would have been confiscated by any customs agent who saw the foreign plant matter and wriggling insect larvae just waiting to become invasive species.

"He's all right, I think," Hermione said. "He seems to be struggling less now. He's still not really Severus, though. I caught him staring at my legs earlier."

Luna stuck her head under the table to take a look at Hermione's legs for herself. "Ooh. They are very nice. Are you still running?"

With a chuckle and an affectionate shake of his head at Luna, Ron slid a plate of biscuits in front of Hermione. She selected a custard cream.

"Yes, I am, and thank you, Luna, but that's not the point," Hermione said. "It's just a bit surprising. Severus never showed any interest in me when he was himself. Not ever."

Neville coughed. Luna popped her head back above the surface of the table. Her hair was ruffled from hanging upside down.

"Tell me about your latest travels," Hermione said. "Where did you go this time? And how's your father doing?"

Like every visit before, Luna had a whole sketchpad full of newly discovered magical species that she'd drawn. Hermione was never sure how much of it to believe. The day sped by in a happy jumble of conversation. Apart from Neville, she didn't see her friends from school anywhere near often enough. Once the sun began to sink below the horizon, they broke out the wine and drank to Ron and Neville's upcoming wedding. Repeatedly.

When Hermione eventually Floo'd back to Spinner's End (she was too drunk to Apparate, but not drunk enough to brave the sofa bed), she discovered Severus asleep on one of the sofas, a book propped open on his chest. Both cats perched near his head, as if it was the only place for them to sleep in the whole house.

Hermione stood there for a few seconds, watching his chest rise and fall with his deep breaths. The Veritaserum qualities of wine took her spinning back to those post-library, pre-Terry days. The fantasies of her with Severus had been half-formed, barely acknowledged pinpricks of light that had flickered and fought to cut through the darkness that lingered after the war. Hushed pangs of desire she'd tried to sweep aside as admiration for all he'd gone through during the war, as appreciation for all he'd done for her, as her ever-present need to gain his approval.

If she was honest with herself, that savouring glance he'd given her that morning was exactly how she'd wanted him to look at her back then.
She wondered what he would have said if she'd told him about her attraction. Severus knew a thing or two about unrequited feelings. He did not, however, know much about letting someone down gently. Most likely, he would have reacted with suspicion and believed she'd had some ulterior motive.

Her wandering thoughts drifted back even further, to her Occlumency lessons—to that memory she'd accidentally witnessed that first time. It was difficult to say which one of them had been more shocked when she'd ended up in his head. Probably Severus. She'd forever regret not being able to gloat about it to Voldemort. The fact that she still had no clue how it had happened and could in no way replicate the event didn't matter. She'd broken through where he hadn't. World's greatest Legilimens, indeed.

One second Severus—Professor Snape, in those days—had been prying her mind open, and the next she'd felt her thoughts impressively surge forward into those black eyes. Love that had not been her own had rippled through Hermione, layered over a peaceful blend of warmth and contentment. He had been spooned up behind a woman in the memory, her curly, dark hair tickling his nose.

"I love you," the woman had murmured on a sigh.

His voice, different when heard within his own head, had whispered back to her. "Marry me."

Hermione had been kicked out at that point. She'd held that secret all the years since, never even revealing it when Harry had broadcasted Severus's feelings about Lily Potter to the whole world. Never telling anyone that there had been a woman who had reciprocated Severus's feelings. Another lost love, Hermione assumed. He'd asked her to marry him. She hadn't.

Hermione had always wondered whether he wanted to even attempt loving someone again after that.

Severus muttered something unintelligible in his sleep, bringing Hermione's attention back to the present. Marking his spot in the book (with a bookmark, not by dog-earring the page; she was not a horrible vandal), she Accio'd the knitted blanket from her room and tucked it around him.

She would have to tell him about that woman at some point.

Raffaella Zabini was not the woman from Severus's dream. He knew it as soon as he approached her table at the Leaky Cauldron. Her hair was dark. Her skin looked as if the silk of her robes would feel rough by comparison. That iceberg on her hand that was masquerading as a ring could have been what he'd felt poking into his back. On the surface, she seemed like a probable candidate.

But he did not love her.

"Severus!" she said, standing up to kiss his cheek. She smelled like jasmine, not citrus. "Come here, I want you to meet my fiance. This is Edgar." At her bidding, a man with a steel grey hair and a rakish smile rose and offered Severus his hand. "Edgar, this is Severus. He's the old friend I told you about."

Hmm. "Friend" hadn't been the term Granger had used. It felt like it fit well enough now, if perhaps a few degrees too warm.

Instead of launching into a discussion of his recent predicament, Raffaella threaded her manicured fingers through the handle of her teacup and said, "I've put you down as bringing a plus one to the wedding. You never responded to the invitation, but that's hardly your fault, considering you
couldn't have remembered you received it. The ceremony is on the eighth of August. Do you think you'll bring Hermione? If so, I won't sit you near the Parkinsons. I only had to mention Hermione to Pansy at a dinner party once to know what a bad idea that would be."

He had lost thirty years of memories, and the woman had summoned him to discuss seating charts. "He doesn't want to hear about all that, Aunt Raffaella," a younger man said as he sauntered up to them. A hand was extended to Severus in a way that suggested the owner thought Severus should be tremendously honoured by the gesture. "I'm Blaise. You were my Head of House when I was at Hogwarts."

Ah. Granger had mentioned Blaise. She'd said, "I went to school with Raffaella's nephew, Blaise. His mother has something like eight or nine dead husbands—including Raffaella's brother. They have a talent for dying as soon as she's been written into their wills. I can't remember what her surname is now. It's forever changing. So if you run into anyone named Seraphina, don't accidentally marry her, just in case. Don't give me that look, Severus. You never know what might happen. Not having all of your memories makes you… well, not easy prey, but certainly easier than you were."

As if he'd needed to have it explained to him that there were plenty of people who were eager to take advantage of someone vulnerable.

"I know, darling," Raffaella said to Blaise, "but I do need to get these numbers back to the caterer as soon as possible."

Severus cleared his throat. "Granger is busy in August, I believe."

He had no intention of suffering through a wedding full of people who were essentially strangers to him. Attending the union of people he actually knew and remembered was bad enough.

"Here," Blaise said. He set a large jar down on the table. "This has seven memories: one from each year I spent at Hogwarts. I haven't seen you often since I left school."

"We'll both provide more memories, if you need them," Raffaella said, casting a significant glance at her nephew. "We're happy to help."

Raffaella's eight vials of memories were presented in a wooden box with everything labelled and lined up in order. The first group of four began in September of 1981 and went through June of 1984. There was a big gap before the next lot, which spanned December of 2001 to March of 2002. The layout she'd chosen reminded him bizarrely of the way Lily had always organised her Potions notes.

"We didn't go to school together, I take it?" Severus asked.

"We did, but only for one year. I was in my first year when you were in your seventh. You also taught me later, of course. That's what those memories from the '80s are."

"What House were you in?"

Given that Blaise had been a Slytherin, it seemed likely that his aunt would have been as well. Severus didn't remember any first years who might have been a miniature version of her running around the Common Room, but he'd had rather a lot on his mind by his seventh year.

Edgar grinned in a boastful way that Severus knew all too well. "Gryffindor, like me," he said, as if it was some personal accomplishment of his.
Gryffindor women. Severus couldn't escape them.

"Much to my eternal shame," Blaise drawled. His mouth inched up into an almost smile when Raffaella swatted his arm.

As Edgar got up to go to the loo, Raffaella watched him leave with stars in her eyes. Severus had a strong suspicion that if he did anything to jeopardise that for her, she'd put aside any old grudges and Floo-call her former sister-in-law to get tips on making murder look like an accident. He waited until Edgar was out of earshot before he spoke.

"Old friend? My, I had no idea the concept of friendship had changed so much in the past thirty years. I shall have to break the news to Lucius that he and I must be downgraded to acquaintances."

Blaise made a noise that could have been either a laugh or a scoff.

"Edgar knows of our history," Raffaella said. "More than you do, at this point." Fiddling with one of the vials in the box, she looked straight into Severus's eyes. "What we had was never serious. I enjoyed our time together, but it was over almost as soon as it started, by mutual agreement. We were never the one the other really wanted."

It was obvious Edgar had been that mythical one for Raffaella. Severus assumed his own desires had remained focused on his long lost friend. Then again, perhaps he had wanted that woman from his dream. If she existed.

Upon arriving home, Severus found the house empty. He waited around for Granger for a while before deciding to dive into Raffaella's memory from December of 2001.

The Pensieve transported him back to the evening of George's engagement. He'd apparently attended the party as Raffaella's date. Memory Severus made the rounds with her, enduring small talk from Ministry officials. Mostly, he watched Granger. Those night sky robes twirled around again and again on the dance floor—with Potter, with George, with Longbottom, with Shacklebolt, with Arthur, with Percy. So many bloody Weasleys.

She was not a skillful dancer. Half the time she tried to take over and be the one to lead, but every misstep made her throw her head back with laughter. Between spins, she paused to accept drinks from her partners and to cast her gaze in every corner of the ballroom. Memory Severus stuck to the shadows.

Conflict and suspicion jostled for space with a feeble beat of fondness that was trapped behind Severus's ribcage. When George's ghastly fireworks display began, Memory Severus was standing at the bar. At the sound of the explosion, he made eye contact with Granger. Her face broke into a secretive smile, just for him.

A skip of Severus's pulse offered up an answer to a question he had asked himself weeks before. He did think Granger was pretty. The joy shining in her brown eyes almost had him taking an involuntary step towards her, even though she was just a memory. She could neither see nor interact with him.

"You've been doing a very good job of hiding," she said to Memory Severus.

"Not good enough, apparently." His smirk, far from being malicious, sanded down the rough edges of the words and shaped them into something teasing.

"Come dance with me," she said. Severus couldn't tell whether her cheeks were pink from the
alcohol or from a blush.

"Are you going to let me lead?"

"We'll see."

After a gesture to Raffaella, missed by Granger, Memory Severus stepped onto the dance floor. Severus couldn't hear their conversation; Raffaella was too far away for the words to have imprinted on her memory.

Granger did let him lead. Mostly. Memory Severus was no better at dancing than her, but their movements were in sync. They matched. Severus strained to catalogue the emotions that surfaced with each smile she aimed up at Memory Severus, each unheard laugh. It felt much the same as it had when he'd watched her dance with the others: at war with himself, simultaneously wary and the tiniest bit fond. The murmur of affection made sense; they were friends. Perhaps the caution was due to not yet trusting her. She was, after all, best friends with Potter. Such poor judgment would throw anyone's character into question.

With a final swell of music, the dance ended. Memory Severus left Granger to return to his date's side.

"I think I've done my duty," Raffaella said by way of greeting. "Do you want to get out of here?"

Memory Severus didn't answer; he simply grabbed her hand and marched out of the ballroom. Raffaella let out a low chuckle. When they came to a stop in front of one of the fireplaces in the Atrium, she squeezed his hand.

"So. You survived."

"Barely."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get out of it. Thank you for accompanying me."

Memory Severus didn't notice Granger and George stumble into the Atrium, but Severus did. Instead of watching his past self bend to kiss Raffaella, unaware of their audience, Severus focused on Granger's thunderstruck expression. One of Granger's hands rose to press over her heart. There was no joy in those eyes now.

Raffaella ended the scene with the dizzying spin of the Floo. Severus didn't need to see what happened next. He had a fairly good idea. He viewed the memory six more times, coming to the same conclusion again and again.

Granger had wanted him. Had he known?

Did she still?

Chapter End Notes

I have just realised that I set this story in 2009, but according to canon, Lily Luna Potter was born in 2007 or 2008. So I guess it's a good thing this fic largely ignores the
epilogue, because I've already established that Ginny is pregnant when Severus loses his memories. Lily will just have to wait a year longer to go to Hogwarts. I swear I checked the dates several times. Numbers are the Draco to my Harry. And not in a sexy fanfiction sort of way, either. I'm not entirely sure I'd even save them from a room that was engulfed by Fiendfyre.
Severus was collecting data.

Waking up cocooned in a blanket that hadn't been there when he'd drifted off to sleep probably didn't mean anything. Anyone would receive the same treatment from Granger if she found them napping on a sofa. Even Lucius would merit a threadbare sheet.

Standing up, he stretched his arms over his head until his stiff back made a satisfying pop. The cats, who had woken him by putting their noses centimetres from his and staring in a way that would have intimidated the most battle-hardened Auror, twined around his ankles and meowed their displeasure. Granger had not yet fed them. Odd.

Following the beasts into the kitchen, Severus retrieved tins of food that both smelled and looked like it had been digested once already. He deposited the slop in their bowls with none of the chatter they were accustomed to receiving from Granger. If they wanted conversation with their breakfast, they should have waited until afternoon. Leaving them to their meal, he retreated to the bathroom.

Granger's mostly empty Muggle bathing products cluttered up the shelf in the shower. Balanced upside down to coax out the last drops of the goop, they crashed to the floor at the slightest breeze. Severus gave up on returning them to the shelf after the second time. And why the devil was everything scented like food? Coconut shampoo. Strawberry shower gel. Kiwi conditioner. Was she a woman or a fruit salad?

A couple of full replacement bottles took up more space under the sink. He had to shove aside lemon shower gel, grapefruit shampoo, and clementine conditioner to reach his bottle of deodorant. Hmm. All citrus. Severus took a whiff of the clementine one.

Oh.

The fresh, orangey scent transported him back to his dream with that mystery woman. Had it just been an ordinary dream, rather than a memory? Perhaps smelling this on Granger at some point had planted the fragrance in his subconscious. Severus frowned at the bottle. Thinking of that dream as something that hadn't really happened was like losing something precious, but if the scent belonged to Granger, it couldn't have been a vision of the truth. Not unless she was much, much better at keeping secrets than Severus gave her credit for.

He was on his second cup of coffee by the time a puffy-faced, groggy Granger plodded downstairs. If Hangover Relief Potion had adverts, she would be the "before" picture. He studied the way she greeted him with a weary smile and claimed the chair across from him. No clues about any lingering desire there.

"Did you have a pleasant evening?" he asked.

"I did. You?"

"It was… illuminating."

Wrapping her hands around a mug of coffee, she looked at the dark liquid with the sort of slavish devotion house elves showed their masters. "I've been thinking," she said. "I need a summer
project."

"Apart from mothering the Squibs and reading everything in my library?"

"I'm going to do that as well, but something else. I was supposed to be interviewing you for a textbook about the two wars, but that's out of the question for now."

He had agreed to that? Truly, his older self was full of surprises.

"I do have my memories of the start of the first war. I suppose you could interview me about that, if you must."

Granger beamed at him like he'd vanished her hangover with a wave of his hand. "That'd be great. Thank you."

With a brief nod of acknowledgment, Severus swiped the last dribble of coffee in the pot. "And there's always the micro-managing of my life. That should take up plenty of your time this summer."

"Mm. True. I should probably start shopping for formal robes now. You'll need them soon. Ron and Neville are getting married. Do you think the person who made Professor Dumbledore's robes is still available? You'd look precious in sequins. Black ones, obviously. No pastels."

Another bloody wedding. Oh, rapturous joy.

Severus watched Granger out of the corner of his eye as he tried to work out, for the thousandth time, what his older self felt for her. She pottered around the kitchen, oblivious, burning her toast and cooking her eggs until they were rubbery. Concentrating hard, Severus reached deep within himself. Prodding at the edges of that same old feeling that he knew her better than he knew anyone provided no clues. Anything deeper was shrouded in fog.

"...and some people will probably give me pitying looks, but I don't care. I'm thrilled for the two of them. Ron and I never worked at all."

How long had she been talking?

"Pardon?" Severus said. "You and Ronald?"

"Yeah, we were together right after the war. I thought you knew."

"Ah. I did not. And how long was he with you before he admitted he was gay?"

Granger laughed. "He's not. He's bi. He likes women as well. He liked me quite a lot for a few months, but we argued too much. We were completely toxic together. Always jealous over every little thing, never any trust. It was a mess. Ron's always needed someone like Neville—someone who will take care of him and let him take care of them in return. We're better as friends. When we tried for more, nothing worked except the physical aspect."

Nausea jabbed at Severus's stomach at the thought of the physical aspect. Had she suffered some sort of grievous head injury during the war?

"I hope you don't actually expect me to attend this wedding," he said.

"Why not? You went to Harry's. And how many people have the courage to invite their Boggart to their wedding? Bravery like that should be rewarded."
Severus brightened. "I'm Potter's Boggart?"

Finally, some good news. So many potential ways to work that to his advantage. He hardly knew where to begin.

Another laugh spilled from Granger's mouth before he could get too far in his plotting. "Hardly. And you aren't Neville's now, either. At least, I don't think so. You were when he was thirteen."

"Show me."

"You weren't there when I saw it."

"And? Show me anyway."

She cringed. "You won't like it."

She was right. He didn't like it. Damn that wolf. And damn Augusta Longbottom's fashion sense.

It started out as a regular dream. Severus wandered the corridors of Hogwarts, crawling through tunnels that didn't exist and climbing ladders and ropes instead of moving staircases. His heart pounded fast as he struggled to find his way. He was late for an exam in some class, but which one? Where was his schedule?

Near Gryffindor Tower, the stone of the castle dissolved into tall trees and the scene became edged in silver. A memory.

His feet had walked this path hundreds of times. They found the way without his input, carrying him through the forest to Granger's cottage. A broom sat propped up next to the front door. Severus stopped, struggling to pin down the reason something so innocuous made his stomach sink. Granger didn't fly, so the broom wasn't hers. It didn't belong to someone bad—someone who might hurt her. Maybe it belonged to someone too good.

The door swung open before Severus could fade back into the forest. Watery morning sunlight shone on the dark brown hair of the man who preceded Granger out of the cottage. Severus's mouth went dry. Granger was in a dressing gown, her hair frizzier than ever before and a lazy smile on her face. She stretched up to meet the man halfway when he lowered his head for a kiss.

Severus staggered back. He had felt this before, this roiling in his stomach, this hollowing out of his chest. That was an old memory, not a lost one, tinged with red and green instead of the brown that highlighted this moment.

Their words didn't reach his ears, but it was easy to read the man's lips when he wrapped one of Granger's curls around his finger and said, "I love you."

Severus turned away before he could see her say it back. He had to get out of there—had to put enough distance between himself and the cottage that the crack of his Disapparition would go unnoticed by them.

As he ran, the forest thickened. The silver tarnished and fell away, no longer a memory. Lily appeared, turning away from him again and again, ignoring his pleas for her to run and hide. A beam of sickly green light ripped itself from Severus's wand and collided with her abdomen.

Severus tried to scream. Inside his head, he would never stop screaming. Only a whisper dropped out as Lily crumpled to the ground. From deeper within the forest, a voice that had to be Charity called to him, begging him to save her. He pushed over trees and ripped bushes up by their roots,
but she was nowhere. He couldn't find her. He couldn't—

"Severus," a familiar voice said. "Wake up."

Silver light returned, infusing everything with its cool glow instead of keeping to the edges of his vision. Piercing through the haze of sleep, it jolted him awake. An otter made of that light floated above him, whiskers twitching. Seeing that he was awake, it did a giddy flip and nuzzled its nose into his neck, right over his scar from Nagini. Severus couldn't feel its touch, but it left behind a sort of peaceful tingle.

"Granger?" he croaked.

The door of his room squeaked open. Granger stood there with her wand in hand. She was wearing the same purple dressing gown she'd worn in the dream. Upon noticing her Patronus attempting to snuggle him, she banished it with a flick.

"I did not tell it to do that," she said. "I wonder if it's so forward every time I use it to send a message. That's an embarrassing thought. I'm definitely borrowing an owl the next time I need to tell Molly or Arthur something."

Severus swallowed the emotions from the dream that still burned through him. Jealousy, desire, resignation. How long ago had it happened? He couldn't ask Granger. Perhaps he could find hints in more recent memories.

"Come on," Granger said. "I'm going to show you how I've always comforted myself after nightmares during school breaks when I can't meet up with you for tea in the kitchens. It's time to get in touch with your Muggle roots."

"I don't have any Muggle roots."

Granger didn't bother shooting him the exasperated look he knew was brewing behind her eyes. Tugging on his arm, she led the way down the hall to her room. The dressing gown was thrown onto a chair before she sprawled on top of the duvet. She was wearing a pair of sleep shorts that were very short indeed and a faded orange t-shirt that proclaimed her allegiance to the Chudley Cannons, of all the ridiculous teams.

A spark of mischief lit Granger's eyes when he hesitated before sitting down next to her. Whatever had crossed her mind, she left it unsaid. Severus reached for the knitted blanket at the foot of the bed like a reflex, spreading it out over both of their laps. The device Granger picked up from the bedside table was a laptop, she told him. She placed it on her knees and angled it so they could both see.

Muggle electronic devices had come a long way since Severus's childhood. The laptop was thinner than almost all of the books Granger owned, but it had the ability to play back images and sounds with far more clarity than the clunky old television his father had acquired off the back of a lorry. Instead of the football matches favoured by Tobias Snape, Granger played a programme that suggested the running of a Muggle bookshop involved drinking rather a lot of wine.

Granger would choose a programme set in a bookshop. The protagonist, in spite of his unfortunate surname and slovenly nature, had an approach to dealing with idiotic customers that Severus could appreciate.

Severus kept his arms crossed. It wouldn't do to give any appearance of actually enjoying the show. In the interests of data collection, he let his knuckles brush against the bare skin of Granger's
upper arm as he pretended to shift around to get more comfortable. Her breath hitched. Interesting. He pressed his leg up against hers. She didn't move away. Very interesting.

When the episode ended, Granger set her laptop back on the bedside table and turned to him with a wry grin. "I wonder if you'll eventually stop having nightmares if I make you do this every time you have one. Like aversion therapy."

Severus chuckled, the sound as confident as he could make it. "I'm not as averse to being in your bed as you might think."

Granger's mouth dropped open. "I can never forget you aren't really your 49-year-old self when you say things like that," she said with a bemused shake of her head.

"I do still have his emotions, you know."

She stared at him for a long time before she said, "Sometimes I wonder. You're different. You never would have… You never said things like that to me before."

Her voice was rough, thickened, like she hovered on the brink of tears.

Well. That would be a first. Women had scorned his attempts at flirtation—such as they were—before, but none had ever responded by weeping. How was he supposed to interpret that?

He didn't know what to do with a crying woman. He never had. Where were the damned cats? Why weren't they on hand to console her? Were he and Granger the sort of friends who hugged? She had never initiated any such contact—neither in his current memories nor any of the donated ones. Touching her scars hadn't felt unnatural or too intimate. Maybe an embrace would sort her out. At the very least, it would provide more data to examine.

"What's the matter?" he asked, placing an experimental hand between her shoulder blades to start. The question came out in the same tone he might have used when asking a student why they were stirring clockwise instead of anti-clockwise.

Granger didn't seem to mind the sharpness of his voice. A shuddering breath steadied her and signalled the end of potential waterworks. Her eyes remained blessedly dry.

"I just miss you, that's all," she whispered.

Feeling resentful of himself was a novel sensation, and not one he wanted to repeat. Her lower lip quivered like she might start up after all. Sliding his hand up to her shoulder, Severus tugged her against him. Finding a hold that felt natural was a struggle; he was all angles and elbows. It couldn't possibly be comforting. She stiffened for a second before relaxing into it. Her arms slipped around his waist, settling into place with practiced ease.

"You miss the old curmudgeon who is so stuffy he'd never so much as say something mildly flirtatious to you?" he said.

"Yes." She took a deep breath in and out. "Very much."

"You are a bizarre woman."

She let out an undignified snort of a laugh as she pulled away from his clumsy embrace. "I know." Soft, soft hands reached up, sweeping the hair out of his eyes. Her charm bracelet tickled his jaw. "And you aren't stuffy."
"I am a curmudgeon, though?"

"I wouldn't have you any other way."

His stomach did a flip. Severus stared at her mouth. There was something about the moment that felt as if he'd walked through it before.

"The sun's coming up," Granger said. "We need to be at Grimmauld Place in, hmm, four hours. Do we give up and have breakfast, or do we try to go back to sleep for a while?"

"Sleep," he said, reclining against the pillows. He made no move to return to his own room, just to see if she would allow it.

She did. Good to know.

Mrs Potter didn't react to Granger and Potter's too-long hug with a hex. In fact, she gave Granger a similar embrace, hampered slightly by the huge swell of Mrs Potter's belly. Severus decided Gryffindors were a strange breed.

The older Potter spawn ran full-tilt towards Severus, grinning in a way that was eerily reminiscent of his paternal grandfather.

"Hi, sir!" the boy said.

Severus sneered down at him. This seemed to be the reaction the child wanted. James giggled in delight. Definitely a strange breed.

Unlike his brother, little Albus called Severus by his given name, enunciated in an exact (if lisping) way that suggested Severus had drilled the proper pronunciation into him. Clearly the cleverer of the two. He must have inherited it from the Evans side of the family.

Grimmauld Place was packed to its creaky rafters with members of the Order of the Phoenix, much to the displeasure of the screeching portrait of Black's harridan of a mother. Being in Sirius Black's ancestral home made Severus's skin feel too tight. Granger, who had Side-Along Apparated him there, claimed it had changed dramatically since Potter and his family had moved in, but Severus was unconvinced. The place still reeked of dog.

Severus took the opportunity to pull Minerva aside and speak to her about the end of his memory loss. He'd been reading extensively on the matter, and he would likely end up bedridden in those final days, as the remaining memories boiled back to the surface in rapid succession. Minerva was the only one he trusted to see to it that he was taken somewhere no one could take advantage of his helpless state. He phrased it differently, of course, claiming he didn't want anyone to be caught in the crossfire if the outpouring of magic when his memories clicked back into place turned violent. Minerva vowed to find him a suitable place to convalesce.

He hoped it wouldn't be the bloody Shrieking Shack.

Under Granger's direction, the group compiled a chart of the years that were missing from Severus's memories. She used the Muggle traffic light system. Years with the most memories were green, those with fewer were amber, and the ones with the least were red. The war years were the greenest, to no one's surprise.

"Right," Granger said. "Those who have been your colleagues the longest are obviously the best source for the early years, except for that first year. Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy are our best bet
there, most likely."

Sidling up to Severus, George extended a plate full of custard creams. "Biscuit?" he said.

Before Severus had a chance to accept or refuse, Granger intervened.

"George Weasley! Don't eat any of those, Severus. They'll turn you into a canary. Temporarily, but still."

"Oh, come on, Hermione," George whined. "I resisted at the Remembrance Day thing. This was the one chance I had to play a prank on him! Once he gets his memories back, he'll know me too well. Speaking of which, I have an interesting memory for you, Snape."

Severus and Granger spoke at the same time.

"Interesting in what way?" he asked.

"What's the date of the memory?" she asked.


Not too long after the Ministry party, then—less than a year. Potter kept a Pensieve at his house for reviewing details from his cases. Severus decided to take a peek at George's allegedly interesting memory. Dumping the contents of the vial into Potter's Pensieve, Severus dived in.

Right away, everything felt different. Memory Severus sat at a garden table with Granger, both of their heads bent over thick books. A ramshackle house that seemed mostly held together with luck and perhaps a bit of Spello-tape loomed over them. In the distance, a cluster of redheads zipped around on brooms and batted a Bludger back and forth with that brown-haired man from Severus's nightmare. Now and then, Memory Severus shot a surreptitious glance Granger's way to watch her nibble on a biscuit.

His feelings for her were not muddled or undefined. Not in this memory. It was like his nightmare, but with the volume turned down a few notches. Severus knew the instant he looked at her.

He wanted her—or he had, back then. And if his nightmare was anything to go by, that desire had only intensified over time.

George, Ronald, and Potter approached. Wrinkling his nose, Ronald looked over Granger's shoulder at her book.

"Do you want to play, Hermione?" Potter asked with a resigned expression that suggested he already knew the answer. He didn't bother asking Memory Severus.

"No, thank you." Granger picked up a chocolate digestive biscuit. "You all go ahead. I'm perfectly happy here."

"Oh, come on," Ronald said. "You're much… well, you're a bit better on a broom than you used to be. Put the boring old book away. You could use the exercise."

Apart from his eyes, Potter had never reminded Severus of Lily before. He did then. The way he squinted one of those green eyes and tilted his head to the side was exactly what Lily used to do when Severus tried to tell her that the Dark Arts had their uses. George smacked Ronald on the back of the head.
"I didn't... I just meant... I wasn't talking about how she's gain—"

Ronald's words cut off, but his lips kept moving. Someone had cast a nonverbal Silencing Charm. Severus's money was on his past self.

Memory Severus sniffed. "You do yourself no favours by disparaging something that is both complex and exquisite simply because you lack the wits to properly appreciate it, Weasley."

George curled his lips over his teeth as if trying to hide a grin, but neither of his companions reacted at all. Imbeciles. It was obvious he hadn't been referring to the book, but to the woman reading it. Even Granger seemed clueless.

Good gods. She really was a Gryffindor.

Severus had long suspected that post-war Granger had indulged in comfort eating for a time. The course of the war could be tracked by the changes in her appearance. At the start: average girl. During the height of it: bone thin. Post-war nightmares: a rounder face and more abundant curves. As close to normality as she was ever likely to achieve: back to average, but this time as a woman.

Eating to soothe oneself was not something Severus could relate to. He went to the opposite extreme when his emotions were unsettled, barely able to convince his jittery stomach that it needed nourishment. It might not have even been a comfort, her overeating. It might have felt essential after going so long with food being scarce. The irrational fear that a newfound abundance of food could be taken away at any minute could stick with a person.

Ronald really was an idiot.

After the others left them alone, Severus lingered near his past self and Granger. George remained just close enough to have overheard their conversation.

"Thank you," Granger said softly.

Memory Severus didn't divert his attention from his book. "Whatever for?"

"Please. As if I would believe anyone else cast that nonverbal Silencing Charm."

She set the chocolate digestive back on the plate, untouched. Glowering, Memory Severus shoved the plate towards her.

"Eat the bloody biscuits if you want them, Granger."

"He wasn't wrong."

Memory Severus looked her up and down before he replied, the path of his gaze slow and deliberate. "I thought you were often praised for your intellect. You can't be that clever if you fail to see that your level of attractiveness has not changed. I see no difference."

Severus didn't understand Granger's reaction to this statement. He'd upset her before, but she'd never looked at him like that. Like he'd struck her. Like he'd betrayed her. No tears misted over her eyes, but the bare hurt reflected there was far worse.

"I'm going to go see if Molly needs help with anything," she said before striding off towards the house.

Confusion pummeled Severus's gut as Memory Severus frowned after her. Whatever realisation
Memory Severus arrived at, it took a few minutes. When he finally got there, eyes closing and shoulders drooping, regret blossomed.

The Pensieve kicked Severus out, none the wiser. George stood over him, smirking.

A line appeared between Granger's eyebrows as they pinched together. "What did you show him, George?"

Drawing his wand, George returned the wisps of silver to his own mind. "Mind your business. It was a very personal, private moment between Snape and myself."

Granger snorted. Turning his thoughts back to what he'd seen, Severus focused on his feelings towards the brown haired man. His nightmare held true there, as well: loathing, resentment, jealousy. All of Severus's old friends, back for a party. Oh, happy day. He waited for Granger to cross the room to talk to Longbottom before he said anything.

"Who was that other man?" Severus asked. "The one I haven't met."

"Terry Boot," George said. "Ravenclaw. He was in Ron and Hermione's year at Hogwarts."

Leaning in closer and lowering his voice to a whisper, he added, "And in case you're wondering, you hate him because he's Hermione's ex-boyfriend."

Yes. Severus had gathered that.

Chapter End Notes

The TV show that Hermione made Severus watch is Black Books (and it's an excellent choice for post-nightmare comfort).
Old Friends and New Promises

Dozens of bottles littered the table in front of Severus, sorted by year. A buffet of clouds. The cats circled the legs of the table, glaring at him. Boudica had voiced her disapproval of the new anti-animal wards by hacking up her breakfast onto the carpet in the front room. Even if the cats hadn't tried to knock all of the bottles to the floor, Severus still would have cast the wards on the table. Having them walk all over an eating surface was hideously unsanitary.

Now, where to begin? Raffaella's memories, bar that first one, tended to be as entertaining as one of Cuthbert Binns's lectures. It was all Ministry events and social obligations. Not that he could blame her. She'd hardly want to send anything more personal out into the world, even into the hands of someone trusted. Not when she had Edgar. Knowing about his fiancee's past with Severus was quite different from Edgar actually seeing the memory of whatever affection had existed between them.

The Malfoys had sent another batch of vials as well, dotted along the timeline between that first year of lost memories and the final year of the war. Severus was not in the mood for anything he might see there. He seldom was.

The little line of glass soldiers that represented the year 2002 caught Severus's attention. Selecting a memory of Potter's from September of that year, he tilted it from side to side. That particular year was amber on Granger's colour coded chart, but the memory in question was from Potter's wedding day, he'd said. Not long after that bizarre interaction with Granger that had been donated by George. Clues as to how Severus had offended her might be found there. Jealousy splintered through Severus's sternum.

If Severus's interpretation of the timeline was correct, by the time he'd been single and had realised that he reciprocated Granger's affections, she'd already taken up with Boot. Which was typical of his luck, really. If only he'd had a Time Turner.

That same lopsided house from George's memory towered over the marquee where the reception was being held. The sheer fabric overhead left the blue sky visible. Memory Severus lurked near the exit, removed from the rest of the smiling guests. And, because it was the man's memory, Potter approached the lone figure.

"I'm really glad you decided to show up, sir," Potter said. "Thank you for coming."

Memory Severus looked across the polished dance floor, past Granger and her inadequate companion, at a blonde woman with a horsey face. Severus squinted in the same direction. There was something familiar about—oh. She was much older, but yes, there was that same pinch-faced expression of disapproval. And the revulsion that made the back of his throat sting with bile was still there, unsurprisingly.
"Had I been given more information, I would have refused," Memory Severus said.

"Err, yeah, sorry about that. I kind of had to, since I invited Dudley. And I didn't know if you'd come, so I wanted someone with a connection to my mum. I'm surprised she showed up, to be honest. Never thought she would, given how many wizards and witches are here."

"You did not have to invite someone who mistreated you for years."

"Should I uninvite you, then?"

Memory Severus let one dark eyebrow raise. Potter just chuckled.

Apparently finished dancing with Boot, Granger allowed Lovegood to lead her towards Memory Severus and Potter. Memory Severus received the usual ditzy smile and nonsensical greeting from Lovegood, but from Granger, he was offered only a nod.

Potter sighed. "Luna, do you want to dance with me?"

"Yes, that's probably a good idea," Lovegood said. "They'll never make up if we're standing right here, will they?"

"I doubt it. Let's go."

What Lovegood did next couldn't possibly count as dancing, but Potter copied her erratic movements with a smile. They were close enough that Severus could just make out his own low voice over the beat of the music.

"Dance with me, Granger."

"No, thank you," she said primly.

Tilting his head back and staring up as if requesting some sort of divine assistance, Memory Severus snarled. "You are the most infuriating woman I've ever met. It was meant to be a compliment, you dunderhead."

Predictably, Granger's hands went straight to her hips.

"Telling me that I'm infuriating is somehow meant to be—"

"Not that. The other day. I see no difference." He ground his teeth together. "The phrasing was unfortunate. I didn't realise it until after I saw your reaction. I had... not forgotten when I said those words to you before, but I don't think of it often. Some moments in a shared past are like that. I'm sure Draco thinks of the time you struck him far more often than you do, for instance."

"Are you joking?" she asked with a laugh that was only half scornful. "I look back on it all the time."

Memory Severus rolled his eyes heavenward again. "My point is, I didn't mean to be cruel." Glancing back down at her, he allowed one hand to almost brush her arm. "Quite the opposite."

"You didn't mean to be cruel this time."

"Yes. You know very well that I intended to be cruel before." Memory Severus took a faltering, almost reluctant step towards her, as if drawn against his will by gravity. "I would not say it again."
Granger stared for several slow shakes of her head before she answered. "I know." Her next words were almost lost as Potter and Lovegood twirled away like a couple of lunatics. "Wait. The most infuriating woman you've ever met? I think I should be incredibly offended by that, given that you've met both Dolores Umbridge and Bellatrix Lestrange."

"I meant human woman. Not toad or demon."

"Hmm. Well, you're the most infuriating human man I've ever met, so we're even." A touch of her hand against Memory Severus's, and Severus knew he was forgiven. "And in that case, I suppose I can dance with you."

"What joy is mine."

Joy was his; it danced and swayed together with desire and relief as Memory Severus danced and swayed with Granger. Severus couldn't hear the words they exchanged, but it didn't matter. Basking in the emotions of that moment was pleasant enough. The song ended too soon.

Mrs Potter insisted on dancing with Memory Severus next, much to Potter's apparent amusement. The two of them spun out of earshot, moving surprisingly gracefully together. With a sneer cast at Petunia, Memory Severus said something that made Mrs Potter throw her head back with laughter. She was still chuckling by the time she returned to her new husband.

"Snape just said to me, 'Mrs Potter, do you suppose your brother has brought along any of his odious inventions? It's been so long since I last saw Potter's aunt; I really should pay my respects.'"

Her impersonation of him was ludicrous. He did not sound anywhere near that nasal.

"What did you say?" Potter asked.

"I told him to make sure it was caught on camera, of course."

"I knew I married you for a reason."

Severus must not have followed through on his threat, or else Potter had decided to save that part of the memory for a special occasion, because the Pensieve ejected him.

"Isn't it weird that there's no number 20?" Granger asked as she breezed in through the front door, a jug of milk from the corner shop in one hand.

"Pardon?" Severus said.

"On your street. I never noticed it before. I've heard of developers leaving out a number 13 before, but never number 20. Do you think there are any other wizards and witches around here? It might be under a Fidelius Charm."

Severus crossed to the front window. There, across the street, was number 20, plain as day. It was the same dirty brick as the rest of the houses on Spinner's End. A flag bearing a peace symbol hung next to the yellow front door. Someone had attached window boxes full of cheerful yellow flowers. Severus couldn't see them clearly from this distance, but he had a sneaking suspicion they were zinnias.

"I can see it," he said.

"Oh! Who lives there?"
"No one I can remember from the first twenty years of my life, but I have a theory. Shall I go find out if I'm correct?"

Severus was right. Zinnias clustered together in the window boxes, doing their impersonation of miniature suns. Raising an arm, he rapped his knuckles against the door.

The freckle-faced man who answered hadn't changed much since he'd been photographed on his wedding day. His long, light brown hair was streaked at the temples with grey, but barely a line marred his skin. He beamed at Severus.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," he said. "Did school just get out? That's later than usual, isn't it?"

"Edward?" Severus said, even though the burst of friendship weighed down by a thread of guilt that he'd felt upon seeing the man had already answered the question. "Edward Burbage?"

"Err, yeah. You all right, mate?"

"Something happened. May I come in?"

Inside, the house was all beaded curtains and tie dyed fabrics. Severus decided as he observed Edward's reactions to the story of his "accident" (Severus was still convinced it had been done on purpose) that he'd been wrong in those letters he'd found in his quarters at Hogwarts. Even if Edward hadn't been born a Muggle, he was no Slytherin. Like his late wife, he was pure Hufflepuff.

"So you can't remember Charity at all?" Edward asked.

"I remember her from school. I don't remember our friendship, though, no. And I don't remember you."

"Wow. You'll get it back, though, right?"

"Eventually, yes." Severus took a sip from the horrible herbal infusion Edward had tried to pass off as tea. He immediately regretted it. "How did you come to be living under a Fidelius Charm?"

"It was your idea. You, err, tried very hard to make Charity and me leave the country during the war. When that didn't work, you convinced her to do this. Char was caught when she went to Diagon Alley, so it didn't help her, but I'm still here." Edward flashed him a weak smile. "You're the one who has to tell other people where it is. Sometimes it's inconvenient, not being able to invite most other Muggles round, but there are benefits. The council can't charge me council tax if they don't know my house exists."

Severus studied this unlikely friend of his. If Edward had trusted him enough to safeguard the location of his house during the war, would he allow Severus to retrieve memories from him?

"To heal the damage, I have to view memories of myself that are donated by others," Severus said. "Muggles can't give memories, exactly, but I can obtain them if I cast a spell that allows me to look into your mind."

"Oh, yeah, no problem. I'd love to help. Go ahead."

Definitely a Hufflepuff.
"Were you present when Charity and I became friends?" Severus asked.

"No, but she told me about it. She rescued you from a disastrous second date with a woman who should have been a one-night stand. It was right after she moved to the neighbourhood—she was lured in by low property prices and the abundance of Muggles, you see. She recognised you at the pub. You had this look on your face that you used to get at school, apparently. Like you were about to say something that would make the woman cry. For some reason, Charity decided it would be kinder if the woman left outraged rather than with her self-esteem in tatters. So she stormed up to your table and pretended to be your wife."

Severus smirked. "Sounds more like she rescued the woman, rather than me."

"Yeah, you always said so."

"Very well, then think of some event when you were present. It's important that I only get one memory from you," Severus said. "Taking in too many memories at once gives me a headache that would rival the worst hangover. Do you think you'll be able to concentrate on just one event?"

"Yeah, of course," Edward said. "I'm pretty into mindfulness these days."

What mindfulness might be, Severus didn't ask. Pointing his wand at Edward's temple, he murmured the spell.

It was a cosy memory, nestled into layers of steadfast love and devotion. In contrast, nerves that Severus thought weren't his own jumped around in his belly. Unlike viewing memories through a Pensieve, which only inflicted his own past emotions upon him, Legilimency left him feeling what the donor had felt in that moment as well. It had been the same with Potter.

Edward walked down the wood panelled hall of a Muggle church, wiping his sweaty palms on the trousers of his suit. Two voices came from within a nearby room: Memory Severus and a woman who had to be Charity.

"It's your last chance," Memory Severus said. "Are you certain you want to do this, or do you want me to help you run away?"

Edward muffled a laugh with his hand. He pushed the door open, revealing a room decorated with childish drawings of animals marching two by two onto a large boat. A toy kitchen with scratched plastic pots and pans stood in one corner next to a kid-sized table and a big box full of toys. Memory Severus and Charity stood in a beam of sunlight spilling in through a tall window: him in a suit like Edward's, her in the lacy wedding dress that Severus remembered from the photograph.

The conflicting jolt of desire (Edward's—definitely Edward's) and wash of brotherly affection (Severus's) was nauseating. As much as he wanted to have memories of Charity beyond what they'd shown their colleagues, Severus decided then and there that he was sticking to the Pensieve in the future. Even the memories he got from Lucius that showcased the most violent moments of the war were less revolting than feeling any level of lust when looking at Charity.

"Edward!" Charity said, ducking behind Memory Severus. "It's bad luck for you to see me."

"Surely it's worse luck for Severus to help you run away," Edward said.

Memory Severus shrugged. "The offer is open to you as well. Are you sure you want to marry her? She can be dreadfully loud."
"Severus!" Charity said, her grin never faltering as she swatted his arm.

Feigning a wince, Memory Severus put a hand over his ear. "As I said: dreadfully loud."

"I'm certain," Edward said. His voice was steady and firm.

"Good. Because if you don't make her happy… well. I was a Death Eater, you know."

"You're also an arse." Charity made it sound like a term of endearment.

"I'll let that one slide, as it's your wedding day. Speaking of which," Memory Severus extended an arm to Charity, "Are you ready?"

"You bet," Charity said, resting her fingers in the crook of his elbow.

With the barest trace of a smile down at her, Memory Severus made a dismissive gesture at Charity's groom. "Away with you, Edward. I've a bride to escort down the aisle."

Sensing Edward's thoughts begin to drift to a different memory, Severus withdrew from his mind.

"Wow," Edward said. "That was intense. I've never had someone else in my head before." He grinned. "Thanks for being gentle."

Severus disguised his laugh with a cough. "I should probably let Granger know that I'm alive. She can't see your house, so—"

"Granger? The Granger?"

"If the Granger is Hermione Granger, then yes."

"I'd love to finally meet her. I'll go with you."

*The Granger?* Just how much had Severus revealed to Edward over the years?

Hermione was in love. Instant, at-first-sight, overwhelming love. It had happened twice before. She should have been prepared, but seeing another one of Harry and Ginny's babies went straight to her tear ducts. The newest Lily Potter dozed in Hermione's arms, oblivious to her aunt's (because Harry was her brother, after all they'd been through together) over-emotional state.

"Don't leak on her," Severus said.

One corner of Harry's mouth curved up. "You said the same thing to her with James."

As if the baby she was cradling wasn't proof enough, Harry demonstrated how much of a dad he'd become by pulling a tissue out of nowhere and dabbing at Hermione's cheeks. Thankfully, he stopped short of holding it up to her nose and commanding her to blow. From the hospital bed, Ginny let out a snore that could have put Hagrid to shame. Hermione's low giggle grew into a full laugh when she noticed the horrified expression on Severus's face.

"Do you want to hold the baby, Severus?" Hermione asked.

His horrified expression didn't change. "Absolutely not. I wouldn't know how."

"You did fine with the other two," Harry said.
It was only a partial lie. With James he had been stiff and severe. Hermione had half expected him to take House points from James for squirming. By the time Albus had arrived, he'd simply chuckled at Hermione's predictable tears and accepted the baby into his arms so she could wipe her nose.

"I did?" Severus asked.

Harry slowly tilted his head from side to side as if weighing his answer. "Well, they're still alive, aren't they? I think Ginny gave you the memory of you holding Albus, so you can probably see for yourself when you get home. April of 2006."

Luna appeared in the doorway, holding what appeared to be a bouquet of pineapples. While Harry went to greet her, Hermione passed Lily into Severus's arms. His mind might have misplaced the memory of holding babies before, but his hands remembered. He supported her head without prompting. When Lily grizzled at being jostled, he swayed back and forth. Against his tall, black-clad frame, Lily looked even tinier. Hermione sighed.

"I want to be a mother," she said without really meaning to. She blamed it on the exhaustion of spending much of the night in the waiting room.

"Do you?" He said it in the same tone he would have used if she'd announced her desire to get fish and chips on their way home. "Would you like me to kidnap this baby, or would you rather go through all of the needless morning sickness and pain?"

This man. Hermione half believed he would do it, if she asked.

"Needless?" she asked with a shake of her head.

Severus nodded towards the bundle in his arms. "There is a convenient baby already here. She's very small. Easy to smuggle out. Reasonably cute, as far as these things go. All newborns resemble garden gnomes, to some degree. Probably best to keep her away from the cats."

"I don't want a child right this instant, but someday. Unfortunately, I don't meet many potential fathers in my line of work."

"Hmm. I'm sure that oaf teaching Muggle Studies next year would be willing to offer his services."

"Yes, because 'oaf' is exactly the description I want for the father of my children. I'd rather someone reasonably intelligent, thank you."

Severus gave her that savouring look again. It made it harder to breathe.

"Very well," he said in a rumbly whisper. "If you wish to besmirch my virtue in order to realise your dreams of mothering the swottiest child to attend Hogwarts since yourself, I'm willing to make the sacrifice."

Hermione stammered and blinked for a few seconds before regaining her footing. She really had to start keeping a record of all the things he said to her so she could tease him when his memory finally returned.

"What virtue? And what do you mean sacrifice?"

"There's at least a 74 percent chance I will emerge from the encounter maimed by your mad hair in some way."
"That's… very specific."

Severus leaned in closer. "I've run the Arithmantic calculations. One must be prepared for all eventualities." Backing up, he raised his voice but kept his gaze on Hermione. "Lovegood, here. Take this baby. Granger doesn't want it."

"Hermione, no, please. No, no, no."

The familiar voice speaking unfamiliar words snapped Hermione out of the fuzzy, syrupy world of her dream. Severus's magic was calling out to her again. Fumbling beneath her pillow for her wand, she called up the moment she'd discovered her library and cast her Patronus.

Hermione followed the otter down the hall to Severus's room, already knowing what she would find. The flirtatious little mustelid had chosen to drape itself around Severus's neck like a ghostly scarf this time. She'd asked Ron about it, and he'd said it always behaved normally around him. Only Severus got the special treatment. If she was still in contact with Terry, she could have asked him whether her Patronus had ever tried to snuggle him, but those bridges had been burnt when he'd moved to Egypt.

Severus looked so young sitting in the middle of the bed with rumpled hair and a panic-stricken face—as if his body, as well as his mind, had gone back several decades.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked as she banished the Patronus.

"I'm fine. It wasn't anything real. Just a nightmare, not a memory."

"Is it because of… earlier?"

He blinked slowly. "Earlier?"

"You know. There's a new Lily Potter in the world."

"Oh. No. Lily did not make an appearance." The years came rushing back as his spine stiffened. "I don't want to talk about it."

"All right."

She was sure he would claim that he didn't want to watch any Muggle television programmes and order her back to her own room, when he grabbed her arm and tugged gently until she sat down next to him. Drawing in bravery with a breath, she wriggled beneath the sheets and rested her head on a pillow. In the darkness, he was all indistinct shapes: black slashes for eyebrows, a thin line for his mouth, a large triangle of a nose.

Severus batted at a lock of her hair that worked its way over to tickle his cheek. "I knew it would try to maim me."

Hermione chose not to mention that he'd watched an episode of Black Books and dozed for hours with her without being assaulted by her hair once.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" she asked with a laugh.

"Hmm. I'll tolerate it. I'm not impregnating you tonight, though."

Good Lord.
"Well, obviously," she said shakily. "I doubt I'm ovulating right now. It would be pointless to try."

Those black slashes shot up. "Dear me. Your previous partners must have been hopelessly inept to make you think that."

"Speaking of past partners, what can I say to persuade you to go to Ron and Neville's wedding and sit with me and entertain me with snarky comments about everyone? I won't even try to make you wear sequins, I promise."

Not her smoothest attempt at a subject change, but it would do. One of his hands caught another wayward curl. He twirled it around his finger and let it spring back, watching its movement as if mesmerised. Lois curled up between them, purring and content.

"I'll consider it," he said.

"If you go, you'll get to see me looking like a human tangerine. Ron has chosen to put me in orange. So much orange. He really needs to discover other colours."

Severus made a thoughtful, sleepy sort of hum. "You looked nice in green. At Potter's wedding."

"You saw that?"

"Bits of it. You were cross with me."

"I was."

"Why?"

It was one of the last things she wanted to do, but Hermione said, "I'll show you the memory that will explain it, if you insist."

"I do. No point in hiding from it. I'll remember it eventually, anyway. Show me tomorrow." He wrapped another curl around his finger. "What made you decide to become a teacher?"

They talked until the sky lightened to dusty pink—until the breaths between sentences lengthened and their eyelids grew heavy. When Severus rolled away from her with a soft snore, Hermione was only half-aware of seeking him out. She draped an arm around his middle and nuzzled her face between his shoulder blades seconds before she, too, drifted off to sleep.
Mystery Woman

Severus didn't know what to say to Granger in the aftermath of watching his past self crush her with the words *I see no difference*. Out of the Pensieve, remorse churned through the pit of his stomach. His current self regretted it, apparently. In contrast, Memory Severus had been pleased that he'd upset her. Vindictive pleasure had lifted him up as tears had flooded her young eyes.

"Do I ever treat you that way now?" Severus asked.

"Of course not." Both of Granger's elbows were propped on her knees, her chin resting on her hands. She let her arms drop down as she sat up straighter. "I wouldn't tolerate that sort of treatment from you—or anyone else, for that matter."

"Good."

Severus thought back to the nightmare he'd had the previous night—the one her Patronus had thankfully interrupted. In it, Granger had lingered outside her cottage with Terry Boot again. As the forest around them had decayed into rotten, blackened stumps and toppled trees, Boot had morphed into Sirius Black. Severus had been unable to move, unable to speak in anything higher than a whisper, but Granger had screamed and screamed and screamed for Severus to help her. Clenching his fingers around her arms until his nails drew blood, Black had dragged her away to the Dark Lord. Severus's whisper-shouted pleas to spare her—he would do anything, he'd claimed, *anything*—hadn't been acknowledged. The Dark Lord had scented the air with Granger's blood as he'd set about the task of breaking her. She had stopped moving—stopped breathing—by the time the real Granger's otter had saved Severus with its soothing light, tugging him out of that hellish world.

It hadn't been real. There had been no silver edge marking it as a memory, but he still couldn't shake the horror. Part of him wanted to hide Granger away to protect her from a dead man. Ridiculous. She was fine. She was safe.

Next to him on the sofa, an unbroken Granger fidgeted with her charm bracelet. The same bracelet that had been digging into Severus's back when he'd woken up with her clinging to him like a limpet that morning. Not that he'd objected to the clinging, but the way it had echoed his dream of that mystery woman had made his breath hitch. He knew he'd made some sort of response to Granger's shyly mumbled, "Good morning," but he couldn't for the life of him recall what it had been.

"I wonder if you might be able to help me identify a woman from one of my memory dreams," he said now, studying her reaction to gauge whether she was hiding anything. "I didn't see her face, unfortunately. Just dark, curly hair. We were… very clearly involved. I have no idea what year it was, but we were in my quarters at Hogwarts. It wasn't Raffaella."

"Oh." A sad, sympathetic smile found its way onto her lips. Ah. Bad news. "I was wondering how and when to tell you about her, actually. I don't know if I can give you any useful information. I don't know much—not even her name. It happened sometime prior to my sixth year. You loved her. Very, very much. Um. You asked her to marry you. I don't know what happened after you proposed. I'm sorry, Severus."

He'd proposed? That was… unexpected. Particularly as it had been prior to Granger's sixth year, before the end of the war. Was this mystery love of his dead? She certainly hadn't married him. Maybe she'd turned him down.
Severus would have to ask Lucius. By owl post, not in person. Seeing the amused expression on Lucius's face when Severus brought up a woman would do no wonders for their friendship.

With a whoosh of green flame, a grinning head popped into the fireplace. Why had Severus not warded it against everyone save himself and Granger? Such a foolish oversight.

"Hi, kids," George said. "How's living in sin treating you?"

"Kids?" Severus asked, ignoring the latter part of the greeting entirely. If only there had been a bit of sin involved in their living arrangements. It would have made the summer far more entertaining. Granger had said that she wanted a summer project.

The grin hitched up higher on one side. "Mentally, you're twenty. Tell me whether you think that counts as a kid when you're forty-nine again."

"I'm twenty-nine," Granger said. "You're only, what, a year and a half older than me?"

"You'll always be a kid to me, love, even when you're a hundred and twenty-nine. It's a hazard of being friends with my baby brother. Now, look out, I'm coming through."

"I don't recall you being invited," Severus said.

George didn't let something so trivial stop him. He stepped out of the fireplace, a wicker picnic basket swinging from one arm. At least he had the decency to clean up the gritty ash that dusted both himself and the floor.

"I come bearing gifts," George said, lifting the lid of the basket to reveal bright yellow tarts with perfectly crimped pastry and a sprinkling of icing sugar. "Mum made these for you, Snape. You might not remember it, but they're your favourite."

Granger's eyes narrowed. "You eat one first, George. One of my choosing."

"Where's the trust, I ask you?"

"It's back in my fifth year. You fed it to a firstie to see what would happen."

"Fair point. All right, go on. Pick one."

Dipping a hand into the basket, Granger hovered over five different tarts, scrutinising George's face each time, before finally making her choice. George crammed half of it into his mouth without argument or hesitation. Nothing happened.

One visitor was one more than Severus wanted, so the sound of someone knocking on the front door made his lip curl instinctively. While Granger scurried off to answer it, George switched the basket to his other hand and set it on a side table that, like all tables in Severus's house, was already weighed down by books.

Edward's voice was the sort that carried, like someone had cast a permanent Sonorus on him. The boisterous greeting he offered Granger announced his presence before the sight of him did.

"Hello," Edward said to George. "I'm a friend of Severus's. I hope I'm not interrupting."

George looked gobsmacked. "Snape! You never told us you had friends. Ow!" He rubbed the spot on his arm that Granger had swatted. "Such violence. He knows I'm only joking."

Upon finding out that Edward was a Muggle, George's face lit up. He claimed he absolutely had to
fetch his father. As if Edward was some sort of zoo animal to be gawked at. While George was gone, Severus pounced on his chance to interrogate Edward. Why hadn't he thought of speaking to Edward right away? The two of them had been friends for ages prior to Granger's sixth year. If anyone aside from Lucius would know about the mystery woman, it would be Edward.

"I have no clue," Edward said once Severus had explained the situation. "Sorry, mate. As far as your relationships go, I only know about Rubella."

"Do you mean Raffaella?" Granger asked.

"Yeah, that's the one. Not that I ever met her." Clearing his throat, Edward cast a sidelong glance at Granger. "I got the impression you had a couple of one night stands over the years, but you didn't seem interested in anything more long term with anyone."

Granger became very interested in the basket of lemony treats all of a sudden. Severus didn't care if they tasted better than Amortentia smelled. He was not going to eat anything that had been delivered by George Weasley.

George tumbled from the fireplace again, followed by Arthur. Straightening his crooked glasses, Arthur caught Edward's hand in an enthusiastic handshake.

"It's so nice to meet you," Arthur said. "I always enjoy talking to Muggles who know our secret. Ooh, are those some of Molly's lemon tarts?"

"Help yourself," Severus said.

To his credit, George gave nothing away. His face remained completely neutral as his father picked up a tart and took a big bite. As icing sugar and crumbs rained down onto Arthur's dark robes, his sparse hair began to sparkle. It shifted in colour from ginger speckled with grey to crimson striped with gold.

Granger crossed her arms. George's disarming smile made her scowl falter, just a little, like she was holding in a laugh. After thirty seconds (and much gaping at himself in a conjured mirror), Arthur's hair went back to normal.

"They reveal what House you belong in," George said when Granger asked him how the tarts worked. "For kids who are too young for Hogwarts, mostly, though I'm thinking of making a version that lasts longer for going to Quidditch matches and the like. Not sure what to call them yet. Sorting Snacks? The final product probably won't be tarts. That, I confess, was just so Snape would actually eat one. Not that it bloody worked. The sugar on top is infused with a potion that is activated by a charm. I cast it nonverbally after you made me eat one."

"Would they work on Muggles?" Edward asked. "I've always wondered which House I'd be Sorted into if I was a wizard."

"Don't see why not," George said. "It reads your personality, not your magical ability. There's nothing in it that should hurt you."

A prickle of unease crept over Severus's skin like goosebumps as Edward raised one of the tarts to his mouth. If George's invention caused Edward any harm, Severus would make him pay.

Instead of yellow and black, as Severus expected, red and gold shot through Edward's hair. Great. Another one. George clapped Edward on the back.

"Welcome to Gryffindor, mate."
Arthur began pestering Edward with inane questions about Muggle inventions, starting with hair dye. Edward didn't offer up a single word of truth, just like he'd done when quizzed about Muggles by his late wife. Arthur ate up every outlandish claim. Both Granger and George had to smother a few laughs, leading Severus to believe that George knew far more about Muggles than his father did.

Severus made a mental note to keep Edward and George away from each other in the future. They could get up to all sorts of mischief if allowed to collaborate.

"What do your Sorting Snacks do when the person has to choose between Houses?" Granger asked George, gingerly picking up a tart. "The hat gave me a choice between Ravenclaw and Gryffindor."

"Huh," George said. "I'm not sure. Try one and we'll find out."

Granger nibbled on the pastry. One half of her curls transformed into blue and bronze spirals, while the other half shimmered into red and gold. She looked like an indecisive circus performer. Thirty seconds passed. Another thirty. And another. Her hair didn't turn back to brown.

"George!"

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Severus,

I cannot recall you being attached to any woman, save Raffaella Zabini, for longer than an evening or two. I asked Narcissa (in my experience, women have much longer memories when it comes to this sort of thing), and she agrees.

You always were good at keeping secrets, so I wouldn't be surprised to find you had a wife and family hidden away somewhere. I do think you would have avoided any such attachments during the war. I'm sure you know she would only have been used against you—by both sides.

Dark, curly hair isn't much to go on. Did you see her face? You are a passably good artist. If you sketch her, I might be able to tell you her name. I imagine you won't want to send me a Pensieve memory of the dream; it was of an intimate nature, was it not? I don't remember you being any less prudish at age twenty. Such a pity. I did my best to break you of it, but no one can succeed in every endeavour.

Let me know if you stumble upon any other clues to this little mystery of yours. And do come for another visit sometime soon.

— Lucius

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Squinting, Hermione scanned through the notes she'd taken during her interview with Severus about the start of the first war. It was well past time to either cast Lumos or turn on a lamp, but she was too focused on her task for silly distractions like adequate lighting.

The movement of Severus withdrawing from the Pensieve didn't catch her attention. It was the sound he made that did it: a rattling breath like a trapped sob. Hermione's gaze snapped to him. He stared at the memory that still eddied around the bowl of the Pensieve, his face pale and devastated.

"Severus?" she said. "What's the matter?"

He didn't answer. Rushing to his side, Hermione picked up the discarded vial and read the elegant

Oh, Severus.

"Was it Professor Burbage?" Hermione asked.

He opened his mouth a few times as if attempting to reply, but instead offered a stiff nod. As Hermione reached a hand towards him, his chin wobbled ever so slightly. He turned away from her. Again, she remembered his robotic voice from his trial, echoing Professor Burbage's last words. Severus, please. We're friends.

That man hadn't seemed like even a distant cousin to the one in front of her now, much less the same person. His walls had been up, his emotions locked away and buried. She wouldn't have believed he'd ever cried over anything, looking at him that day.

Stepping closer, Hermione risked wrapping her arms around Severus's waist from behind. He remained motionless for a few moments before resting one hand on her wrist. His thumb rubbed back and forth over the chain of her bracelet.

"That Healer is a fucking liar," he said, his voice gravelly and choked. "She said that dreams exaggerated everything. She said I should try to obtain the associated memories. Seeing the real thing was worse."

His breaths were ragged, each one a battle against the threat of tears. Seeing him in so much pain made Hermione's chest ache and her eyes sting.

"If you want to cry—"

"I don't."

"Well, that's fine, too. I was just going to say that I've seen you do far more embarrassing things than cry over something that damn well deserves your tears. I'm not going to judge you."

With a sniffle he tried to hide, he glanced back at her over his shoulder. "What sort of things?"

"On my twenty-fifth birthday, you went with me to meet up with my friends at The Three Broomsticks. Harry got the bright idea for us to play Never Have I Ever. It's a Muggle drinking—"

"I know what it is."

"Oh. Anyway, you and I got sort of competitive with making each other drink. Never have I ever read Hogwarts, A History more than three times. Never have I ever had a tattoo, that sort of thing. That one was really insensitive of me, wasn't it? You seemed amused at the time. "She smiled into the fabric of his shirt at the tiny laugh that escaped him. "We both got completely pissed. You had Sobering Solution back at Hogwarts, but we had to make it there first. We took turns holding each other's hair back when we vomited on the side of the road."

He let her see his face then, tears and all. Spinning around in the circle of her arms, he placed one hand on her hip and the other on the small of her back. Hermione's hands found their way to his shoulders. The hair that brushed his collar tickled her fingers. With an unsteady sigh, Severus rested his forehead against hers.

"Who won?" he asked.

"Pardon?"
“Our little competition on your birthday. Who made the other drink more?”

She chuckled. "I think we both lost, to be honest."

"Hmm. That means I won."

"If that's what you want to believe."

Stubble scratched her fingertips as she wiped the tear tracks from his cheeks. Because they were so close, his dark eyes were nothing but a blur. She felt, more than saw, his eyebrows raise. Turning his head to one side, he feathered the lightest kiss over her palm.

He would not do such things if he was completely himself. He wouldn't. Hermione's poor heart didn't get the memo. It skipped and fluttered into a quicker rhythm. Oh, she'd been lying to herself for years, hadn't she? She'd never got over her silly, silly infatuation.

"Granger," he whispered. The hand grasping her hip tightened, drew her closer.

Her name spoken in that deep voice sounded like an invitation. If the man in front of her had all of his memories and wasn't in such a distraught state, she would accept. She would stretch up on her tiptoes until their mouths met, swallow his gasp of surprise, and channel all of her pent-up longing into a kiss.

But he didn't know the full weight of their history, and he was upset. Hermione stretched up on her tiptoes until her lips met his forehead.

"Do you want to watch more Black Books?" she asked.

He stepped back, removing himself from her hold. Those walls that had been absent went up. "No, thank you. Go back to your writing. I think I'll brew something."

"Severus, please. I need you."

Severus blinked the sleep from eyes that were still sore and gritty from weeping. Another pulse of magic coursed through him, as familiar and bright as Granger. He remembered, suddenly, being roused from sleep by this magic before, deep in the dungeons. It had been different then—all panic and fear, wailing and sobbing. The magic that called out to him now was not from any nightmare of the battlefield. It did not wail; it whispered in a lover's voice. It wrapped around him, warm and enticing. It wanted. Wanted him.

Well now. That was a useful bit of data, indeed.

He considered casting his Patronus, the way Granger did for him when he had a nightmare, but why disturb what was clearly a pleasant dream? Instead, he padded downstairs to the kitchen.

As he waited for his tea to brew, Severus thought back to that embrace they'd shared earlier. For half a second, he had been so, so close to untangling how he felt about Granger. Something unwavering and essential had shone through—just a flash that had quickened his pulse when she'd touched his face so tenderly. Not long enough to name it, but long enough to know that it was precious to him. The sort of thing that—if experience and borrowed memories were any indication—Severus didn't get to keep.

In the wake of whatever that feeling had been, he'd almost kissed her.
As if he hadn't already been exposed enough around her, with his nightmares and his reaction to the memory of Charity's murder. As if he hadn't already given Granger enough ammunition, should things between them ever turn sour.

Flirting with her so blatantly that even a Gryffindor couldn't misinterpret it was one thing. He could play that off as a joke if necessary. He could spin some lies and take it back. She'd never need to know that he'd meant every word. But a rejected kiss?

Now, tea in hand, Severus moved to the front room and decanted his memory of their embrace into the Pensieve. Reliving it wasn't like viewing his lost memories. No emotions came swirling back to the surface as the scene played out before him, no matter how he strained and reached. Just to be sure, he watched it all the way through twice, stopping at the point when Granger kissed him on the forehead like he was her little brother.

Yes, she definitely would have rebuffed his advances if he'd gone in for a proper kiss. Thank Merlin he hadn't.

Footsteps creaked down the stairs. The dream was over, then. Granger's hair was almost back to normal—or as normal as her hair ever got. In the low light of the table lamp it was more brown than a wild mishmash of red, gold, blue, and bronze. The light was strong enough to see that her cheeks flushed pink the instant she entered the room and noticed Severus standing there. He affected a puzzled expression. Inside, he was smirking.

It must have been quite the dream.

"You're not looking at more memories, are you?" Hermione asked, peering over the rim of the Pensieve. "You just watched two a couple of hours ago. Remember what the Healer said about taking it slow—"

"I was reviewing memories that I've already seen," Severus said, whisking the contents of the Pensieve back into his head before she could get any ideas about snooping. "I spontaneously remembered something about half an hour ago."

"Really? That's wonderful!"

One of her hands rose to press over her heart as the other grasped his arm, heedless of the fact that her fingers wrapped around the dormant Dark Mark. Severus did not think anyone was sweet under any circumstances, but the way her whole being nearly vibrated with hope was almost a little bit sweet. Almost.

"What did you remember?" she asked.

"Being in my quarters at Hogwarts as your magic called out to me during a nightmare."

"Oh. Do you think anything triggered it?"

Stepping closer to her, Severus considered his options. No, he wouldn't tell Granger that her magic had made him aware of the erotic nature of her dream. She would be embarrassed, not pleasantly off-kilter and flustered. He would tuck the information away for a later date.

"No," he lied. "From what I could tell, it happened randomly. It felt like… like the opposite of stepping into a room and forgetting why I'd entered it."

As he spoke, he swept his thumb back and forth over the knuckles of the hand she'd placed on his arm, making the gesture seem absentminded rather than calculated. She worried her lower lip
between her teeth.

How could his past self have missed the flashing neon signs that pointed to how Granger felt about him? He must have known. Mere days of observation had led Severus to the conclusion that although she wasn't prepared to act upon it, she still wanted him. And he… Well. He wouldn't mind recreating whatever she'd been dreaming about. He was certain of that much, even if his deeper emotions remained a mystery. Being close to her was surprisingly pleasant.

"Were you ever really like this?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"This." Removing her hand from his arm, she gestured vaguely at him. "I struggle to believe that this is how you would have behaved towards me at age twenty. All… you know. Tactile. Not that I'm objecting. Hugging you like I hug all of my other friends is nice. But once you have your memories again, you'll have quite a few objections for yourself. Particularly about some of the things you've said."

Severus made a half thoughtful, half amused hum. "So you've mentioned. We shall see. And to answer your question, I would not want you to meet me as I truly was at age twenty."

He'd been someone who would have handed Granger over to the Dark Lord before she could have drawn breath to shriek out a protest, not someone who would have invited her into his home for a summer of reading her way through his library and engaging in pyjama-clad midnight chats. According to his own faulty memory, he'd been a devoted Death Eater a short time ago, but he couldn't imagine going back. Not now. Not even if the Dark Lord had never gone after Lily.

Granger studied his face as if she thought she would find some hidden answer there. "Maybe having your older self's emotions has mellowed you a bit."

"Would you ever describe him as mellow?"

She giggled. "Good point. Hmm. I think I'm going to get that glass of water I came down here for and go back to bed. I might be able to squeeze in a few more hours of sleep."

"Very well." Bending down, Severus kissed Granger's forehead the same way she'd kissed his earlier: quick and platonic. "Sweet dreams."
Old Magic

Bright August light sneaked past the edges of Severus's bedroom curtains and wrenched him away from sleep. He scowled at the sun for daring to be so high in the sky. The dusty remnants of a dream lingered just out of reach, slipping away bit by bit the more he tried to grab hold of them. Something about Charity saying she was proud of him.

No one was singing confusing, off-key songs in his shower or chatting to his cat. Swinging his legs out of bed, he stomped down the stairs. No pot of coffee waited for him. Grumbling, he slammed the canister of coffee grounds down on the worktop. Lois meowed at him for daring to tend to his own needs before feeding her. Severus snarled as he tipped food into her dish. She sniffed the offering once and sauntered away.

Hagrid had shown up three days before with the news that he'd successfully integrated Granger's unwanted hippogriffs into the Hogwarts herd. After an afternoon of numerous Reparos and Evanescos on the main living space (her library's wards had mercifully held), her cottage had once again been habitable. There had been no reason for her to keep staying at Spinner's End.

Lois was not taking Granger's absence well.

Not in the mood for breakfast either, Severus scrutinised Granger's colour coded memory chart. Over the past couple of weeks, he'd been working on making the earlier years edge away from red and closer to green. Memories from the Malfoys and his longest serving colleagues had taken him through the final year of the first war and into those fleeting days of peace before the Dark Lord's return. Not today, though. He felt like watching something more recent.

Granger had written brief notes on her vials of memories, offering hints about the contents. Things like "Mistletoe... again" or "Sofas" or "43rd birthday." One of her vials from February of 2009 caught his attention. Just a couple of months before he'd lost his memories. The clue she'd provided was "Cats." She'd told him that he'd taken her to get Boudica, hadn't she? They'd chosen their familiars together after her previous one had died. Surprising that it had happened so recently. The elderly orange cat he'd seen in a few memories must have had double its share of the usual nine lives. Snatching up the vial, he headed for the Pensieve.

The Great Hall materialised before him, but not as Severus had last seen it. This version appeared to have been violated by Valentine's Day. Pink and red heart-shaped balloons floated among the candles near the ceiling, occasionally popping and raining down glitter when shot with an arrow by a fat cherub. The edges of the long tables were lined with heart-patterned bunting. Even the food was all pink and sparkly: pink porridge, pink yogurt, pink—ugh—eggs and toast. This had to be the work of Althea, the former Muggle Studies professor. Granger had told Severus that in addition to menacing her colleagues with mistletoe, Althea had also specialised in sickeningly twee Valentine's Day decorations.

At the head table, Granger sat in her usual spot next to Memory Severus. She gave her rosy oatmeal a half-hearted stir. Severus froze in place as emotions rained down over him like the ridiculous glitter overhead.

Oh. Oh, no. This was new. This was more than the fondness and desire that had rippled through him during some of the earlier memories. This glowed and hammered against his ribcage, beating in harmony with the Life Debt.
He loved her.

"Granger," Memory Severus said, standing up. "Come with me."

She looked up at him with puffy, reddened eyes. She'd been crying.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Somewhere that will hopefully make you stop moping. Minerva, we'll return in plenty of time to supervise the Hogsmeade trip."

After taking a moment to steady himself, Severus followed the two of them out of the castle to the Apparition Point. Memory Severus transfigured their teaching robes to resemble Muggle attire and extended an arm to Granger. She took his hand without question or hesitation. Before they turned on the spot, Memory Severus gave Granger's fingers a light squeeze. He kept hold of her for a few seconds longer than necessary when they landed at their destination: an alley in a sleepy suburb.

"Little Whinging?" Granger said with a wry smile. "Are you going to cheer me up by torturing the Dursleys in some way?"

"If my first idea doesn't work, then certainly."

"I'll have to sabotage it, then."

Chuckling, Memory Severus led her out of the alley and onto a road called Wisteria Walk. A white cat glared balefully at them as they turned up the footpath leading to a house that looked more unkempt than its neighbours.

"Mrs Figg's house?" Granger asked.

Severus pressed the doorbell. "It is impossible to discuss the latest issue of Potions Quarterly with someone intent on sobbing into their porridge. Although the study of potions is... not your forte, you are at least capable of comprehending the latest research. That's more than can be said for the rest of the staff. We're here to get you another beast."

"And if I don't want one? I can't just replace Crookshanks."

"I never suggested you view it as a replacement. If you fail to bond with any of the cats, we will make our way to Privet Drive to carry out your alternative plan." His voice grew more formal as the door creaked open. "Hello, Mrs Figg."

Memory Severus put a hand on the small of Granger's back as he allowed her to precede him into the house. The wizened old woman with flyaway grey hair who had greeted them led them upstairs to a room with pink carpet, five scratching posts, and too many litter boxes to contemplate. At least everything looked clean. Several half-kneazles frolicked around, pausing now and then to attack one of their compatriots or a convenient passing ankle.

"These are the rescues," Mrs Figg said. "I have a litter of kittens coming within the next couple of weeks—"

"No, we'd like one of these," Memory Severus said.

Sinking down onto the floor in a cross legged position, Granger stroked the forehead of a familiar cat. Boudica stretched her whole body out as long as it would go, then climbed onto Granger's lap and wrapped her front legs around Granger's hand as if hugging it.
"Oh," Granger whispered in the same tone she'd used when meeting Potter's baby. "Hello."

Memory Severus was so engrossed in watching Granger that he didn't notice the approach of another cat with similar markings until it climbed up his leg and bit his hand.

Ah. Lois.

"That one has an attitude," Mrs Figg said. "Finding someone to take her is going to be difficult. I hate to separate her from her sister, but I suppose it can't be helped."

Granger looked up at him with an expression that Severus recognised. It was the way she'd looked when she'd confessed how much she missed the complete version of him.

"No one wanted Crooks, either," Granger said. "He'd been there for ages by the time I found him."

Mrs Figg shot Memory Severus a guileless smile. He answered it with a roll of his eyes. She'd known exactly what sort of reaction her statement would elicit from Granger. Memory Severus pried Lois off of his trouser leg and held her up in front of his face. Lois lost the ensuing staring contest when she licked the end of his nose.

"It had better not get used to doing that," he said. "I dread to think where its mouth has been. I suppose we'll have to take both of them, Mrs Figg. I'll have this one."

Granger beamed at him. "Really?"

"Yes, but if it is too much of a menace, I'm leaving it in your bedroom and giving Sophia strict orders to never again allow you entrance to my quarters. Don't think you can go to Longbottom for assistance, either. He's been barred since the day he joined the staff."

The way Memory Severus cradled the bundle of fur against his chest belied his words. Against Granger's protests, Memory Severus paid Mrs Figg for both cats.

"It was my idea to come here," he said. "Consider it a gift."

He'd given her a cat on Valentine's Day. Good gods.

"Thank you."

Even though Granger knew where they were going this time, Memory Severus still offered his hand for Side-Along Apparition. As their fingers twined together, the memory ended.

Severus rubbed the bridge of his nose before returning Granger's memory to its vial. His breaths turned shallow and quick. Love. Had that been the fleeting something that had jolted through him right before he'd almost kissed her? How far back had it started? Returning to the table full of memories, he selected one of Granger's from the year before. November 2008: Flu. He dived back in.

Memory Severus sat surrounded by the hallmarks of flu: cough potions, fever potions, headache potions, books that had been read in one sitting and cast aside. The green underwater light that filtered through the tall windows of his sitting room at Hogwarts cast an even sicklier glow over his skin than usual. Leaning over him, Granger placed a gentle hand on his forehead to check his temperature instead of casting a much more precise diagnostic spell.
There it was again: love. Not as powerful as it had been in the memory with the cats, but already present, already warming him from the inside. It was more like a beginning in this memory—like the first stirrings of an idea that sparked a plan. Woven through it was a cautious glimmer of hope.

"How are you feeling today?" Granger asked.

Memory Severus glowered. "How does it look like I'm feeling?" A chill trembled through him. "It would be in your best interest to just leave me to die in peace."

"Oh my God. After all you survived during the war, you're claiming you can't endure a bout of flu? You weren't nearly so dramatic when you were recovering from Nagini's bite, Severus. You were very stoic."

"I was stoned on some truly fantastic pain potions at the time."

For some reason, this made Granger blush. "I remember. Anyway, why on earth would it be in my best interest to let you die? Who would I pester during meals if I did something so silly?"

"It would be in your best interest because as one of the only beneficiaries named in my will, you would profit from my death. Additionally, if you continue to insist upon exposing yourself to my germs in order to force me to eat soup, you'll end up catching this vile plague."

"You're joking."

"I am not. Influenza is quite contagious."

Granger huffed. "Being deliberately obtuse doesn't suit you. You know I meant the bit about me being one of your beneficiaries." She blinked owlishly at him when he only raised an eyebrow. "Who are the others?"

"Lily's descendants and a Muggle friend of mine. Do not, under any circumstances, tell Potter. I intend to be dead when he finds out. I have no desire to subject myself to his inevitable outpouring of sentimentality. It's just a few things from my school days with his mother. Edward—the Muggle—will get the house and its contents, save my books. Those will go to you."

"Oh, well, in that case…"

Leaning to one side, she grabbed a cushion off of the sofa and held it over Memory Severus's face. She allowed one muffled exclamation of protest from him before yanking her squishy weapon away with a laugh.

"You dunderhead," she said fondly. "No amount of books would be worth leaving you to die in peace. I had a flu jab, so I'm willing to risk catching your plague. You'll just have to put up with me showing up and fussing over you till you're better."

"You could fuss to rival Molly Weasley." Memory Severus grumbled, but his smile and the gurgle of amusement that Severus felt contradicted it. Turning the cushion over in his hands, Memory Severus stared at the stone floor. "Potter stopped by earlier. He was surprised you'd appointed yourself as my Mediwitch."

"Oh?"

"Apart from the fact that Hogwarts employs a genuine Mediwitch, he seemed to think you should be spending all of your free time in your quarters, shovelling yourself full of ice cream and wailing about your newly single status. I suspect he's been watching too many brain-rotting Muggle films.
He also assumed I knew about said single status."

With a shrug, Granger slumped down next to him. "Terry got offered a job in Egypt as a curse breaker a couple of days ago."

"And he's qualified for that? Hasn't he been a low-level Ministry drone for years?"

"Well, he passed their tests. That was enough for them. It's something he's wanted to do since the first time he spoke to Bill, I think. So, that's great for him, but he wanted me to drop everything and move with him. Never mind that I could never leave my students to be bored to sleep by Professor Binns—not after I worked so hard to make them give a damn about the subject. Never mind that I've made promises to Mrs Figg and Argus to keep doing our Squib Life Skills courses. Never mind that Minerva has told me I'm all but guaranteed the position of Deputy Head when Filius retires in a few years. Never mind that I'm partway through writing a textbook on the wars, and nearly everyone I need to interview lives here. When I told him all of that, he said I could teach anywhere."

"Yes, I can see why he would think someone whose speciality is the history of British magic would be in demand elsewhere."

"Exactly." She closed her eyes. "And, well, he proposed."

Panic, icy and jagged, surfaced in spite of the fact that she must have said no. The feeling clamped its jaws around Severus's throat and latched on like that bloody snake.

"He did this after you informed him of why his plan did not match up with your career goals?" Memory Severus asked in a sardonic voice that didn't match the sudden pallor in his cheeks.

"It was sort of in the middle." Granger's voice cracked as she continued speaking. "Almost six years together, and I didn't even consider saying yes. Even without Egypt, I'd have said no. I've thought about it before, of course, but it was always one of those 'maybe someday' things. When it became something concrete, I didn't want it. At all. Thus the newly single status." She forced a fragile smile. "Honestly, Harry doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm fine. A bit bruised, but perfectly capable of being a soup-pushing pseudo-Mediwitch. Speaking of which, here. Have some of this."

Memory Severus obligingly took a sip from the mug of rich broth she pressed into his hands. "Boot was an imbecile to not ask you after six days, given how far above him you are," he said. "Waiting six years makes one wonder how he manages to tie his shoes without assistance."

"How far above him I am?" Granger grinned. "Severus, was that a compliment?"

"Hard to say. I'm delirious with flu."

"Mm. Of course. I didn't have to wait for him to propose. I could have asked him at any point if I'd really wanted to marry him."

"You could never be so stupid."

Her head jerked back. "Have you always disliked him?"

"I dislike everyone."

"Not me." She said it with all of the confidence she could muster, but Severus thought he could almost feel her uncertainty bouncing alongside the relief that poured from Memory Severus.
Memory Severus smirked. "Debatable."

"You build libraries and break laws for everyone you dislike?"

"Only for you." A coughing fit shook his body for the better part of a minute. "Ugh. Disgusting. If I give you your Christmas present a few weeks early, will you leave me alone to die?"

"No. But I will leave you alone to rest—not to die. No gifts necessary." Standing up, she gave his shoulder a brief, friendly pat. "Feel better."

"Granger?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you're staying." One corner of his mouth lifted up. "If you went swanning off to another country, I'd have no hope of ever repaying my Life Debt."

She chuckled. "You say the sweetest things."

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Not long after Severus finished watching the second memory, Granger knocked on his door. That she didn't just let herself in felt strange and wrong after he'd become accustomed to her doing just that, but Severus didn't tell her to do so next time. Instead, he returned her greeting and watched as she beckoned Lois to join her on one of the sofas with a wiggle of her fingers.

"Did you know Raffaella was getting married?" Granger asked, stroking a hand down Lois's back. "I saw the announcement in the Prophet this morning. The ceremony was yesterday."

"Oh, that. Yes. I was invited, but I opted to avoid it. Attending the wedding of people I didn't remember sounded horrifyingly dull."

"Hmm, I suppose. Don't think I'm going to give up on trying to convince you to go to Neville and Ron's wedding, though."

Severus settled into the spot next to her. The new knowledge of his past (and possibly ongoing) love for her held his posture rigid. Yawning, Granger tucked her legs up beneath her. The movement made their elbows brush together and brought her head near to resting on his shoulder. With Granger so close, Severus tried, yet again, to break through that infuriating wall that blocked how he currently felt about her.

Right. So. He found her physically appealing. That had been established. They were good friends. Also firmly established. A short time ago, he'd loved her. That couldn't have vanished. Could it? He wasn't the sort to go falling in and out of love on a whim. Severus focused until his teeth hurt from clenching them together. Nothing. She was familiar and pretty. Anything else was trapped on the other side of that wall.

And what about Granger's feelings for Severus? That she wanted him physically was another obvious fact, but did she reciprocate the more tender emotions that had infused those memories?

Not being able to use Legilimency whenever he liked was turning out to be a pain in his arse. Perhaps he could think of a reason to suggest he view a recent memory in her head, rather than in the Pensieve, so he could sense her emotions that way.

"Are you all right?" Granger asked. "You look a bit peaky."
"I'm fine. Do you have everything prepared for your Squib course?"

The beginning of the course she taught with Mrs Figg and Argus was scheduled for the following week, which meant she would soon be at Spinner's End even less often.

Lois wouldn't like that at all.

Granger gave a nervous attempt at a smile. "I think so. Just about. We have double the number of people signed up compared to last year. Which is good, but—"

Another knock on the door interrupted her. When Severus answered it, he found Edward standing there with a wooden box.

"I have something for you," Edward said, "but you can't get mad. Oh, hi, Hermione. It's good to see you again."

"Err, it's good to see you, too."

Granger cast a careful look at Severus. Telling him not to get angry about something was a surefire way to ready his temper to strike. He narrowed his eyes at Edward.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

Edward set the box on a side table. "You know how you didn't like viewing memories of Charity by using your Legili-thingy on me because it was 'unsettling'—" he moved his fingers to indicate the scare quotes, "to experience my feelings for her? Well, I remembered you telling me a few years ago about how you tried to help Hermione's parents get their memories back. You said you read the minds of Muggles who knew them and then extracted your memories of their memories. You thought it might have worked if her parents were magical, so I contacted George… Severus, don't look at me like that."

Upon flipping open the lid of the box, Severus was confronted with dozens of vials of memories. Edward Burbage: May 1987. Edward Burbage: September 1992. George had used magic on Edward—invasd his mind. Severus hushed the inner voice that insisted on uttering the word hypocrite. Severus attempting to help Granger's parents was entirely different from George meddling in Severus's affairs. It was.

Slamming the box shut, Severus thrust a hand at Granger. "Take me to Weasley's house."

"Not until you calm down. Angelina will be a bit put out with me if you kill her husband."

"It was my idea," Edward said. "George didn't even want to do it at first. He said he reckoned you'd find a way to give him detention for the rest of his life, no matter how long ago he left school."

"Why didn't you ask Granger to do it, then, if you were so determined to let someone go poking around in your brain? George is hardly the soul of discretion. Had he even cast the spell before? He could have hurt you."

Granger's hand travelled the length of Severus's arm before giving his fingers a tentative squeeze. He allowed it.

"He didn't hurt me, though," Edward said. "Anyway, it's done. There's no taking it back. I didn't let him see anything too personal. And now you can see plenty of memories of Charity." He sighed. "You should see them, Severus. She would have hated for you to lose them."
"They will return to me when my memory is healed. I haven't lost anything; those memories are merely buried. You exposed my private life to George for nothing."

Severus stood beneath another sprig of mistletoe with Granger, the scene once again banded by silver. Like before, she sipped on a glass of light pink punch. This time, they stood ever-so-slightly closer. Not crossing the boundary between friends and lovers, but drawing nearer to it.

Severus waited for something. He didn't know what. Everything from his heartbeat to his magic teetered on the knife-edge of suspense. Something new was supposed to happen this time. He knew it. He got the feeling he'd been waiting a very, very long time.

Everything flickered, grew more silver, and suddenly he was kissing her. He didn't start kissing her; the dream skipped right to the middle. One moment he stood there looking down at her, and the next his eyes were closed and their mouths were pressed together and it was everything. Instead of the punch she'd been drinking, she tasted like coffee and cinnamon and honey. Somehow, there was no longer a glass in her hands. Unencumbered fingers dug into his shoulders. His arms wrapped around her waist, knuckles scraping on the wall behind her.

The end was much like the beginning. Silver receded, guttered like a dying candle, and he was no longer kissing her. They stood in their former positions as if it had never happened. Maybe it hadn't. Maybe it was a fantasy that had found itself tucked within this memory dream. Severus kept waiting, disappointment slowly settling like snow.

"I think it's my turn this time," Granger said, taking aim at the mistletoe with her wand. "Reducto!"

Severus woke up with an afterimage of exploding greenery flashing before his eyes.
Ever since he'd stirred his first cauldron in Slughorn's classroom, brewing had been Severus's chosen method of relaxation. The more experimental, the better. It quieted his mind and focused all of his senses on his task. Now was no different. Calm seeped in as he ground dried hellebore blossoms in his mortar and pestle and sprinkled them over the gently boiling purple liquid in his cauldron.

A different scene swam across his vision: himself, working on a silver potion in a golden cauldron. He added a dusting of a fine, glittering white substance he didn’t recognise—some sort of powder, perhaps. It was too blurry to tell for certain. Something small and dark fluttered in his peripheral vision. The potion surged up the edges of the cauldron in a violent wave, almost bubbling over along with his surprise.

The memory receded, leaving Severus staring at his half-completed experiment. That had been it. The moment that had stolen his memories. Upon searching his lab back when it had happened, the Aurors had discovered everything scoured clean of evidence (allegedly by Severus's own wand), but that golden cauldron had been left out.

Severus bit the inside of his cheek. He'd been so focused on the mystery of Granger that he'd barely devoted any thought to the mystery of his condition. Inexcusable. Just because he felt that he could trust Minerva and Arthur and a few others, it didn't mean he actually could. What sort of spy was he, allowing these people to dole out information as they saw fit? Had he really become so complacent after the war?

He needed find out what that powder was—or what it was supposed to be. Someone may have tampered with it. No one was beyond suspicion. No one.

There was also the possibility that it genuinely had been an accident, caused by a mistake on his part. He would examine that once he'd ruled out the other options. Retreating to the sitting room, he began yanking books from the shelves. What potions ingredient would he not recognise? What on earth had he been doing?

Lovegood. He could question Lovegood. She was always sending him exotic souvenirs from abroad, was she not?

A knock at the door interrupted his impromptu research. Edward and George waited on the doorstep with matching sheepish expressions.

"Hi," George said, rocking back on his heels.

"What do you want, Weasley?" Severus asked.

"Pint of Guinness. Let's go."

Severus pictured the clear potion simmering over a low flame in one of his other cauldrons. It would be another week until the lunar cycle was complete and the potion was ready, but George would be more likely to go out for a drink with Severus sans suspicion if a precedent already existed. And Severus did need to do something about the fact that George had obtained far too many memories from Edward.

"Very well," Severus said. "But you're buying the first round."
"Granger. Granger. Graaaaaaaanger."

"You're going to scare her if you keep that up. No one wants to wake up to their former professor looming over them and chanting their name in the dark. Well, hmm. Actually, Hermione might enjoy that. Carry on."

"I could cast my Patronus. That's how she always wakes me."

"Mate, I'm amazed you can even say Patronus right now. I don't fancy your chances of successfully casting it."

"Bollocks. I could. Oh, I think she's waking up."

Hermione had been awake since the first time Severus had mumbled her name. With a groan, she cast Lumos and glared at the two wizards who stood at the foot of her bed. It had to be a bizarre dream. No way would Severus actually let himself and George into her cottage at—she glanced at the clock—half past two in the bloody morning.

"What," she said between gritted teeth, "are you two doing here?"

"Good morning," George chirped. "We need a Bonder."

She shook her head and blinked a few times. Nope. Still didn't make any sense. "Bonder?"

"For the Unbreakable Vow," Severus said.

Raising her hands to her temples, Hermione squinted at them. "Back up. Start at the beginning. If you don't explain yourselves in about thirty seconds, I'm going to feed you both to Boudica."

Boudica, the traitor, chose that moment to rub her face all over Severus's legs and purr rapturously. Some attack cat she was. Severus scooped Boudica up and smirked at Hermione as if they'd transported back to her teen years and he wasn't holding a half-kneazle, but the coveted Defence teaching position.

"I went round to Snape's because I felt bad for my part in causing a rift between him and Edward," George said. "The three of us went down to the pub and sorted things out."

Sorted things out meaning they didn't talk about what had happened at all, but took turns buying rounds and talking about inconsequential things, most likely.

"Right," Hermione said. "And the Unbreakable Vow?"

"That was Edward's idea," Severus said. "Weasley is going to vow to never tell anyone what he saw in Edward's memories. He's also to undergo voluntary Obliviation from Bert to erase the memories from his head once I've viewed all of them."

"Bert?" Hermione said.

"One of the Muppets."

"Severus. It is either too early or too late for this. I can't decide which. Are you genuinely suggesting that a piece of felt with a unibrow is going to Obliviate George?"

"Bert is one of the Aurors who follows me around Hogwarts." Severus's tone oozed with the sort of disdain he usually reserved for his worst students. And Harry. "He used to be an Obliviator before he became an Auror. He said he'd do it. There are quite a few memories, you see. George wants a
professional so he doesn’t end up like me or… Who was that idiot you said Obliviated himself with your brother's broken wand?"

"Gilderoy Lockhart," George said.

"Right. Him. So, we need a Bonder."

Hermione closed her eyes so she didn't have to look at the two of them. "I'm not going to be part of an Unbreakable Vow you make when you're drunk, George."

"I'm sober as a judge. Snape, not so much, but I appointed myself the designated Apparator. Only had one pint, and that was hours ago. Not that he trusted me to Side-Along him here. That's why he came by Floo."

Hermione had three exceptions to the wards she set on her Floo connection every night, in case she needed to be reached during an emergency: the Potters, the soon-to-be Weasley-Longbottoms, and Severus. That list had just diminished by one third.

"Could this not wait till morning?" she asked. "You decided to just barge into my house in the middle of the night? What if I'd been sleeping naked or something?"

George smirked. "Then he really would have forgiven me."

"Weasley," Severus said in that tone again. Apparently, being drunk brought out the professor in him. "Do try to focus on the task at hand."

Climbing out of bed, Hermione lumbered towards the kettle. She needed tea.

"I'm not doing it," she said. "Your parents would never forgive me if I took part in something that could result in your death with one accidental slip of the tongue. And you." She pointed an accusing finger at Severus, who simply raised his eyebrows and kept scratching behind Boudica's ears. "Haven't you had enough of Unbreakable Vows for one lifetime?"

"I don't recall," Severus said sardonically.

"Very funny." Attempting to rake a hand through her messy curls, Hermione leaned a hip against the kitchen worktop. "I might be able to help you another way, I suppose. Do you remember what I did to Marietta Edgecombe, George?"

"Yeah, of course." He faked a sniffle. "I was so proud. Fred was, too."

She allowed a soft smile in spite of the ridiculous hour. "We could do something like that. A jinxed contract that writes something on your face if you break the terms."

"I've heard she still has scars from those spots. So you won't take risks with my life, but you'll take risks with the glory that is this?" George waved a hand over his face.

"Yep."

"Hmm. I guess that could work. Snape? What do you reckon?"

While they explained the back story, a wobbly Severus sat on the edge of Hermione's bed. He was the one who came up with the winning idea during the ensuing debate about what to potentially spell out in spots on George's face: "SHOP AT ADA'S" over his forehead and cheeks. Ada's Amusements was a fairly new shop in Diagon Alley, and George's only real competition.
By the time Hermione drafted the contract, applied the necessary jinx, and George signed it, Severus had removed his boots, flopped back on the bed and spread his arms and legs as if in the middle of making a snow angel on her sheets. Hermione saw George to the Floo and firmly warded it behind him.

"Budge over," she said with a shove of Severus's shoulder. "If my hair maims you, it's no more than you deserve."

Severus took his time about complying. Squeezing in next to him, Hermione put her forever-cold feet against his. It had the desired effect. With a yelp, he scrambled away from her side of the bed.

"Good gods, woman," he said. "How do you manage to walk around on those ice blocks?"

With a whispered Nox, Hermione cast the room back into darkness. "It's a talent."

"Hmm. Should I Floo home?"

"It's fine if you want to stay. You're not impregnating me tonight, though."

Severus snorted in a way he never would have allowed when he was sober. "I should think not. I'd rather have all of my wits about me for such an event." Deciding to risk the icy punishment of her feet again, he wriggled closer. Each exhale that passed his lips washed over her cheek and cooled her skin. Instead of sour alcohol, his breath smelled like mint. "I'm far too old to be this drunk. It's disgraceful. I can't believe I allowed it to happen."

Hermione laughed. "That's what you said on my twenty-fifth birthday. That's the only time I've seen you drunk other than right now, actually."

"But you've seen me stoned on pain potions. You said so in that flu memory."

"Oh, yes." Hermione hesitated. Why not tell him? She traced meaningless shapes on the scant stretch of bed between their bodies. "You were so stoned, in fact, that you stripped down to your underwear in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place and passed out on one of the sofas."

"I did no such thing!"

With her eyes once again adjusted to the darkness, Hermione could make out the stubborn set of his jaw. She was sure he could see the eyebrow she quirked up in response.

"Do you want to see the memory?" she asked. "Because that can be arranged. Harry was there as well."

"Potter saw me?" There was that disapproving professor voice again.

Hermione hid her smile against her pillow. "Why is that worse than me seeing you?"

"Because you're you, and Potter is Potter. Obviously."

"Mm. Obviously."

Clearing his throat, Severus tugged on one of her curls and watched it spring back. "Lois misses you."

Hermione didn't bother trying to conceal the grin that comment inspired. It was too big to be contained. "Lois does, huh?"
"Yes." Frowning, he made a confused little hum. "I've been here before."

"Where?"

"Your bed. I just had a flash. I remember…"

A flash of memory that placed him in her bed? Impossible. He had to be confused, getting things all muddled up from the alcohol. Hermione and Raffaella had similar enough features that one could be confused for the other in a darkened room. It had probably been some memory of Raffaella. Hermione ignored the bitter taste left in her mouth by that thought.

"Severus, you haven't," she said. "I don't think you've even been to my cottage since Terry and I broke up. Not while you still had your memories. Before that, I was in a relationship for quite a long time. Not in any position to be entertaining other men in my bed."

"Are you certain?"

"Trust me; I'd remember that. What did you see in this flash?"

"Me, here, with you like this. Exactly like this. And then I…” His hand hovered for a moment before settling on her shoulder, warm and dry. "I would like to try something, if you will allow it."

Her consent was as easy and automatic as a first year spell. "All right."

It happened quickly: just a closed-mouth brush of his thin lips against hers. Backing away, Severus furrowed his brow as if trying to assign a name to a semi-familiar face. Hermione held her breath. She had time to replay the event in her head before he spoke, the slow-motion repetition ramping up the speed of her pulse.

"Have we done that before?" Severus whispered.

"No." She exhaled. "Never."

"Not even when there was mistletoe involved?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Hmm. Pity."

For a second, he looked as though he wanted to go back in for a more thorough investigation. That, she would have refused, no matter what the little flip of her stomach had to say on the matter.

The reassuring weight of Severus's hand stayed on her shoulder as his eyes drifted shut and those mint-scented breaths grew slower and deeper. Sleep took longer in finding Hermione, but it eventually tugged her under.

She dreamed of mistletoe.

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Severus was, as George had put it, as sober as a judge. All evening he'd pretended to drink, putting on a show of becoming more and more intoxicated. As Granger succumbed to sleep, Severus remained wide awake. Lifting his hand from her shoulder finger by finger, he wandlessly cast a spell to alert him if she woke. It wouldn't do for him to get caught.

The memory loss had to be connected to Granger in some way. His focus kept snapping back to her again and again. No one else was a puzzle; he'd known how he felt about the rest of them instantly.
Bumbling around with memory after memory hadn't been necessary with anyone but Granger.

Then there had been the flash of memory he'd experienced when stretched out next to her in bed. He had been there before. In the silvery, runaway memory, there had been that flowering vine crawling up the wall behind her, that soft halo of curls framing her face, that stack of too many pillows beneath his head. He'd kept the kiss the same as it had been in the memory, too: brief and sweet. As expected, it had been inconclusive on his part. Pleasant, of course, but there was that infuriating block. Granger had reacted as if kissing him was something entirely new. He was fairly sure she thought she was telling the truth.

Had someone done a better job of erasing her memories than the butchering he'd received? How could he tell? He couldn't spot the gaps in her memory when his own was entirely absent.

Severus moved through the cottage methodically, opening drawers, speed-reading any scraps of parchment he found, searching for anything resembling a clue. Granger slept on. This older version of him suffered a pang of guilt when he discovered Granger's journal, but Severus ignored the uncomfortable twitch that rippled through his abdomen. Keeping one eye on Granger, he cast Gemino on the journal, then shrank the copy and slid it into his pocket.

Had his "accident" been caused by someone who had been jealous of whatever had been developing between himself and Granger? Raffaella? True, Raffaella was married now, but that didn't necessarily rule out the possibility of her being bitter. Boot? Granger had been with him for six years, and she'd refused his marriage proposal. It stood to reason that Boot wouldn't be pleased if Granger started to move on.

Sighing in her sleep, Granger stretched an arm over the spot Severus had previously occupied. Severus squashed the urge to abandon his search and crawl back in next to her. Instead, he shooed Boudica away from the wardrobe and began digging through the pockets of Granger's robes. No one was immune to suspicion, he told himself again. He had to be thorough, even if he couldn't imagine a world in which Granger had attacked his memories. His theory about former flames made far more sense.

Perhaps the culprit hadn't been a frustrated ex-lover, but an enemy. That Edgecombe woman, for instance. Did Severus have many enemies, now that all of the Marauders were dead? None had, as of yet, made themselves known. Boot could potentially fall into both categories: spurned lover of Granger, enemy of Severus.

Where had Granger said Boot lived now? Egypt? Damn. Severus hated hot weather, but there was nothing for it. He'd have to pile on the Cooling Charms and pay Terry Boot a visit.
True or False

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Severus rubbed his tired eyes. The acrid smoke billowing around the kitchen made his throat burn, but the potion was ready. Two chipped earthenware bowls sat before him on the yellow worktop. Into one bowl, he placed the sharp, true memory of a few hours before, when he'd drawn his own blood to check for traces of powdered moonstone and pearl dust. Ashwinder eggs—the supposed cause of his memory loss—were a main ingredient in several love potions. Remnants of some love potion ingredients (like the aforementioned powdered moonstone and pearl dust) remained in the system for months after the potion's brief effects faded.

As he'd expected, the results had been negative. Only a faint echo of Ashwinder eggs was to be found. Severus had been under the influence of a love potion before; he knew what that gnawing, disgusting obsession was like. In his fourth year at Hogwarts, Sirius Black had charmed Sylvia Somers into slipping one such potion into Severus's butterbeer. That humiliating experience had felt nothing like the genuine affection that coloured the memories of Granger, but he had to check. Unless someone had managed to brew a concoction that manufactured true love, he couldn't blame the vanishing of his feelings for her on missed doses of a potion.

Into the second bowl, Severus placed a false memory he'd implanted into his own head: Minerva tap dancing on the head table during the Welcome Feast. Dipping a pipette into the oily looking brown potion that smoked away in his bronze cauldron, he dribbled three drops of the potion into each bowl. The memory of drawing his blood turned green: true. The one of a tap dancing Minerva shifted to red: false. Colour leached out of both memories until they were once again silver mist. Good. The potion worked as expected.

Severus blinked away a sudden glimmer of memory. He had done this before, in this kitchen. Creating potions had always come naturally to him, but it was no wonder the recipe for this one had practically shouted itself from his head. This was not his first attempt. Checking the book he'd seen in that flash of memory revealed notes that proved he'd spent months toiling over perfecting the formula for the memory checking potion at some point in his forgotten past. He had no idea whether he'd needed to verify his own memories or those of someone else. Not exactly reassuring news.

He returned the bloodletting memory to his head, but placed the false tap dancing memory into a vial. It could be amusing to give it to Minerva the next time Gryffindor beat Slytherin at Quidditch.

Every memory on his table received the same treatment. One after another, they all glowed green. Next came the arduous task of checking memories he'd already received. Green, green, green. All clear and true. Severus sagged in relief. Not that he'd anticipated a different result. False memories inspiring the emotions he'd felt during the viewings was unlikely.

His fingers trembled slightly as he withdrew the flash of memory he'd experienced in Granger's bed—the one he'd reenacted by kissing her. Three drops of the potion, and it swirled into green.

Severus pushed his lank hair back from his face. It had really happened. He wasn't prepared to rule her out entirely, but instinct and a lack of evidence to the contrary told him Granger was likely another victim, rather than the perpetrator. If she'd done it, she probably would have tried to Obliviate him when he'd admitted to having that flash.
How many of her memories had they wiped? How much of Severus had been stolen from her? And if Severus discovered the culprit's identity, where would he hide the body?

Right. There would be time for revenge fantasies later. Severus needed to work on the dreams next. He was less sure about how they would react with the potion. For his control samples, he selected the memory dream of Charity's death and the nightmare he'd had of Granger being dragged away to the Dark Lord by Sirius Black. The potion correctly marked them as true and false, respectively, though the colours were paler than they'd been with the Pensieve memories.

Severus lined other memory dreams up for their turn: lounging in bed with the mystery woman, seeing Granger with Boot outside her cottage, kissing Granger beneath the mistletoe. The first two reacted the same as Charity's death: pale green. The memory of the mistletoe dream bubbled and fizzed for a moment before turning a darker green. Odd.

The dream had omitted the beginning and end of the kiss, hadn't it? Granger and Severus had been talking beneath a sprig of mistletoe, then the kiss had consumed them without warning. Watching it play out in the Pensieve, Severus confirmed that the moment his lips captured hers had not been part of it. Returning the memory to where it belonged, Severus took his time painstakingly separating the two scenes—talking and kissing—during his second attempt at extraction. Three drops of the potion in each one confirmed that they were two separate, true memories. The one had been layered inside the other in his sleep. The logic of dreams was probably to blame for that, but he would investigate it further in any case.

Chewing on his lower lip, Severus considered the mystery woman again. If she was not a mere fantasy, why the devil did she smell like Granger's bath products? Had he and Granger been talking about two different women? One who belonged to that citrus-scented dream (likely Granger herself), and one whom Severus had proposed to at some point prior to Granger's sixth year (absolutely not Granger unless time travel had been involved, because he would remain celibate for life before he would seduce an underage student)?

Severus's heart scrambled up into his throat. His skin prickled with the awareness that someone was in the house. Aiming his wand at the kitchen doorway, he came within a breath of firing a hex at Granger.

Wincing, she held up a bag that had a few little round windows where the brown paper had been rendered transparent by grease. Instead of the pungent sting of his potion, the kitchen now smelled like sausages, baked beans, smoky bacon, and all things delicious.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to startle you. I was just going to leave this under a Warming Charm in here. I thought you'd probably dragged yourself home to be miserable and headachey in your own bed when I woke up and you weren't there. Your approach to hangovers is very, very different from mine, apparently."

"Is that a fry up?" Severus asked.

"Of course. I always like one when I'm a bit worse for wear after a night of drinking, even with Hangover Relief Potion. Sometimes only the Muggle cure will do."

Waving his wand, he summoned a couple of plates and two sets of cutlery. Her concern for his wellbeing (especially after he'd woken her in the middle of the night with his fake drunken antics and absurd demands) made the copy of her journal jab at his conscience from where it was locked upstairs in his bedside table. Severus dismissed the feeling.

"I'm quite well," he said, "but I won't turn down breakfast. There's coffee if you want it."
Granger poured another cup for Severus while getting one for herself. Given that he hadn't slept at all the previous night, it was not only appreciated, but necessary. Cringing at the horrible squeak of the polystyrene containers within the bag, Severus unpacked enough breakfast to feed a family of four. Granger had expected him to eat all of this on his own with a delicate, post-drinking binge stomach? They really did have different approaches to hangovers. It was a good thing he wasn't currently suffering from one.

"Where's Lois?" Granger asked, nibbling on a triangle of toast.

"Chasing gnomes in the garden and sulking because I wouldn't let her stick her face in the cauldron to supervise my brewing."

"Hmm. Too bad. I had it on good authority that she misses me."

Severus stared at Granger's mouth for a beat before responding. "That she does."

"Boudica was disappointed when she discovered your absence this morning."

"Indeed?" Beneath the table, he bumped his foot against hers. "Next time I'll stay for breakfast. For Boudica's sake."

With a barely suppressed smile, she shifted ever-so-slightly closer to him. "Next time? You're going to make a habit of stumbling into my bedroom drunk?"

Severus's raised coffee cup only partially hid his smirk. "Well, not stumbling or drunk, perhaps."

Granger rolled her eyes and huffed out a disbelieving laugh, but she didn't move her foot.

During his brief perusal of her journal, Severus had caught sight of his own name again and again, but nothing she hadn't led him to expect was to be found in its pages. No descriptions of kisses, no mentions of Severus sharing her bed, no allusions to a secret romance. Either she hadn't written about any of it, she'd been the one to erase Severus's memories and had covered her tracks, or whoever had tampered with her mind had edited the journal. If they had gained access to either her home or her quarters at Hogwarts, that likely meant they were known to her. Trusted. Someone she would have invited in, never suspecting.

Maybe it had even been Severus himself, trying to erase a love affair gone sour in order to salvage their friendship.

No. It had to have been Boot.

"Speaking of Lois," Severus said, "would it be too much of an imposition to ask you to allow her to stay with you next weekend? I'm attending a potions conference."

"Of course it wouldn't be an imposition. Especially not after you let Boudica and me stay here for so long. Where are you going?"

"Cairo. Your ex lives in Egypt, correct? I thought I might drop in on him while I'm in the country and request the donation of a few memories. The more sources I can draw from, the better."

"Terry?" Granger's eyes widened. "He does live there, yes. I have his address, but we, err, don't exactly talk anymore. He didn't want to stay friends when we split up."

A refused marriage proposal would do that.
"Do you have reason to believe he would rather not see me?" Severus asked.

She frowned. "I think he'd like to help out, but… I don't think he'll exactly be pleased to see you."

Excellent.

"You know who would be pleased to see you, though?" Granger asked. "Ron and Neville, at their wedding. Well, that might be overstating things. But I would be pleased, and so would Harry and Molly and Arthur. Have you finished considering it yet?"

Severus speared a bit of hash brown with his fork. "Honestly, Granger, I'm shocked at you. Bringing that up now is clearly taking advantage. I'm liable to agree to anything in this weakened, hungover state—even something as tedious as attending a wedding."

She laughed. "You have repeatedly given the impression that you wouldn't mind me taking advantage of you."

As soon as the words were out, Granger looked as if she wanted to bite her tongue and take them back. Her cheeks burned pink. Severus gave her a slow, broad smile.

He had to take a breath to stop himself from telling her about her missing memories. No matter how much he wanted to include her, he needed to do more research first. Nor could he give in to the building urge to kiss her—properly, this time—until she remembered what they'd been.

Instead, he chuckled low and let his hand brush against hers where it rested on the table. "True," he said. "I would not mind at all. Hmm. I suppose I can suffer through one wedding, for your sake."

The way she beamed at him made the idea of subjecting himself to the Longbottom-Weasley wedding almost bearable. Almost.

As far as Severus was concerned, thirty-eight degrees was no sort of temperature for a place where humans lived. Fortunately, Boot's flat was in a blocky, yellow building that kept Frost Pixies on the top floor. Frost Pixies survived by absorbing heat from their surrounding environment, so it was a beneficial arrangement for all concerned.

If only the organisers of the potions conference had thought to book a few Frost Pixies instead of cramming several dozen Potions Masters into the airless heat of a hotel function room in Cairo's magical district. Severus had lost count of how many Cooling Charms he'd cast as the speeches had droned on and on.

The subject of the conference had not interested Severus at all: recent advancements in potions to treat psoriasis. Many of said potions required extended exposure to sunlight, thus their choice of somewhere so infernally sunny for the conference. Still, it had provided a useful excuse for Severus to be in the area.

The cup of tea Boot presented to Severus had some sort of greenery floating in it. What the hell was this? He'd said yes to tea, not to salad. Severus gave it a closer look and a sniff. Oh. Mint leaves. Boot had apparently started to adopt local customs. That could be a good sign; it pointed to him being content in his new home rather than longing for the old one. And at least there was actual tea in it, unlike the entirely herbal nonsense Edward always tried to serve him. Severus took a sip. It would do.

Boot's own cup had a dose of Veritaserum drifting amongst the mint leaves and black tea, deposited there when Boot had gone back to the kitchen to retrieve a plate of what looked like
shortbread topped with almond slivers. Severus had already rifled through every drawer in the sitting room while Boot had been preoccupied with the brewing of the tea. Nothing relevant had turned up.

Looking at the other man, Severus had a flash of himself casting Obliviate—just the sound, unaccompanied by visuals. Not exactly promising.

"So you have no idea how it happened?" Boot asked.

"Not yet, no."

"Wow. That's really awful. I'm sorry." Boot cleared his throat. "How's Hermione?"

"She's well. Progress on her book has been delayed due to my condition, but she's very… dedicated to seeing that I recover."

Boot chuckled. "Yeah, I can imagine."

Just in case, Severus tried skimming Boot's surface thoughts. A gifted Occlumens could, after all, block the effects of Veritaserum. Nothing pushed back against Severus—not even the slightest flicker of awareness from Boot that his mind has been breached. A stream of, "How long is he going to stay? I wish Hermione had warned me," and similarly predictable thoughts rolled past. Severus ducked back out before Boot's mind could land on any headache-inducing memories.

Instead of savouring his tea sip by sip, Boot downed the whole thing in a few gulps. A waste of perfectly good tea, but convenient for Severus's purposes. Boot's face took on a blank expression.

"When was the last time you were in the UK?" Severus asked.

"At Christmas, to see my parents," Boot said in an emotionless voice.

Hmm. That didn't fit with the timeline. Severus's memories had gone into hiding in late April, but that didn't exonerate Boot. He could have planted the seeds back in December, hired someone to do the dirty work for him.

"Did you see Hermione Granger on that visit?"

"No. I haven't seen Hermione since we ended things."

"Did you play any part in my memory loss?"

"No. I didn't know about it till you showed up here."

Damn. This was not going at all to plan. Boot was supposed to have confessed and be bound by an Incarcerous by this point.

"What would you do if Granger moved on?" Severus asked.

"Be a little sad, then get angry with myself for being a hypocrite," Boot said.

"Why would that make you a hypocrite?"

"Because I've been dating my coworker for the past four months."

Severus glowered at Boot. He hated when his instincts were proved wrong. The man wasn't pining over Granger. There weren't even any pictures of her on the walls.
"Would you ever do anything to harm Granger?" Severus asked.

"No."

"Have you ever tampered with Granger's memories?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who has harmed Granger or tampered with her memories?"

"I met a few Death Eaters who injured Hermione during the war. I don't know anyone who has altered her memories, as far as I know."

Severus's glower intensified. "You haven't ever hired someone to meddle with another person's memories?"

"No, I haven't hired anyone."

"Have you ever worked against me or Granger in any way?"

"Not since my seventh year, when you were Headmaster. Never against Hermione."

"If you heard that Granger's memory had been erased, who would you suspect of casting the spell?"

"You."

Severus clenched his teeth. Good gods, how he hated this man. It was almost worse than loathing Potter or Black; he couldn't point to any bad behaviour on Boot's part to justify it, which made it all the more frustrating.

"Why would you suspect me?" Severus asked.

"I always thought Hermione trusted you too much. If anyone could get close enough to trick her, it would be you."

"Obliviate," Severus said with relish, wiping the interrogation from Boot's mind. He ate one of the biscuits as he waited for the effects of the Veritaserum to wear off. He'd heard all he wanted to.

Finally, Boot shook his head and blinked a few times. "Sorry about that," he said. "I was miles away. What were you saying?"

Chapter End Notes

I have never been to Egypt. The composition of the tea that Terry gave to Severus comes entirely from the "Tea Culture" article on Wikipedia. For my readers in the US, 38 degrees Celsius = 100 degrees Fahrenheit.
Annoyingly, the first of September insisted on rolling around. Employment put a real dent in the
time Severus could devote to his investigation. He sat in his quarters after the Welcome Feast, once
again kicking himself for wasting most of the summer with his hyper-focus on Granger. Leaning
over his desk, he pored over his list of suspects.

1. Rupert Smith, the new Muggle Studies teacher. Showed interest in Granger again. Granger is
likely correct about his motives. He wants her fame and her connections, not her. The imbecile.

2. George. A prank gone wrong is a definite possibility. Also knows at least some mind magic, as
demonstrated on Edward. Close to Granger, but she knows him too well to trust him. Permanently
scarred by me during the war.

3. Bert and Ernie. New to my life, and therefore suspect. Bert is an expert at mind magic, being a
former Obliviator. What motive could they have? Look into their pasts.

4. Raffaella. Obvious reasons. Spurned lover, etc.

5. Lucius. He said he ’d missed the twenty-year-old Severus. Skilled with mind magic. Would likely
not approve of anything between Granger and myself, due to idiotic prejudices. On the other hand,
his son owes me a Life Debt, and Lucius is probably more concerned with his shoes than with my
love life.

6. Althea, the former Muggle Studies teacher. Nauseatingly sentimental and romantic. Might she
have been attempting to push us together in some hamfisted way? Had she decided to leave her
post before or after my "accident?" Get information about her resignation from Minerva at first
available opportunity.

7. Marietta Edgecombe. It would be a long time to carry a grudge over a few pimples, but people
have killed over even lesser slights. I doubt Granger would trust her enough to let her guard down,
but Edgecombe could have disguised herself with Polyjuice. Find out whether she was gifted
eough to have brewed it herself.

8. Rita Skeeter. Granger blackmailed her. I doubt I endeared myself to her after she wrote that
book about me. Particularly not if she had the nerve to call me "Sevvy" before I lost my memories.

9. One of Granger ’s close friends: Potter, Ronald, Longbottom, Lovegood, Mrs Potter. Trying to
protect her from me? The Potters named their child after me, but any admiration they feel may not
necessarily extend to wanting to see their friend romantically attached to me. Longbottom
apparently demonstrated plenty of courage during the war, but he has all the ruthlessness of a
marshmallow. Lovegood is seldom in the country (perfect alibi). Ronald seems the likeliest of the
group (ex lover of Granger’s, not a fan of mine), but is currently happy with the marshmallow. All
need to be investigated, regardless of resemblance to confectionery. Perhaps ask the Potter
children a few leading questions? Sans Veritaserum; not worth the headache if caught.

10. A student who received a failing grade and wanted revenge. Check last year ’s grade books.
Unlikely to possess the skill to have modified Granger’s memories, but could potentially have
mangled mine.

11. Someone who was hurt by me during the war. View more of the Malfoy family ’s memories for
potential names. Also: loved ones of the Death Eaters who were captured and sent to Azkaban due
to my assistance and testimony.

12. Granger. Skilled at mind magic, but unlikely to have removed thirty years of my memories, either accidentally or on purpose. Not after what happened with her parents. No evidence of our past relationship in her journal. Would she keep such a relationship from her friends? If anyone else’s memories have been altered, that will add even more complications.

13. Aberforth Dumbledore. I killed his brother. The last thing I remember before Potter found me wandering the castle is Aberforth ejecting me from his pub. Possible significance?

14. Boot. It’s possible I left too much wiggle room in my questions. Example: he could honestly say he did not know someone if he had never met them in person. It is also possible that I am ridiculous and simply want it to be him far too badly.

15. Sophia, the guardian of my quarters. Portrait, obviously, but prejudiced against Muggle-borns and always rude to Granger. Could have coaxed someone more corporeal into doing her dirty work for her. I am lying to myself. I know this one is a stretch. I am simply avoiding …

16. Me. Could it be that I erased Granger’s memories and someone else tampered with mine? Even though my faulty memory places me so close to being a Death Eater, Granger's guard is well and truly down around me. She said on the very first day that she would place her life in my hands without hesitation. Such a beautiful, stupid Gryffindor, to put that much trust in a friend (lover?). Fuck it all. She’ll never forgive me if it’s true and she finds out.

17. Some combination of any of the above working together. The skill demonstrated in the wiping of Granger’s memory is masterful and subtle. In contrast, what was done to me is more like an accident caused by Hagrid’s pink umbrella. If Hagrid could keep a secret for more than two seconds, I would suspect him. On the other hand, whatever was done to me has also buried my feelings towards Granger. Who could manage to hide love? If, indeed, I love her still.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose to dispel the mental image of Lily's unforgiving frown finding its way onto Granger's face. He could almost see himself casting Obliviate on a wide-eyed woman, but the blurred features were all wrong in his imagination. Hair, eyes, skin, all too pale. Lois hopped onto the desk, butted her forehead against his, and gave him a flat-faced glower when he didn't immediately offer up his usual response of a smile and a scratch under her chin.

Clearly deciding that the parchment Severus was hunched over was to blame for his bad mood, Lois tried to bat it off of the desk. Severus let out a mirthless laugh. Courageous half-Kneazle, protecting him from the mean scrap of paper that made him scowl so. If only animals could donate Pensieve memories. Lois and Boudica both undoubtedly knew all of Severus and Granger's secrets.

Severus tapped the end of his quill against the fourteenth item on the list. Hmm. Portraits. He wondered if the Gobstones Museum would be willing to make a deal. Was the portrait still there, acting as tour guide to the one or two visitors the museum had in a month? He would find out at the weekend.

Setting the charm to disguise the list as a lesson plan and locking it away in his desk, Severus withdrew the copies of Lovegood's sketchbooks that he'd obtained from her father. Getting them had been easy; he'd simply claimed that he wanted to reacquaint himself with all of the ingredients Lovegood had gifted him over the years. As a Ravenclaw, Xenophilius could appreciate intellectual curiosity.

Pretending to drink a cup of disgusting gurdyroot tea had, thus far, not been worth it. Nothing in Lovegood's sketches produced anything like that mysterious, glittering white powder he'd had a
flash of himself using in that silver potion. Lovegood had updated her sketches upon receiving correspondence from him, detailing how he'd prepared the ingredients and what uses he'd discovered. Interesting, to be sure, but not what he wanted at the moment.

Severus drifted away from the drawings and towards his cache of memories. Even now that he'd realised how distracted he'd allowed himself to become, he was still drawn to the vials with Granger's handwriting. Maybe there was a reason for it. Maybe she was the golden key that would unlock everything.

Giving in to his instincts, he snapped up a memory from December of 2008 that was labelled: "Mistletoe… again." It would have been Granger's first Christmas as a single woman after years of being with Boot. Severus bet that mistletoe kiss he'd dreamed about had happened then. He could check the memory for holes and inconsistencies that might indicate part of it had been erased.

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Love hit Severus squarely in the solar plexus the instant he saw Granger standing close to Memory Severus in the staff room. Severus wanted to capture that feeling and carry it with him beyond the memory. Such sweet torture, with textures and layers that felt more real than the hideous blankness he was saddled with outside the Pensieve. Granger sipped one of those pink drinks again.

"It won't be that bad," she said, biting her lower lip as she grinned.

"The entire Order? It will." Memory Severus shuddered.

"You see them every May at the memorial service without complaining too much. And you went to that reunion, remember?"

"Hestia Jones never tried to kiss me at midnight at either of those events."

Granger scowled in a way that Severus found very, very gratifying. "Hestia kissed you?"

"She tried to at a similar New Year's Eve party, yes. It was the year after the war. She only did it because no one else was queuing up to do so. As if I didn't prefer it that way. I didn't allow her to follow through. Her breath smelled like Firewhisky and pity."

"Too bad I was still your student at the time," Granger said lightly. "I don't like Firewhisky, and I've never pitied you."

Memory Severus let a smirk tug his mouth up slowly, his dark eyes shining.

A drunken giggle came from across the room, followed by a reprimand in a Scottish brogue as mistletoe materialised above Granger and Memory Severus. Her lips parted.

Anticipation coiled like a spring in Severus's stomach. This was a scene from one of his mistletoe dreams. Again, he waited along with Memory Severus, holding his breath for some expected event that never arrived.

"I think it's my turn this time," Granger said, casting disappointment over him as she drew her wand. "Reducto!"

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Hermione swept down the dungeon corridor, flanked by Lois and Boudica. September was her favourite time of year. It had all of the best things: a new school year, her birthday, crisp weather, and changing leaves. The only blight on the glorious approach of autumn, apart from Severus's
condition, was the new Muggle Studies professor. His interest in her fame (or, more likely, the fame of a certain messy-haired, bespectacled best friend of hers) had not abated since the staff meeting before the summer holidays. It was why she was avoiding her office and the staff room and anywhere else Smith might think to look for her during her free period—which coincided inconveniently with his.

Severus's voice reached Hermione before she saw the open door. That familiar, silky baritone berated the first year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs for the miasma of cheap perfume and pungent Muggle aftershave they'd created in his classroom. Ah, the joys of teaching preteens. The clash of scents smacked Hermione in the face as she peered inside. No wonder he'd opened the door to air things out.

It had been quite some time since Hermione had seen Severus teach. Possibly since her final year as a student. Nostalgia blanketed her as she watched him pace around the classroom, robes billowing. Bert smiled at her from his stool near the back of the class. Boudica joined in on the observation, but Lois seemed more interested in cleaning herself.

"Mister Lupin," Severus said, making the name sound like an insult. He paused by Teddy's cauldron. "Explain to me why you have added extra Flobberworm Mucous to your potion."

Teddy drew his shoulders back and looked Severus straight in the eye. How was it possible that little Teddy was already eleven years old? Wasn't it just yesterday that Hermione had held his chubby hands to steady him as he'd learned how to walk?

"Because it makes the potion thicker, sir," Teddy said. "I read in Potions Quarterly that this year's crop of Punguous Onions was a bit watery, on account of flooding in the fields where they're grown. I added the extra Flobberworm Mucous because I thought the potion wouldn't be much good for curing boils if it slid right off of them."

Severus crossed his arms. "You expect me to believe that you read Potions Quarterly?"

"I used to, sir. Um. Before your… you know. Memory thing. The last one I read was in April. You used to owl me your old copies. You said you didn't think I would understand them, but you lived in hope that someday you'd have someone to talk about it with who was less… verbios? Verbose?"

"The latter. Verbose. Which you are currently proving to be."

"Right. Less verbose than Hermio—than Professor Granger."

Hermione choked back a laugh. Why did that make her miss the complete version of Severus with a sudden ache? There was something deeply wrong with her.

Severus let out a dubious hmm. Leaning over the pink smoke that rose from Teddy's cauldron, he stirred the potion.

"One point to Hufflepuff," Severus said. As he straightened, he gave Teddy an assessing look. "Be absolutely certain you know how all of your ingredients will interact before you experiment in my classroom, Mister Lupin. If you dare to melt a cauldron or cause an explosion in my presence, I will take double the number of House points I would usually deduct. You have just demonstrated that you should know better."

Teddy's cheeks flushed. "Yes, sir."

In the past, Hermione had witnessed Severus telling a rapt Teddy about Tonks's Potions experiments (many would have apparently gone quite well if only she'd been able to keep from
knocking the cauldron over so often). Hermione had long harboured suspicions that Severus actually liked Remus's son, though she knew Severus would never admit it.

Catching sight of Hermione, Severus tilted his head at her in a silent question. She waited till he'd dismissed his students before she entered the classroom. Bert followed the kids and took up his post outside the door. As Teddy passed by her, Hermione squashed the urge to ruffle his hair like they were at Harry's house. She wasn't Hermione to him here. She was Professor Granger, the same as the rest of the students, no matter how many of his nappies she'd changed.

"Why were you watching my class?" Severus asked, shooing a curious Boudica away from the batch of potions the first years had produced. "Have Bert and Ernie taken you on as an apprentice?"

Hermione shrugged. "It's been a while since I saw you teach. I noticed the open door, looked in, and started feeling nostalgic."

"Given the memories I've seen, I find it hard to believe that any former student of mine would feel nostalgic for my classroom."

"I know. There must be something wrong with me."

He laughed. "Clearly."

Picking up one of the vials of potion, Hermione wrinkled her nose at the murky, watery attempt. Someone would be getting a T.

"If I asked you to make a colleague cry, what would you say?" she asked.

"I would say name the time and place, and please tell me it's Longbottom."

"Of course it's not Neville. It's Rupert Smith."

"Oh." Severus sneered. "Him. Is that why you're here? Am I to be your bodyguard during dinner?"

She tutted. "As if I would use you so shamelessly."

"Did I imply that I objected to you using me? I thought we'd firmly established that I am amenable to being taken advantage of by you."

He was using that smirk. The one that made her insides twist pleasantly as her old crush bubbled back to the surface. It was different from his usual mocking smirk. Softer, more like a smile in the way it reached his eyes. He'd used it before he'd lost his memories, but always paired with silence rather than suggestive statements. And now she knew what those lips felt like brushing against hers. A breath snagged in Hermione's throat.

"Did you get on with Charity Burbage?" he asked.

Hermione blinked at the sudden switch in topics. "Erm, yes? I generally got on well with all of my professors, except for Sybil and Umbridge. And you. For a good portion of my school years, anyway."

"I was wondering whether you dislike Muggle Studies professors as a rule, or if you've just been unlucky with the most recent ones."

"I wouldn't say I dislike Althea," Hermione said. "She isn't my favourite person, but that's more to
do with us having wildly different taste in almost everything. She is nice enough, in spite of her love of all things twee. I can't recall us ever having a serious disagreement. I don't need to have Sybil's dubious talents to tell you that Smith is not going to be so fortunate."

"Really? I thought Althea must have had some sort of problem with you, given that she made mistletoe chase you year after year in spite of the fact that you were involved with someone."

"Oh." Hermione chuckled. "The mistletoe wasn't chasing me. It was chasing you. Althea liked to send it after all of the single staff members when she'd had a few too many drinks. Which usually meant everyone except Neville and me. I did wonder why you never stopped her. If you'd wanted to, you could have reduced her to tears with no effort at all, but you just kept casting those Reductos every time the mistletoe caught you."

"And it always caught me with you?"

"No." Hermione's cheeks hurt from how wide her grin became. "Not always. One time it caught you with Sybil. The look on your face... Yes, that's basically it, right there. Ah, that was one of those Patronus-worthy memories."

"Hmm. You've mentioned these allegedly Patronus-worthy memories a couple of times. What were the others?"

Hermione dipped her face into the Pensieve without waiting to be invited to join Severus. The memory she'd chosen had happened quite late in her sixth year, when their Occlumency lessons had veered more towards long discussions that were peppered with surprise attacks from him. Memory Hermione scurried into his office, too-heavy schoolbag levitating behind her. She had two quills holding her enormous hair in a bun; smooth skin without even a hint of crow's feet; and absolutely no idea how many heartbreaking, horrifying, and beautiful things were in her future.

"Occasionally I forget how much younger than me you are," the present-day Severus said with a grimace.

"Really? I never forget how very old you are."

"Watch it, Granger."

"You watch it. Literally. It's about to start."

"Sir?" Memory Hermione said as she took her usual seat next to his desk. "May I ask you something?"

Memory Severus didn't look up from the paper he was marking with a D. "In my experience, yes. Constantly. Whether I will answer rather depends on the topic."

"Are my parents a target?"

That made him look up. Setting his red-inked quill down, Memory Severus swivelled in his chair until they were almost knee-to-knee, the way they had been so many nights after dinner in those days.

"I have not been told of any immediate plans, but that doesn't mean they are safe. The Dark Lord may not involve me."

Nodding, Memory Hermione drew in a steadying breath. "I've been thinking about casting a
"You realise such a charm may be irreversible if you cannot remove it in time?"

"Yes." Memory Hermione's chin wobbled. "Better they not know me than be tortured and killed because of me. Since I am going to stick by Harry until the end, my life is in rather a lot of danger. And I will carry on fighting without him, should he f-fail. I am willing to die in this war if I have to, but I'd rather spare my parents the pain of burying their child."

Hermione knew better now. She knew, after difficult discussions with the couple known as Monica and Wendell Wilkins, that her parents would have preferred to feel that indescribable pain. They had made it clear that they would rather know her and feel the never-dulling ache of her absence than have an empty space inside them where memories of happiness and love and a daughter used to be.

Memory Severus paused for a long time, tapping an index finger against his lower lip. "When you first entered my classes," he finally said, "I wondered why the Sorting Hat had not placed you in Ravenclaw. Your thirst for knowledge was—and still is—immense. The intervening years have disabused me of the notion that you are anything but a Gryffindor. In addition to the lamentable tendency towards showing off… You are extraordinarily brave, Miss Granger."

Memory Hermione's mouth dropped open. "Oh," she whispered. "That is my new Patronus memory as of right now. Finally getting praise from Professor Snape."

Memory Severus scoffed. "I—"

"Shh. No. Please don't ruin it, sir. You called me brave. Extraordinarily brave. Let's leave it at that."

A few beats passed, his glower getting darker as Memory Hermione's eyes went wider. It hadn't actually been strong enough to power a Patronus, of course, but the whole scene still made Hermione smile, years later.

"Miss Granger, did you just shush me?"

"I think I might have. Just a little bit. Sorry, sir."

"Five points from Gryffindor." Without warning, his wand shot up and aimed at her temple. "Legimens."

Once they were out of the Pensieve and Hermione returned her memory to her head, Severus squinted at her.

"It—"

"Shhh. No." Laughing, she placed her fingertips over his mouth. "Please don't ruin it, sir."

His lips pursed, kissing those fingers before he took her hand in his and arched an eyebrow. "Very well, Miss Granger. You may keep your… schoolgirl fantasy."

Hermione covered her face. "Sweet Merlin, Severus." She could no more hold in her giggles than she could stop Boudica from chasing gnomes. "Did you seriously just use your innuendo voice when calling me Miss Granger? You are going to be extra disturbed by that one when you finally
get your memories back."

He chuckled. "We shall see."

Severus marched down a rain-slicked road. Silver snaked around his vision like a frame. A dream. Just another memory dream. A few steps more, and that silver exploded everywhere. It thrashed and pounded in his skull like a hangover. Indistinct scenes fluttered behind his eyelids, slipping away before he could grasp them.

He sat up in bed, awake.
Beneath the surface of the lake, everything was quiet and green. Severus stayed underwater until the burning of his lungs forced him up for air. Exercise was a very generous term for the way he was swimming. Hell, swimming was a generous term for it. His actions more closely resembled aimless drifting.

The slippery, rapid-fire visions in that silver explosion of a dream had reminded him of his nightmare of Charity's death. Not in content, but in the way all of the faces blurred as if seen through a thick fog. Like viewing something from Lovegood's mind. Instead of people or voices or anything significant, Lovegood's contributions to the recovery of Severus's memories always had the strangest things in the sharpest focus: a plain grey rock, an amber bottle of butterbeer, a furry purple caterpillar.

The clearest detail in the dream had been the cobbled street rushing up to meet his face as he'd fallen. Everything else had been silent and indecipherable. And this time, there was no chance of getting a Pensieve memory from Narcissa to shine a light on those indistinct faces.

He'd tested the dream with his potion upon waking. It was true. And unlike his most recent mistletoe dream, it was all one memory, not multiple ones that had tangled together in his sleep.

Spinning over in the chilly water, Severus floated on his back. According to that vision he'd had back at Spinner's End, he'd created the memory testing potion at some point in the years between the prophecy and the memory loss. He'd had some reason to check the validity of memories during that time. Was that what the dream had been? The inspiration for those tests?

Ugh. It was too early for so many questions without answers.

Granger's trainers thudded against the dirt as she ran past. Catching sight of him, she jogged in place. In deference to the lowering temperatures, her long legs were covered. Severus mourned the loss of her running shorts.

"Are you cold enough to start running with me instead of swimming?" she asked between quick breaths.

"Not yet," Severus said.

She grinned. "You will be."

With that ominous prediction, she took off again, running away like those dream-fuzzed scenes.

Minerva and Neville tilted their heads to one side in unison with Hermione. The portrait Severus had chosen to replace Sophia regarded the three Gryffindors with the same unimpressed expression that the Potions Master wore. Two mouths—one flesh, one painted—twisted into near-identical sneers.

"Well, that's just unsettling," Neville whispered.

"Severus," Minerva said. "Sophia has guarded the chambers of the Head of Slytherin since—"

"I am aware, thank you." Severus cut her off. "She's quite content with her new location. I consulted her about where she would like to be placed."
"And where is that?" Minerva asked. "If the Headmistress of this school might be permitted to know, that is."

"Near the entrance to the locker rooms. When I left her, she'd switched to her human form so she could flirt with various strapping young Quidditch players."

"Yeah, I can't see how that could end badly," Hermione said. Stepping closer, she shook her head. "You know, I'd seen pictures, but I don't think I fully realised how much you resemble your mother until just now."

"If it was your father, rather than your mum, I would almost worry that Harry would mistake it for you and think you were dead again," Neville said. "Though I suppose he would know better this time."

Again with the synchronised sneers. Neville was right. It was unsettling.

"Longbottom," Severus said. "I am sure that statement made sense in your head, but the rest of us have not partaken of whatever you've been smoking in the greenhouses."

"He's referring to your portrait from when you were Headmaster," Minerva said. "When you were unconscious in hospital following the Battle of Hogwarts, Harry found me conversing with the portrait in my office. It's been destroyed now—by you. I tried to stop you, but both you and the portrait were quite insistent."

Upon healing from his injuries after the war, Severus had claimed that the only knowledge he'd given his portrait during his short tenure had been spilled to Harry via Pensieve memories, and he didn't want anyone getting any foolish ideas about him belonging on that wall when he died. Before disposing of the painting, he'd told Minerva that if she wished for any pearls of wisdom, the live version of him was, astonishingly, still available.

Hermione wondered if she would have visited the portrait if it had still existed when he'd lost his memories. Probably not. She wouldn't have had the heart. A second incomplete version of Severus would not add up to a whole.

"Harry thought because the portrait was awake, it meant you had died," Minerva continued. "He was quite distressed until I explained."

The portraits of Headmasters and Headmistresses were aware from the moment they were painted and placed in a locked cupboard to await whatever information their subject wished to pass on to future holders of the office. Minerva had fished Severus's portrait out of its Privet Drive-esque accommodation and propped it against the desk for their discussion the day Harry had happened upon them. If Harry had ever bothered to read—

"Has he never read Hogwarts, A History?" Severus asked.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. She should not have found Severus's response sexy. And yet…

Even breaths filled the gaps between questions, the sound unnaturally loud in the deathly calm of Severus's quarters. Lois was out wandering the castle. Even the underwater window was empty, with no grindylows or merfolk or giant squid spying on his activities.

Only the beady eyes of a spiky, hedgehoglike creature from Lovegood observed the scene from a fishbowl. Its spines had the ability to induce genuine, deep belly laughs when ground into a
powder and blown into someone's face. Selling the thing to George had provided an adequate excuse for the requested visit. And such multitasking. If only Severus could make extra galleons while investigating everyone on his list.

"Would you ever harm Granger?" Severus asked.

"Depends what you mean by harm," George said without any hint of emotion. "I've spanked her in bed loads of times, but she gives the impression that she rather likes it."

Severus's blood turned to ice. Something fluttered and tried to break free behind his ribcage.

"What?"

"We've been having an affair for ages. Ever since she threatened to report my bad behaviour to my mother in my seventh year. I like a woman who takes charge." A grin broke out over George's previously blank expression. "Aaaand I should probably let you know that I'm joking before you kill me. Or before Hermione somehow senses that I've said such crass things about her and either kills me or tells my wife. Or, worse, tells my mum. Don't worry. I've never actually slept with Hermione. Even if I wasn't a happily married man, the thought of so much as snogging her makes my skin crawl. Not that she isn't pretty, it's just... All right. Judging by your expression, I'm thinking I should stop talking about that, too."

Severus began going through all of the ways he could potentially remove George's other ear. George gave Severus's shoulder a cautious pat. It looked like George would be losing an arm as well, then.

"Explain yourself," Severus said.

"I'm enough of an Occlumens to resist Veritaserum. I didn't even see you slip it in the tea—very nicely done—but I did feel the effects. I reckoned it was best to go along with it and see what you wanted. I was actually intending to answer all of your questions—truthfully, mind—but then I couldn't resist when an obvious joke presented itself. It's the closest I'm likely to get to playing a genuine prank on you."

Severus had already known he could not rely too heavily on Veritaserum, but this was ludicrous. How could someone like George have the discipline to resist its effects? Severus's wand hand twitched. How he missed Legilimency. And Unforgivables. Well, he still had access to the latter without risking a splitting headache. Tempting. The mischievous quirk of George's lips lowered into something that looked alarmingly like sincerity.

"Listen," George said, his gaze never wavering from Severus's eyes as he spoke. "I know you're allergic to the Gryffindor tendency to say whatever is on our minds, so this is probably going to break you out in hives. I'll get you some Calamine Potion after. I also know you have absolutely no reason to trust me."

"Obviously."

"Yeah, well, for as little as I'm sure it's worth, I swear to you that I am telling the truth right now. I love Hermione like she's my sister. I would never mess with her memories or purposely hurt her. As far as I know, I've never hurt her on accident, either." He cleared his throat. "Erm, although, there was this punching telescope when... You know what? Never mind. Not relevant. It was mostly Fred's fault."

"Stick to the bit that is relevant, Weasley," Severus said.
Nodding, George waved in the vague direction of where his ear used to be. "This stopped mattering a long time ago. I wouldn't try to take you out of the picture. Not only because I know you could kick my arse in a duel or because various gatherings would be a lot less amusing without you snarking away in a corner somewhere, but because by doing so I would deeply, deeply hurt Hermione. Watching her struggle for years trying to bring her parents' memories back... It was rough. I wouldn't put her through being forgotten again. Not for anything."

Severus rubbed at the tension headache that radiated from the middle of his forehead. "How very touching."

"Isn't it? Shame I won't remember I said any of this in a few minutes. But you'll remember, so that's something."

For a split-second, Severus contemplated taking George at his word and trusting him. He gave himself a mental shake. Narcissa was definitely right about him keeping company with too many Gryffindors. This was not how his instincts were supposed to work.

George smiled sadly. "It's OK, Severus. Really. I understand. Just take the past few minutes, though, yeah? I still don't fancy ending up with the Lockhart Special."

Severus vanished the dregs of George's Veritaserum-laced tea. "Is that supposed to make my trust in you deepen to an extent that I don't Obliviate you?"

"Hey, it was worth a try, right?"

"It was. Valiant effort. Obliviate."

The strident tones of his mother's voice mingling the deep rumble of a man's laughter brought Severus out of his quarters. Potter stood there next to Ernie, chatting away to the portrait as if he and Eileen were old friends.

"Potter," Severus said. His voice didn't have as much venom as he would have liked. "Did you need something?"

"Yeah. I came by to discuss a few things, if you have time."

"Don't leave without saying goodbye," Eileen called after Potter as Severus motioned for the younger man to enter the sitting room. To Severus, she added, "Such a nice man."

Were all of the women in his life afflicted with some ghastly curse that drew them to Potter men? Lily had married James. Granger was best friends with Harry. Charity had attempted friendliness with everyone when they were schoolchildren, but James should not have merited a single smile from her kind mouth (he had). And now, even the painted version of his mum from before she'd been his mum was falling for a Potter's dubious charms?

Severus wondered if Poppy had any Anti-Nausea Potion in stock.

Potter grinned. "At least one Snape likes me."

"My mother never was the best judge of character," Severus muttered, shutting the door firmly behind them. "Clearly, I should have left her in that museum."

"She was in a museum?" Potter asked. He helped himself to the seat nearest the underwater window, like it was his usual spot. Lois climbed onto his lap and curled up in a purring ball.
Fantastic. Even his cat had been hit by the Potter Curse.

"The Gobstones Museum, yes," Severus said. "Not as an exhibit; she was part of the estate where the museum was built."

"Huh. I didn't even know there was a museum about Gobstones."

"Nor does anyone else. It's possibly the least popular tourist attraction in Wizarding Britain."

Grandmother Prince had donated her estate—portraits and all—to the National Gobstones Association when she'd died, so technically it was the Plautia Prince Gobstones Museum. Plautia had been a national champion or some such nonsense. Severus had never met her. As far as he could remember, the only time he'd seen his mother's portrait had been on the day Eileen had told him about the existence of magic. Their clandestine trip to the Gobstones Museum had been her idea of a treat.

It was a miracle he'd been so thrilled about being a wizard after that experience. He'd thrown around the idea of visiting the portrait after her death, but the portrait was not the person.

Digging into the pocket of his robes (much to the displeasure of Lois), Potter withdrew what looked like a mechanical wasp, all shiny bronze gears and whirring sliver antennae. It was meant to record the conversations of its targets until it was called home by its owner.

"Anyway," Potter said. "I discovered this in a plant pot when I decided to go back to Raffaella Zabini—err, Raffaella Brown, now—and ask her a few more questions about what happened to you," Potter said.

How had it ended up in a plant pot? Severus had given the blasted thing clear instructions to set up camp in the eaves of the roof, well hidden from view. It was obviously faulty.

"And?" Severus said. "What is it?"

Potter narrowed those Lily-green eyes and arched an eyebrow. "A Whisper Wasp. It's an eavesdropping device." The Whisper Wasp disappeared back into his pocket before Lois could pounce on it. "I don't think for a second that I can stop you from investigating things yourself. Hell, I'd be doing the same if I was in your shoes. I will, however, remind you that certain things—like Veritaserum, for instance—are tightly regulated by the Ministry. Please don't go too far and do anything that will get you into trouble, sir. I will always do my job, even when someone I respect is involved."

"I wouldn't dream of putting you in such an awkward position," Severus said. Meaning, of course, that he wouldn't get caught.

"Great," Potter pasted on a falsely bright smile. "I was wondering if you had any new theories about what might have happened, since you have quite a few more memories than the last time we talked."

Severus flinched inwardly. He actually wanted to tell Potter. He wanted to get a second perspective—Potter's perspective. Far more than he'd wanted to believe George. What an alarming thought.

Potter was an Auror. Scattering select bits of knowledge near someone with that level of access to various resources could work in Severus's favour, but Severus didn't yet know enough. He needed to have a better grasp on his own role in what had happened before he went giving away potentially incriminating evidence.
Especially if he'd Obliviated Potter's best friend. Looking at Lily's boy, Severus sighed.

"I'm afraid I'm none the wiser," Severus said. "It's a maddeningly slow process."

"Yeah. At one or two memories per day, I can imagine. I've looked into some people who have reasons to hold grudges against you. There are… quite a few." Turning a bit paler, Potter pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with an index finger. "I also questioned anyone who might want some sort of revenge against Hermione. Rita Skeeter's book made everyone think you and Hermione were… You know. During the war. Um."

Merlin's beard. The man looked like he was about to resort to hand gestures due to being unable to say the words. How had he managed to produce three children if he was this squeamish about sex? Or was it that he was only prudish where Severus and Hermione were concerned?

"Yes, Potter. I did manage to catch the glaringly obvious insinuations when I read it."

"Right. So. I investigated Rita herself, actually. She really, really hates Hermione. I'd rather this whole thing be a genuine accident and there be no nefarious plots against you, but I also kind of want it to be Rita, just so I can arrest her."

"I can't recall meeting the woman, but given what I know of her, I can sympathise."

"I'll let you see the Pensieve memory if that glorious day ever comes. As of right now, though, it's still very few leads and even less progress." Raking a hand through his hair in a way that made him look even more like his detestable father, Potter puffed out his cheeks with a long exhale. "Oh, and speaking of Hermione, it's her birthday tomorrow. I wasn't sure whether anyone had told you."

Severus clenched his jaw. No one had. It was an absolute certainty that Granger gave Severus birthday and Christmas presents, rendering him socially obligated to return the gesture. What the hell was he supposed to get her? He was going to have words with Minerva and Longbottom for not giving him adequate warning.

"You usually give her a book, I think," Potter said.

Of course he did. When he wasn't building her entire libraries.

"Hello, Granger," the portrait of Eileen Snape said.

"Hi, um… Mrs Snape. Hi, Bert."

The elderly Auror gave her a friendly wave. It was bizarre, thinking of the stooped young woman as Severus's mother. The portrait had been completed when Eileen was in her late teens, making her more believable as his daughter.

Straightening the sleeves of her black robes, Eileen sniffed. "Eileen will do."

"Eileen, then. You can call me Hermione, if you want."

"But Severus calls you Granger?"

"Severus is stubborn. And I think he's expecting me."

"He seems to be. On both counts." The portrait didn't swing open to admit her. Eileen lit a Muggle cigarette that she withdrew from a hidden pocket in her robes. She exhaled a plume of smoke like it was an action she'd rehearsed in front of a mirror, copied from films. "Hmm. You are prettier than
he described."

How had he described her? And when?

"Thank you?" Hermione said.

Eileen chuckled. "It was a long time ago, darling." She said darling as if that, too, was an affectation borrowed from films. "It would have been quite inappropriate for him to describe you as pretty back then."

A long time ago meant the current Severus wouldn't remember it. Damn. Not that he would necessarily tell her even if he did possess the relevant memory. Inappropriate… hmm. She must have been his student at the time.

"Tell me, Hermione," Eileen said. "What—"

Eileen's words cut off with a squeak of protest as she swung to one side and Severus appeared in the entrance to his quarters.

"Evening, Granger," he said. "Mum, the whole point of you being notified that I'm expecting a guest is for you to let them in."

"I was going to! We were just getting to know one another."

"I'll stop to chat on my way out, Eileen," Hermione said. "I promise."

Muttering something about her becoming the saviour of portraits as well as Squibs and house elves, Severus ushered Hermione further inside with a hand on the small of her back. The warmth of his fingers soaked through her robes and tingled over her skin.

"What were you and my mother talking about?" he asked once they were alone.

"Oh, just ordinary small talk. I told her about the weather and what books I've been reading. She asked about my intentions towards her son."

His hand was still on her back. "And what answer did you give her?"

"That my intention is for you to father my children, obviously."

Severus nodded. "Good. Wise choice. She would have spotted a lie."

The sitting room was painfully neat. No stacks of marking and research and Potions journals and books. No cups of tea standing in for paperweights. Over the years, Hermione had learned that when Severus was stressed, he tended to tidy, as if his worries needed room to stretch out on empty surfaces. The night before his trial, he'd hobbled around the drawing room at Grimmauld Place and got on Kreacher's nerves by tucking various trinkets into drawers. Severus was never messy, but a slightly disorganised Severus was a happier Severus.

"Are you all right?" she asked, touching his shoulder.

"I am well, thank you." Taking her hand in his, he studied her charm bracelet. His focus narrowed on the little blue flower charm that Neville had given her that morning. "This one is new."

"Yeah. It's from Neville and Ron. They all are, actually."

She didn't mention the occasion. She was too old to make a fuss about her birthday—even a
milestone one like her thirtieth. A trio of merpeople swam past the underwater window, staring in. Hermione always wondered if the merfolk remembered her when they saw her in Severus's quarters—if they recognised the girl who had once slept as a captive in their dark, cold waters.


Hermione couldn't shrug it off and say something about them seeing a pretty flower and thinking she would like it. Not when one of them was Neville.

From the top shelf of one of the packed bookcases, he produced a present wrapped in gold paper. "Here. Happy birthday, Granger."

Hermione started. "How did you know?"

"I have my ways." Severus's mouth curved upwards. "Open your gift."

Beneath the wrapping, she discovered a leather-bound book. The faded gilt lettering on the spine tore a laugh from her. She had seen Experimental Charms by Demetria Denham several times, but she'd never managed to read more than a few pages before Severus had struck.

"We fought over this book for the better part of a month," she said. "You borrowed it from Filius when you knew very well that I was going to ask him for it. We kept stealing it back and forth—"

"Oh." Severus jerked as if he'd received an electric shock. "You had something that let you see where I was. A map?"

"Yes! It belongs to Harry. But he told you I had it and let you borrow his invisibility cloak to level the playing field. As if a spy needs an even playing field. And you somehow recruited Neville to help you. Neville. I maintain it had to have been blackmail. Filius eventually took the book back and told us to find our own copy, because he wasn't going to be held responsible for the start of a third Wizarding War."

"That explains why I was drawn to it when I was trying to decide what to give you."

"Where did you find it?" Hermione stroked the cover as she set it down. "I've been looking for a copy for ages."

Severus scratched his chin with one long finger. "I couldn't possibly say."

"Severus Snape." Hands on her hips, she tried to fake a convincing frown. "You had it this whole time, didn't you?"

His expression was far too innocent. "How am I supposed to know?"

Laughing, Hermione wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you. I love it."

In contrast to their first embrace, he reacted instantly, holding her tight. Beneath her hands, his tense back muscles relaxed. The comforting thrum of his heart beat steady and sure against her cheek. Hermione hoped she wouldn't lose this when he was back to himself.

"Did you know you only hugged me once before you lost your memories?" she said.

"Did I?" With an inscrutable expression, he held her at arm's length. "Might I have the memory?"

"Oh. Yeah. Of course."
Hermione's cheeks heated as her wand tugged the silver strands from her mind.

"I look forward to discovering why this makes you blush," he said with that smirk that made her knees a tiny bit weak. He turned to place her conjured vial among his other memories.

Right. Time for a subject change, she decided.

"Why did you get rid of Sophia?"

He straightened his sleeves and sniffed the same way his mother's portrait had done just minutes before. "I do not trust her to keep my quarters secure. The portrait only has their subject's mannerisms and disposition, as you know, but Sophia doesn't strike me as someone who had a particularly honest disposition. Mum, for all her flaws, was as loyal as a Hufflepuff. Often to her detriment."

Hermione couldn't tell whether the sinking sensation in her stomach was for Eileen or Severus or both. "Do you trust anyone?" she asked.

He gazed off into the darkness of the lake as he considered the question. Seconds drew closer to a minute, measured out by the ticking of the silver clock above his fireplace. Finally, he nodded.

"Lois. I trust Lois."

Hermione laughed. "Not Boudica?"

"Merlin, no. I'm no fool."

"And what about me?"

"You're no fool, either."

Hermione rolled her eyes. He smiled like he'd never lost his memories. Like he knew everything about her. As his eyes flashed with something she couldn't identify, Severus toyed with the forget-me-not charm on Hermione's bracelet.

"I am getting there, Granger."

Granger had labelled the memory of their alleged first hug with the exact date: 24 April 2009. Mere hours separated that moment from the one that had stolen thirty years from Severus. Hardly enough time to squeeze in a whole relationship. Severus let himself fall into the memory, certain he was about to watch a scene in which Granger's memories had already been altered.

Memory Severus leaned against a stone pillar in a bookshelf-lined room that could only have been Granger's quarters. Boudica and Lois snoozed together on a cat bed big enough for two in front of the remains of a fire. The diamond paned windows were streaked with the evidence of distractedly-cast cleaning spells used in place of elf magic. There was a hazy, summery quality to the light on this side of the castle that made Severus want to stretch out on the cushioned window seat and read as many books as he could until he dozed off.

Granger twisted her hands together. "I was just wondering if you would consent to being interviewed for my book," she said, the words whooshing out in a rush.

Amusement pierced through Severus and brightened the glow that had become a constant presence
in his recent memories of Granger.

He had still loved her on the day he had forgotten her.

"Of course," Memory Severus said, no hesitation. "What time is convenient for you?"

Granger looked braced for a refusal until his words sank in. Beaming at him, she practically attacked him with a hug. His arms moved as if he'd never before embraced someone, stiff and cautious. As one hand landed in the centre of her back, she squeezed him tighter—squeezed a chuckle out of him. Memory Severus rested his chin on top of her head and let his eyes close. Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep inhale.

Drawing back, Granger rose up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, Severus. I know how private you are. I won't pry too much… OK, I will, but just let me know whenever you need a break. And I promise I'll let you approve the final copy before publication. Not a single word will be printed without your consent."

The words sounded harmless. Reassuring. Why, then, did a thunderstorm of surprised hope get muffled by an all-too familiar blankness? Walls slammed into place, blocking every warm and wonderful thing Severus felt for Granger.

Memory Severus pressed his lips into a thin line. "I'm afraid I must go. I have a detention to supervise. I'll see you tomorrow. We'll set up an appointment for your interview then."

Well. That was one of Severus's queries answered. Taking out his list and removing the disguising charm, he erased the musings related to the question of who could manage to block love.

He could.
Relax. Severus breathed in for a count of four, held it, and exhaled. He had caused this; he could fix it. The urge to work out the puzzle of Granger and dismantle his own shields was too persistent to ignore. It was something he was supposed to do. Conjuring a mental image of walls crumbling and disintegrating, he tried to let go.

Reality had other ideas. One glance at Granger was enough to confirm the walls held strong. His body took a definite interest in the low scoop of her neckline, but his emotions towards her remained as flat as a millpond.

A temporary fissure had blinked in and out of existence once before, when he'd almost kissed her after viewing Narcissa's memory of Charity's death. What had he done differently then, apart from some humiliating near-weeping?

Severus could almost remember how it felt to love Granger, having experienced it in the Pensieve, but trying to summon it out in the real world was similar to trying to recall a scent. He could bring to mind the bitter richness of the black coffee he seemed to live on these days, but the thought of the fragrance was hollow and lifeless without the source of it.

A giggling, tipsy Granger plopped down next to him in his booth. Severus grumbled. Against all odds, she had managed to talk him into attending Ronald and Longbottom's joint stag do. She'd already been wearing the low-cut purple robes when she'd pressed him to accompany her. The neckline was likely to blame for his capitulation.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked, brown eyes somewhat unfocused. "I was just about to head to the bar."

Severus swiped a finger through a ring of condensation on the table. "No, thank you. I've decided to abstain this evening. Who knows how raucous Longbottom's stag do might become? Someone needs to see that certain war heroes and heroines make it back to the castle without passing out in a ditch."

"Very considerate of you."

"Mm. I still have that Life Debt, you'll recall."

She sighed. "I'd erase it if I could. You know that, right? I never wanted you to be indebted to me."

As Granger leaned closer, a fresh, sweet scent wafted towards him.

Citrus. Oh.

Severus's gaze flitted from her eyes to her lips. She rested her curly head on his shoulder, her hair tickling the scar that had been carved into his neck by that snake. His arm made demands to slip around her, like his body remembered hers even if his mind didn't. He kept both hands on the table.

"Although," she said, "if your Life Debt was forgiven, you'd need to find a new excuse for being nice to me."

"Because a return to cruelty isn't an option?" Severus asked, sliding out of the booth as nonchalantly as possible. As pleasant as it was to have her so close and soft, it wouldn't do for them to be seen displaying affection in public. Not when someone had possibly gone to great lengths to
keep them apart. "Hoping for another library, are you? Or perhaps you'd like me to go to the bar for you?"

"I guess I'll settle for the latter," she said with a lazy grin. "For now."

At the bar, the grooms-to-be sat surrounded by various friends who seemed to think being loud compensated for being moronic. The scene shifted before Severus's eyes, trembling into a rainy night in the same pub—a night that had apparently been during Granger's relationship with Boot. In the vision, Severus sat at the bar with Longbottom, pointedly not looking at a nearby table where Granger perched on Boot's lap. Severus's gut twisted at the sight.

"Is it everything you imagined?" Vision Severus asked, pausing to take a gulp of Firewhisky. "Getting pissed with your Boggart?"

Vision Longbottom drew himself up as if some inner voice had just delivered a lecture. "Nah. You aren't wearing Gran's clothes, for a start."

"I liked you better when you were afraid of me."

Vision Longbottom laughed into his own Firewhisky. "No, you really didn't." With a glance at Granger and Boot over his shoulder, Vision Longbottom's expression shifted into an obnoxiously sympathetic, gentle half-smile that he aimed at his drinking companion.

Severus blinked, and the room returned to the present. Damn that wolf and damn Augusta Longbottom's fashion sense yet again. And damn Longbottom for having the nerve to pity him. How much did Longbottom know?

"All right, Snape?" Longbottom asked.

"Yes. Fine." Severus paused. "Did we have a conversation here about me being your Boggart?"

Longbottom drew his eyebrows together for a few seconds. "Oh, yeah. That was a couple of years ago, I think. You want the memory?" Craning his neck to see over Severus's shoulder, he added, "Actually, there's another memory I was thinking of showing you. I'll give you both of them."

When Severus returned to the table with the memories from Longbottom and the frou-frou cocktail Granger had requested, he found Granger engrossed in conversation with Lovegood and George. Severus chose to sit next to George. Safer.

"Hello, Severus," Lovegood said. "I brought you something." Opening her rainbow-patterned handbag, she unpacked several items: a finger trap shaped like a double-headed dragon, a ball of orange twine, three rusty springs, what seemed to be a hair clip made from petrified Devil's Snare, and a box of Muggle condoms.

"Just what you always wanted," George said.

Lovegood reached deeper into the bag. "No, those are mine. Just a minute, it's in here somewh—oh, here we are." Into Severus's open palm, she deposited a tiny bottle full of clear turquoise eggs.

"What are they?" Severus asked.

"No idea." Lovegood began repacking the items she'd shifted out of the way during her search. "They're from a newly discovered species of magical beetle. I haven't named them yet. Their bites leave big green welts that last for days and leave you seeing Snunks everywhere."
Severus opted to refrain from asking what a Snunk might be. George picked up Lovegood's finger trap and slid his index fingers inside. Tiny flames shot from the nostrils of the dragons as the teeth clamped down, making him jump. Lovegood took it back with a dire warning about the fire attracting some of the aforementioned Snunks.

"Lovegood," Severus said. "I had a recovered memory of myself brewing with a glittering white powder I didn't recognise. Any idea what it might have been?"

"Ooh, interesting. Nargle droppings, maybe? Though I think they're usually more gold." She ignored Granger's snort. "I don't think it's anything that came from me. The things I give you tend to ooze, rather than glitter, as a rule."

"It doesn't sound like any ingredients you've given to me, either," George said.

"Why would he give you ingredients?" Granger asked.

"For my inventions. He and Luna have a nice little business set up selling me exotic ingredients at exorbitant prices. Didn't you know? He also let me help out with testing the stuff from Luna once, but I got myself banned from his lab for," George lowered his voice in an imitation of Severus's, "excessive stupidity."

Granger's hands fell to the table with a thunk. "You let him test ingredients with you?"

The unspoken words rang clear: you let George test ingredients with you instead of me?

"Hey," George said with a smirk, "maybe he just didn't want to mix business with pleasure."

Severus watched George in his peripheral vision. In the past, George had dropped heavy hints that he harboured some far too accurate suspicions about Severus's feelings for Granger. Who else knew, apart from George and—astonishingly—Longbottom? Draco had wagered that Severus had been bedding Granger. It didn't necessarily follow that Draco knew about any deeper feelings on Severus's part. Lucius had bet against intimacy, claiming the older Severus was depressingly noble. That could go either way.

Thanks to the Skeeter woman, many people probably thought something along the same lines as Draco. Plenty were at least aware of his friendship with her. He'd lost count of the number of times people had asked him where she'd been when they'd attended the memorial event separately.

Granger stabbed her straw into her glass and took a resentful sip.

"Maybe it was because George has more experience with experimental potions," Lovegood said. She patted Granger's hand. "You're very good at following instructions, though."

This was not the consolation that Lovegood seemed to think it was.

"George is capable of some truly impressive magic," Granger said, "but Severus, do you have any idea what sort of grades you gave him when you were his teacher?"

A mental image of leaning over and kissing Granger's scowling mouth chose that moment to taunt Severus. Not a flash of memory—just a fantasy.

"No," he said. Reaching across the table, he stole a skewer of pineapple slices from Granger's drink. "But nor was I aware I'd ever allowed him to assist me. What sort of grades did I give you, Weasley?"
"Difficult to say. Is there anything lower than a T? Probably that."

Severus rolled his eyes. "It's no wonder you got yourself barred from my lab."

Longbottom's memory opened up into the loft at Spinner's End in December of the previous year. Severus's nose itched with a phantom sneeze as billows of dust greeted Memory Severus, Granger, and Longbottom.

"Do not attempt Accio," Memory Severus said. "It was already old and fragile when it belonged to my mother. I can't imagine being stored up here has done its condition any favours." He gestured to the stacks of boxes that he'd filled with Eileen's books after her death. "It should be somewhere in one of these."

"Are there any dangerous volumes we should know about?" Longbottom asked.

Memory Severus scoffed. "Unless you consider Muggle Chalet School books to be dangerous, none of my mother's books require caution."

"I have no idea what those are, so I'll remain armed, just in case."

"Ooh," Granger said, dropping to her knees in front of a box. "I read a bunch of the Chalet School books the summer before I started Hogwarts. You know, to prepare me for boarding school."

Another swirl of dust rose up as Memory Severus opened what turned out to be Eileen's collection of Muggle mythology.

"And how did that work out for you?" he asked Granger.

"Well, let's just say it's a good thing I also read all of my school books and *Hogwarts, A History.*" She stretched out an arm and nudged his shoulder with the tips of her fingers. "Though none of them prepared me for you."

"I should hope not."

The three of them fell into silence, save for the rustling of papers and opening of cobwebbed boxes. Most of the contents were Muggle in origin, but Memory Severus discovered a battered old book on the history of house elves buried beneath some Georgette Heyer novels.

After a few steps across the creaky floorboards towards Granger, history book in hand, he paused. Longbottom carried on working, but Granger had her wand out, a muted Lumos shining from the tip and illuminating the pages of *The Chalet School in Exile.* She was three chapters in.

The amused affection that grew within Severus was echoed in the smile that crept across Memory Severus's face. The way he looked at her had no possible description other than tender.

Longbottom noticed. He said nothing.

"Granger," Memory Severus said, schooling his expression into something more neutral. He had to repeat her name twice more to get her attention. "Here. I forgot Mum had this, or I would have offloaded it onto you years ago. The subject matter is far more to your taste than mine."

"Oh." She accepted the book as if receiving something precious. "Thank you."

It was eventually decided that Granger would levitate the Muggle novels to the front room. According to Memory Severus, "You're bound to read them no matter where I store them, and I
can't have you stirring up dust by traipsing up here every time you visit."

"You've been changing a lot of stuff around here recently, huh?" Longbottom said once Granger had vanished down the loft ladder, taking the Chalet School and love along with her.

Memory Severus gave a noncommittal hum.

Longbottom scratched his bearded chin. "She hasn't said anything, but she likes you too, you know."

Severus honestly couldn't say whether more hope or more annoyance rippled through him at those words.

Memory Severus pried open another box. "Longbottom, you and I aren't friends."

"Oh, believe me, I know."

"We are colleagues. That is all. We tolerate one another—a small miracle, considered I was once cursed with the burden of teaching you. We will not be engaging in any heart-to-heart chats."

Chuckling, Longbottom shook his head. "I think I'd hate it as much as you if we did, given that I was once cursed with the burden of having you as a teacher." He used his wand to shift a box from the top of a teetering stack. "But Hermione does like you. Very much. Merlin knows why."

Silence. They went back to their search.

After several strained minutes, Memory Severus produced a crumbling Herbology text from one of the boxes and held it out to Longbottom. "This is the edition you have been looking for, correct? You needn't bother returning it. I have no use for it."

"Yeah, this is it." Longbottom grinned. "Thanks."

Granger had a tiny mole next to her left nipple.

Severus thought it was Granger. All he could see was naked skin, a sea of white sheets, and a double frame of silver enclosing the dream instead of the usual one. The dream controlled the direction of his gaze, and it seemed quite content to look at her body. He couldn't complain too much.

Bending over maybe-Granger, Severus trailed a path of heated kisses down her abdomen. Nerves jostled around in his stomach and made his hands shake where they touched her. The scent of citrus teased a smile from him. Yes, that was Granger's waist. Granger's curvy hips. Granger's small, high breasts. Granger's soft, soft ink-stained fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Severus," she whispered. His name had never sounded like a prayer before.

On a blissful shiver, the dream collapsed. Severus opened his eyes.

Well now. Knowing what Granger looked like naked was a whole new level of distraction.

Even with winter fast approaching, Longbottom's garden was impressive, Severus had to admit. In one of the few open patches of grass, Longbottom had planted a large ring of some sort of fast-growing trees that had twined their branches together to form a tent canopy. The foliage was a dazzling mix of bright red, orange, and yellow that would have looked pulled from a Muggle
postcard of New England, if such postcards featured leaves that were as broad as a hippogriff's wingspan.

Wedding guests sat in gold chairs beneath the laced-together branches, waiting for the ceremony to begin. For lack of a better option, Severus sat in the back on Longbottom's side.

Instead of the lurid orange favoured by the Chudley Cannons, Granger, Lovegood, and Mrs Potter wore robes that were closer to the rusty orange of the leaves overhead. Lovegood really needed to stop acting as bridesmaid for friends who put her in colours that did nothing for her and everything for Granger. Not that Lovegood seemed to mind. She pranced down the aisle next to Mrs Potter with her usual dreamy smile on her face.

Both Granger and Longbottom teared up before Percy Weasley—the officiant—had said a word. Ronald swiped Longbottom's tears away with a pair of freckled thumbs. Potter was ready with a handkerchief for Granger. Watching her happy sniffling, a bright pang ricocheted through Severus. It was like that time he'd nearly wept in front of her—there and gone in half a heartbeat. Too quick to identify the feeling beyond knowing that it was something treasured and necessary.

No matter how he strained or relaxed or reached, it didn't resurface. Solid familiarity reigned once more.

Severus used the wedding reception as an opportunity to talk to as many potential suspects and informants as possible. Most people, he had always found, would fill the silence if it was left there too long. He let them. The technique was especially effective if one first coaxed the person to talk about everyone's favourite topic: themselves.

From various fellow guests, Severus learned about two extramarital affairs (cheerful conversation for a wedding) and one case of acromantula egg smuggling (Hagrid would never learn), but nothing that seemed immediately relevant to him. Still, he made a mental note. The information could prove useful.

At the very least, he would obliquely warn Minerva of Hagrid's activities. It would be no skin off of his considerable nose if one of the cretins he taught got themselves devoured by an acromantula, but Minerva might require him to assist with the paperwork and the notifying of guardians after the fact if it was one of the Slytherins. Best avoided.

The party was a bit like that memory from Raffaella—the one from the night George had proposed to his wife. Severus watched Granger dance with Potter, with Longbottom, with too many Weasleys to count, with Lupin's son, with men he didn't recognise. Only, this time Severus was confident he would not be Flooing home with another woman at the end of the night.

How had he ever questioned whether he found Granger pretty?

Once he'd had enough of socialising with purpose, Severus retreated to the apple and hornbeam orchard on the other side of the little stone house. Tilting his head back, he stared up at the night sky through the nearly-bare branches. Like Scotland, there were more stars here than he'd ever dreamed of during his early childhood in Cokeworth.

"You've been doing a good job of hiding," Granger said, drawing his attention back down to earth. As she approached, she offered him one of the glasses of elf-made wine she carried.

"Not good enough, apparently," Severus said, echoing the memory of that Ministry Christmas party. He shook his head at the wine. "No, thank you. I am not sure I wish to drink anything that impairs my judgment and control until I am fully back to myself."
Granger set both glasses on the low stone wall that marked the perimeter of the orchard. "That makes sense. After all, the last time you drank you did end up kissing me."

"The next time I kiss you, I will be completely sober, I assure you." Severus extended a hand. "Dance with me."

Granger let herself be drawn into his arms. This far from the party, the music of the band was nothing more than a faint collection of slow notes accompanied by a muffled voice, but it was enough to sway to.

"What makes you think there will be a next time?" she asked, smirking up at him.

Severus urged her closer with his hand on the small of her back. "Won't there be? I may not be able to read your mind right now, Hermione, but I thought I could still read you."

He used her first name like a weapon. A jagged sigh told him he'd hit his target. She moved closer still. It felt as if he'd downed a whole bottle of that elf-made wine, let it bubble through his veins.

"Sometimes you make it very difficult to remember all of the reasons I shouldn't let you flirt with me." Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. "Much less let myself flirt back."

When had flirting with Granger transformed from something Severus did to glean information into something he did purely because he wanted to?

"Why shouldn't we do something so undeniably pleasant?" he asked. "We are both single, correct?"

"Yes, but if you had never lost your memories, you would be appalled if I so much as cast a longing glance your way."

"Is that right?"

She would know it was not right if she'd ever paid attention. He had seen it play out in borrowed memories again and again. She'd never understood what he'd meant with all of the library building and Valentine's gifts of cats and statements that implied her body was exquisite.

Or maybe she had, given the memories she'd lost.

Granger shrugged. "You never wanted me before," she said, her voice paper-thin.

"What if I did?" Severus brought a hand up to cup her cheek, tracing his thumb along her full lower lip. "As I've said before, I still possess the emotions of that other me. Maybe I kept my interest carefully guarded."

"Well," she said with a breath of laughter, "I guess you were a spy."

"Indeed." Letting both arms wrap around her waist, he relished the enticing warmth of her body against his. "What would you say if I did approach you with my memories intact? Would you want the version of Severus Snape who remembered being your teacher? Would you try as hard to please me now as you once did in my classroom?"

It was difficult to understand her when she pressed her face into his chest, but Severus thought she muttered something like, "Good Lord."

"Which one do you want?" he asked. "Me with my memories or without?"

"Both."
Severus let out a dark chuckle. "At the same time? That may be a challenge, but if we can find a third party willing to take Polyjuice once my memories are recovered…"

"You are going to be the death of me." Her fingers moved around to the back of his neck to toy with the hair at his nape.

Severus was still attempting to twist her words into a mention of the little death without being completely crude (likely impossible) when she spoke again.

"There would almost certainly be much less hand waving."

"Pardon?"

"Compared to when I was in your classroom," she said. "You asked if I'd try as hard to please you. Also, I assume I wouldn't need to hiss instructions in Neville's ear, since he wouldn't be there."

"Don't sully this by bringing Longbottom into it."

With a mischievous grin, Granger rose up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "I was never bossy with you, since you were my teacher. I'm afraid that would probably change."

Severus laughed. "I would expect nothing less."
Hermione grumbled under her breath about dunderheads as she turned Rosalind Macmillan's essay red with corrections. Honestly, the girl had listed the outcome of the 1964 Quidditch World Cup as one of the contributing factors behind Voldemort's first rise to power. Hermione would never go all vintage Severus and call her students idiots to their faces, but within the privacy of her office, it was another story.

The flare of green in her fireplace that signalled an incoming Floo-Call was a welcome distraction.

"Hey," George said, giving her a strained smile from within the flames. "Got a minute?"

"Sure." Abandoning the essays, Hermione crouched down next to a snoozing Boudica to get a better look at him. "Is something wrong?"

"Maybe. I, err. Well. I visited Snape back in September to buy some ingredients. Something about it has been nagging at me ever since, but I couldn't work out what. It just seemed… off, somehow. So, I finally borrowed Harry's Pensieve and checked the memory. Took me a few times to catch it. You know that clock over the fireplace in Snape's quarters? It skipped ahead by about ten minutes at one point."

The muscles in Hermione's legs tensed as the urge to run away from every logical conclusion washed through her. She wiped her suddenly clammy hands on her robes.

"I haven't told Harry or Ron," George said. "I thought I'd get your opinion first. You don't suppose he isn't quite as convinced about that whole defection from the Death Eaters thing as we thought, do you?"

"I don't think so." Dusting her hands together, she stood up. "I can think of a few other reasons he might have Obliviated you. I'm going to go have a little chat with him."

For a moment, George looked like he was going to object.

"Bert or Ernie will be outside the whole time," Hermione said. "And Severus himself taught me a very useful charm in my second year."

"If you don't get back to me within twenty minutes to let me know you're OK, I'll… I'll tell my mum!"

She released a brittle laugh. "Shame you were never a Prefect. You clearly missed your calling. Don't worry, George. I'll be fine."

Professor Snape had been very specific. He'd told Teddy he was not to melt a cauldron or cause an explosion when he was in Snape's presence. But Moaning Myrtle's bathroom wasn't anything close to the Potions classroom. Teddy could be a bit more adventurous while he was within shouting distance of Myrtle's u-bend.

Hunching over his little cauldron as the liquid inside simmered into molten gold, Teddy thought about all of the stories Harry had told him of his escapades at Hogwarts. Harry had—well, Hermione had—brewed Polyjuice Potion in this very bathroom.

As Teddy didn't have access to a Hermione to help him steal from Snape's stores (and would have
felt bad about stealing from him, truth be told), he had to content himself with experimenting with the handful of ingredients he'd pestered his grandmother to buy him at the apothecary in Diagon Alley.

"Ooh," Myrtle said, floating just over his left shoulder. "Hello again."

This was the only problem with his choice of location: Myrtle herself. He'd made the mistake of mentioning Harry on his first visit. She hadn't left him alone since.

"Hi, Myrtle," Teddy said.

"I don't suppose Harry is going to visit you anytime soon, is he?"

"Err, no. I don't think so. He's pretty busy with Auror stuff. I'll see him next week when I go home for Christmas."

Myrtle sniffled. "Too busy to see me—for years and years."

Teddy held his breath. This was a crucial moment. Just a sprinkle of powdered dragon horn. The potion belched out sulphurous steam.

"Just like when I was alive!" Myrtle wailed.

"Myrtle," Teddy tried to shout over her, "could you please—"

"No one had time for me then, either!"

Her cries rose to an ear-piercing level. Teddy groaned. Myrtle made it very difficult to remember his resolution to be kind to her.

"Well?" Granger said, tapping Severus's wand against her leg. That she'd managed to take him by surprise and disarm him was nothing short of humiliating. "Are you going to explain why George is missing those ten minutes?"

The clock. How could he have been so careless? Some instinct that Severus didn't recognise demanded he go against years of offering up half-truths and misdirection and avoidance when cornered. Because he likely wouldn't have landed in this mess if he'd listened to his own urge to leave George's memory intact, he obeyed.

Stooping down until his face was level with Granger's, he presented his temple to her. "As I am currently lacking my wand, you will need to extract the memory for me."

It was uncomfortable, allowing someone else to pull the misty threads from his mind. Like the difference between lightly touching one's own skin and the tickle of another person's fingers. Severus winced as he maintained focus on pushing out the record of the mistletoe dream in which they'd kissed.

His heart dropped into his stomach for the second time that day as Granger flicked the memory into the Pensieve—the first time being when she'd uttered four of the most terrifying words in the English language: We need to talk.

Granger looked dazed when she finally emerged from the Pensieve. Two patches of pink stained her cheeks.

"What was that?" she breathed.
"A memory dream. I've devised a potion to test whether such dreams depict true events. That one does."

"Your potion is faulty. That never happened."

"Did you feel any foreign emotions as you viewed it?" he asked. "That's how it feels when I view a memory—as if the emotions belong to someone else and they are being forced into me. I suspect it's different when the memory loss is the result of an Obliviation. The only way to recover Obliviated memories, as far as I'm aware, is torture."

"What does any of this have to do with George?"

"It is my opinion that someone has altered your memories," Severus said, the words scraping against his throat as he forced them out. "Memory dreams and recovered memories have both indicated that we were... considerably more than friends prior to my accident. I used Veritaserum on George to see if he had anything to do with it. I thought a prank gone wrong was a possibility. He is an Occlumens—a talented one. He was able to block the effects of the potion. He knew the Obliviate was coming before I cast it and assured me it was fine with him, for the record."

Granger's grip on his wand slackened to the point that he could summon it back to himself with a murmured Accio, as easy as blinking. Severus left it where it was.

"How much more than friends do you think we were?" she asked. "Was it just that one kiss, or—"

"Unless I'm mistaken, you have a mole on your left breast."

With a noise that was somewhere between a squeak and a cough, Granger rubbed the back of her neck. "Um. So, I gather you decided it wasn't George? Who do you think might have done it? And how many other people did you interrogate and Obliviate? I don't for a second believe George was the only one."

Severus considered showing her his list, but decided nothing good would come of taking that route. She would only get indignant about his very reasonable methods of investigation and squawk about Longbottom not being a marshmallow.

"Apart from George, I have questioned one other," he said. "No one was harmed, and no memories were taken apart from the questioning. As of right now, my main suspects are people who are new to our lives, people with reason to hold a grudge against one or both of us, and... someone who would not currently remember casting the spell."

Granger stared at him as if he'd announced a penchant for house elf abuse. "You don't seriously think that you Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Minded me."

Severus squinted at her. "Those words do not make sense when used collectively as a verb."

"It's a film. Well, it's also a line from a poem. I'll show you the—never mind. You think you might be the one who Obliviated this more than friendship from my memory?"

"It's a possibility, yes."

"No." Her curls swished back and forth as she shook her head. "You wouldn't do that to me."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "I did it to George."

And to Boot, but Severus wasn't going to confess that. Best to let her believe his other interrogation
had been with that Skeeter woman or some other enemy.

"What you took from George wasn't *important* to him," she said. "If you said you thought you might have Obliviated some of George's memories of Fred before you lost your memory, I wouldn't believe that, either."

"You think you know what I would do? Funny, so did the Dark Lord. I'm told that did not work out particularly well for him. Everyone thought they knew me during the war, but none of—"

"I did. I knew you were on our side. That was one of the first memories I showed you, remember?" Granger stalked forward until they stood toe-to-toe. "I can imagine you doing any number of shady things if you deemed them necessary. Particularly when you're lacking decades of memories that place you on the side of the Light. Why do you think I cast Expelliarmus before I confronted you? But the man who knows me—who spent hours using Legilimency on Muggles and risked Azkaban on the off chance it would heal my parents... That man would not rob me of memories that mattered to me."

"I would have thought your experiences during the war would have robbed you of some of that naivete and idealism," Severus said. "You are allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment. Humans have an almost endless capacity for betrayal, Granger."

She surprised him with a chuckle. "I'm aware. Are you actually convinced it's you, or are you just being contrary because I'm so against the idea?" Without giving him a chance to answer, she scrubbed a hand over her face. "I want to see how this potion works, even if you do know about my mole. And why does no one else know about this thing between us? None of my friends have ever said a word about it. Do you think they were Obliviated as well? That's a lot of ground to cover."

"I imagine you didn't tell them about us."

"If it was just a one-night stand that got wiped from my memory, then maybe, but not if we were in a relationship. I would tell the whole Wizarding World. We are no longer at war. I'm no longer your student. There's no reason for me to keep a relationship with you a secret, so why would I? Would you be ashamed for people to know you were with me?"

"Of course not."

"Neither would I." As she leaned closer, her jaw set and determined, citrus wafted towards him. "I would be proud, Severus."

A pair of small fists banged against Eileen's portrait frame. Reluctantly, Severus went to investigate with Granger at his heels. Zeb Burke, his most incompetent student, stood in the corridor, his arms raised in preparation for another volley of knocks. That the boy had been sorted into Slytherin was a source of constant bafflement.

"Professor Snape!" Zeb said. "I need your help. Gabriel Flint took my Charms essay."

"I'm sure Professor Flitwick is preparing a fruit basket to thank Mister Flint for sparing him the task of reading it," Severus said.

Zeb blinked. Ernie leaned back in his chair and shot Severus a reproving look. Granger gave Severus a firm jab in the back, out of Zeb's eyesight.

Severus rolled his eyes. "Where is he keeping the essay? His dorm? Did you try creating a distraction so you could sneak in and take it back?"
"Well, see, sir, he stuck it to the ceiling in the second floor corridor. I could unstick it if I could get close enough. I think. Maybe. But I'm rubbish on a broom, and—"

"Come along," Severus said with a put-upon sigh. "I'll retrieve it for you." He grabbed the old broom that was propped up against his wall. Broomless flight tended to unsettle people.

"You'll be wanting this," Granger said, holding out his wand. "I'll walk up with you. I'm headed that way, anyway. I need to go Floo-Call George."

Severus wanted to ask what she would tell him, but couldn't with Ernie and Zeb tagging along.

Zeb's short legs moved double-time trying to keep up with Severus as they neared the stairs.

"Professor Granger? Why did you have Professor Snape's wand?"

"We were duelling," Severus said. "The war may be long over, but keeping one's skills sharp is still important. And sometimes, Mister Burke, it can be advantageous to allow Gryffindors to think they have the upper hand."

Granger laughed.

Smith, the Muggle Studies professor, gave Granger an oily grin worthy of a used-car salesman as they passed by him at the centre of a crowd of students. One glare from Severus quelled whatever he opened his mouth to say, thank Merlin. In the second floor corridor, Zeb pointed out the location of his essay. Before Severus could go after it, shouts came from within Moaning Myrtle's bathroom: Myrtle herself, and what sounded like a male student.

"I'll check it out," Granger said, striding through the door.

Severus turned to Zeb, prepared to tell him that they would be having a discussion about suitable methods of revenge once he'd retrieved the essay, but a new commotion from within the bathroom killed the words in his throat.

"Protego!" Granger said, the last syllable drowned out by the thunder of an explosion.

"Murder!" Myrtle screeched. "Another murder in the bathroom!"

"Stay here," Severus commanded Zeb before rushing in, wand drawn.

Teddy Lupin screamed for help in front of a shattered cauldron. Severus barely registered his presence. The Protego Granger had cast had been for Lupin. The boy was fine. Ernie could see to him. But Granger…

Red spread out from her crumpled body, creating a macabre inkblot test on the damp floor tiles. Severus felt as if all of the blood in his body drained away to join hers. His shields cracked down the middle, releasing everything he felt for her—everything. On a wave of love and desperation and oh, fuck, why now, he skidded to her side and dropped to his knees.

"Hermione," he gasped, turning her over.

Her neck had been torn open by a piece of cauldron. Whatever Lupin had been brewing had raised blisters where it had splashed against her face and arms. Severus's eyes stung. His whole body wanted to tremble, but he forced himself to remain steady as he passed his wand over her wound and muttered Vulnera Sanentur. Her pulse was fast and weak, her skin clammy.

Scooping Granger's limp body into his arms, Severus left his broom behind and flew towards the
George gave her thirty minutes. He didn't really think Snape would do anything to Hermione. Not if Snape had the emotions of his older self. Those two had been smitten since Hermione had barely been out of school. Maybe even before that. And it was a long journey down to the dungeons from her quarters.

Still, it wasn't like Hermione to fail to check in. That was the sort of thing she'd lecture George for doing. By the time he made the sprint from the Apparition Point into the castle, George's heart was racing for reasons that he suspected had little to do with the brief burst of exercise.

Bad news had always travelled fast—if not with much accuracy—at Hogwarts. George motioned to the first person he saw: a distraught Hufflepuff girl who was surely tinier than George had ever been when he'd attended school.

"I heard that Professor Snape flew her out of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom," the Hufflepuff said when questioned about Hermione's whereabouts. "He didn't even use a broom; he just flapped his robes like a bat. And Professor Granger was bleeding everywhere and Teddy Lupin was there and now Hufflepuff don't have any points left AT ALL and my brother said Teddy is probably going to go to Azkaban for killing a teacher but I don't think they put kids in Azkaban but maybe they will since Professor Granger is friends with Harry Potter."

If the Hufflepuff finally paused to take a breath, George didn't witness it. He ran at full speed towards the Hospital Wing. Through the double doors, he found one of Snape's guard Aurors talking in tense, stern tones to a sobbing Teddy, whose hair was mousy brown instead of turquoise or orange or purple. Madam Pomfrey stood on one side of an occupied bed, smearing a green, camphor-scented ointment over swollen skin. Snape sat hunched over on the other side.

George struggled to breathe. The pale, blistered figure occupying the bed was Hermione. Snape wasn't touching her, but the way he looked at her was almost like clasping one of her hands in his. His robes drooped open, revealing an ugly splash of blood on the white shirt beneath. A matching stain was painted over the front of Hermione's robes.

"What the hell happened?" George asked.

Teddy barrelled straight into George and locked his skinny arms around George's middle. "It's all my f-fault!"

"Shh, lad," the Auror said. George couldn't remember whether he was Ernie or Bert. "There was an accident with some illicit brewing of potions in a bathroom. Professor Granger cast a Shield Charm on the boy, but ended up getting hit herself."

George patted Teddy's back. "Hey, mate, it's OK." He gave Madam Pomfrey a pleading look. "Isn't it?"

"She'll be fine," Madam Pomfrey said, and George's lungs worked again. "You were very lucky that Professor Snape was there, Mister Lupin."

George wasn't sure how lucky Snape's proximity truly was. If this wasn't Snape's doing, then Teddy had awful timing.

McGonagall marched in at the brisk pace she'd always used when George and Fred were about to get into serious trouble. An excuse almost tripped off of George's tongue as a reflex. Close behind her were Harry and Andromeda, both still dusting Floo Powder from their clothing. Releasing
George, Teddy trudged on heavy feet towards his grandmother and godfather.

"George?" McGonagall said, seeming to notice his presence for the first time. "What are you doing here?"

"He has some business with me," Snape said, sitting up straight. It was only then that George noticed Snape's eyes were red-rimmed. Had he been crying? Bringing his wand up to the side of his head, Snape withdrew a memory and swished it into a conjured vial. "Here, Weasley. The password to my quarters is Murtlap Essence. The Pensieve is in the sitting room."

With two Aurors and the Headmistress present, George decided Snape was sufficiently supervised. Down in the dungeons, he got past Eileen's portrait with minimal conversation due to promising her a game of Gobstones at a later date. How he was supposed to play Gobstones with a portrait, he had no idea. Dumping the memory in the Pensieve, George dived in.

In spite of the drama and worry of that evening, George had to crack up laughing when his memory self talked about spanking Hermione. Oh, he amused himself sometimes. And the expression on Snape's face was priceless. Watching the memory through to the end made him sag with relief. Snape wasn't plotting against them any more than he ever did. He was just worried about someone hurting Hermione—altering her memories.

Who the hell would have been able to get close enough to do that? If George discovered their identity, they would be finding itching powder in unspeakable places for the next several decades.

Hermione's mouth tasted like pennies.

Smacking her chapped lips together, she opened her gritty eyes. The last thing she remembered with any clarity was going to investigate a disturbance in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. That had apparently not gone particularly well, as she now stared up at the vaulted ceiling of the Hospital Wing.

A rustle of parchment at her side drew her attention. Severus sat there with a stack of marking and a red-tipped quill.

"Severus?" she said, her voice coming out as a dry croak. "What happened?"

"Mister Lupin decided to carry on his grand family tradition of trying to kill people."

"Severus."

Sighing, he set his marking aside and gave her the whole story. Little flashes floated back to her as Severus explained what had happened. She had a vague, misty recollection of Severus saying her name—her first name. Then she'd been weightless, flying through the air.

The multiple Blood Replenishing Potions explained the coppery taste that lingered on her tongue. Hermione tested out the raw, reddened skin on her forearm with a touch of her fingers. Not too bad. She'd definitely had worse.

"I guess you finally repaid that Life Debt," she said.

"I don't give a fuck about the Life Debt, Granger. But yes, it appears to be gone."

"Hmm. Then I suppose I can't call upon it when I ask you to treat Teddy the same way you've always treated him."
"Granger. You cannot let the boy get off lightly for this. You could have died."

The way Severus's voice cracked on the word died made Hermione's heart stutter. Her palm found its way to his stubble-dusted cheek, drawn there by the need to press comfort into him.

"I would never suggest he go unpunished," she said, "but a fair punishment is a very different thing from you making his life hell for the next seven years."

Severus harrumphed. "I will consider it."

Hermione realised that reply meant no, but she intended to ask again. Deciding to abandon the topic for the moment, she rolled gingerly onto her side.

"Did you bring me any books?"

"I did, but I also promised Poppy I would withhold them until morning and convince you to get some much-needed rest."

Hermione tutted. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

His lips twitched with a suppressed smile. "I don't."

"What if I close my eyes and you read to me and we both pretend that I'm trying to sleep? Just for a while?"

"Hmm. A short while."

Severus didn't give her a choice of listening material. Instead of any of the books he'd had Neville retrieve from her bedside table, he read the essay he'd been marking. His deep, precise voice held a sneer with every syllable.

Hermione tuned out until the words blurred around the edges and became meaningless. She wanted him to crawl into bed next to her and carry on reading—close enough that his voice would become a physical thing, a rumble that she could feel.

Reaching out, she took Severus's free hand in hers. His reading didn't falter. Somehow, she believed his hand should have felt as familiar as her own if they'd been lovers, even if the memories had vanished. It didn't. Hermione traced the scars and calluses that were his souvenirs from decades of brewing potions until, finally, the heaviness of sleep pulled her under.

Hours later, the scene still kept replaying in Severus's mind: the blood, the roaring in his ears, the soul-shattering panic, the onslaught of love. Seeing Granger near death had done what he'd been unable to accomplish; the clouds surrounding his emotions for her had cleared.

It would not have been his method of choice, to say the least.

Banishing the image of her sprawled face down and bleeding, Severus set his marking aside. Granger's breaths were deep and even, but the unmarred stretches of her skin were still too pale. He wanted to take her back to Spinner's End, where she could rummage through his books and sing that blasted song in his shower and feel brand new.

Being without the Life Debt was odd. Like the sudden absence of a noise he'd grown accustomed to hearing forever buzzing in the background. A different sort of tug towards her had lodged itself in its place, streaming past the wreckage of the walls that had once caged it in. The love he felt for
her now was more intense than it had been in the Pensieve, as if all of these months together had built on top of their forgotten past.

As Granger slept on, Poppy looked in, checked vitals, administered more potions. She didn't attempt to order Severus to return to his quarters. She'd likely known him too long to bother.

A restless whimper from Granger alerted him to her nightmare before her magic reached across the scant distance between them and called his name. Severus didn't think she'd lash out the way he would if surprised out of sleep, but he didn't risk it. Instead, he drew his wand to cast a Patronus. When she'd done the same for him, he'd found the joyful light a soothing way to wake up.

The old memory didn't work. A feeble glow sputtered into life, nothing more. Severus sighed. Fine.

Closing his eyes, he summoned a parade of memories, both recent and borrowed. Dancing and flirting with Granger. Granger taking care of him when he'd had flu. Granger beaming at him in Mrs Figg's house. Kissing Granger beneath the mistletoe. Granger opening her eyes, alive and safe, just hours before.

"Expecto Patronum."

Severus's Patronus sprang forward, powered by thoughts of Granger, but still a doe. Still his long-lost friend offering him protection in spite of himself.

Without Severus commanding it to do so, the doe nuzzled Granger's neck. Granger's whimpers ceased. Her eyes fluttered open, regarding the doe with an expression that flickered between adoration and heartbreak.

"Oh!" Granger said, sitting up too fast and looking as if she regretted it.

Severus banished the Patronus. "What's the matter?"

"Boudica. Will you feed her for me?"

"Both of our beasts are currently being spoilt by Minerva. And before you worry yourself about George as well, he barged in while you were unconscious, intent on rescuing you from my evil clutches. I gave him back the memory I took. We parted on amicable terms."

"Oh. That's good. I'm still annoyed with you for doing that to him in the first place, though." Her frown looked as if it was meant to convince herself as much as him. "What time is it?"

"Nearly two."

"You can't be intending to sit in that chair all night." With a long-suffering sigh, Granger shifted over to one side of the bed and threw back the blanket. "Come on. Get in."

It didn't take much convincing for him to remove his outer robes and his boots and slide in next to her. A look from her was enough. He didn't point out that there were plenty of other beds available.

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

Her mouth opened and closed a few times with words that were never given breath. Placing a hand on his chest, Granger offered him a fragile smile. "Will you show me the other memories?"
"If you wish." Sweeping her hair back from her forehead, he dropped a kiss there. "Go back to sleep."

Elbows jabbed at him as she wriggled around and fought to find the most comfortable position. She finally settled with her head on his chest and her arm flung across his midsection. One of Severus's arms ended up wedged beneath her. Experimentally, he brought it up so his hand cradled her shoulder.

"You don't make the best pillow," she said. "I forgive you for that, though."

"How magnanimous of you."

Granger yawned. "I think I could forgive you for almost anything. You know that, right?"

He didn't. How could she possibly make such a claim?

"If you say so," he said.

"I do. But come to me before you go using more Veritaserum and Obliviating people, OK? We'll work it out together. And we can take our suspicions to Harry and Ron. Believe it or not, you can trust them."

Either he wanted too badly to please her or he was still half-mad from his earlier frantic worry, because Severus found himself saying, "Very well. I will include you in the process. I make no promises about Potter and Weasley. Now, goodnight, Granger."

"Mm. Night."
Darkness brightened into the staff room at Hogwarts, but not as Severus had ever seen it. The walls and floor were a misty shade of white instead of the usual dark wooden paneling and dull grey stone. Fairy lights twinkled in and out of existence over every inch of the high ceiling. The silver frame around the dream indicated—quite impossibly—that it was a memory.

Impossible, because Severus was naked.

"Christ, mate, put some clothes on," a familiar, laughter-tinged voice said. "You can't just walk around the staff room with your bits out. I've half a mind to tell the Headmaster."

Charity stood before him in a purple Muggle tea dress, smiling and whole and looking as if she'd never been touched by the Dark Lord's magic.

Severus blinked. "I am the Headmaster."

"So you are." Charity held out pale grey robes for him to shrug into. "Though if we want to get technical, you abandoned your post a little while ago."

"I did." The robes fit him perfectly, enveloping him in velvety comfort. "And now it appears I'm hallucinating."

"Why would you say that?"

"You've been dead for months."

"Oh, that." She waved a dismissive hand. "You're pretty close to being dead, too. At least for now." Tilting her head to one side, she gave him a sad smile. "I know you'd probably rather see Lily, but you're stuck with me. If I'm honest, I would have fought her for it. And you know I would've won. She might be all Gryffindor-brave and have more experience duelling with a wand, but I grew up with three older sisters. I can pull hair and give wedgies like you wouldn't believe."

A choked laugh escaped Severus. "Char—"

"I'm really glad you put on those robes, or this would be incredibly awkward."

With that, she flung herself at him. Their arms locked around each other. There was a curious sort of peace in the tightening of her embrace—something that hushed the apology that welled up in his chest.

"I am so proud of you," Charity whispered, backing up to hold his face between her hands. Her eyes overflowed with tears, but she kept smiling up at him.

Severus wiped her cheeks. "As far as delusions go, this one is tolerable."

"Tolerable. High praise, indeed."

"It is. You were usually intolerable in life."

"I did try," Charity let out a sniffly giggle. "Right. Time to make a decision. Do you want to carry..."
on living, or would you rather move beyond the Veil? Goodness knows you've fought long enough, but I hope you'll decide to fight just a little bit more. There is love waiting for you out there among the living. Trust me; I'm dead. I know things." She waggled her eyebrows.

"That must make a refreshing change from when you were alive."

Charity cackled. "Oh, I love you, you miserable old bastard. So, what's it to be? Go through the door and back to your life, or take my hand and go on?"

Severus stared at her open palm for a few tense seconds before shaking his head. As he took a shuddering breath and stepped away from his dear friend, the room began to fade. Her voice became little more than a distant echo.

"Severus?" she said.

"Yes?"

"It's exactly who you think it is."

What certain Gryffindors thought passed for whispers roused Severus from sleep. He kept his eyes closed, listening to their conversation. Granger had shifted around in the night; her back was nestled against Severus's front. One of his hands rested on the pleasant curve of her hip. The arm beneath her body was starting to go numb, her hair tickled his face, and the presence of her friends was unfortunate, but it was far from an objectionable way to wake up.

"Maybe we should just leave the stuff and go," one of them said. Ronald, unless Severus was mistaken.

"Yeah, maybe." Potter. "Err. Do you reckon this has been going on long?"

"I don't even know what this is."

"Really? Should I have given you an instructional guide as a wedding gift?"

A third person chuckled. Longbottom, perhaps. "Ron, I told you I thought they fancied each other." Yes, definitely Longbottom.

"I thought you were joking."

"Well," Potter said bracingly, "as long as they're happy, right?"

"Of course," Longbottom said.

"Err, yeah," Ronald said. "Yeah, sure. Merlin, what if they end up having kids, though? Any kid of theirs will be brilliant and absolutely fucking terrifying."

"I am retiring from teaching the day any Granger-Snape children start Hogwarts," Longbottom said. "I'll go back to being an Auror. It's less dangerous."

"I'm sure any future progeny of mine will thank you for making that career change, Longbottom," Severus said.

Granger made a sleepy noise of protest as Severus withdrew his tingling, heavy arm from beneath her with as much finesse as he could manage.
"Sev'rus?" she mumbled.

"You have visitors," Severus said, glaring at the three men who stood at the foot of the bed.

Potter and Ronald, both in their work robes, carried a giant floral arrangement and a bag from Honeyduke's, respectively. Unlike Longbottom, Potter and Ronald had the decency to look suitably uncomfortable.

Like the morning person she was, Granger popped up with a grin. While her friends showered her with get-well gifts and hugs, Severus took the opportunity to make his exit. Charity's words from his dream raced through his mind again and again during his descent to the dungeons.

*It's exactly who you think it is.*

Severus couldn't have suspected what he and Granger would one day become. Not as far back as that. At a guess, the whole scene had happened in his own head when he'd hovered on the edge of death.

Could it have been something to do with the war, now forgotten and not offered up in anyone else's memories? Perhaps it wasn't a true memory at all, but his subconscious telling him now that the person he most suspected—himself—was the one at fault for his current woes. He would need to brew more of the potion to test the dream for accuracy. And to show Granger how the potion worked.

Upon reaching his quarters, Severus searched his stock of memories from immediately after the war. The earliest one from Granger had taken place in August. *Trial, part one.*

The drawing room of Black's childhood home materialised when Severus fell into the Pensieve. Memory Severus folded a knitted green blanket with military precision and placed it over the armrest of a sofa. Granger stood in the doorway, so young, smoothing imagined wrinkles out of her sensible charcoal coloured robes. Severus didn't love her in this memory—didn't even particularly like her. Not a hint of desire crept into the Pensieve. Mostly, he felt a contrary blend of gratitude and resentment.

"What will you do when the trial is over?" she asked. "Will you go back to teaching?"

Memory Severus made a noise that was part scoff, part laugh. "Oh, Miss Granger," he said with the same mocking expression he'd given her when he'd uttered those words in an empty classroom during the height of the war. "Surely it doesn't need to be written in a book for you to understand that I will almost certainly not be acquitted? I am exceedingly guilty. I won't pretend otherwise."

"You also told me you didn't expect to live through the war." She spread her arms wide. "And yet, here we are."

"Hmm, I don't know. It may be that I am dead after all. I rather think my own personal hell would resemble Black's hovel."

Granger smirked. "And I would be there, asking you questions?"

Memory Severus didn't smile, but Severus did, feeling the bright burst of amusement that rippled through him.

"Undoubtedly," Memory Severus said. "Ah, and here are two more pieces of evidence."
Potter and Ronald gave him befuddled looks as they appeared behind Granger. A couple of Aurors accompanied them.

"Sir?" Potter said. "It's time."

Memory Severus nodded, giving no hint of the panic that punched him in the stomach. One of the Aurors escorted him to the Ministry. As Granger, Potter, and Ronald walked with him to the courtroom, a bystander tried to spit on Memory Severus.

Granger raised her wand and sent the disgusting projectile back at the man with a decisive flick. "I think not," she said.

"See?" she whispered to Memory Severus, taking care to speak through her teeth so the countless reporters couldn't read her lips. "If this was hell, I'd have let it hit you."

"That is precisely what you want me to think, Demon Granger."

Granger sat squeezing Potter and Ronald's hands through what this memory had captured of Severus's testimony. Memory Severus answered the Wizengamot's questions in a neutral, even tone. Unlike Severus's approach to collecting memories, the Wizengamot started at the beginning and worked their way through. Much of the information consisted of things he genuinely remembered.

He emerged from the Pensieve without any firm conclusions.

"Just to warn you," Harry said, "Rita Skeeter wrote about your accident."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I suppose I'm endangering the students of Hogwarts with my negligence in some way?"

"No, actually. She sort of accused you of doing it for attention, since you've not been in the spotlight recently."

"That cow."

Hermione picked through her selection of chocolates from Honeyduke's, setting aside the fruit creams for Ron. She couldn't stand them, but they were his favourites. Which was probably why he always chose that particular box for her. She didn't mind. By now it was as much a tradition as getting a Weasley jumper on Christmas morning.

A twee card from Rupert Smith was vanished without regret. Moving on to the next envelope in her stack, she recognised George's untidy scrawl. When opened, George's offering rained confetti over all of them. Hermione should have expected it, really. Opening the dancing Pygmy Puff card, she read the message inside.

Hermione,

Get well soon!

Love,

George, Angelina, Fred and Roxanne

PS: Everything is sorted with Snape. Don't be angry with him on my behalf. It happened exactly as he said. I really was fine with it.
PPS: If Madam Pomfrey makes a fuss about the confetti, tell her it will vanish itself in ten minutes. Probably.

PPPS: Any idea how to play Gobstones with a portrait? I may have promised Snape's mum something I can't deliver.

"So," Ron said, shaking confetti from his hair, "are you shagging Snape?" When she didn't immediately reply, he added, "I'm not saying it's a bad thing. You'll notice I didn't mention his greasy hair or the fact that he's so old and mean or—"

Hermione shoved one of the chocolates into his mouth. He chuckled around a mouthful of strawberry cream.

"I'm not," she said quietly. Because Neville saw her and Severus more often due to work, she turned to him. "Did you ever see any indication that Severus and I were romantically involved before his memory loss?"

"Beyond just fancying each other? No. Why?"

"He has had some recovered memories that feature me, but I don't remember any of it. He thinks I've been Obliviated. Wait, why are you so sure that he fancied me? No offence, Neville, but if you tell me that Severus confided his feelings in you, it will completely shatter my worldview."

Neville shrugged. "Well, there's the fact that he didn't hate you and even went so far as to seek out your company. That was a pretty big clue. Also, the way he looked at you sometimes when you weren't paying attention." He paused just long enough for Hermione's stomach to swoop at that claim. "But let's circle back to this Obliviation."

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice hard. "That grabbed my attention, too."

"I don't know if I believe it," Hermione said. "They could be implanted memories, right? Although, if they are, whoever implanted them has apparently seen me naked—or at least topless. That would narrow the pool of suspects considerably."

Ron made a strangled noise. "It wasn't me," he said. "I don't even remember what you look like naked. Forgot it all the second I took my wedding vows, obviously." Ignoring the snort that came from Neville, he grabbed another chocolate. "I forgot on purpose—not because anyone messed with my memories. Felt like I should specify, since memory tampering is apparently really in fashion right now."

"It does seem to be, doesn't it?" Harry grumbled.

A drop of water tickled Hermione's back as it travelled from her damp hair down between her shoulder blades. She thought she'd scrubbed away the last traces of the camphor scented ointment in her lengthy bath, but the way Severus kept breathing in deep through his nose made her second guess how thorough she'd been. Maybe she should have repeated one more time after lathering and rinsing.

Her skin was back to normal, smooth and flushed pink from the heat of her bath. Thanks to Severus's quick action with a Healing Charm and Dittany, she wouldn't be adding a mark on her neck to the map of her scars. It had been enough progress to convince Poppy to discharge Hermione from the Hospital Wing in time to teach her classes earlier that day—after seven minutes of debating.
Sprawling on the floor of her sitting room in her warmest pyjamas with a roll of parchment in her lap and a steaming mug of tea in her hand was miles better than being cooped up in the Hospital Wing. Hermione leaned her back against the sofa, where Severus sat with his own parchment (clad in his usual black robes, not pyjamas). The box of non-fruit cream chocolates laid open on the coffee table. At Hermione's suggestion, they were brainstorming alternative theories about what had happened to them.

"Are you free tomorrow evening?" Severus asked, scribbling something on his parchment. She tilted her head back onto the cushion behind her so she could look at him upside-down. "I have patrol duty at eight, but other than that, I don't have any plans."

"I'm brewing another batch of my memory testing potion. You can come to my quarters after your patrol if you wish to see it demonstrated." His dark eyes studied her from beneath half-lowered lids. "I will also provide you with the memories you requested."

"Right. Yes. Good."

Hermione busied herself with fishing a catnip mouse out from beneath the sofa to throw to the cats. Could her naked body have been something he'd glimpsed in her mind during Occlumency lessons? She'd lost track of all of the embarrassing moments he'd witnessed while helping to build her shields brick by brick, but she rather thought she would remember him seeing that. Especially as he had been Professor Snape, not Severus, back then.

"Was it just me in the dream?" she asked. "The one with my mole, I mean. Was I just standing there topless?"

Severus's smirk was that lazy, warm one that she loved. It left her feeling as if her pyjamas had gone transparent.

"I played a rather… active role," he said. Definitely not something from the era of Occlumency lessons. A pleasurable shiver ran through her.

One of Severus's thumbs caressed the place on her neck where the cauldron shard had struck. "I am still furious with Lupin for nearly killing you," he said, "but you'll be pleased to know that I resisted taking even more points from Hufflepuff when I saw him breathing in the corridor on the way up here."

"Such admirable restraint."

"I thought so."

Hermione swatted his leg. "Tell me your most outlandish theory so far."

"I do not have outlandish theories." He selected one of the dark chocolates from the box and paused to eat it before he continued speaking. "My most unlikely, however, is time travel. I briefly considered the possibility that a future version of you will travel back to some point prior to your sixth year. In this scenario, the reason you don't remember being with me is because it has yet to happen to you."

"Time Turners don't work that way—at least the one I had didn't. They're far more limited."

Severus's hand halted on its path to grab another chocolate. "You had one?"
"Borrowed, yes. Ages ago. You were still my teacher at the time, and I was still a child. I suppose I could go back by some other means. We do live in a magical world. But you looked as old as you are now in that dream you showed me." Hermione placed a chocolate on her tongue, taking a moment to savour the hit of caramel when she bit into it. "Why before my sixth year?"

Severus stared through the window at the dark sky and tumbling snow. "It is the time period you gave when I asked about that mystery woman from my dream."

The flutter that swept through Hermione's abdomen left her feeling weightless and a bit breathless. She remembered the radiant devotion that had enveloped her when she'd been in his mind, the rasp of his voice whispering, "Marry me."

It couldn't have been her. The point she'd made about his appearance in the dream was valid, and where would he have hidden an adult Hermione while the younger Hermione was potentially running around the castle? Possibly during the war, no less.

It had to have been someone else.

"Maybe," she said, "you and I were together without any time travel involved, but we hadn't told anyone yet, because it was very early on. We'd been on one date."

"It went quite far for a first date, then."

"You clearly couldn't resist me." Hermione gestured at her ice skating Niffler pyjamas. "How could you, when I wear things like this?"

"Indeed." Severus's eyes shone in the firelight as a tiny smile tugged at his mouth. "Your theory sounds plausible thus far."

"So, after our date, I was Obliviated for whatever reason. You figured out what had happened to me, and you tried to create a potion that would get even with whoever cast the spell. Something that was designed to erase decades from their memory in a way that would look like an accident. You intended to tell me about my lost memories only after the deed was done, because you knew I'd tell you not to go seeking revenge and to report them to Harry and Ron instead."

"Also plausible."

"Somehow this potion got spilled on you, and here we are."

"Hmm. I am by no means infallible, but I can't imagine myself being so careless with something so dangerous." Stretching his legs out, he rubbed his temples as if trying to soothe away a headache.

"Maybe one of the cats is an Animagus who is madly in love with you," Hermione said. "Or with me. Will you help me check? I've never cast the spell before. The one time I saw it done, it took two wizards to manage it."

Combining her magic with Severus's made Hermione's skin warm and her mouth dry. He moved no closer, but it felt like his body draped over hers as their spells layered together. Intoxicating power pulsed through her wand hand: darker than her own, with an edge as sharp as his tongue.

Neither of the cats reacted much when the blue light of the joined spell hit each of them in turn. Boudica curled up next to the fire and dozed off. Lois stared at the humans as if she expected a treat for being subjected to such undignified treatment. Both of the cats remained cat-shaped instead of twisting and morphing into witches.
"I thought not," Hermione said, sagging at the withdrawal of Severus's magic. "At least we know we don't have any infatuated Animagi secretly living with us."

Lois pounced on Hermione's bare toes with her claws extended, lest Hermione think herself too well liked.

"I'm not sure this exercise is helping us get any closer to the truth, Granger," Severus said. "At Spinner's End, I had a recovered memory of making my memory testing potion, which would suggest I had some reason to check the validity of memories in the past. Any theories about that?"

Hermione scowled. "Well, that's not at all reassuring. I guess it could have been something to do with Voldemort. He did manage to trick Harry with a false vision of Sirius. Maybe you were inventing something to prevent Harry from falling for that again."

"Possibly." Leaning forward, he tapped his wand on the side of her mug. The cooled liquid inside was replaced with fresh, hot tea from the teapot she'd placed under a Warming Charm. "If you refuse to accept that I may have Obliviated you without your consent, will you consider the possibility that you requested it? Perhaps we agreed that becoming involved was a colossal mistake and opted for Obliviation in order to retain our friendship."

"I don't think so. I prefer to learn from my mistakes."

Severus let out a short laugh. Given how prim her voice had sounded, she couldn't blame him.

"No, you're right," he said. "I don't believe that's what transpired. If we were together, I doubt it was a mistake."

Chapter End Notes

I cannot take any credit for the Animagus idea; it was all Babsmd. I hadn’t even considered that theory when I added Lois and Boudica to the story. I just like cats. ;) A couple of Severus and Hermione’s other theories have also been popular with readers. Namely, time travel and mutually agreed upon Obliviation.
Hermione swirled honey into her porridge and sprinkled it with cinnamon. Next to her, Severus was a quarter of the way through his first cup of coffee. A quarter of the way to being able to tolerate socialising. The latest issue of Potions Quarterly was spread out on the table before him. Reading first thing in the morning didn't require an injection of caffeine the way talking did.

Sipping her own coffee, Hermione thought back to the night before. If we were together, I doubt it was a mistake. She shoved aside the possibility of a forgotten romance and focused on what she remembered.

Severus's attraction to her now was beyond obvious, but how long had it been there? Neville wouldn't have mentioned those covert glances unless he'd been certain.

It was difficult to imagine the man who had been her demanding, disapproving teacher actually wanting her. Old insecurities reared their heads and demanded a giant sign with arrows and exclamation marks and a bluntly worded statement of his interest. As if Severus—the real Severus—would ever provide such a thing.

The current Severus would. Probably with innuendo included. The current Severus hugged her and kissed her forehead and took advantage of any opportunity to touch her. The real Severus didn't—unless it had all been erased from her memory.

The daily influx of owls arrived, drowning out conversations with the flapping of their wings. A snobbish eagle owl landed in front of Severus and held out a leg with an ivory coloured envelope. It looked at Hermione as if it would snap off one of her fingers if she dared to get too close. Severus sliced the envelope open with his wand and withdrew a brief letter and an invitation to a New Year's Eve party at Malfoy Manor.

"Good gods." Severus groaned. "It's far too early to be dealing with Lucius. Listen to this. Severus, My wife requests that I encourage you to bring Miss Granger as your guest. I must confess that Draco and I have made another bet. Draco believes Miss Granger will not wish to set foot in the Manor after the unfortunate events of her previous visit. I think anyone who can maintain a friendship with you while living much of the year in the same castle must be more forgiving than that. Don't let me down, Turncoat. Lucius."

Hermione laughed. "I honestly don't know whether I want Lucius or Draco to lose that bet. Are you going to go?"

"I believe so. The guests aren't likely to be people who run in the same circles as the Potters and Weasleys. I should take advantage of the opportunity to speak with that crowd when they will likely be under the influence of alcohol. It may prove illuminating."

"Then I'll go with you. I think I can safely say that Lucius doesn't actually want the likes of me at
his party, so both he and Draco will lose, in a way."

Severus folded the letter slowly before tucking it back into the envelope with the invitation. "Very well, but you will be careful."

"Of course I will. I'm always careful."

Severus didn't need to roll his eyes. The way he drawled, "Indeed," got the message across for him.

After they'd finished their breakfasts and Potions journals, they left the Great Hall together. On their way to the staff room, they strolled past Teddy. His hair was still mousy brown. Unsurprising, considering what had happened and how much of his first year was going to be spent in detention. Hermione wanted to hug him until his hair went turquoise again. She'd done as much when he'd given her a tear-soaked apology in the Hospital Wing. As there were other students in the corridor, she settled for a reassuring smile and wished him a good morning.

Severus looked back and forth between Hermione and Teddy, a frown fixed onto his mouth. With a sigh reminiscent of Ron facing down a pile of homework, he held the issue of Potions Quarterly out to Teddy.

"Be prepared to discuss the article on newfound uses for Wiggentree bark by the time I see you at the Burrow," Severus said. "I'm sure you've heard of my skills as a Legilimens. If I catch you even contemplating brewing anything unsupervised—"

"You won't, sir," Teddy said, a cautious grin breaking out on his face as he accepted the journal. "Thank you!"

Hermione squeezed Severus's hand as Teddy made the smart choice and retreated. Before she could annoy Severus by calling any more attention to what he'd done, a thought made her blood run cold. Unsupervised brewing in Myrtle's bathroom. Oh, no. Grabbing Severus's arm, she hauled him around the corner and into an alcove.

"Muffliato," she said.

Severus's eyebrows jumped up. "Granger, what—"

"Polyjuice," she said. "Someone could have used Polyjuice Potion to impersonate me. That would explain why I don't remember being with you. Because it wasn't me."

Hermione's voice trembled on the last word. Imagining someone else using her body to kiss him and touch him made her skin feel too tight and her wand hand itch with uncast hexes. Hell, thinking of someone kissing him at all had that effect. For his part, Severus looked completely impassive.

"I did consider the possibility that someone used Polyjuice to get close to one of us," he said. "But I didn't… Hmm. If it was an impostor, they were very thorough. They even smelled like you."

"They did?"

"Like your bath products, yes. The citrus ones."

"Oh. I didn't start using those till well after your memory loss."

"I remember. The old bottles fell over and attacked me every time I attempted to shower at the start of the summer." Rubbing his jaw, he glared down at the floor. "Surely I would have said
something between sleeping with you and losing my memories. I know I saw you just before the potions accident. Perhaps I went in for a kiss, got rejected, realised how I'd been fooled, and Obliviated that from your memory."

"That… I could actually believe you doing that, except for one thing. Unless it happened when I was still in a relationship, you wouldn't have been rejected."

Severus's pale skin flushed pink, making him look as young as his memory in spite of the threads of silver in his hair. His smile was nothing more than a barely there upward curve of his lips, but it reached all the way to his eyes.

"We should head to the staff meeting," Hermione said. "We'll be late."

"Yes. We can't have that."

Someone—perhaps in tribute to Althea—had tacked a bunch of mistletoe up in one corner of the staff room. Severus gave it a wide berth as they entered. He dodged various colleagues to take his customary seat.

It was a shame no one had thought to place a bowl full of Althea's punch in the staff room as well. The pink, subtly floral drink had been one of the highlights of every holiday season that Hermione had spent at Hogwarts as a professor. Hardly a day in December had passed when she hadn't been found with a glass of the stuff. She would have to owl Althea for the recipe.

Hermione settled into the chair between Severus and Neville as Minerva called the meeting to order. Rupert Smith seemed unable to sit still, constantly scratching at his collar. Luna would undoubtedly diagnose him with some sort of infestation of fictitious insects. Like always, Hermione took notes as Minerva went on about patrol schedules and who would be staying at the castle over the holidays. During her time in Binns's classes, Hermione had mastered the art of transcribing a lecture while mostly thinking about something else.

That something else, in this case, was Severus's hand. Beneath the table, he skimmed his knuckles over hers. The scratch of Hermione's quill jerked, halted, restarted. Severus kept up that barely-there stroking for several stretched-out minutes before sliding his hand around so their palms touched. She was the one who interlaced their fingers. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a slight quirk of his mouth. He rubbed gentle circles on her thumb with his.

Hermione swallowed a sigh. She really had been lying to herself for years. This was more than a crush. Maybe it always had been. It was deep in her bones—lasting and true. For all that she joked about Severus giving her Patronus-worthy memories, the moment she'd discovered her library had been what had powered her otter for the past decade. Even during her long relationship with Terry. If she had been Obliviated, had she acknowledged her own feelings in those lost memories? Had it been a gasp, a sudden inner exclamation of I love him, or had it been like this: a slow-dawning glow that grew brighter and brighter until it could no longer be denied?

By unspoken agreement, both Hermione and Severus lingered as the meeting drew to a close and everyone else filed out of the room. With a wave of his wand, he shut the door once they were alone.

"I believe it's become something of a tradition for the two of us to find ourselves here," he said, positioning her beneath the mistletoe. "Thankfully, this plant-life is stationary instead of being piloted by someone who thinks everything in life can be improved with glitter."
Hermione trapped her lower lip between her teeth. "Are you responsible for the mistletoe, then?"

"Of course not. Sybill is. Something about it promoting positive energy in the lead up to the solstice or some such nonsense. I stopped listening very quickly. I am merely taking advantage of its presence. It might spark the spontaneous recovery of a memory. Being in familiar situations often does, recently."

He was so close. Heat from his body warmed the length of her. Hermione wanted him closer.

Severus's gaze darted back and forth between her eyes as if fighting the urge to read her mind. He looked up at the mistletoe, then back at her.

"Do you want me to cast Reducto?" he asked.

"No," she whispered. "I didn't want you to cast it the first time we got caught beneath the mistletoe, if I'm honest."

Severus's expression revealed nothing. It was like looking at the Professor from her school days. "Oh?" he said.

Hermione couldn't keep it in any longer. "I've been half in love with you since I was nineteen years old." With a self-deprecating laugh, she added, "More than half. I—"

He kissed her.

It was nothing like that chaste, experimental peck from months before. Cradling her face between his hands, he swooped down and slanted his mouth over hers. A gasp parted Hermione's lips, inviting him in. When their tongues brushed together, she grabbed onto his shoulders. His arms moved down to wrap tight around her waist, pressing her against the wall—pressing himself against her. Everything narrowed to the surprising softness of his lips, the taste of black coffee, the new-school-year scent that he always carried around with him.

"Granger," Severus said as he pulled back slightly, "I've collected enough memories of you to know that I… wanted you long before I ended up in my current condition. Apart from what you cannot recall, I've seen the way I flirted with you in your own memories." One side of his mouth hitched up. "Not anywhere near as blatantly as I have recently, mind, but I gave you a cat on Valentine's Day, for Circe's sake. Nothing I did for you was because of the Life Debt. Obviously."

"Are you sure? I don't want to take advantage—"

"I wish you would."

"Severus! I'm serious."

"So am I. I would not have kissed you unless I was certain it was what I wanted. I know it's right, Granger." Pausing, he tilted his forehead against hers. "Unless you do not want this?"

Hermione gave a smiling shake of her head. "Did you miss the part where I told you I've been more than half in love with you for a decade?"

"I might have." With another kiss, quick and so gentle, he held her tighter. "Tell me again."

Severus strolled through a silver-framed dream of a museum. Displays of Gobstones made from precious gems and metals glittered in the late summer sunlight. Not another living soul was to be
seen. He came to a stop in front of the portrait of the stooped, teenage version of Eileen.

"Muffliato," he said. After casting a series of wards that would alert him to the approach of another person, he addressed the portrait. "Hello, Mum."

"Severus? My goodness. You're old!"

His lips twitched as if he was almost tempted to smile. He didn't.

"I am considerably older than the last time you saw me, yes," he said. "Are you aware of the events unfolding in the world at the moment?"

"A bit." Eileen took out one of her Muggle cigarettes and lit it with a snap of her fingers. "How is my subject these days?"

"She died. Quite some time ago."

"A war casualty?"

"No. A domestic one."

Eileen's sigh came out as a plume of smoke. "Well, that's disappointing. And what of the husband? Tobias, was it? Is he in prison?"

"Rotting in hell, if such a place exists."

"One can only hope. Was there something you needed, darling, or are you just here to chat?"

It made something both resentful and mournful resonate through Severus to think of this eager, smiling girl turning into his cowering, silent mother. This portrait was her personality at its most basic, its most essential. Bit by bit, Tobias had dismantled everything that had made her Eileen. Only her dogged loyalty had remained, for all the good it had done her.

"The former," he said. "What I am about to ask of you must remain a secret unless the Dark Lord is defeated. If I should die—"

"Die? Severus, what have you got yourself into?"

"A war, Mother. If I should die, a young woman named Hermione Granger will likely visit this museum. I've arranged for certain clues to reach her in the event of my death. She is seventeen years old, but she will likely be older by that point. She has brown eyes, astonishingly unkempt brown hair, and she may well have a ginger idiot in tow. I apologise in advance for subjecting you to their company. I've had the misfortune of being her teacher for six years. Miss Granger's talent for asking questions and regurgitating information from textbooks is endless. I can't imagine she'll spare you simply because you are incapable of running away."

Eileen chuckled, the sound high and girlish, not roughened by years of smoking. "She sounds like fun."

"That is not the adjective I would use. You can verify Miss Granger's identity by asking her what she did to lose House Points when I called her extraordinarily brave. The correct answer is she shushed me. When she comes to you, tell her the password to gain access to Classroom 2B at Hogwarts is Thaddeus Thackeray. I'm sorry for using you as a glorified owl. If I could safely contact her directly, I would do so."
A cloud passed over the sun, casting long shadows across the portrait. Eileen took a few drags of her cigarette.

"What is this girl to you?" she asked.

"An unimaginably irritating student," Severus said tightly. It tasted like a lie. "As of last week, she's the only person remaining on the side of the Light who is at all likely to believe a word I—"

A crash made the dream crumble away. Severus opened his eyes to find himself in his quarters. Wiping a hand over his face, he hauled himself off of the sofa. When had he dozed off? Lois sat next to the book she'd knocked off of a side table, licking herself as if the disturbance had nothing to do with her.

A cauldron full of brown potion waited beneath a Lois-proof bubble, ready to test memories. The dream of Charity in that otherworldly version of the staff room had been verified before his impromptu nap. The wisp of memory had turned green when he'd added three drops of the potion.

It's exactly who you think it is.

The dream of his mother's portrait suggested that Granger had been important to Severus before they'd been friends. Contrary to his claims that she'd been nothing more than an inquisitive thorn in his side, the feeling that she'd mattered to him in some small way still worked its way under his skin.

Severus checked the clock that had betrayed him to George. Granger would still be patrolling. He had time.

"Mum," he said to Eileen's portrait as he strode into the hall. "Did I visit you during the war and speak to you about Granger?"

"You did! Oh, it was such fun, darling. I felt just like a spy. I kept the secret all this time. Well, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"I did tell Hermione that she was prettier than you'd described, but that hardly matters, does it?"

"Mum."

"What? The war is over. Tom is dead. Did you know my subject went to school with him? Minerva told me. Anyway, Hermione was supposed to be in on the secret. I thought it would be OK."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose and ignored Bert's smothered chuckles. "It's fine, Mother."

If Bert had fallen asleep on the job, it would have been ideal, but Severus wasn't that lucky. He considered waiting for Granger and asking her to check the classroom, but he wanted to search it for himself. It took only a few minutes to reach Classroom 2B with Lois and Bert tagging along. Severus tried the doorknob. It opened without the need for a password. The room was empty of everything but dust, cobwebs, and spare desks.

"What are we doing here?" Bert asked.

"Recovered memory from the war. I haven't the slightest…"

Severus trailed off as a quicksilver memory flooded his vision. A weary, rail-thin Severus stood in
the same spot in the darkened classroom. This Vision Severus placed a thick, leather-bound notebook and a vial of a glittering white substance on a desk.

"What the fuck am I doing?" Vision Severus muttered.

Reality shimmered back into view. Rubbing his eyes, Severus focused on the now-empty desk.

What, indeed?

A muffled conversation drifted in from the corridor. As always, Eileen's portrait saw no need to be prompt about admitting an expected guest.

Granger leaned against the wall of Severus's sitting room when the portrait finally clicked shut behind her. She managed to look simultaneously shy and bold as she stood on tiptoe to greet him with a light kiss on the lips.

"Hello," he said. "Does the name Thaddeus Thackeray mean anything to you?"

"Thackeray's collection of essays was one of the books you assigned during my Occlumency lessons. Did you have another recovered memory?"

"I did, but not one that took place during your lessons."

Severus recounted the events of his dream (omitting his mention of her messy hair, thank you very much, Mum) and the memory flash that had come over him in Classroom 2B.

"Unless I'm mistaken, the powder was the substance I described to Lovegood," he said. "I suspect it's what caused my potions accident. I experienced a recovered memory of adding it to a silver potion, then feeling surprise as the potion bubbled over. It may have been swapped for a different ingredient."

Granger scratched her forehead. "Thanks to Rita Skeeter, a lot of people would probably think disguising themselves as me would be a good way to get close to you."

"In fairness, it would be, provided they did not attempt a conversation of any real depth."

"Yeah." She huffed. "Anyway, someone could have used Polyjuice, seduced you in order to gain access to your private stores, and switched the powder with something else then. If that's the case, I will squash that insect and whomever used my face to kiss you before I did."

An almost unbearable swell of fondness brought a smile to Severus's face as Granger bristled with indignation.

"What could you have been leaving me during the war?" Granger asked. "Hmm. Dumbledore's portrait might know. Let me see the memory in the classroom. You never know; I might recognise something."

Severus swished it into the Pensieve. A few moments later, Granger emerged with the same expression of intense concentration she usually wore when reading something to do with complex Arithmancy.

"It looked sort of familiar," she said, "but I can't think where I might have seen it. Maybe in one of those issues of Potions Quarterly that you gave to Teddy."

"There is nothing like it in my stores," Severus said. "I've spent hours searching my own books and
several in the Restricted Section, to no avail. I must have kept notes about the potion I was brewing, but if they exist, I can't find them."

"We could ask someone," she said with a distracted hum. "A Potions Master with a memory longer than twenty years, who is also up to date on the latest research. Slughorn, maybe."

"I wouldn't trust Slughorn as far as Potter's youngest could throw him. Unless he's undergone a personality transplant since I knew him as a student, he's a greedy, fame-obsessed leech. I will, however, ask Lupin for those back issues of Potions Quarterly. Now, would you rather see my other memory dreams?"

"Potion first, please."

One by one, he showed her how the potion reacted with true memories, with false ones, with true dreams, and with false dreams. Tugging the mistletoe dream from his temple made him smirk at how they had practically recreated it in the staff room.

Once the demonstration was complete, Granger wiped her hands on her robes and released a shaky exhale. "After thinking it over, I'm not sure I want to see the memory dreams after all."

"No?"

"Just in case it was someone using Polyjuice. Would you want to watch me with someone else disguised as you?"

Severus took a moment to consider this. Pain jolted through his jaw when he clenched his teeth. "Only if their true identity was revealed in the process. It would be useful to know where to aim the Cruciaturs Curse."

"Well, there you go, then." Shifting close enough to surround him with the scent of citrus, she slid a hand down the length of his arm to link their hands together. "I really, really hope there's some other explanation."

"I suspect there is. None of my emotions in recent memories of you are at all distressed, and as I said earlier, I very much doubt I would have said nothing to you about it after we were... together. Until we discover what that alternative explanation might be, I shall have to create some new memories that definitely feature you."

The disparity between her level of experience and his chose that moment to blare through Severus's mind. All he'd managed to get up to by the time he'd turned twenty had been a fair amount of snogging with a Muggle girl who couldn't find anything better to do in Cokeworth and one awkward, fumbling night with Thora Monkstanley.

Granger, on the other hand, was experienced. She'd had multiple lovers. As had the nearly fifty-year-old Severus, however temporarily. The difference between them was she could remember most—if not all—of hers. Severus merely had a tidy bundle of theoretical knowledge; the largely unsatisfying encounter with Thora; and a few love-bright, seconds-long scenes that may or may not have featured Granger. And he had spent months—months!—firing innuendo at her that suggested otherwise. His memory still had so many holes.

When had his quarters become so stiflingly hot? Staring down at where his hand was joined with hers, Severus remembered with a start that his emotions belonged to the forty-nine-year old version of him. The simmering desire and love made perfect sense, but why the devil was his older
self feeling this rising wave of nerves? Gods, he hoped things had got better after Thora.

"Severus?" Granger said with a tender smile. "Come here."

And then his arms were suddenly full of her, all alluring softness and a different sort of warmth. Granger caught his lips with hers. She kept her kisses slow and drugging, like she could spend hours or even days studying how their mouths moved together.

"I would have remembered this," she whispered.

Something in the surety of her tone made Severus feel taller and a little lighter, like her voice had the power to lift him up even when he didn't believe the words. She couldn't have shielded herself from Obliviation through sheer force of will.

"I'm tempted to Obliviate the past thirty seconds from your mind, just to prove a point," Severus said.

Granger chuckled. "Don't you dare."
Jogging needed to be reclassified as the fourth Unforgivable. Severus didn't care that it wasn't technically magic. It was evil, and he wouldn't hear a word to the contrary. Muggles needed to be saved from it as well.

Casting a longing look at the iced-over lake, he plodded along next to Hermione. He should have known he loved her when she'd revealed that he jogged with her when it was too cold to swim. What else but love would possess him to do such a thing?

Severus was experimenting with calling her Hermione instead of Granger. Just in the privacy of his mind, to start—rolling it around and seeing how it felt. The intimacy of it was appealing.

"None of my friends were particularly surprised," Hermione said, interrupting his musings. "Neville said it was about bloody time. Luna didn't mention any mythical beasts, shockingly. She just told me she thought we would be very happy. Ginny said I had to promise to tell her if you had some sort of pleasure dungeon. Harry and Ron looked a bit queasy, but that was likely Ginny's fault."

Severus snorted. Against his advice, Hermione had told her closest friends of their developing romance. Everyone else was being kept in the dark for the time being. Severus needed to get the two of them some Foe-Glasses.

"Anyway," Hermione said, "back to potential culprits. Do you really suspect Raffaella?"

Severus's lungs burned with every frigid breath. "Somewhat. Neither Potter nor I have been able to find anything that incriminates her, but she and I parted less amicably than I originally thought. I viewed the memory of our breakup yesterday afternoon. It was... You were mentioned."

Hermione nearly stumbled. "I was?"

"She made some offhand comment about thinking you should help tame your hair. I told her—not quite firmly—that there was nothing wrong with your hair as it was. It turned into a big row in which she claimed I wanted a different curly-haired former student of mine. She accused me of being with her only because she was closer to my own age and unencumbered by fame and ties to Potter."

"Was she right?"

"I haven't a clue. Quite possibly." Dodging an icy puddle, he shrugged one shoulder. "When we met in Diagon Alley this past summer, Raffaella mentioned that we'd both wanted other people during our time together. Given that she provided me with a few memories that pointed quite obviously towards the identity of the person I wanted, I suspect the truth is that time has healed whatever wounded pride was there. She appears happy with her new husband. Not that either of
those facts are enough to strike her from the list."

"You didn't… That long ago? Really? You felt something for me back then?"

"So it would seem."

How did she have any Occlumency shields at all? Severus swore he could feel her emotions. They shone from her in the way she placed a hand over her heart and gave him a look of surprised joy tinged with regret that made his own heart give a little fluttering leap.

In the distance, the Whomping Willow shook off the frost that had blanketed its branches during the night. Hermione took a deep breath in, smiling on the exhale as if it was a beautiful morning and not fucking freezing. The vivid pink and orange sunrise would have been pleasant to watch from inside, next to a fire, Severus had to admit. Even more so if it had been a sunset.

Severus glanced at Hermione instead of the painted sky, feeling a bit less frozen as his thoughts drifted to the kisses they'd shared.

"What about other former partners?" Hermione asked, dragging him back to the present.

Severus huffed out a laugh. "Apart from a Muggle girl in Cokeworth who taught me how to kiss —"

"Ooh, I should send her a thank you letter."

He did not grin. Not even slightly. "Yes, well, apart from her, the only one I can remember is Thora Monkstanley. I cared for her not at all, and I'm certain the feeling was mutual. Even so, I will look into what became of her. I should have done so before now."

"There's also your would-be fiancee," Hermione said. "She should probably be on the list, even if we don't know who she was."

"I suppose. Oh, a woman sent me a memory of herself molesting a Severus Snape doll months ago. She should absolutely be on the list."

"Seriously?" Hermione shuddered. "I once got an anonymous love letter that used Mudblood as a term of endearment."

"I am capable of casting all three Unforgivable Curses, you'll recall. You need only point me in the right direction."

She laughed. "It was anonymous. And not worth risking Azkaban."

They ran without speaking for a few minutes, only the rhythmic thumping of their feet and their rapid breaths breaking up the silence.

"No one who was once involved with me is still carrying a torch," Hermione said eventually. "Though I don't suppose that will stop you adding them to your list."

"Of course not."

"Hmm. Viktor is married to a lovely witch named Teodora, and what little there was between us happened when we were just kids. In addition to having Neville now, Ron claims to not even remember what I look like naked."

Severus did not glower at this statement. He kept his face perfectly impassive. Inside the privacy of
his mind, he began creating new hexes for certain redhead dunderheads.

Hermione cast Severus a sidelong, smiling glance, as if she'd read his thoughts. "And Terry…"

As her voice trailed off, she skidded to a stop. Her hands went to her hips. Oh, hell. If Severus had to guess, he'd say she'd just flashed back to his impromptu trip to Egypt and coupled it with his admission that he'd used Veritaserum on one other person aside from George. At least he'd already destroyed the copy he'd made of her journal.

"Severus Snape! You did not smuggle Veritaserum into another country. Do you know what could have happened if you'd been caught? If you're so determined to land in Azkaban, let's go to the Apparition Point right now; I'll take you there myself. I could have told you it wasn't Terry if you had bloody asked me."

They were not going to quarrel about Boot. Severus refused to allow it.

"I have no plans to smuggle controlled substances abroad in the future," he said. "You know how to perform Legilimency, correct?"

"What? Yes, but what does that—"

"Do it now. I'll show you the entire interrogation."

Hermione spluttered a bit before saying, "Yeah, because it's not like you're the greatest living Occlumens or anything."

"I will show you only the truth." Placing a hooked finger beneath her chin, he tilted her face up until his gaze locked with hers. "I swear it."

"Fine." With a flick of her wrist, her wand slipped out of her sleeve and into her palm.
"Leglimens."

Her invasion was too gentle to be called an invasion—more like being tucked beneath a puffy quilt and kissed on the forehead. It was adorable.

Severus replayed his questioning of Boot word for word. As it came to a close and she started to withdraw, he flashed up an image of himself sitting by her side in the Hospital Wing, trying to cast the Patronus Charm. He let her see the old memory of an unexpected hug from Lily failing to produce the necessary happiness. The brown eyes that held his widened at the slide-show of Hermione that he'd used to conjure the doe.

She remained there in his mind for a few moments after the visions faded, like a lingering embrace. Her presence retreated as softly as it had arrived. He hadn't said the words, the way she had, but showing her that display was as good as shouting them.

"That was… very sweet, actually, but don't think you can manipulate me into not being annoyed with you," she said, shuffling her feet as if she didn't know whether she wanted to move closer to kiss him or storm away in a fit of Gryffindor self-righteousness or both.

"I shan't be adding this to my list of Patronus-worthy memories, then," he said. "Shame."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Come on. Let's do another lap."

Mrs Potter should have asked to hear about Hermione's pleasure dungeon, not Severus's. Between the two of them, Hermione was the clear sadist.
Christmas Day started in his shower. Unlike every other morning shower Severus could remember, this one was not taken alone. It also took place within a double silver frame. Just a dream.

The shower was the one that sat tucked into the corner next to the giant bathtub in his quarters. Pale rose-veined marble tiles lined the walls, cold and slick. Severus hoisted Hermione against those tiles and hitched her legs around his hips. Her hair draped over his shoulder in long, wet ropes. Rumbling out a groan at the sharp pleasure of her teeth dragging over his neck, he held her tighter. Steam created billowing clouds around them as hot water pounded against Severus's back.

His hips surged forward, blurring everything into bliss. He woke with her moan still echoing in his ears.

As he attempted to catch his breath, Severus pinched his eyes shut and willed sleep—and the dream—to return. No such Christmas miracle was in the offing. Dragging himself out of bed, he ignored his modest pile of gifts in favour of going for an unfortunately solitary, longer than ordinary shower.

These dreams were bloody inconsiderate, ending when they did. He was still grumbling by the time he nudged Lois away from his wrapped gifts and settled down to open them.

Most of the gifts were generic: gloves, Firewhisky, a tin of shortbread. The sort of thing one gave an acquaintance whose preferences were a mystery. Lovegood had sent him some mysterious brown sludge in a jar that showed promise, according to her accompanying card. It wobbled into a rainbow when prodded with his wand. Intriguing. Molly had knitted him a green jumper with a silver S on the front. It was hideous and lumpy, but for some unfathomable reason the gesture made him smile. Lois went into fits of rapture as she rolled around in the pile of discarded wrapping paper, alternately attacking it and rubbing her face all over it.

From Hermione, he'd received a book that filled him with an urge to dive immediately into its words. *Brewing by the Light of the Moon: the Journals of Hesper Starkey.* Severus hadn't known Starkey's journals had been published. She was the Potioneer responsible for much of what was known about how the phases of the moon affected various potions. Tucked inside the cover, he found a sheet of parchment covered with Hermione's distinctive, rounded scrawl.

Severus,

You read this book last spring. Funnily enough, once you reached the final page, you told me you were tempted to Obliviate yourself so you could have a chance to read it again for the first time. It was that good.

Your original copy got ruined by Lois. She peed on it. It may be wise to keep this one away from her. She is prone to fits of jealousy.

I hope you enjoy the book as much the second time around. Happy Christmas.

Love,

Hermione

She signed nearly all of her correspondence with her love. Severus had seen her do so plenty of times. He placed the note safely between the pages of the book. Casting a ward on the book to protect it from certain familiars and their bladders, he set off for Hermione's quarters.

He expected to find her dressed and ready to face the day. Instead, the woman who greeted him
was still in her pyjamas, all sleep-rumpled and warm from hours spent cocooned in a duvet.

"Christmas Day is the one time of year I attempt to have a lie-in," Hermione said, looking oddly proud of herself. "I actually managed it this time." The way she tugged him down to her level for a kiss hello was still new and exhilarating. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas. Thank you for my book." As Hermione began pottering around, filling Boudica's personalised dishes with food and water, Severus followed her. "Speaking of memories, I had a memory dream last night. All of my memory dreams have a sort of silver frame around the edges of the scene, but some have a double silver frame. None of the books on memory loss that I've found have mentioned anything similar. Any theories?"

"Hmm. Implanted memories, maybe? From someone who knew of your potion and knew how to fool it. You should ask Poppy. Or maybe Draco Malfoy. He's a Healer now, right? He probably knows more about mind magic than Poppy does, to be honest." A devilish grin brightened her face. "You could always go to that Healer you saw at St Mungo's. I know how much you liked her."

Before Severus could so much as laugh derisively or wonder aloud whether that Healer had managed to excavate the greenery from between her teeth, a still Muggle photograph propped up next to a Christmas card grabbed his attention and catapulted him into another flash of memory. Hermione's sitting room once again dissolved—this time into a cosy Muggle home decorated in rich earth tones. The curly haired woman and tall, balding man from the photograph sat across from Vision Severus on a sofa, nursing cups of tea.

"How is she?" the woman asked. Her voice was a higher pitched version of Hermione's familiar alto, strung tight with the same tension that held the woman's jaw clenched.

"She's well," Vision Severus said. "She has started writing a book about the wars."

The man flashed him a sad version of Hermione's smile. "You still haven't told her about this, I take it?"

"I wish to avoid any unrealistic expectations," Vision Severus said.

The memory vanished, popping like a soap bubble. Back in the present, Hermione looked up at him with another concerned expression.

"Your parents?" he asked, gesturing at the picture. "I think I might have visited them after you started writing your book."

"Really? I don't know why you would have. I'll write to them and ask."

Christmas card terms. She'd said that was the extent of her relationship with her parents. Severus could think of only one reason he would have gone to her parents, but like his past self, he did not want to raise unrealistic hopes.

Hermione settled down next to the fire to open her gifts. Most people had given her books or book vouchers. From Longbottom and Ronald, she received a mistletoe charm for her bracelet. She saved Severus's gift for last.

"It's a Foe-Glass," he said as she popped open the shell-shaped compact mirror. "I purchased one for myself as well. It seemed prudent."

Leaning over, Severus peered at the surface of the glass. Like his own, it displayed only the vaguest of shadowy shapes, though hers contained far fewer.
"Ooh, I haven't seen one of these in years. Where did you…" Her words faded into a murmur as she unearthed the other item in the box. The blue goldstone charm shimmered under her touch, its wards reacting to her magic.

"It has a few protective spells embedded in the stone," Severus said, his cheeks burning with a blush he refused to allow. He'd been too practical; his gifts were the equivalent of a Muggle buying his partner a new home alarm system for Christmas. Gryffindor that she was, she would interpret the gesture as an implication that she was less capable than him. "It will shield against mild hexes. If you should sustain any serious injuries, my own stone will alert me." He hitched up his left sleeve so she could see the strip of leather that bound a similar charm to his wrist. "Barring any Anti-Apparition wards, I should be able to use it to Apparate to your location."

It had been his dormant Dark Mark that had given him the idea for guided Apparition, though he would not reveal that fact to her.

"Do they work both ways?" Hermione asked. "Will I be able to play the hero and rush in to rescue you if necessary?"

"They can be modified to do so, if you like."

"It's only fair. I want to protect you as much as you want to protect me."

Her easy, matter-of-fact delivery of that statement made something tighten in Severus's throat. For a moment, he understood her claim that she would remember kissing him in spite of any Memory Charms. The experience of hearing words like that from someone was so foreign, he half-believed he would have been able to cling to the memory through any amount of Ashwinder egg induced amnesia, illogical as the notion was.

Shifting over until she almost perched on his lap, Hermione draped her arms around his neck and touched her lips to his. "Thank you for my gifts," she said. "You know, between this and those memories you let me see, I'm starting to suspect you have a secret soft side buried underneath all that sarcasm."

Severus grabbed the knitted hat Mrs Weasley had given her and tugged it down over Hermione's eyes. "Fuck off, Granger."

She laughed.

The Burrow smelled of mince pies, roasting turkey, melting beeswax candles, and fresh evergreen branches. Mrs Potter greeted Severus and Hermione at the door, her middle child waving shyly at them from her arms.

"Happy Christmas!" Mrs Potter chirped. After kissing Hermione's cheek with an exaggerated mwah noise and letting Albus do the same, she aimed a speculative look at Severus.

"Don't even think about it," Severus said, "or you'll not hear a word about that pleasure dungeon that interests you so."

This only seemed to encourage her. Cackling, Mrs Potter gave him the same treatment she'd given Hermione. Severus couldn't very well hex her while she was holding a child, so he tolerated it. She would have to set the boy down at some point.

The Burrow's sitting room was a quiet oasis in a house teeming with Weasleys. Mostly quiet. Potter lay sprawled on the sofa, his daughter asleep on his chest and quiet snores periodically whistling
from his nose. Everyone had agreed to let him rest; he was exhausted from pursuing a werewolf who had recently attacked several people. Things had changed for werewolves since the war; the Ministry had a programme in place to provide Wolfsbane at free or reduced cost. As far as Severus was concerned, anyone who didn't take Wolfsbane when it was provided deserved far worse than being pursued by Potter.

At the sight of Potter, Severus withdrew his own Foe-Glass. Instead of a compact mirror, it was disguised as a pocket watch. The same blurry figures as the last time he'd looked at it drifted around on the glass. He glanced pointedly back and forth between Potter and the image on the false watch.

"Hmm," he said. "It must be faulty. I'm standing in the same room as Potter, and it hasn't changed."

Hermione swatted his chest. "You know very well why it hasn't. I'm going to go say hello to Molly and Arthur."

Severus opted to lurk in the sitting room. His relative solitude did not last long.

"Wotcher, Professor," Teddy Lupin said, approaching with a teetering stack of back issues of Potions Quarterly in his skinny arms. Something about the words made the briefest memory of a grinning, pink-haired witch stumble across Severus's vision. He'd seen her in more than a few donated wartime memories, that Auror who had evidently taken one too many Stunners to the head and chose to marry Remus Lupin. "I brought all of them, like you asked."

"Mister Lupin," Severus said with a curt nod as Lupin dropped his burden on the coffee table with a thunk that made Potter mutter in his sleep. "Do you recall whether a glittering white powder appeared in any of these issues?"

The boy chewed on his thumbnail. "No, but I'll help you look."

"If you must."

They sat side by side in mismatched armchairs, leafing through articles with such small print that Severus wondered if he needed glasses.

"Sir?" Lupin said after a few blessedly silent minutes. "Are you still angry with me?"

"What do you think?"

"Probably. I am really, really, really, really sorry."

"Noted."

Lupin sighed. "Are you going to be mad at me forever?"

"Certainly not. I won't live forever. And stop biting your nails. It's a dangerous habit to have if you wish to be any sort of Potioneer."

Yanking his hand away from his mouth, Lupin instead toyed with a lock of his dark green hair. "Can I give you memories to help you get better? I don't remember reading about any sparkly powder in Potions Quarterly, but I did see something sort of like that in your lab."

Severus's heart leapt up into his throat. "When?"

"Around last Christmas. The Weasleys and Harry and everyone were visiting Charlie, so my gran
asked you to watch me for a bit, 'cause she said she was desperate. You were brewing. When we get back to school, can you teach me how to give you the memory?"

"No, he can't," Potter said. Had Severus not been so distracted, he would have noticed the shift in Potter's breathing that indicated he was awake. "That spell is way too advanced for you. You'll put your eye out."

"Someone more experienced can perform the spell for you," Severus said over Lupin's responding whine. "Legilimency is also an option, but not one either of us would find pleasant."

"Legilimency is not an option," Potter said, shifting Lily around to cradle her in one arm as he sat up. "I'm not subjecting him to that. Come here, Teddy. Focus really, really hard on the memory. I'll get it out for you."

Severus's private lab at Hogwarts was more cluttered in Lupin's memory than in the present day. Not messy, by any stretch of the imagination, but there was more stuff. A few white mice snuffled through the wood chips that lined their cage. One table was dedicated to holding a mountain of books and scrolls of parchment that were filled to the margins with Severus's handwriting. Lupin hadn't paid close enough attention to them for Severus to be able to make out any of the titles on the worn spines.

Next to a golden cauldron full of a simmering silver potion, a familiar leather bound notebook was open to a list of ingredients. The notebook he had left for Hermione in Classroom 2B during the war. Lupin craned his neck to see the contents, and Severus found he could make out part of the list.

2 Ashwinder eggs, frozen

Root of one dandelion (gone to seed), minced

3 strands Thesstral hair (mane), offered willingly

10 sage leaves, powdered

5 Jobberknoll feathers

There was far more—it was a monstrously complex potion—but Lupin only managed read the first five lines before Memory Severus slammed the notebook shut.

"Sit on your hands," Memory Severus said.

"Why?" Lupin asked as he obeyed.

"So you are unable to touch anything."

"Oh. OK." The boy swung his scrawny legs so his heels knocked against the rungs of his chair. "What are you making?"

Severus gave the potion three anti-clockwise stirs. "Something I have been attempting to perfect for nearly a decade."

"Wow. Do all potions take so long when you're making it up yourself?"

"No. This one is particularly complicated. And before you ask, its purpose is none of your business."
Reaching across the table, Memory Severus plucked up a vial of a glittering white substance. It looked more like sand than powder when he weighed a pinch of it and sprinkled it over the surface of the potion. Lupin couldn't see over the rim of the cauldron, but from what Severus could tell, the potion emitted a gentle glow instead of bubbling over as it had in his recovered memory.

"What is that stuff?" Lupin asked, nodding at the vial.

"Also none of your business. Do not so much as breathe on it."

"Ooh, is it dangerous?"

"It can be, but I am more concerned with the expense and the rarity. It's worth more than I could get for your organs on the black market, and I could not easily replace it even if I was able to raise the funds."

Lupin giggled. The stern look Memory Severus shot him from beneath lowered black brows held none of its usual weight. Hiding under the resentment at the intrusion and the knee-jerk refusal to acknowledge any positive traits in Remus Lupin's son, there was the faintest trace of something Severus hadn't yet acknowledged. Something that had been present in every interaction he'd had with Lupin prior to Hermione's accident. It felt disconcertingly as if he liked the child. More than that, he was proud of Lupin's intellectual curiosity and his drive to do well in Potions.

Life was bloody bizarre at times.

Crossing to the mice's cage, Memory Severus grabbed one of the wriggly creatures and brought it back to the cauldron. Lupin made a murmur of protest as Memory Severus dipped a tiny pipette into the potion and brought it to the mouse's mouth.

"It's not going to hurt her, is it?" Lupin asked.

"No, but you would do well to become less squeamish if you want to advance beyond basic potions. Brewing is a subtle art, but preparing the ingredients can be gruesome. Now, shall I proceed, or are you volunteering to take her place as test subject?"

"Err, no. Go ahead."

The mouse drank down three drops of the potion and cleaned the remnants off of its whiskers. Upon being placed back in its cage, it shook its head a few times, looking dazed, before curling up in a corner and going to sleep. All of its compatriots had the same reaction.

Lupin stared at the huddle of snoozing mice for a beat. "Is that it?"

"For now." Memory Severus decanted the remainder of the potion into four vials. "I should find out whether this version worked in a few hours. After that comes the tiresome part of waiting and checking for side effects. If all goes well, I can finally move on to testing on half-Kneazles."

"Like Crookshanks?"

"Yes, but not so old as him. Half-Kneazles have minds that are a better match for ours, but mice are a good starting point to work out some of the kinks."

Breaking the sitting-on-the-hands rule, Lupin gnawed on one of his hangnails. "Sir? Can I have the mice when you don't need them anymore?"

Memory Severus pursed his lips. "We shall see. Now, did you read that article I sent you?"
Hermione brought her face close to the large glass cage that held Teddy's—formerly Severus's—mice. Mostly, the creatures inspected the humans who peered in at them, but a few repeatedly pressed a lever in the corner. At each swipe of their tiny paws, the contraption attached to the lever dispensed a food pellet, much to their squeaking delight. Teddy's room smelled like freshly scrubbed pewter cauldrons and the wood chips at the bottom of the mice's cage. If the briny, herbaceous, and metallic scents of various ingredients were added to the mix, it would have an air of Potions lab.

Over the years, Severus had sometimes had a cage full of squirming test subjects in his lab. Sometimes he hadn't. Hermione was ashamed to admit she'd never taken much notice of them. She'd barely realised when the most recent batch had vanished. They had been part of the shifting scenery of his lab, like the ever-changing cuttings were in Neville's greenhouses.

"I didn't know the mice came from you, sir," Harry said. "Andromeda never mentioned it. We had a fight on our hands when it came time for Teddy to go to Hogwarts. He wanted to take them along."

"I could have taken at least one if they'd been rats," Teddy said with a pout. "But Professor Snape said he didn't think rats were good for anything, even experiments."

Harry nodded. "That sounds about right."

Severus's face took on the blank expression that Hermione had come to associate with the arrival of recovered memories. Whatever vision the mice provided, it made him brush his knuckles against hers, the same way he had in the staff room before he'd kissed her beneath the mistletoe. Because Teddy's attention was elsewhere, Hermione took the opportunity to give Severus's hand a quick squeeze. She could have kissed Severus full on the mouth, for all that Teddy noticed. The boy had picked up a crumbling potions text that looked ten times as old as he was and half as heavy.

"Did you teach them the thing with the lever, Teddy?" Harry asked.

"No," Severus said. "I did."

Bringing his hand up to his mouth and then jerking it away as if thinking better of it, Teddy scowled at the book. "Sir?" he said. "Do you reckon the potion you tested on the mice is what you were working on when you lost your memories?"

"What do you think?" Severus asked.

Did Severus realise what a teacher he was where Teddy was concerned? Always answering his questions with questions, gently guiding Teddy towards untangling the solutions for himself.

Hermione was not jealous. Nope. Not at all. Her inner hand-waving eleven-year-old was another story.

"I think it was," Teddy said. "I never looked up the ingredients before, because you said what you were making was none of my business, and I didn't want to make you angry by trying to work it out. Only, you're already angry with me, and I got an idea just now, so I thought I might as well see if I was right. This says Jobberknoll feathers and powdered sage are used in memory potions."
"They are, indeed," Severus said softly.

A memory potion. One he'd apparently been trying to perfect since the end of the war. He'd also experienced a vision of a recent visit with her parents. Hermione's eyes stung.

_Oh_, she loved this man.

"In my recovered memory of your parents, I told them I didn't wish to raise your hopes until I was certain," Severus said to Hermione. "Given my current state, I clearly wasn't certain. Don't get your hopes up, Granger." Without giving her a chance to respond or fly at him and hug the breath out of him, he stooped down so he could look Teddy in the eye. "Mister Lupin, did you tell anyone about anything you saw in my lab that day? The potion? The ingredients?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see anyone else enter my lab?"

"Just Gran, but you'd already put everything back in the store room by that point. Oh, we saw Terry going into Hogwarts on our way out, though."

"As in Hermione's Terry?" Harry asked. At the censorious glares from both Hermione and Severus, he rushed to amend his question. "I mean, as in Terry Boot?"

"Yeah," Teddy said in a light voice, oblivious to the sudden tension in the room. "I told him Hermione was out with Luna and Neville, and he said that was fine; he was there to talk to Professor Snape. Maybe you should ask him if he knows any more than I do."

Severus's dark eyes glittered. "Two hundred points to Hufflepuff for being more useful than the vast majority of adults I've encountered since my accident."

Teddy and Harry's eyebrows winged up in unison. Bouncing on the spot, Teddy pinched his lips together as if fighting to swallow a predictable question about whether this sudden outpouring of generosity meant he was forgiven.

"Severus!" Hermione said, laughing. "That's hardly fair."

"Why not? The boy has provided me with a partial list of ingredients for that potion as well as potentially implicating Boot. And when I have ever awarded House Points in a fair and balanced way?"

Harry chuckled. "He's not wrong."

"Can you even give me points outside of school?" Teddy asked, his hair a hopeful shade of sky blue.

"I cannot. When we both return to Hogwarts, I will make it a more reasonable fifty."

"That's no fun," Harry said. "I wonder if Terry came home for Christmas this year. I'll go visit his parents and find out. I don't want either of you barging in and interrogating anyone, OK? Let me handle it."

"That's no fun," Severus echoed. The corners of his mouth twitched when Teddy giggled.

Severus would never say it—would likely bring up "that time Lupin nearly killed Granger through arrogance and sheer idiocy" for years and years to come—but Hermione knew Teddy was well on
his way to being forgiven. What would Remus and Tonks have made of this camaraderie between their son and Severus? Would it have even existed if Teddy hadn't been so eager for stories of his mother's skill at brewing that he'd glommed onto Severus in spite of the notorious prickliness?

Staring at the mice, Hermione replayed what she'd seen in Severus's mind of his questioning of Terry. Veritaserum wasn't infallible, as George had demonstrated, but she'd been with Terry for six years. She knew him. He was kind and stubborn and clever and good. If he'd played any sort of role in what had happened to Severus, it couldn't have been with his knowledge. An accident, maybe—some slip of the tongue around the wrong person, but not anything he'd done on purpose.

Harry ran a hand through his messy hair: a living, older version of every photograph Hermione had ever seen of his father. James and Lily had once been so certain they knew Pettigrew that they'd staked their lives on it. Severus's voice from the day of her accident came drifting back to Hermione.

*Humans have an almost endless capacity for betrayal, Granger.*

The Boots wore matching novelty Christmas jumpers. Harry had forgotten about that tradition, once much-lamented by Hermione. With Terry far away in Egypt the rest of the year, they had apparently decided to stretch their Christmas out to fill every day between the twenty-fifth and New Year's Eve. The knitted offering for the thirtieth was dark blue with a flashing Christmas tree.

Harry tried to imagine the Snapes doing something similar. Tobias was a long dead mystery—one Harry likely didn't want to unravel, given that what little Snape had revealed about Tobias over the years had been entirely unpleasant. Harry didn't know about Eileen, either, but he could see her portrait embracing silly jumpers with relish. As for their son… Not even at age four and within the safety of Harry's imagination would Snape consent to wearing such a thing.

Harry pictured Hermione asking the current Snape to wear a nauseatingly garish jumper, and suddenly there he was. He popped into Harry's mind's eye without hesitation: as festive as tinsel apart from his glower. Huh. Harry suspected it wouldn't be that easy in real life.

Terry stood beneath a charmed toy locomotive that chugged around the perimeter of his parents' kitchen, his arms crossed over his light-up chest.

"I did go to speak to him, yes," Terry said. "About a year ago, like Teddy said, but I can't tell you what we talked about, Harry. I'll give Snape the memory if he asks, but it was private. Telling you about it would be betraying his confidence, even if he doesn't know it right now."

Harry narrowed his eyes at his former classmate. "Since when do you and Snape have secrets together?"

"Since then. I don't like him any more than I ever did, but it doesn't mean I'm going to go around shouting out his secrets for all to hear."

Well, ouch. Harry had only done that the one time, and only to hurt Voldemort. If he'd known Hermione's efforts to save Snape had succeeded, he wouldn't have done it at all. Probably.

"He visited you when he went to Egypt, didn't he?" Harry asked. "Why didn't you mention anything about this then?"

"Because at the time he was way too close to thinking himself a devoted Death Eater for my liking. I just wanted to give him a few memories of innocuous shit and get him out of my flat as soon as possible."
"And you had nothing to do with his memory loss?"

"Of course not. Hermione and I may not have parted on the best of terms, and I'll never understand why she's friends with him, but after everything with her parents… I wouldn't do that to her. Hell, I wouldn't do that to him, either."

"Right. Well, you're in the country until the sixth? Do me a favour and don't go anywhere until Snape has spoken to you."

Hermione shivered as she and Severus trudged up the long drive of Malfoy Manor, wrapped in a Muffliato. Floating globes of ice with heatless flames tucked inside lit their way. Severus wanted to tug her close and help her get warm, but they were still not revealing their burgeoning relationship to anyone outside her closest circle of friends. He settled for aiming a Warming Charm at her insufficient coat. She was more than capable of casting the spell herself, but he liked the idea of it being his magic to wrap around her.

"Thanks," she said, rubbing her thawing arms. Her thumb lingered over the place where he knew a vile word had been carved into her skin. Severus's stomach lurched.

"Have you been back here since the war?" he asked.

"No. I've had no reason to visit."

"We don't have to attend the party. If you'd rather, we can go back to Hogwarts and—"

"Don't be silly. I'm fine. It was a long time ago, and like you said, we can't pass up the opportunity to talk to people who don't run in the same circles as the members of the Order. We might uncover something useful."

A frosty breeze lifted her hair into a curly halo. She'd left it loose, untouched by both magical and Muggle styling products.

"You look beautiful," Severus said—just blurted it out like some sort of Hufflepuff on his first date. Fortunately, it made her flash him a grin and whisper her thanks. He straightened the cuffs of his jacket.

"Being back here is more weird than anything, to be honest," she said after a few beats of silence. "A decade ago, I would never have believed that Lucius and Narcissa would accept me into their home as a guest. If Bellatrix was still alive, then I would have a problem with going to the party, but this is just… surreal."

"If Bellatrix was in attendance, I would gladly cause a distraction so there would be no witnesses to testify against you in a murder trial."

"So considerate. It's no wonder I'm crazy about you."

The grand front doors of the Manor opened automatically to admit them. Severus sliced his wand through the air to cancel his Muffliato. Instead of bowing and scraping house elves, an animated coat rack was on hand to relieve guests of their outerwear. After placing his jacket in its care and unwinding the scarf from his neck, Severus turned to find Hermione casting an appreciative stare at his formal robes.

"It's no wonder," she said again with a secretive little smile.
"If you persist with that shameless ogling, the wrong sort of person might get ideas about us," Severus whispered.

Hermione heaved a dramatic sigh. "Fine, fine. The sacrifices I make for you."

Turning her attention to their opulent surroundings, she smoothed restless hands over the front of her skirt. She'd chosen long sleeves to mask one of the scars she'd received in this place, but those sleeves were attached to a deep crimson Muggle dress instead of robes. Somehow, Severus didn't think Lucius and Narcissa would appreciate it as much as he did.

"Don't forget to check your mirror from time to time," Severus said as they made their way to the ballroom with a platonic level of distance separating them. "And don't accept any food or drink from anyone who is not me."

"I hadn't intended to. Is it exhausting being so paranoid?"

"Yes."

The ballroom was all wintry splendour. More of those illuminated globes of ice hovered in clusters near the vaulted ceiling. Groups of snow-dusted trees provided nooks for conversation. The dance floor had been charmed to look—though mercifully not feel—like a sheet of ice.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Lucius said as he sauntered towards them. Good gods. He matched the decor. The robes were a subdued dark blue, but his omnipresent walking stick had been transfigured to resemble an icicle. The Ministry would have a fight on their hands if they ever tried to part Lucius from his ostentatious accessories. "So pleased you could join us. Severus, you're looking well."

As he spoke, Lucius held his hand out to his son. Grumbling, Draco relinquished a weighty, jangling velvet bag.

"Thank you for having me," Hermione said. Her smirk twisted into a grimace as she noticed someone over Draco's shoulder. "You could have won your little bet if you'd told me Rita Skeeter was going to be here, Malfoy."

Severus scanned the ballroom, but Skeeter had vanished in the time it had taken Hermione to announce her presence.

"What would be the fun in that?" Draco asked. "I thought you would have made your peace with her when you were seeing Boot, anyway. For his sake."

Hermione blinked up at him as if he was as dim as his childhood friends. "I don't see how being with Terry would have led to me taking leave of my senses."

Severus could, but he made no comment.

Draco let out a dark chuckle. "Did he never tell you? That's surprising, though I can hardly blame him. Rita is Boot's godmother."

Hermione's posture went rigid. No, Boot had certainly never told her. What a shame Draco was no longer a student at Hogwarts. If he was, Slytherin would have just been awarded House Points to match the amount Severus had given Lupin. If any Ravenclaws or Gryffindors had evidence against Boot to provide, they would receive the same reward. Who said Severus couldn't be fair?

Under the influence of Veritaserum, Boot had only mentioned Death Eaters when Severus had asked if he knew anyone who had harmed Hermione. Skeeter had hurt Hermione in plenty of non-
physical ways over the years, and Boot was obviously acquainted with his own godmother. Severus castigated himself for not being more specific with his wording. That was one of the pitfalls of Veritaserum. Even if the person could not resist its effects, their answers were ultimately down to how they interpreted the questions being asked of them.

There was, of course, also the possibility that Boot was an Occlumens like George. He was certainly a liar, if only by omission.

"Are you sure?" Hermione asked.

"Very." Draco nodded. "She's also my wife's first cousin once removed. If you think encountering her unexpectedly at a party is bad, you should try coming home from work to find her sitting on your sofa."

"I'd rather not, thanks." Hermione shuddered. "I should give up on all of my projects and focus on you instead, Malfoy. Yes, Squibs might be treated as second-class citizens and mostly shoved into the Muggle world unprepared, but you have suffered."

"Haven't I just?"

The crowd shifted, revealing a face that appeared on the dust jacket of a book that claimed to be about Severus's life. Speak of the devil.

"Look, Severus, there's Raffaella," Hermione said, pointing in the opposite direction. "Is that her new husband? Excuse me; I'm going to go introduce myself."

She scurried off with all the subtlety of Hagrid to check her Foe-Glass. Well. Not everything could be learned from a book, but hadn't she done quite a lot of sneaking around during the war? Perhaps she was rusty.

Severus did his best to look disinterested as his gaze connected with Skeeter's. When Skeeter spun away, something about the sight barrelled into Severus like a physical thing, sending him stumbling and gasping into a memory.

The icy elegance of the ballroom melted away to reveal an airy, modern flat. Painfully modern, judging by the furniture. Severus wouldn't want to try sitting for any length of time on any of the things that were masquerading as chairs. It all looked as if it had been chosen to show off the owner's Gringott's balance, rather than for any sort of comfort.

Vision Severus stalked around the flat, opening drawers and feeling beneath tabletops. Springs squeaked behind the place Severus stood and watched. Someone was in the bed. The shapeless lump beneath the blankets shifted, revealing blonde curls spread out on a pillow. Vision Severus paid her no mind. As he continued his search, Rita Skeeter slept on.

The memory slipped away, leaving Severus once again in the Malfoy's ballroom.

"Lucius," Severus said slowly, "how well do I know Rita Skeeter?"

Exhaling a laugh, Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Not that well, Turncoat."

Severus hadn't been thinking along those lines. Even if Skeeter hadn't been bundled up in flannel pyjamas with the other side of the bed still neatly made, one emotion had shouted above the anger that had flickered in the background of the memory. Severus hated her. Hardly surprising.

The present-day Skeeter had done another disappearing act while Severus was captured in the grip
of his memory, but she was still somewhere in the ballroom. Withdrawing his own Foe-Glass from his robes, Severus opened the false pocketwatch cover. Most of the figures remained misty, vague shadows. One of them had solidified a bit, revealing light hair and a feathery shape that was acid green in colour.

Again, hardly surprising, but having confirmation was always useful.

On reluctant feet, Severus began making the rounds. That most of the people he introduced himself to already knew him was a small mercy; they didn't expect him to smile. When he did, it threw them off-kilter. Now and then, he held eye contact and brushed over someone's mind, delving just deep enough to gauge intentions and sense surface thoughts, not deep enough to send himself back to St Mungo's. No one was obliging enough to be thinking of anything related to his accident.

Again and again, Severus found himself searching for a glimpse of Hermione. He wanted to go to her, to place his hand on the small of her back and find out what she had to say about the evening thus far. How disconcerting. He ordinarily found public displays of affection to be nauseating and entirely unnecessary.

By the time Severus encountered Draco again, he'd had more than enough of encouraging people to talk about themselves.

"Scorpius, what the fuck?" Draco muttered. Following the younger man's line of sight revealed Hermione chatting to a woman with light brown hair and classically pretty features. Hermione bounced a little boy in her arms—a boy who could only have been Draco's son. "It's bad enough she's clearly won my wife over, but Scorpius, too? Astoria is an easy target; she's a soft touch. My kid isn't supposed to—oh, bloody hell."

The child threw his head back and laughed at something Hermione had said to him. Both Hermione and Astoria joined in with his laughter when Scorpius wrapped his arms around Hermione's neck and hid his face in her hair.

"Well, it's official," Draco said. "The enemy has got her claws into my offspring. He'll probably be sorted into Gryffindor and start a Potter fan club." Taking a sip of wine, he waved a hand as if to dismiss words Severus hadn't spoken. "Don't give me that look, Severus. It's not because of her blood status. I've seen more than enough magical blood to know that hers is the same colour as mine. It's the fact that she's Granger. Disliking each other is practically a tradition by this point."

Hearing Lucius's son admit that his blood was no different from that of a Muggle-born made Severus half-believe he'd dozed off during Raffaella's monologue about her wedding. Narcissa put on a show of appearing to be more accepting in order to keep pace with the times, but it seemed that Draco actually was more accepting. How had such a thing happened?

Not for the first time since awakening in this post-war world, Severus wondered why he and Lucius were still friends, given how disparate their worldviews had become. Perhaps it was practically a tradition by this point for them as well.

"Speaking of your professional life," Severus said, "how much do you know about mind magic?"

"Quite a bit. Why?"

With apologies for being that person who asked a Healer medical questions at a party, Severus described the double silver frame in some of his memory dreams. Far from huffing in annoyance at the topic, Draco leaned forward as he listened.
"Interesting," Draco said. "It's not something I've encountered before. Experiencing a silver aura around memories that resurface is common, but I've never heard of a double aura. I might be able to tell you more if I could see one of these memories."

"I'm sure you could."

The day Severus let Draco (or anyone but Hermione, for that matter) see those dreams was the day he tried to communicate with those beyond the Veil in order to profess his eternal love for Sirius Black.

Draco let the subject drop.

Severus did not see Skeeter again. When he peeked at his Foe-Glass, he found she'd blended back in with the other shadows. After midnight passed and guests began to depart, Hermione sought him out.

"I just sent a Patronus to Harry, telling him happy new year," she said. Potter knew what they'd learned about Boot, then. Taking a few steps closer, she patted the pocket that held her Foe-Glass. "Did you see the godmother as well?"

"I did."

"Thought so. Draco and Lucius will be so disappointed, by the way. Neither of them appeared in mine."

"We will have to break the news to them gently." Another shuffle, and they stood just far enough away from each other to be perceived as friends by an outside viewer. Severus leaned ever-so-slightly towards her. "Come on. Let's go home."
I made a slight change in chapter 20. I removed the bit about the photograph, because I decided to slightly change that plotline (it did not want to cooperate). It doesn’t make any difference to the story; I just wanted to let you all know so that those of you collecting clues can discard that one.

The exterior of the Boot family home brought Petunia immediately to Severus's mind. The house was of near identical construction to those around it; only the brass house number marked it as different. Everything else—from the nondescript red bricks to the conservatory—was the same. The front garden had a weed-free lawn with neat, clear edges and a scattering of shrubs that had been trimmed with such painful precision that they resembled something produced in a factory rather than something found in nature.

It was all so normal and suburban that Severus almost longed for a loathsome youth with a penchant for graffiti to come along and decorate the place. Stepping up to the front door, he rang the bell.

Hermione's ex answered. His brown hair looked like he'd been running his hands through it. The messiness wasn't of the carefully crafted variety that took ages in front of a mirror to perfect; it was genuine. As Boot shifted back to allow Severus to enter, Severus held eye contact for just long enough to brush over the younger man's surface thoughts.

At least I don’t have to watch what I think this time. I should have just told him before. Worst case scenario, what would he have done? Sold me out to Rita? Well, maybe.

Half of Severus's own thoughts remained back in Scotland, relaxing in front the fire with Hermione in those last moments of quiet before the students once again descended upon the school. As he wiped his shoes on the doormat, he tried to rub warmth back into his hands. The broom ride had been both cold and arse-numbingly long. Good gods, he missed being able to Apparate on his own. He also missed his twenty-year-old body that hadn't fought its way through two wars. At least the Apparating would eventually return to him.

The interior of the house did not blend in with its neighbours. Once they passed through the entry hall and into the sitting room, magical touches graced every corner: a Ravenclaw house crest, bookcases full of magical texts, a charmed rag that polished already gleaming shelves. There was still something too perfect about it—something that tempted Severus to move one of the cushions on the sofa so they no longer lined up like good little soldiers.

Reaching into his pocket, Severus withdrew a teardrop-shaped vial of clear potion. Time to get to the point of making that wretched journey.

"Veritaserum?" Boot asked.

"Indeed. Will you consent to taking it?"
"No. Absolutely not."

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Something to hide?"

"When it comes to things that are in any way your business? No, but I'm not going to let you render me incapable of not answering any question you want to ask."

Well. That was a promising sign. While not definitive by any means, it suggested that Boot's answers in the previous interrogation had been truthful. If Boot had been able to resist Veritaserum's effects, he likely would have agreed to take it on this visit.

"Very well," Severus said. As he returned the vial to his pocket, he withdrew his Foe-Glass. Blurred shapes whispered across the surface, none of them sharpening into Boot's features. Interesting. Such Dark Detectors could be fooled as well, of course, so Severus needed to remain on his guard. "What is it you wanted to tell me that you couldn't share with Potter?"

"Right." As Boot spoke, he paced back and forth. "About a year ago, I came to you for help. Rita Skeeter had some information she was holding over my head, saying she'd go public with it unless I could offer her a story about Hermione that was more interesting."

"Meaning more scandalous."

"Basically, yeah. She wanted something she could prove. Something people couldn't dismiss as rumour or gossip."

"And this information she had on you was?"

Boot winced. "There is a pretty rigorous interview process to become a Curse Breaker for Gringott's. In addition to needing tonnes of NEWTs, there are a few additional exams set by the goblins, and... Look, you have to understand that I have never failed an exam in my life. Never. So when I started drawing a blank, I panicked, and..."

"You cheated." A smirk powered by pure Schadenfreude dawned on Severus's face. "Never failed an exam, but you were able to cheat without being detected on your first try? When a goblin was the invigilator? Hmm. Why did you come to me for assistance? You were my student for seven years. I'm certain even you were able to guess how much sympathy I have for academic dishonesty."

"Rita said that if I told anyone, she would leak the information about me right away. I thought... I don't know. You can keep a secret like no one else. Plus, you're friends with Hermione. I thought you'd want to protect her, I guess. I'd have tried to fix it myself, but I'm no good at being sneaky."

"Your performance on the goblins' exam says otherwise."

"Rita is more tenacious than any goblin I've ever met, and that's saying something. Anyway, you said you'd help because you didn't trust me not to throw Hermione to the wolves to save my own skin. You also said I'd owe you a rather large favour at some point in the future, and you intended to collect."

"Yes, a favour would be the least you could do." Steepling his fingers together, Severus reflected on his recovered memory of searching Skeeter's flat while she slept. "And what form did my assistance take?"

"I doubt it was anything legal. That's why I didn't want to tell Harry. My guess is there was some Legilimency and Obliviation, as well as a bit of breaking and entering. Maybe an Imperius Curse."
Severus was certain it had been. He was also certain he had kept whatever evidence he'd discovered at Skeeter's flat. Not even the "depressingly noble" version of Severus, to borrow a term from Lucius, would have let something that potentially useful go to waste.

"I see," Severus said. "Why did you never tell Granger that Skeeter is your godmother?"

Boot's pacing came to a halt. "I… Well, my mum and Rita used to be best friends. They stopped talking before I went to Hogwarts. I haven't had any sort of relationship with Rita in decades. Honestly, I think part of why she blackmailed me was to get back at my mum a little bit."

"Your family dramas do not interest me. Nor does any of that answer my question."

Boot huffed. "Would you have told Hermione if you were in my shoes and you had a connection to Skeeter?"

Absolutely not.

"Yes," Severus said. "If Astoria Malfoy can accept her husband in spite of his relation to Bellatrix, then surely the fact that you possess a bothersome godmother could have been pardoned."

Almost laughing, Boot shook his head. "Bellatrix isn't likely to pop up and annoy Astoria, but you might have a point."

"I wouldn't put it past her, to be honest. Do you think Skeeter would ever harm Granger?"

"No. Not physically. That isn't how Rita works. But from what I gathered, she does really, really hate Hermione."

"Yes," Severus drawled. "I had managed to work that out for myself. Being trapped in a jar by someone has a funny way of destroying all potential for friendship."

Ron's freckled cheeks puffed out as he exhaled a long sigh. "I can't believe you assigned me homework. I wouldn't have stopped by if I'd known this would happen."

Hermione barely glanced up from the book in her hands. Now that Teddy had provided a partial ingredients list for Severus's potion, she was helping Severus go through the inventory logs for the Potions store room from previous years. They were trying to work out other possible ingredients by making a list of things that had been taken out of the store room at the same time as Ashwinder eggs, dandelion root, Thersral hair, sage leaves and Jobberknoll feathers. Thus far, they had not met with much success. Too many times, one or two of the ingredients had been taken out along with supplies for his classes.

When Ron had showed up looking for an excuse to avoid being dragged to the last of the post-Christmas sales by his husband and Augusta Longbottom, Hermione had put him to work scouring the inventory from 2004.

"You had to know it was a risk when you came to my office," Hermione said. "You've known me for nearly twenty years. Homework is a constant danger with me, Ron."

"Yeah, fair enough."

Lois and Boudica lay curled together on Hermione's lap in a purring heap. Their warm weight was
a familiar comfort, even if their bulk made it more difficult for her to shift forward and jot down notes as she went through 2005's inventory. Stroking a hand down Boudica's back, she ignored the happy kneading of claws into her thighs. After owning a cat almost constantly since her third year, she'd become inured to such things.

A tawny coloured school owl tapped on the window to announce its arrival. Lois and Boudica's interest in Hermione's cuddles vanished in an instant. Human affection lost its lustre when they were presented with a large bird on which they could hone their hunting and pouncing skills. On the other side of the glass, the owl ruffled its feathers.

"Get back, you two," Hermione said as she scurried to the window. "Ron, take them, would you? I think that's the owl I sent to my parents."

With Ron's (swearing) assistance, Hermione managed to retrieve the folded, blue-lined Muggle paper from the owl and reward it for its efforts with an extra treat. The letter was, indeed, her parents' response to the note she'd sent after Teddy had helped to reveal that Severus's potion had been for the Grangers.

**Hermione,**

*I'm sorry to hear about Severus's accident. Is memory loss something that happens a lot in the wizarding world? From our perspective, it certainly seems so.*

Yes, Severus has been visiting us. He thought it was best to avoid raising your hopes until he was certain something would come of it, given how upset you were when the magical doctors said it was time to give up trying to restore our memories. Ever since our last St Mungo's visit, Severus has been showing up once or twice a year with updates on how his research was progressing.

You asked what we know about the potion Severus was brewing. We know next to nothing about the ingredients, but he did show us the final part of the process on his last visit. I think it was late January or early February of last year when that happened; we haven't seen him since then. He thought he was finally getting close to perfecting it. Apparently he'd been working on the theory since sometime during your war, but he didn't start any sort of trials until it became clear the usual methods wouldn't fix us.

Severus warned us there was little hope of rolling our memories all the way back to your birth; there were no memories belonging to anyone magical available from that long ago. He did think he could get us back to your first clear memory, which we all agreed was better than nothing.

The potion requires two memories to work: one as early as possible and one as late as possible. Severus was testing the potion by teaching mice two tricks: how to run a maze and how to press a button for food. For the mice, he used the same spell that you used on us. He taught them how to press the food button, hid their memories of learning how to do that, then taught them how to navigate the maze. It might have been the other way around; the point is he removed the memory of the first skill before teaching them the second one. A big challenge, according to him, was restoring our memories of having you as a daughter without erasing everything we'd experienced since you altered our memories. We didn't want to suddenly think it was 1997 again. Nor did we want to forget our memories had been altered in the first place.

To the potion, Severus added his own memory of the mice just starting to learn how to press the food button, as well as his memory of seeing them complete the maze for the tenth or eleventh time in a row. He called those the anchor memories. Once those were in, it needed to sit for an hour or two.
When the potion was ready, Severus added some sort of sparkling dust. The potion glowed with symbols that he said gave him the range of dates that would be restored to the mice’s memories. He dosed the mice with potion, they went to sleep, and when they woke up they remembered how to press the food button again. They also still remembered how to run the maze, which proved that their more recent memories remained intact.

Severus’s idea was to use your earliest memory of us and his latest memory of us as the anchor memories for our potion. Everything before your earliest memory would still be the false memories of the life you created for us when you forced us into hiding, but we would know you.

Oh, Wendell has just remembered that there was definitely some sort of magical snake egg in the potion. Does that help at all? Severus said he was going to move on to testing the potion on some magical cats, but we never heard back about any of that.

Hope you are well. Please pass on our wishes for a speedy recovery to Severus.

— Monica

Severus had seen Hermione’s parents more often than she had since that final St Mungo’s visit. Unlike Severus, the Grangers had not retained their old emotions. Her enchantment of them had seen to that. With the owl gone, Boudica consented to being held again. There was a curious kind of hollowness that always came packaged up with the few notes Hermione received from her parents. A yawning emptiness that carved itself into the place they used to occupy.

Their situations were different, since at least her mum and dad could still flourish and be happy even if it was without her, but Harry had warned her it would be like this. He'd said you never really forgot that your parents were gone, but sometimes something small made you remember the full weight of it all over again.

"Do you reckon Snape tested this potion on them?" Ron asked with a nod towards the cats. "They're half-Kneazles, right? And you two got them around the same time he gave the mice to Teddy."

And that was how Hermione and Ron found themselves attempting to draw blood from two half-Kneazles on a Saturday afternoon. Ashwinder egg stuck around in the system for ages. Severus undoubtedly still had a tiny bit floating around his bloodstream. A simple charm could potentially tell them whether the cats had been exposed to the potion. Hermione and Ron chose to go after Lois first; she was the more likely test subject, as Severus had unlimited access to her.

"You hold her," Hermione said, "and I'll cast the spell to draw the blood."

Lois was also the more temperamental of the two. The second the procedure was complete, she slashed at Ron's arms with her claws in revenge.

Ron hissed in pain. "Why didn't you stun her so she wouldn't feel it?"

"Oh, don't let her fool you. She didn't feel a thing. I can demonstrate on you, if you want to see for yourself. The spell makes it painless."

"No, I think enough of my blood has been spilled just now."

Handing a vial full of half-Kneazle blood over to Ron, Hermione snuggled Lois to make up for the ordeal. Lois apparently blamed Ron for the whole thing; she yowled and glared at him from the sanctuary of Hermione’s arms.
"Hermione?" Rupert Smith said, letting himself in as he gave a token knock on her office door. Taking in the sight of Hermione cradling Lois and cooing apologies to her while a scratched-up Ron stood nearby with a vial of blood, Rupert froze. "I was just wondering if you wanted to accompany me to the Three Broomsticks for some lunch."

"No thanks," Hermione said. "I'm kind of busy."

"Are you sure I can't convince you?" Rupert asked with an uncertain smile.

"Now is really not a good time."

"I could bring some lunch here, if that would be more convenient," Rupert said. As his gaze passed up and down Ron, his eyes widened as if he'd only just realised that Lois's new scratching post was another one of Harry Potter's best friends.

Hermione sighed. Rupert hadn't bothered her for more than colleague-type small talk about the weather and students in ages. Why couldn't he have stuck to that?

"I'm sorry, Rupert, but I'm really not interested," she said.

Ron waved the vial of blood. "We have lunch sorted, anyway."

Rupert backed slowly out of the room. Well, that was one way to discourage him.

"Who was that?" Ron asked.

"New Muggle Studies professor. If Severus hadn't objected to me tagging along to talk to Terry—"

"Tagging along?" Ron interrupted with a grimace. "Why the hell would you ever want to be in a room with your ex and your current… boyfriend doesn't seem the right word, does it? He's way too old for that. Hmm. Your ex and your current… Snape? I say avoid it at all costs. There's no way it could be anything but awkward."

"You're frequently in the same room as me and Neville. I was in your wedding party."

"Yeah, but you and I stayed on good terms after we split. And you've been friends with Neville for years, too. That is definitely not the case with Terry and Snape."

"No, that's true. I'm pretty sure out of all of my exes, Terry is the least likely to be friends with Severus."

"Which one is the most likely?" Ron asked.

"Err, I wouldn't place any bets on any of you managing it, if I'm honest."

"But say you did have to choose one of us. Who would you choose?"

Hermione snatched the vial from his hand. "You just want to know if you'd rank above Viktor, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"You amaze me."

Stretching out along Severus's sofa, Hermione rested her feet on his leg. His hand moved in a
hypnotic rhythm, passing from her ankle up the length of her shin and back again. It was the most he'd ever touched her bare skin, and Hermione was loath to break the spell by bringing up any of the things they needed to discuss. In spite of the fact that he never ventured any higher than her knee, her mind went a little fuzzy every time his fingers vanished beneath the hem of her robes.

"Boot was being blackmailed by Skeeter for information on you," Severus said. "I assisted in making the problem go away, but likely not in a manner I would wish to confess to Potter or Ronald."

"Oh. Well, that explains why he wouldn't say anything to Harry. And you just… helped him?"

"So it would seem," he said, his face remaining completely straight when he added, "I'm sure it was an act of pure generosity on my part."

Hermione laughed. "I'm not." Leaning to one side, she plucked her mother's letter from the detritus of inventory logs and Potions texts on the coffee table. "This came from my mum. I tested Lois and Boudica's blood for Ashwinder egg. It came back very faintly positive with Lois, but not at all with Boudica."

As he read, Severus's touches slowed. "Hmm. There must have been a charm cast on the potion. That would be what revealed the range of dates she talks about. Arithmancy had to have been involved in the process of creating it as well, but I'd already guessed that much."

"Maybe you asked Septima for assistance."

"I doubt it. I would have definitely wanted more than one test subject. Maybe we should ask Mrs Figg about that. I wonder why I didn't use Boudica."

"Because you've met me."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "That would explain it, yes." Severus let his fingers wander up to just above her knee. "Did anything else of note happen today?"

"Nope. What about for you?"

"Not particularly."

Gradually, those sweeping touches rose higher. Severus traced his fingertips along one inner thigh before skipping over to the other and going back towards her knee. Again and again, he followed the same path. Every time she thought he would finally move higher still, he denied her. Every teasing repetition made her breathe faster.

"Come here," Severus said, right as she was on the verge of begging.

Grasping her waist, he guided her up until she straddled his lap. The now-familiar sensation of his mouth against hers made her sigh. They'd spent plenty of time kissing in her rooms and his, but it had always been quite… polite. She'd kept her attentions tame, determined to let him set the pace if he wished things to progress to where they were now—to where his hands wandered beneath her robes and she could feel how much he wanted her.

Recalling his confession that he'd retained memories of only one previous partner, Hermione wondered for a world-tilting second if Severus was nervous.

"You know," she whispered, tilting her head back to coax his lips to trail along her neck. "I imagined the two of us ending up in this exact position the first time I was allowed to enter your
quarters."

"Did you?"

She nodded. "It's different than I expected. It's... more now that it's real." Drawing back, she scrutinised his face in the dim firelight. "It is, isn't it? You're absolutely certain of how you felt about me before your accident?"

Severus shifted his hips, smirking when she let out a little gasp. "Yes," he said. "I'm certain."

Together, they stumbled between kisses towards the one place in his quarters she'd never entered: his bedroom.

Deciding to behave as if he was genuinely new to this, she backed away slightly and unfastened her robes. The fabric fell away with a rustle to pool at her feet. Severus's hands tightened into fists. She took charge of removing her bra as well—that was an advanced manoeuvre if any of her clothing was. Slipping out of her knickers was accomplished with help from Severus, but she swore she saw the slightest of tremors in his hands.

Her own fingers shook as she started tugging at the buttons of his robes. The only assistance he offered there was bending and moving to allow her to remove each article in between pressing encouraging kisses to her neck, her mouth, her chest. A hint of evening stubble dusted his jaw, scratching lightly at her skin.

With a hushed word from Severus, the bedclothes folded back. Hermione tumbled onto soft, soft white sheets that smelled like him. He bent over her, his brewing-roughened hands parting her legs, his mouth teasing its way down her abdomen. Hermione grasped his shoulders.

"Severus," she whispered.

He had been fairly new to this at the age of twenty, she decided, but it didn't matter. He studied her responses to the movements of his lips and tongue and fingers, following her occasional nudge or murmured request until he had her cresting, spiralling, falling.

Severus lay on his back, and as Hermione shifted her body onto his, trembling and breathless, she nearly wondered if she was new to this. And then finally, finally—

"Oh, Hermione," Severus said, his eyes fluttering shut.

Feeling his skin grow slick with sweat, watching him lose control, she almost believed she would have remembered being with Severus through any number of Obliviates, logic be damned.

The scene within the double silver frame of Severus's dream was familiar. Not in a vague, deja vu sort of way, but in a very definite one. It was a memory Hermione had already given him.

Dream Severus and Hermione stood together in her quarters. With a radiant smile, she flew at him and locked her arms around him in a hug. Just like in her memory, Dream Severus returned the embrace as if he had only ever heard descriptions of hugs and this was his first time seeing a real one in the wild. Severus predicted the exact instant of his dream self's chuckle when Hermione squeezed him tighter. Love held him along with her arms.

The same kiss that Hermione had pressed to his cheek in her memory landed there in the dream. "Thank you, Severus," she said. "I know how private you are. I won't pry too much... OK, I will, but just let me know whenever you need a break. And I promise I'll let you approve the final copy
before publication. Not a single word will be printed without your consent."

Syllable for syllable, it was the same. The dream cut off before her memory had, evaporating with the end of Hermione's speech. It missed the moment when Severus's walls had inexplicably slammed into place—when all of that love had been hidden away for months on end.

Severus woke to the deep breaths of the woman sharing his bed. One of Hermione's hands curled over his upper thigh, and that same love curled around him. In an ideal world, Severus would smirk to himself as he recalled the events of the night before, wake her up, and do his best to keep her in bed for the rest of the morning. Instead, he blinked up at the ceiling and puzzled over his dream.

Why would that memory need repeating? Why would any of them? The Healer had said that viewing donated memories when some event returned to him as a dream would be beneficial. No mention had been made—not by the Healer nor in any of his reading on the subject—about memory dreams replaying what he'd already seen in the Pensieve.

And this one had been wrapped up in that double silver aura.

Hermione snuggled closer. Pushing her hair out of her face, she gave him a drowsy smile. "Oh, good," she said. "You're not bleeding."

"Was there a chance I would be?"

"I had it on good authority that there was a 75 percent chance of you being maimed by my hair if you allowed me to besmirch your questionable virtue. I'm relieved you beat the odds. That, or your Arithmantic calculations were incorrect."

"It was 74, not 75."

Hermione chuckled. "You really are an insufferable know-it-all, aren't you?"
Lovegood's memory began with a view of the cobblestones of Hogsmeade's High Street. She traced the toe of a neon green boot over the frost encrusted moss that grew in the gaps between stones while Longbottom hemmed and hawed over a window display of shiny necklaces, bracelets and earrings. Nearby, Memory Severus swooped down upon a group of students who mistakenly thought they could get away with sneaking sips from a bottle of Firewhisky as long as it was concealed by a brown paper bag. Imbeciles.

"Hermione said her parents always used to buy her jewellery on Christmas and her birthday," Longbottom said. "I thought Ron and I could carry on the tradition, since everyone else always gets her books, but I don't know. Do you reckon it'd make her sad?"

"A little, maybe, but just because it will make her sad, it doesn't mean it won't also make her happy," Lovegood said. "I think it's a nice idea. Ooh, Neville, look at that one."

Lovegood's breath fogged the window as she pointed out an enormous, sparkly brooch that would not have been out of place among the Potions ingredients she posted to Severus from far-flung corners of the globe. Severus couldn't decide whether the strange protrusions of jewels looked more like eye stalks or antennae.


"Yes, it is exactly Granger's style," Memory Severus said sardonically. He removed the contraband bottle from its wrapping as he approached, sneering at the label. "Even if those cretins hadn't put their disgusting mouths all over this, it's not fit for human consumption." He sniffed it. "And unless I'm mistaken, they've mixed it with butterbeer. Monsters. Here, Longbottom. Happy Christmas."

Laughing, Longbottom accepted the bottle. "Cheers. Maybe I can use it as an herbicide to get rid of that Pernicious Pine that keeps trying to creep into my garden at home."

"Hello, Severus," Lovegood said. "Are you shopping for a gift for Hermione as well? There's a ring that matches the brooch."

"So there is." Memory Severus smirked. "Alas, I've already purchased a book for Granger, and she has not done anything since her school days to warrant being presented with… that."

"Do you think so?" Lovegood asked. "I think she would like to get a ring from you."

With a dreamy smile, Lovegood resumed her examination of the cobbles. Everything else blurred, as the memory belonged to her. It was like viewing the world through a frosted window. Surprise blossomed and brightened into recognition before Severus could locate the source of the initial feeling. All he could make out was the painful straightness of Memory Severus's posture and the way his gaze stayed riveted to the jewellery display.

"Longbottom," Memory Severus said. "Give her that. Her Patronus is an otter, is it not?"

As Lovegood's face rose again, everything wobbled back into focus. There, next to the hideous brooch and ring, was Hermione's bracelet. Only the tiny otter charm dangled from the delicate chain.

Longbottom babbled about how perfect it was and how it would pave the way for easy gifts of more charms in the future, but Severus barely heard him. All of his attention was consumed by the
Severus stared at the threads of Lovegood’s memory as he rose out of the Pensieve. The bracelet. If it had been visible in any of his double-framed dreams, Hermione could look at which charms were present and estimate when it had taken place. One after another, he examined each dream.

Their kiss beneath the mistletoe was no help; her long sleeves concealed all but a brief flash of silver chain. The shower dream had no bracelet present at all, but it was hardly surprising that she would remove it to bathe. He watched it a second time, anyway. Her arm stayed beneath the blankets in that first double-framed dream he’d had—the one that featured her spooned up behind him in bed, touching him and whispering, "Good morning." In spite of her face never being visible, he was certain that woman had been Hermione. Finally, the dream in which he’d kissed his way down the naked body of a much more identifiable Hermione revealed a fleeting glimpse of three dangling charms.

Severus watched it play out again and again. There was no denying what he saw. A metallic sprig of mistletoe swung back and forth between miniature representations of a book and an otter. Longbottom and Ronald had given Hermione that mistletoe charm after Severus's accident. On Christmas morning, he'd watched her carefully peel open the wrapping paper instead of ripping it like a normal person.

Perhaps time travel was not such an outlandish theory after all.

Hermione's colour-coded chart (now mostly amber and green, with only a few splashes of red) sat propped up in the valley between two mountains: one formed from shelf upon shelf of bottled memories, and one made up of mistake-riddled essays. Copious amounts of red ink bled through the parchment, proving that Bert the Auror really was a marvel when it came to copying Severus's grading style. When the whole lost memories ordeal was over, perhaps Bert would consider retiring from the Auror Department and taking up a part-time position as a teaching assistant.

On the sofa, Hermione grumbled at a book that had been written about the Goblin Rebellions. It had almost as many bookmarks as it had pages. Entire sections had been crossed out. Scathing notes filled the margins as if it was an assignment from one of her students, rather than a published manuscript from an alleged expert.

"It's just as well this idiot lives in New Zealand," Hermione said. "If he was anywhere nearby, I'd show up at his house with a list of corrections. I can't believe some of my students read this rubbish. Why does no one ever consult the goblin historians about these things?"

"You know precisely why they do not," Severus said.

"Maybe it should be my next project, after I finish my book about the wars. Anyway, back to this dream of yours. When did you have it?"

"Autumn. Just before Longbottom and Weasley's wedding. I spoke of it to Longbottom; he said they had no idea at that point that they would give you the mistletoe charm."

Scrawling a final note in her lesson plan, Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "I don't know," she said. "Time travel still seems pretty bloody outlandish to me." She made a face as if her next words tasted bitter on her tongue. "Maybe you're a Seer."

Unbidden, Charity's words from Severus's dream of that hinterland between life and death came
back to him.

_It’s exactly who you think it is._

He had clearly believed _something_ had been about to happen on the night of his accident. Why else would he have squashed that tidal wave of hope and buried his love for Hermione so deep that even he had been unable to find it in the months that followed?

He'd felt that same suppression of emotions recently, when viewing additional memories of his trial. First during his retelling of the night he'd killed Dumbledore, then during his account of the day he'd watched Charity die, and again as he'd waited for the Wizengamot to deliver their verdict. That wall going up had been like a breath before plummeting into icy water—a closing-in on oneself and bracing for impact.

"As far as I can recall, I have never shown the slightest talent for Divination," he said, "but it is worth investigating."

"I would never say Divination made sense, by any stretch of the imagination, but it makes more sense than… Oh!"

The Goblin Rebellion book dropped with a thump, startling both cats out of their nap and sending Boudica scurrying to the bedroom. Lois settled for lunging at Hermione's ankles.

"I know where I've seen it!" Hermione said, dodging the attack from Severus's familiar with a practiced sidestep as she stood up and marched towards him. "That glittering stuff that you called powder and my mum called dust—the final ingredient in your potion. It's _sand_, by the way. Remember how I said I thought it looked familiar? It bloody well should have. I only wore an hourglass full of it around my neck for the better part of a year. How could I have missed it?"

"Divination makes more sense than you're making at the moment. What was it?"

"Time Turner sand. I'm almost certain." Brown eyes that had, in recent days, mostly gazed at him with warm affection or fond exasperation, narrowed at Severus. "How could you allow Teddy to be exposed to that? How could you allow _yourself_ to be exposed to that? Do you know how dangerous it is? I once saw it turn a grown man into a baby. You could have been turned so far back that you ceased to exist."

Well. That potentially lent some credence to his time travel theory. Severus chose to refrain from voicing the thought aloud. The hands-on-hips, teeth-clenched Hermione before him did not look as if she would appreciate such an observation.

"I did not know how dangerous it is," he said, "though I could have guessed. I'm certain my past self knew. I must have taken precautions."

"That's all you have to say for yourself?"

"What else do you want me to say? You are berating me for a crime I don't remember committing. Do you truly think I would allow Lupin to be placed in danger?"

"No," she said instantly. "I don't."

That was something, at least.

"I would apologise if I knew whether there was any need for it," Severus said.
Hermione snorted. "You would, would you?"

"I can apologise."

"All evidence to the contrary."

He thought about saying it. The words were simple. Brief. *I'm sorry*. And yet, he did not wish to throw the sentiment around as if it meant nothing. Particularly not when he felt certain it was unnecessary in this case.

"If it helps," he said instead, "I would not risk toying with something so volatile in my current state."

Hermione shrugged. While Severus continued sorting memories from the years that were still labelled as amber or red on the chart, she paced around as if unable to settle anywhere. Eventually, her steps took her to his bookcase. Her fingers tripped up and down the spine of a book about the history of the Patronus Charm and Dementors.

"Severus? I think I've changed my mind."

"About?"

"Your dreams. The ones with two silver auras." Her cheeks turned pink. "I do want to see them."

"Do you? Very well."

Severus stood with his hands clasped behind his back as Hermione dipped into the Pensieve to watch his double-framed memory dreams. His stomach flipped over and over as he waited. Somehow, it felt more like stripping himself bare than when he actually removed his clothing in front of her.

At last, she emerged. The blush that had previously only painted her cheeks spread down her neck and beneath the collar of her robes. She cleared her throat.

"I wonder why that memory of me asking you for an interview repeated itself as a dream," she said.

Of all of the things he had shown her, she chose to focus on the most innocent.

"I plan to ask Draco's opinion," Severus said.

Hermione made a dubious hum. "You trust him?"

"No, but he possesses relevant knowledge, and he does owe me a Life Debt. I trust Lois and you. No one else."

Lois flicked her tail and yawned to show her opinion of this declaration. Months before, on Hermione's birthday, Severus had named Lois as the sole recipient of his trust. *I'm getting there, Granger*, he'd said when Hermione had asked about herself. Now, she shifted close enough to surround him with the comforting scent of citrus and linked her hand with his.

"Who is still on your suspects list?" she asked. "Apart from Rita Skeeter, obviously."

"Nearly everyone who was on it at the start."

"What about Rupert? Was he on it at the start?"
"The Muggle Studies professor? Yes, why?"

"He's just suddenly started trying to get me to spend time with him again. I don't know. It might be nothing."

Severus scowled. "If Smith is making you uncomfortable, it's not nothing."

"True. I'll talk to Minerva about it." The hand that held his drifted up to pluck at a loose thread on his sleeve. "I was thinking about the whole Skeeter thing earlier, and I had an idea."

"I still say we should fall back on your tried and tested methods."

"She registered her Animagus form years ago; it wouldn't work."

"I was referring to trapping her in a jar, obviously." Severus pushed a disobedient curl out of her face. "What's your idea?"

"It would involve trusting someone else."

"Lois?"

A half-grin teased at one corner of her mouth. "No. Ginny. She writes a monthly column for the Daily Prophet. We could make a copy of something Skeeter always has with her. A certain quill, for instance. We'll charm it to record her conversations—a bit like those Whispering Wasps. Have you heard of those? Then we just have Ginny swap them the next time she's in the office."

Severus had not only heard of Whispering Wasps; he'd been warned against their use by Potter.

"And you believe Mrs Potter is capable of accomplishing this without being caught?" he asked.

Potter himself was watching Skeeter's comings and goings, clutching at anything that so much as looked as if it may have once been in the same neighbourhood as some evidence against her. If he discovered his wife attempting to gather information illegally… Well, Severus quite enjoyed the possibilities, actually.

"Ginny grew up with Fred and George," Hermione said. "She knows a thing or two about being sneaky."

Severus would believe it when he saw it.

Mornings had always been Hermione's favourite time of day. There was something about the clean slate of a new sunrise that always energised her. Ordinarily, she climbed straight out of bed and got ready for her run. In the pervasive chill of the dungeons, she stayed between the sheets to soak up Severus's warmth for just a bit longer.

They would have to let Minerva in on the secret if they carried on like this—if the Headmistress didn't already know that Hermione had spent the past few nights in Severus's quarters. Standing guard over Severus as they did, Bert and Ernie had already been informed.

Minerva and the Muppets—and didn't that just sound like a god awful Muggle rock band?—were the last thing Hermione wanted to think about when her front was curved against Severus's back, skin on skin. One of her arms was wedged between them, her charm bracelet digging into her ribs, but she hardly noticed. Sliding her other arm around his waist, she kissed the space between his shoulder blades.
It was how she'd ushered in the previous morning, in an echo of his memory dream. She'd let her hand drift down to touch him, whispered, "Good morning," and picked up where the dream had left off. True or false, those double-framed dreams had proved to be inspirational.

She was unconvinced by the one that took place in his shower, though. It seemed impractical to risk slipping and breaking something when there were any number of sturdy surfaces nearby. Her desk, his bed, her sofa, the floor, the bench she'd used when she'd been his student…

"No. Hermione."

It took her a moment to realise that the words had come not from Severus's mouth, but from his magic. As a nightmare quaked through him, panic rippled out from the epicentre and caught her in its aftershocks. With her wand out of reach, she risked holding him tighter and saying his name. He sat up, gasping as if she'd taken him on several laps of the lake.

"You OK?" Hermione asked. She rubbed a hand back and forth over the tense line of his shoulders.

"I am fine, thank you."

He wouldn't want to discuss it, she knew. He never did. Hermione did what she could to infuse comfort into the steady brush of her hand as she waited for his heartbeat to calm. Sliding back down next to her, Severus rested his head on her breast.

"Did my magic call out to you again?" he asked, waiting for her murmur of confirmation before he continued. "Curious bit of magic, that. Did you know it can happen with good dreams as well as nightmares?" One finger traced a swirling pattern over her belly. "I obtained proof over the summer, when what seemed like an exceedingly pleasant dream of yours made your magic call to me."

"Did it?" Hermione chuckled. "Ah, I think I remember the one you mean. That was exceedingly pleasant."

Severus raised his head up just enough to smirk at her. "I thought you'd be more embarrassed."

Shrugging, she smoothed a hand over his lank hair. "You've acted out most of that dream in real life. Even if you hadn't, I can't control my subconscious. I had this dream about Neville once—"

"Good gods. Stop talking. Why must you sully things by bringing up Longbottom?"

"Because it makes you make that face, right there." She kissed the furrow between his eyebrows. "I'm going do some research on prophetic dreams during my free period today. I've been thinking about it. You could be a Seer. Just look at Sybill."

"Mentioning Trelawney when we are naked is even worse than mentioning Longbottom, for the record. Suggesting I look at her is obscene."

"I have to agree with you there. I only meant that it isn't like She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Mentioned can control her Seeing. She isn't even aware of it when she has a genuine vision."

"I suppose that's a valid point. Hmm. I'll take prophecies about my own sex life over prophecies about Potter any day."

"Oh, so it's OK to bring up Harry? All right, noted."

Severus chose to shut her up by covering her mouth with his instead of using words. Hermione did
not complain.
The Daily Prophet's offices erupted in a storm of cooing and clucking the instant Ginny's coworkers realised she was accompanied by two of her children. Lily watched the scene placidly from her mother's arms. Albus glared at everyone in a way that suggested his parents had chosen the correct middle name for him. Unlike James, who strutted and showed off whenever people stared, Albus had always shied away from the limelight that came along with being the son of the Chosen One.

"Aww, she looks just like you, Ginny," Parvati said. "Can I hold her?"

"Please do. She's heavier than she looks. My arms are getting tired." Shifting her shopping bags around to give Parvati better access, Ginny handed Lily over. "I thought it was about time Lily met everyone here."

"Ginevra, so nice to see you," a strident, usually unwelcome voice said. Today, Rita Skeeter's less than dulcet tones made Ginny fight a smirk.

As expected, Rita's Quick-Quotes Quill hovered above a sheet of parchment, waiting to distort Ginny's words into something unrecognisable. When both of the boys had been brought in as infants to be introduced to everyone, Ginny had specifically chosen days when she knew Rita would be absent. Gritting her teeth, Ginny steeled herself for battle.

"Oh, Rita," she said. "Can't we please talk normally for a change? I really didn't come in to be interviewed."

"Of course."

A wave of Rita's wand banished the quill and parchment to her office. Naturally, the door was left open just a crack so the quill could continue scribbling. Excellent.

"Where is little James today?" Rita asked.

"Playing at a friend's house."

Rita tutted. "And poor Albus wasn't invited? Does he struggle to make friends? It must be difficult for him, having such a famous father."

"Mummy," Albus whined. "I'm bored."

"Here you go, darling, play with the stuff Uncle George gave you. I'll just be a few minutes, I promise." Ginny thrust the bright orange Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes bag into his hands. If she knew her son, it really would take only a few minutes. Turning back to Rita, Ginny nailed on a smile. "Al would have gone with his brother today, but I promised him he could help me choose a birthday gift for Professor Snape."

There. That ought to get her off the topic of the Potter children for a while.

"Oh! And how is he doing? Why are you shopping for him? I thought Snape was closer to your husband. Have they had a falling out? Perhaps because Snape still thinks himself a Death Eater?"

"Professor Snape is recovering nicely." Ginny stopped herself. She'd been about to say Snape no more subscribed to Death Eater ideology than she did, but Rita would twist that into a fake
confession about Ginny believing the Death Eaters had it right. "He hasn't thought himself a Death Eater since Harry's parents were killed, as everyone knows. That hasn't changed. I needed to come to Diagon Alley, so I volunteered to get something for his birthday. He and Harry are as close as they ever were, but Harry is kept quite busy with his Head Auror duties."

Come on, Al. Ginny could only keep babbling answers to Rita's questions for so long before her temper rose above the boiling point. She shot a furtive glance at her son. Albus sat cross-legged on the floor, squeezing something that looked like a squishy green brain. Nice choice.

"Is Harry's job causing tension at home?" Rita asked with what was probably supposed to be a sympathetic pout. "Is he missing out on family meals? Working weekends instead of spending time with his children?"

Sweet Merlin. Would Harry arrest Ginny if she just killed the woman? Wasn't there something in their wedding vows prohibiting that? To love, to cherish, to aid and abet? She should have sneaked it in. Ginny could wait till Rita was in her Animagus form and squash her under her shoe. Snape would almost certainly let her borrow his dragonhide boots; she would need something extra heavy and stompy to ensure the job was done properly.

"Harry always makes his family a priority," Ginny said. "He—"

Bright green goo splattered across Rita's face and clothes, courtesy of Albus and the Bouncing, Bursting Brain. A fair amount got on Albus himself, but Rita looked like she'd stood in the way of a giant's sneeze.

"I'm sorry!" Albus squeaked.

"Oh, no," Ginny said over Rita's indignant shouts. "I'm so sorry, Rita. I'm sure it'll wash right off, or George would have complaints from parents, wouldn't he? Goodness, what a mess. I didn't realise. I'd never seen that one before."

Complaints from parents were one of George's favourite things. If Howlers didn't self destruct, they would likely get pride of place on the wall of the shop's staff room.

Dabbing at Rita's slime-coated glasses with the edge of her scarf, Ginny carried on spouting apologies until Rita spun on her heel and marched off to the loo.

"Here you go, mate," Dennis Creevey said with a chuckle as he crouched down and offered Albus a handkerchief. "You can wipe yourself off with that. I don't think you want to use soap and water. It'll just make it worse."

Ah, so Dennis was familiar with that particular product.

"What else did your uncle give you?" Dennis asked. "He didn't send you over here to Dungbomb our office, did he?"

Albus giggled and opened the bag to reveal the rest of his treasures. Dennis reacted to each one with the sort of enthusiasm Ginny remembered him and his brother showing for all things magical when they'd been at school. She allowed herself a brief smile before shuffling around so her back was to Rita's office door.

Everyone's attention was either on the kids or on their work. Holding her wand behind her back, Ginny nudged the door open a tiny bit more and cast a wordless Switching Spell. A rustle in her pocket let her know the dummy quill with the Recording Charm had been swapped with Rita's.
A shriek came from the loo. Rita had discovered the result of using soap and water, then.

"Come on, Al," Ginny said, taking his hand. "Let's go see Professor Snape."

Albus Potter looked like a Muggle fairytale illustration of a goblin. Splotches of bright green decorated his skin, hair and clothes. A few similar spots had also found their way onto Mrs Potter and young Lily.

"Hi, Severus," the boy said in his careful, lisping way. "I got hit by a brain."

"Hello," Severus said. "I see this."

"Invention of George's," Mrs Potter said. "It vanishes in a few hours, unless you try to wash it off."

"Slim chance of a small child trying that tactic."

Mrs Potter laughed. "Grown reporters, on the other hand…"

"Now that, I would like to see." Severus nodded towards the Pensieve. "Have I mentioned that tomorrow is my birthday?"

"I already knew. I have a few things for you. Albus chose the one from all of us. The smaller one is just a little something I thought you would like." Mrs Potter winked in a way that would make even the first year Slytherins roll their eyes at her. "Let me know if you want anything exchanged."

While Mrs Potter deposited two brightly wrapped parcels into Severus's arms, Albus sprawled out on the floor with Lois. The half-Kneazle rubbed her face all over the green marks and purred, much to the boy's amusement. Hmm. George had likely used Green Goosegrass to create the resistance to washing; Kneazles were drawn to it. A toy stuffed with catnip and Green Goosegrass would just about do Lois in from sheer bliss. An infusion of Starthistle would easily wipe the green stains from Albus's skin. Severus chose to keep this fact to himself. The child seemed to enjoy his bizarre appearance.

"Come on, Al," Mrs Potter said. "Let's see if we can find Aunt Hermione and Uncle Neville before we head home."

Moments after their exit, Severus discovered that Mrs Potter had neglected to fill the Pensieve with the memory of Skeeter being turned green because she had already tucked a vial of cloudy silver into the gift from the entire Potter family. Dipping into the Pensieve revealed that she'd cut the vision off before the swapping of the quills. Thank Merlin she had that much sense.

The gift Albus had chosen was an almost comically large pot of red ink. The inkwell was carved with an ornate array of potions ingredients. Severus chuckled to himself once he'd viewed it from every angle. It was the formula for Shushing Solution. A perfect addition to any classroom, in his opinion. The boy definitely took after the Evans side of the family.

Opening the box with Skeeter's acid green quill sent Severus into a silver tailspin of recovered memory.

His surroundings morphed into the kitchen at Spinner's End. On the worktop, a different Self-Writing Quill scratched across the pages of a leather-bound notebook. The same notebook he'd seen himself leave for Hermione in Classroom 2B in a wartime memory. Next to a jumble of cauldrons and ingredients, a Bubble Charm held a bottle of sparkling sand captive.
Charity tapped her foot on the worn lino and stirred a steaming cup of tea. The pair of them couldn't have been older than twenty-five, at most.

"Hair from a Thestral's mane, given willingly, allows the substance to be bound to one object," Vision Severus said to the quill. "It appears to neutralise the unwanted effects in mice as well. Arithmantic calculations indicate I should be able to stabilise and manipulate it further. Future experiments to include Stargrass, Unicorn Hair, possibly Wartizome."

"Did I ever tell you that I wanted to be an Unspeakable?" Charity asked.

"Really? I'm astonished it didn't work out. You are so taciturn."

Ordinarily, in these visions and dreams, Charity reacted to his teasing with laughter and called him an arse. This time, she looked down at her tea and exhaled a cooling breath that rippled across the surface.

"I was particularly fascinated with the possibility of working in the Time Chamber." She swallowed hard. "Severus… I may not have known her well, but I don't think she would have wanted whatever it is you're planning to do with that."

The memory shattered and blew away, leaving Severus once again in his office, alone.

He slumped into his chair. His younger self obtaining the Time Turner sand as part of some ill-conceived plot to save Lily shouldn't have surprised him. Not at all. Had Charity managed to dissuade him, or had he carried on with his attempts?

Shoving the lid back onto the box, Severus tucked it into one of the inner pockets of his robes. He owed Edward a visit. A Muggle house under a Fidelius Charm would be a suitable spot to hide the quill.

Hermione, framed by two bands of silver, gazed out of the lake window in Severus's quarters. Panic and regret tainted the air, but instead of going to her and trying to fix whatever had been broken, Severus opened the door to find a blurry Draco waiting there.

"Hello," Draco said. Distorted by the dream, it could have been anyone's voice. "May I come in?"

"Of course."

Draco paced, glanced at Hermione, threaded his hands through his hair. He sounded like a lost child when he finally spoke again.

"I need your help."

A gentle hand on Severus's shoulder brought him back to the surface, out of the watery light of his dream. He'd fallen asleep at his desk, his head pillowed on his folded hands. Wincing, he stretched until his stiff back popped.

"Sorry I'm so late," Hermione said, bending down for a kiss that was comfortable and familiar and made his breath hitch. "How was your day?"

"Fine." Severus did not breathe a word about his vision of Charity. "Yours?"

"It was OK. Teaching kept getting in the way of research. Time sort of got away from me once I
was free to stay in the library. Apparently, prophetic dreams usually begin manifesting during childhood, around the same time as accidental magic. It's exceedingly rare for them to start as late as your forties. You never had any dreams as a child that came true?"

His dreams as a child had mostly featured exaggerated versions of the fears that had haunted his waking hours. Being left alone, being ridiculed, angering Tobias, clowns.

"No," he said. "Never."

"Hmm. I also researched your mother's family, since Seeing tends to be hereditary. If there was a Seer among the past four generations, they kept it a secret. Maybe we should go Muggle and look up the Snape family on the Internet, see if there were any magical ancestors there."

Severus barked out a laugh. "If they existed, I would have found them decades ago. Death Eater desperate to distance himself from his Muggle upbringing, you'll recall."

"Ah, right." Bouncing on her toes, Hermione checked her watch. "Hey, it's after midnight. You're officially fifty."

"I feel it."

"Falling asleep at your desk will do that." Chuckling, she twirled her wand between her fingers. "Do you want your present now? Here, stand up."

A flick and swish of her wand sent a familiar sensation along the length of his body. It was like the rush and weightlessness of diving into the lake. Severus tilted his head to one side.

"OK, try running," she said.

"You're making me run on my birthday?"

"Oh, just do it. You'll see why."

Severus's put-upon air only lasted for a few steps. His movements looked the same, but instead of the jolt of his feet pounding against flagstones, it felt like kicking his legs to propel himself through water.

"I wanted to have it finished by Christmas, but it wasn't quite ready."

His stomach gave a little swoop. "You invented a spell for me?"

"To be honest, it's as much for me as it is for you. I figured you wouldn't whinge so much about running with me if it felt more like swimming." Hermione grinned. "Happy birthday."

Draping one arm along the back of the sofa, Severus toyed with a lock of Hermione's hair. She glanced up from the book in her lap—a slim volume featuring personal accounts of recovering lost memories. Severus was somewhat amazed there were any books on that particular topic that she had yet to read.

"You know how the force of someone's memories unlocking can sometimes cause an involuntary eruption of magic?" she said. "Well, this wizard in Sweden accidentally vanished his family's entire home a couple of years ago. I didn't realise it could be quite that dramatic. In all of the other cases I've read about, it was always someone lighting all of the candles in the room or levitating their cat or something."
"I imagine it depends on the power of the wizard in question. The amount of memories that have been lost could also be a factor."

Worry lines creased the skin between her eyebrows. "That doesn't exactly bode well for you."

"Near the end, the spontaneous recovery of memories happens faster and faster, as I'm sure you know. When it gets to the point that I am bedridden, Minerva has instructions to see to it that I'm taken somewhere secluded. There's no need for concern. I won't be vanishing Hogwarts."

"You know I'll be going with you, right?"

Severus made a noncommittal hum. He knew she would try. He would make Sybill his Secret Keeper if he had to. Trelawney disliked Hermione enough that she wouldn't be easily swayed by pleading. Severus wanted Hermione close, but more than that, he wanted her safe.

"Was the Swedish wizard's family included in this vanishing?" he asked.

"No. Can you imagine? Losing his home must have been traumatic enough. This says they rebuilt in the same spot. I think I'd want to move."

"It would be a sensible time to do so. You wouldn't need to pack anything. The family let him carry on living with them?"

"Of course they did." She bumped her shoulder against his. "I'd still keep you around, even if you vanished my library."

"Would you?"

"Didn't I once say I could forgive you almost anything?"

His heart and his brain got in an argument, one thudding out its desire to accept her words, one demanding solid proof. "How can you be so certain?"

She smiled like she was the one who was twenty years his senior. "You are one of the most important people in my life, you dunderhead. You have been for a long time now. We've forgiven each other a lot over the past decade or so."

Pausing for thought was the wise thing to do, but some part of him wanted to test her—to discover whether her impossible promise was hollow, never meant to be redeemed. Severus heard himself say something that was possibly one of the stupidest things to ever pass his lips—right up there with a hateful slur and "My Lord."

"Would you forgive me if I'd invaded your privacy?" he asked. "If, for instance, I'd shown up at your cottage in the middle of the night, feigned intoxication, waited until you fell asleep, and then made a copy of your journal to read at my leisure?"

Severus wanted to snatch the words back out of the rapidly chilling space between them. Of course she couldn't forgive that. He should have been content with what she could offer him instead of prodding at the limits of her affection.

He knew her body: the ticklish spots; the places that, when touched just so, made her beg for more; the hills and valleys of her curves. In the weeks since his birthday, he'd memorised all of it. He did not know the closed-off expression on her face. He didn't want to.

Out in the corridor, a deep voice traded muffled words with Eileen's portrait and Ernie. A fist
rapped smartly, requesting entrance.

"You'd better get that," Hermione said. Crossing to the lake window, she turned her back on him.

Draco stood on the doorstep, his grey eyes shadowed by dark circles. He tugged at the cuff of his left sleeve.

"Hello," he said. "May I come in?"

Severus blinked. It was clearer and less muffled than his dream, but the words were identical. He tried out the same response he'd given in his sleep. Stepping back to allow the younger man entrance, he said, "Of course."

Both of Draco's hands swept through his platinum hair. He stared at Hermione for a beat before shaking his head. Severus knew what Draco would say on the breath after a broken sigh.

"I need your help."
Watching Draco slide a hand down his face and hunch over, Hermione almost thought she'd turned the clock back to their sixth year. He'd been fine when she'd seen him on New Year's Eve—all smiles and snark. What had changed in the past month to make him look like that haunted boy again?

Draco started and stopped a few times before finally forcing out the words. "Did you know how to brew Wolfsbane when you were twenty?"

Oh. Hermione's thoughts raced as fast as her pulse. Remus had been barely older than Scorpius was now when he'd been bitten—a punishment doled out to his father by Greyback. She'd never met Lyall Lupin, but she knew quite well how caustic and disagreeable Draco Malfoy could be.

"I was familiar with the process and the formula," Severus said. "I'm certain I could brew it, but I have no memory of ever doing so." His cheeks coloured slightly. "The ingredients were... somewhat beyond the means of most wizards. And as I'm sure you know, the Dark Lord was fond of encouraging the werewolves allied with him to embrace their condition."

Draco's gaze connected with Hermione's. For the space of that knowing, shivering glance, she was back in Greyback's unforgiving grip, her arms pierced by his long fingernails, his putrid breath on her neck as he told Ron how much he wanted a bite.

"I know," Draco said, staring at the cold flagstone floor. "I tried brewing it on my own. I don't know what I did wrong. I followed the instructions exactly, but the smoke was the wrong colour."

"Why do you need it?" Hermione asked.

Again, Draco took his time in answering. When his reply came, it was in the form of a pushed up shirtsleeve. Jagged, deep teeth marks sliced through the faded evidence of his former allegiance to Voldemort. He was a Healer, so the wound was as well-tended as it could have been, but it was still ugly—infected and dark. The cost of this wordless confession showed itself in the rigid set of his spine.

"Oh, Malfoy," Hermione whispered, not caring whether he rejected her sympathy.

Severus studied the blackish red lines with a dispassionate air. "Potter mentioned he'd been chasing a werewolf who'd gone around biting people."

"Yeah. I treated the idiot last night. The wolf, not Potter. Wolfsbane is provided by the Ministry now, but that arsehole came in on a full moon without taking any, knowing what he was, because he'd broken a finger. Some of my coworkers got him subdued and restrained him to wait for Potter's lackeys to collect him, or it would have been... much worse. I managed to hide that he'd bitten me and worked the rest of my shift."

He'd carried on working with a fresh werewolf bite? The imaginary turned-back clock in Hermione's mind shot forward again, as far as possible from the Hippogriff scratches and death sentences of their third year.

"I love my job," Draco said, pacing to the lake window and back again. "I'm good at it. I'm fucking brilliant at it. They don't have any reason to sack me, but if I sign up for the Ministry's Wolfsbane programme, they'll find a reason. A former Death Eater and a werewolf? No one is going to want me to be their Healer."
"I will," Hermione said softly.

Draco let out a scoffing sort of laugh. "Steady on, Granger. My first day as a wolf, and you already have that gleam in your eyes."

"What gleam?"

"The one that says you want to rescue me and get me a doghouse and some chew toys."

"How about we start with me teaching you how to brew Wolfsbane, and we'll discuss chew toys later?"

Severus could, of course, brew a perfect batch of Wolfsbane on his first try, but helping Draco would give Hermione some time and space to think. More importantly, it would give Severus time and space to finally learn how to say the words *I'm sorry* to her.

Severus eyebrows shot up. "You can brew it?"

"I can. You taught me how a few years ago."

"Why?" Draco asked, his face going even paler than normal. "Is Lupin's kid—"

"Your cousin is not a werewolf, no. I was just interested in the process and curious to see if I could do it." And, perhaps, the tiniest bit eager to prove to Severus that she was that skilled. "Given who my teacher was, I know the potion's quirks and where the widely available instructions fall short of perfection. You should be able to manage it, Malfoy. If you can't, I'll brew it for you. Come on. We'll use my office."

On the silent walk up from the dungeons, Hermione's thoughts drifted away from Draco's problem and back to her own. A vindictive itch pestered at her to use Legilimency on Severus, to read his buried thoughts the way he'd read her scribbled words. Not that she harboured any delusions that she could shatter his Occlumency shields again. She'd only managed it that one time, when she'd seen his memory of proposing to a woman who loved him. Hermione had never discovered how she'd broken through.

If Severus actually was a Seer, then that proposal could have been… No, she wasn't going to let herself follow that train of thought. Would Severus have read her journal if he'd been himself, with all of his memories intact? If he'd suspected her of something, then possibly. More likely he would've tried to trick her into confessing something incriminating. Of one thing she was certain: he would not have admitted the invasion of privacy the way the current Severus had. If she told the 50-year-old Severus that she could forgive him for nearly anything, he'd chuckle that deep chuckle of his, maybe imply she was naive, and then change the subject.

It was true, though, what she'd said about the two of them forgiving each other a lot over the years. He'd forgiven her when she'd invaded his privacy. Eventually.

Hermione should have shown him that memory ages ago.

Severus was fucking Granger. Draco was sure of it.

Well, not at that precise moment. Right then, Granger was too busy critiquing Draco's stirring technique for anything of that sort, but in general, yes. Severus and Granger had orbited one
another for years, coming close but never quite touching. Draco had never been able to work out who was the planet and who was the sun.

Severus had sent Draco the Pensieve memory of one of his mysterious dreams with a double silver aura—not that Draco had been able to provide any answers. In the dream, Severus had barely been able to return Granger's embrace when she'd all but thrown herself at him. Now, though, Draco would wager it was quite another story. Granger had been a powerful enough Occlumens at age 18 to keep Aunt Bella out (and, honestly, thank Merlin for that), but her body language gave her away where Severus was concerned.

Good for Severus. Draco couldn't see the appeal, but Severus deserved to get what he wanted. So much so that Draco didn't even file the information away to use against either of them.

Astoria would only scold him if he did. Draco didn't need the headache.

He did need something to hold against Granger to keep her quiet, just in case. Nothing involving Severus; there was that whole Life Debt thing. Technically, Draco supposed he was placing himself squarely in Granger's debt as well. Not that she would see it that way. Her bleeding heart leapt at any chance to do a good deed. It was why he'd let his secret pour out in front of her. Being an underdog (ugh, emphasis on the dog in this case) was a surefire way to get Granger on one's side. His reputation would need all the help it could get in the coming months. And with Granger's opinions on discrimination against werewolves, it was almost like Draco was doing her a favour—making her feel useful and giving her a cause to get all riled up and Granger about.

Draco's skin prickled. No, he couldn't tolerate owing her anything. Her thoughts on the matter might change if she one day needed something he didn't want to provide. But what could he give her? A book from the Manor's library? Was that enough to repay her for teaching him how to brew his own sanity? All of the truly valuable items were in the garden shed, but there was nothing in there that was Light enough to appeal to the likes of her, unless she wanted some broken Time Turners to study or a vat of Veritaserum to use on cheating students or a pair of Father's shoes to wear. Father wouldn't part with the latter.

Hmm. McGonagall had surprised the hell out of Draco by asking him to find a place for Severus on the grounds of the Manor when the memories started coming back so intensely that Severus could no longer function. It made sense; the Manor was secluded enough to protect others from any outpouring of magic that happened when Severus's memories finally snapped back into place, and Draco was more than capable of seeing to Severus's care. Draco could take Granger to Severus's bedside. She would want to hold Severus's hand and fret pointlessly and get in Draco's way.

No, Severus would vanish the Life Debt by killing Draco if that route was taken. Placing her in any amount of danger, no matter how small, would be inexcusable in Severus's eyes. Draco would just have to find something else she wanted.

"You know," Draco said, because he couldn't resist, "you could have saved me quite a few Galleons if you'd tapped into that legendary Gryffindor courage a bit sooner."

Granger rolled her eyes. "That isn't the motivation you seem to think it is. OK, see how it's starting to smoke? Keep a close eye on it. The exact second it turns purple, add the Wolfsbane."

Draco obeyed with a sigh. His wolfy secret was going to get out eventually. The best he could hope for was some sort of damage limitation. He dreaded the next time his wife's cousin decided to drop by for a visit—even more than he usually did. Rita had been so much more entertaining when she had just occasionally popped up at school to terrorise Potter and Granger.
"Good," Granger said as the smoke shifted to blue. "Ten more anti-clockwise stirs. Perfect. I think you've earned yourself that chew toy."

Draco snorted. "Fuck off, Granger."

"Tsk. Keep that up and you'll get your nose smacked with a rolled up newspaper."

"I really wish Severus had his memory back."

Granger's expression shifted from teasing amusement to something soft and sad. "Me too."

Tobias would have bought her flowers. Or, more likely, he would have nicked a wilting bouquet of carnations from a garage forecourt. Severus had witnessed it often enough—the downcast looks, the vows of devotion, the promises to never again do what he'd done a hundred times before. It had always been effective. Apology accepted, back to normal.

He wasn't his father.

Rubbing his temples in an attempt to vanish his growing headache, Severus tried to guess what his older self would do. He wouldn't humiliate himself by threatening to sleep outside her quarters until she heard him out, that was for certain. The only emotions he found sinking into the pit of his stomach were the same things he would have felt at age 20: love-struck panic, frustration, and a sickening sort of certainty. Hermione would leave. They would never live out all of those double-framed dreams. Except, of course, the dream of Draco asking for help and the rerun of Hermione's donated memory.

Severus blinked. That wasn't exactly true, was it? Hermione had reenacted one of the dreams after she'd viewed it in the Pensieve, waking Severus up with her wandering hands and breathy voice. Even the citrus scent and the metallic jab in the small of his back had been the same.

He'd dreamed about kissing her beneath mistletoe in the staff room; the kiss that had been the start of them had taken place in that exact location. And Severus had certainly kissed a path down her bare skin—whenever he could, in fact—but he had been particularly thorough about it the first time they'd been together. No shower sex as of yet, but that was the odd one out. And there had been the night he'd read her journal. Not a dream, that time, but a vision she'd insisted hadn't been true. He'd seen himself brushing his lips against Hermione's in her bed at the cottage. He'd proceeded to make exactly that happen.

Was he a Seer? He didn't feel like one. He didn't even know the past, much less the future.

Crossing to the Pensieve, Severus compared and contrasted dreams with reality. The dreams were quick, hazy things with muffled sounds and too much silver. The longest among them was thirty seconds, if that. But in every case, he managed to find a moment from his waking hours that was identical—something he had lived and remembered.

Perhaps they would eventually find themselves in his shower after all.

Severus's stomach swooped as if he'd fallen from his broom. Bathing with Hermione… One of the first memories he'd received had featured his younger self eavesdropping on her in the Prefects' Bath. The more annoying of those Patil women had given it to him. During Hermione's sixth year, Severus had stood frozen next to the statue of Boris the Bewildered, fear forming a lump in his throat as he'd listened to Hermione screeching a song she would sing at Spinner's End over a decade later.
Had he known, even then? That same year, he'd lied to Hermione about his reasons for teaching her Occlumency. Severus still didn't know why he'd truly done it. The only other person who might have been able to shed some light on the subject had been silenced with a hateful jet of green from Severus's own wand.

The portrait version, however, was still available. Severus squirmed.

Upon forcing himself to leave his quarters to seek an audience with said portrait, Severus found his employer kneeling on the ground with her arse in the air. Just when he thought his life could not possibly get any stranger. A Gobstones board had been sketched on the floor in white chalk. Classic Game; Minerva had eight Gobstones remaining to her opponent's nine. Across the circle, George, Ernie, and a handful of Hogwarts professors watched Minerva take aim.

"Severus!" Eileen's portrait shouted. "Close me, please. I can't see."

Dazed, Severus obeyed. A chorus of cheers and groans rose up when Minerva missed her target. The loudest of the groans came from Eileen.

"Evening," George said to Severus with a grin. "Sorry, did we disturb you? I owed your mum a game."

"I should have chosen a different proxy," Eileen grumbled. "Minnie, you need to flick your wrist more. Like this, see?"

The chuckle that shook George's shoulders made his hair shift to reveal the gaping hole where an ear had once been. At the sight of it, Severus toppled backwards into a vision.

The surroundings were almost the same: the dank, faintly lit dungeon corridor outside his quarters, with Sophia's portrait in place of Eileen's. Years somehow both lifted from and piled onto George's face. His laugh lines weren't as pronounced, but his haunted expression belonged on a much older man. Severus hadn't known George was capable of something so far from a smile.

"What is it you want, exactly?" Vision Severus asked.

"I want you to... I don't know." A shake of Vision George's head brought his injury into view. "Teach me how to block it all out and pretend everything isn't fucking horrible. At the rate I'm going, I'll lose my business, too. Looking miserable all the bloody time isn't exactly great for luring customers into a joke shop."

Guilt and Severus were old friends, but the sensation of sympathy welling up and searching for a fissure in his defences was less familiar. Had the vision come to him during his first week without his memories, he might have struggled to identify the feeling.

"Weasley, in all your years of being my student, did I ever look anything other than miserable?"

Vision George exhaled a sour imitation of a laugh. "Fair point."

Clasping his hand behind his back, Vision Severus considered the request. "I have one condition. If, by some miracle, you manage to develop strong shields, you will drop them when you are not working. I'll not have your mother kicking down my door when you fail to deal with your loss in some suitably over-dramatic Gryffindor manner."

As George's face registered surprise, the vision collapsed back into the present.

Bloody typical. Severus himself had given George the key to resisting Veritaserum by teaching
him Occlumency.

The real George moved to take his turn at the game. Like Minerva, his form was all wrong. It would be a long time before one of them managed to knock seven of the other's Gobstones out of the circle. Rupert Smith scratched one of his wrists as he moved next to Longbottom to get a better view. Severus resisted the urge to scowl.

"Minerva," Severus said. "Might I use your office? I had a recovered memory of my year as Headmaster; I would like to verify it with the portraits."

It was as good an excuse as any. Armed with Minerva's password and accompanied by Ernie, Severus made his way to his former office.

"Headmaster," Phineas Black's portrait said with a slight bow.

"Not any longer," Severus said. Steeling himself, he looked up into blue eyes that still held that irritating twinkle. "Dumbledore."

Dumbledore beamed. "I was wondering when you would finally come speak to me."

"Do you recall the circumstances that led to me tutoring Hermione Granger in Occlumency?"

"Oh, certainly. It was your idea. You came to my office and said you thought Miss Granger might be able to succeed in teaching young Harry where you could not. I don't believe she did, in the end."

"I see." Severus's younger self had told Hermione that the lessons had been on Dumbledore's orders. "And you never discovered my true reasons?"

"Dear me, Severus." Dumbledore chuckled. "Are you implying that you might have hidden something from me? How shocking. I always believed you to be such an open book."

The portrait was not the person, but still. He was one to talk about withholding information. Could Foe-Glasses work on animated canvas as well as flesh and bone? Knowing it to be an exercise in futility, Severus flipped open the cover on his faux pocketwatch.

Dumbledore's portrait didn't appear among the shadows clouding the Foe-Glass, but someone else did. Rita Skeeter's smirking face was almost as clear as it had been at Malfoy Manor. She was in the castle.
More Than Half

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Vitellia, who let me bounce ideas off of her when I was ready to pull my hair out over various plot points I was starting to wish I'd never included. Which is one of the big drawbacks of publishing chapters as I write them, I suppose. If you have not read Vitellia's Past Imperfect over on FFnet, you absolutely should. It is complete as of yesterday, and it's both heartbreaking and funny (my favourite combination). Also, Severus's proposed method of dealing with Rita was inspired by a comment from buttons1721 on the previous chapter.

A swooping sensation went through Severus as his nonverbal charm confirmed that Ernie was his only human companion in the Headmistress's office. Well, the man standing next to him was probably Ernie.

"What spell did I teach you last spring?" Severus asked.

"A charm to remove the peel from marmalade."

"Here." Severus handed him the Foe-Glass. "We might have a slight problem."

"Well, hell. Do you think I should send a message to Harry? He'll be cross with me if he misses out on Skeeter being arrested for something."

"I was planning on squashing her under the heel of my boot if necessary. If you think Potter would enjoy witnessing that, then by all means."

"Lad, you shouldn't say things like that to an Auror."

"Probably not."

Focusing on the memory of kissing Hermione under the mistletoe, Severus sent his Patronus flying off to her with a warning. Ernie followed without further reprimands when Severus took the Foe-Glass back from him and rushed towards the stairs.

Skeeter's image faded bit by bit on their journey back to the dungeons. By the time they rejoined the now diminished audience watching the Gobstones game, the damnable woman had vanished entirely.

George and Minerva both still had as many Gobstones as when he'd left. Pathetic.

"Stand aside, Minerva," Severus said. "I'll be Mum's proxy."

"Thank Merlin," Minerva said. "I forgot how much I hate this game. And if your mother's portrait calls me Minnie one more time—"

"Thank you, darling," Eileen said. "Maybe you won't completely embarrass me."

Severus hated the game as well, but he'd played it often enough as a child. A practiced flick of his
thumb sent the first of George's Gobstones spinning out of the circle. And there was the reason he hated it: the foul-smelling liquid that sprayed from the Gobstone onto George's face. Mum had been the president of the Gobstones Club when she'd attended Hogwarts. Playing the game with her, Severus had been sprayed often.

As Severus picked up the spent Gobstone, he used a silent Accio to summon a strand of hair from Sinistra's robe. Someone at Hogwarts had likely let Skeeter in. None of his fellow teachers showed up on Severus's Foe-Glass, but there were any number of reasons why that might have happened. An unwilling accomplice, someone under the Imperius Curse, a particularly trusting moron.

Severus charmed the stolen hair to wrap around the Gobstone and slipped it into his pocket. He repeated the process with his other colleagues and George, using the different coloured stones to keep track of which hair belonged to each person. Smith, Longbottom, and Trelawney were now absent; he could obtain their hair later. He couldn't use Polyjuice to disguise himself as Hagrid, Filius, or—thanks to that werewolf—Draco.

Teddy Lupin laughed as George wiped yet another glob of disgusting liquid from his face, then laughed harder when a grinning George smeared the Gobstone goo on the boy's cheek. Hmm. A Metamorphmagus could mimic anyone's appearance, half-breeds included.

No, probably best not. Hermione would duel Potter for the right to strangle Severus if he got Lupin involved. Still, at least that explained why Severus had decided to mentor the boy. He would likely come in handy someday.

"Not bad," Eileen said once the game was won. "Certainly better than Minnie."

Severus rushed in before his employer could aim a Reducto at Eileen's portrait. "Minerva, I need to speak to you and Filius in your office in fifteen minutes."

He didn't wait for her to confirm the appointment, opting instead to retreat to the fireplace in his quarters. He had arrangements to make.

The first Potter to answer Severus's Floo Call was young Lily. She made a valiant effort at reaching through the protective child fence in order to grab his nose. Her indignant wails when she failed in this endeavour brought her mother into the room.

"I'm afraid I must request that you return my birthday gift," Severus said. "The one from you."

"Ah, didn't fit in with the rest of your pleasure dungeon, then?"

"Indeed. If you would go to Spinner's End this evening, I'll arrange for it to be there."

"Check your Christmas gift," the doe said in Severus's deep voice. It stroked its face along Hermione's arm before it dissolved.

"Still a doe?" Draco said, crossing his arms. "That's interesting."

Oh, honestly. Turning her back on him, Hermione fished her Foe-Glass out of her pocket. She groaned. That bloody beetle. A slice of Hermione's wand through the air cast a wordless charm to detect the presence of other humans. Only her and Draco.

"All right, Granger?"

"Not particularly." She tilted the false mirror towards him. "Did you have any visitors at your
house before you came here? I think you might have picked up a stowaway."

"For fuck's sake," he muttered. "No, she wasn't there, as far as I know. Why is she so interested in
you?"

"I sort of kept her in a jar once. And blackmailed her. A bit."

Blinking, Draco stared at her as if they'd never before met. "Huh. So that's what Severus sees in
you."

Statements like that were best ignored, even if Hermione did almost want to laugh.

"Come on," she said. "Bottle up your potion and let's…I don't know. See if we can find her, I
guess."

She needed the Marauder's Map. If Harry hadn't insisted it was unfair for a professor to always be
able to catch students wandering the halls…

"And what do you propose we do if we find her?" Draco asked. "Should we take a jar along?"

"Legilimency? I bet she's skulking around in her Animagus form and trying to keep her presence
here a secret, so I can probably justify it to the Headmistress."

"Ugh, fine. As a favour to Severus, I suppose I can—"

"Not you. I meant I would do it."

Draco tucked the bottled potion into his robes and held the office door open for Hermione. "You
cannot be serious."

"Of course I am. Severus taught me in sixth year." Hermione squinted at the Foe-Glass as she tried
determine which staircase to take. Rita's image was beginning to fade.

"Yeah, I'm sure he was really ruthless with you when you were his student and the Headmaster was
watching his every move. I, on the other hand, learned from Aunt Bella."

"Severus didn't need to be ruthless in order for me to get past his shields. I sincerely doubt Bellatrix
ever managed that."

Draco scoffed. "Right. Anything you saw in Severus's head, he wanted you to see."

He really hadn't. Severus had, in fact, threatened to Obliviate her at the time.

In between bickering over who was better suited to invade someone's mind, Hermione and Draco
bickered over which route to take. The image in Hermione's Foe-Glass became more shadow than
substance.

"You do realise that Severus didn't intend for you to tell me that Rita was here, right?" Draco
asked.

"I'm sure he didn't, but you were willing to let me brew Wolfsbane for you. Several of the
ingredients are poisonous, as I'm sure you know. There's a fine line between killing and curing
with that potion. You trusted me with your life, so I reckon I can trust you with this. Plus, you must
know her far better than I do by now."

"Not sure Severus will agree with that logic, but OK."
Hermione glared at the Foe-Glass. It had the nerve to no longer show Rita's face.

Hermione and Severus started off with a cushion separating them on his sofa. Placing one hand into the demilitarised zone, he decided to begin with facts instead of apologies.

"Minerva and Filius have added extra wards," he said. "The secret passageways we know of are all blocked off, and only the Headmistress will be allowed to let visitors in at the gates. If someone who isn't an employee of Hogwarts tries to pass through when a teacher opens the gates, they'll be stopped. She's going to tell the staff that it's the Governors' fault—I told her to claim that they were concerned about a former Death Eater coming to visit me when I was without my memories."

Hermione nodded. "I owled Harry to ask to borrow his map. And you contacted Ginny?"

"I did. She is going to switch the quills back at the first opportunity."

Dream by dream, he talked her through his findings. Hermione let her own hand wander into the boundary cushion as he spoke, stopping centimetres away from touching him. Lois eyed the cushion, but decided the spot Boudica occupied next to the fire was the more valuable real estate.

"I wish I could ask your fifty-year-old self about all of this," Hermione said.

"Me too."

That potion he'd been creating for Hermione's parents had revealed the dates of the memories within it. If Severus had a cauldron full of the potion, would he be able to alter it in order to discover if—when the shower dream would happen in real life?

No point in wondering about it, he supposed. Even if he had access to the formula and the ingredients, he wouldn't waste something so valuable on something so frivolous.

Severus brushed his little finger against Hermione's. Right. Time for those apologies.

"I'm sorry. Not that it excuses my actions, but I was attempting to rule you out as a suspect when I read your journal. I have not once invaded your privacy since we… advanced beyond friendship."

"Oh, is that what we are? Advanced friends?"

"You know very well that isn't what I said."

"Hmm. I just realised we never actually sat down and discussed exclusivity. I just sort of… assumed. We are exclusive, aren't we, Severus?"

It was so artless that Severus had to smile. She delivered the question like a girl passing a note to him in class, asking him to be her boyfriend. He opened his mouth to tick the box that said yes, but Hermione smirked and carried on speaking.

"Because if anyone dares to touch you," she said, "I'm likely to learn how to cast some of those Unforgivables you're so proficient in."

Chuckling, Severus risked placing a leg on the cushion and lifted his hand to cup her cheek. "As entertaining as that would be to watch, I do not wish to be with anyone else."

"Good."
He was quite ready to place his imbecilic confession behind them and jump headlong into make up sex (Lucius had once shared far too much information about the benefits of the occasional disagreement with one's partner), but Hermione had other plans. After touching her lips to his in the chastest of kisses, she brought her wand to her temple.

"I have a memory for you," she said. "Have you viewed any today?"

"Just one, this morning." Potter had written Roonil Wazlib down as the owner of the memory. Idiot. "What is it?"

"It happened in October of 2001, I think. Have a look."

Within the memory, Severus's quarters were almost as disorganised as they were in the present day, with open books and piles of notes strewn about. These days, it felt strange to see his living space sans Lois and Boudica. They'd become a constant fixture in his life. Like familiar furniture, but much needier. And moodier, in Lois's case.

The fuller figured, early twenties version of Hermione looked around the sitting room as Memory Severus led her inside.

"It's not how I pictured it," she said.

Oh. She'd once told Severus that she'd daydreamed about sitting on his lap and snogging him the first time she'd been allowed entrance to his quarters.

"What did you imagine?" Memory Severus asked. "An overlarge bat roost?"

"Of course not. But where do you hide your coffin?"

"I dearly wish I could still take points from Gryffindor for your impertinence."

"I'm sure you'll find some unfortunate student to pay the price for me."

Memory Severus maintained a straight face, revealing none of the amusement that bubbled through him. Nor did he let on to the ripple of half-formed desire and fondness that appeared when he took the seat next to Hermione on the sofa. Her robes shifted as she got herself situated, revealing the slightest glimpse of cleavage. Memory Severus looked.

So did Severus, to be fair.

Was this the earliest memory in which Severus had felt such emotions? It hadn't been there in the memories from the era of Raffaella. Not really. And this had taken place just two months before Severus had kissed Raffaella in the Ministry Atrium as Hermione and George had looked on. There was an undercurrent of conflict and reluctance to it in this memory—like he wanted her to remain firmly in the Miss Granger box forever. The fool didn't know what he was missing.

"How are your parents?" Memory Severus asked.

"Tired of looking in the Pensieve. Other than that, it's hard to say. They still haven't had any spontaneously recovered memories, in spite of your recent contributions."

Even when they were only friends, Severus would have tried to ease the pain of that statement by wrapping his unpracticed arms around her. Memory Severus merely allowed his hand to linger on Hermione's as he passed her a book that detailed the long history of Potions research—the
intersection of his discipline with hers. She gave him a brittle smile.

They looked at it together, Memory Severus thumbing to passages he thought would interest her and taking the opposite side in every debate that ensued. With each page, the space between them shrank. Still not close enough to be classified as intimate, but close enough that his tentative desire began to warm and a blush stained Hermione's cheeks.

"There's another volume I've been meaning to show you, but I left it in my office," Memory Severus said. With instructions to browse his personal library if she got bored during his absence, he set off to retrieve the missing book.

Nestled among the shelves was a plain, honey coloured wooden box. The box that now lived in Severus's bedroom. The box that contained Charity's letters.

It was like watching a Muggle horror film with characters who were, of course, intent on wandering into danger. No matter how much Severus willed those infuriating characters to not open that door, not go investigating that strange noise, not trust that hitchhiker, they always refused to obey. Forcefully thinking *leave the box alone* at Hermione didn't make her comply, either. The lid sprang open.

She didn't see much. Only Charity's final, bloodstained note that said *I still believe in you*. Upon realising it was something personal, she hesitated just a beat too long before moving to close it. Memory Severus was already there, slamming the lid shut.

"Leave," he said.

"I'm sorry! Oh, no. Severus… I'm so sorry. I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't. You're like Potter in more ways than one, it seems. I said *leave*, Miss Granger."

Everything good he felt for her was shoved down, trampled under the anger and hurt that roared through the memory. Hermione fled.

"How long did it take before I forgave you?" Severus asked once he rejoined Hermione outside the Pensieve.

She shrugged. "Difficult to say. After giving you a couple of days to cool off, I wrote you a heartfelt apology. The only response you gave me was to start sitting next to me at meals again. You claimed it was because of the Life Debt."

"Naturally."

Severus could almost see the looping script. She would have included a simple admission of guilt, a fervent hope to regain his trust, and a claim that she would have regretted her actions even if she had not been caught. None of it would have swayed him. Not on its own.

Severus thought his forgiveness had less to do with her contrition and more to do with the fact that, like Charity, Hermione had believed in him when no one else had. Sinking back down onto the sofa, he reflected on a parade of memories. Her brief capture at Hogwarts, when he'd first shown her the cottage—when a simple sigh of relief from her upon seeing his face had felt a little bit like Light magic. Her defence of him against the crowd at his trial. Her magic reaching out to him when her dreams turned dark, asking him, of all people, to keep her safe. Her ridiculous Patronus cuddling up to him without her knowledge every time she sent him a message. Her sad smile on the very first day he'd lost his memories, when she'd told him she would trust him with her life.
"I wasn't offered entrance to your quarters again until, hmm, February, I think?" Hermione said. "It was the day my parents viewed the final memory from you and we gave up for good. Or we gave up as far as I was aware, at any rate. You didn't say anything about my parents that day; you just told me to come over so you could show me a variant of Blood-Replenishing Potion you'd developed that took half the time to brew."

So, it had been before his split with Raffaella, but only just. Raising his wand, Severus summoned the box of Charity's letters from his bedroom.

"Here," he said, thrusting it into Hermione's hands. "Read them."

She gaped at him. "It's not some sort of scale we have to balance so things are even on both sides. You don't have to do this to earn my forgiveness. You apologised, and I believe you meant it and won't go snooping again; that's enough for me. I don't want to go snooping, either. We're still allowed to keep some things private, Severus."

"I am aware of that. Read."

Severus wasn't sure why he wanted to share this piece of himself with her—all of the pieces, really. It didn't make sense. Hermione read cautiously at first, casting glances at him out of the corner of her eye. By the time she reached the final letter, tears streamed down her face. Setting the box on a side table, she climbed into Severus's lap and wrapped her arms around him.

"I wish I'd known her better." She sniffled. "I'm glad you had a friend like that."

Severus rubbed a hand up and down her back until her breathing calmed.

"Am I forgiven?" he whispered.

"Of course. I already said you were."

"Good. There's something I would like to try."

Leaning past Severus, Hermione turned the shower up to a temperature that was better suited to melting flesh from bones than to bathing. He flipped it back down with a yelp. It was still far too close to boiling for his liking, but she would probably compare it to the Arctic. They would both have to compromise. It was worth it to have her pressed against him, naked and smiling.

"We can try," she said as her back met the shower wall, "but I still say it won't work."

Severus kissed her. "It will. Trust me."

"Shower sex is for twenty-year-olds who devote most of their waking hours to staying fit. They do yoga and a billion squats and can put their feet behind their heads, probably. If we were closer in height, then maybe I could turn around, but you're too tall. Also, you don't even have a mat or anything to keep us from falling and breaking a hip."

"I could cast a Temporary Sticking Charm and attach you to the wall—"

"Don't you dare."

Her ensuing laughter shivered into a gasp when Severus slipped a hand between her thighs. Everything was like the dream he'd had on Christmas morning. Her teeth scraped against his neck and her legs wrapped around him in just the same way. Even the sound of her moan was identical.
It did work—for a minute or two. Gravity kept interfering and making Hermione slide down the marble tiles. Severus's arms and thighs ached with the effort of hitching her back up again and again. Eventually, with a squeak of alarm from Hermione, things came to a halt as Severus's feet skidded backwards. They both landed upright, but only just.

Severus couldn't help joining in with her laughter. He expected Hermione to make some comment about broken hips or having told him so when she held his face in her hands. Instead, three unexpected words drifted up to him between her chuckles.

"I love you."

She'd made that same declaration before, after a fashion. Beneath the mistletoe, she'd told him she'd been half in love with him since she was nineteen years old. More than half. A lump formed in Severus's throat. Holding her close, he hid his face against her shoulder. The truth he'd never before said aloud refused to come out, but she seemed to hear it, anyway.
The copy of Rita Skeeter's acid green quill rested on Severus's desk, blaring out tinny replicas of two familiar voices.

"What do you mean you can't approach her?" Skeeter asked.

"She reported me to McGonagall for harassment," Rupert Smith said. "I'll lose my job if I keep trying, and then where will you be?"

"I'll be exactly where I bloody am now. Why am I even paying you? You've been utterly useless."

Smith's tone turned resentful. "It's not my fault she's so frigid."

"It is, actually. If you'd used a love potion—"

"Yeah, because no one would suspect a thing if she was suddenly swooning all over me after barely giving me the time of day before. Especially not her best mate the Potions Master."

Scoffing, Hermione paused the playback charm. "Why didn't this arsehole appear on my Foe-Glass? It must be faulty."

"I suspect he had no intentions of actually going through with whatever Skeeter wanted him to do," Severus said. "His plan likely consisted of collecting her money and making a show of trying to deliver. He had no malicious intent towards either of us, unless you count his clumsy attempts at flirtation."

"I absolutely do count that."

Severus did, too. It was fortunate for Smith that he had refused to dose Hermione with a love potion. Heat rose up the back of Severus's neck as his stomach roiled. He hated love potions. Hated them. They should have been considered as unforgivable as the Imperius Curse. It amounted to the same thing. If he heard of anyone using a love potion on Hermione—on anyone... well, it was not so very long ago that he'd been a Death Eater.

A flick of Hermione's wand restarted the recording and interrupted Severus's vengeful train of thought.

"If that idiot hadn't wiped his memories, this would all be so much easier," Skeeter said.

Silence stretched out for so long that Severus started to question whether that was the end.

"Let me get this straight," Smith said with a wry chuckle. "You think that if Severus Snape had all of his memories of being a spy and deceiving arguably the most powerful Legilimens in recent history, it would be easier for either of us to find out what is in that notebook?"

"If you'd put the slightest effort in with Granger, she would have solved it. She can't resist showing off how clever she is."

It devolved into even more of a shouting match after that. At the end, Severus stood up and straightened the sleeves of his robes.
"Care to make a wager?" he asked.

"About?"

"How long it will take me to get Smith to turn on Skeeter and tell Potter everything he knows."

It took five minutes.

Potter Senior and his gang of scoundrels helped, oddly enough. Once Severus flashed their little map and asked in his coldest voice why a certain name might have appeared near Smith's the other day, Smith folded.

Another option would have been to send the quill to Potter as an anonymous tip, but that wouldn't have been nearly as satisfying. Severus found a certain amount of vindictive glee in making Smith squirm with just a glare.

Hermione would likely label that as unhealthy, no matter how much she disliked the man, but Severus disagreed. Everyone needed hobbies.

Potter brought Severus two Pensieve memories once Rita was apprehended. The first was Potter's view of Skeeter's arrest. The second memory was from Skeeter herself: Severus's accident as she'd seen it. She'd been there, in her beetle form, looking for a story during a slow week.

"She's hoping to prove she didn't actually cause your memory loss by providing that one," Potter said. "Oh, and she told us where to find this." Reaching into his pocket, Potter produced the leather-bound notebook Severus had seen himself leave for Hermione in Classroom 2B. "It was open when I went into her flat, but the letters are all scrambled, so I didn't read it or anything."

At Severus's touch, the jumble of symbols on the page untangled itself into words, legible to both him and Potter. Severus slammed it shut.

"Right," Potter said. "I'll leave you to it, then. Let me know if you see anything significant in her memory of your accident."

As soon as Potter left his quarters, Severus dumped the arrest memory into the Pensieve and dived in. They'd lowered the wards and had Smith arrange to sneak Skeeter back onto Hogwarts grounds. Her preferred method of travel was crawling beneath Smith's collar as a beetle. How she hadn't asphyxiated on his cologne was anyone's guess. Once she'd been forced back into her human form and bound by Potter's Incarcerous, she'd screeched about false accusations and how she was going to ruin Smith. She would have gone on ranting if Ronald hadn't hit her with a Silencio.

Severus watched it twice. Hobbies.

The memory of Severus's accident started out in Hogsmeade. Althea, Smith's predecessor, was shopping in Scrivenshaft's when Rita saw an easy opportunity. Althea never noticed the little hitchhiker in her shopping bags.

Back at the castle, Memory Severus finally came onto the scene. His emotions were locked away, held captive behind that wall that used to guard his feelings for Hermione. Rita crawled beneath the door of his lab and watched as Memory Severus sprinkled Time Turner sand into his cauldron. There was no time to react. With two flashes of light and a wave of silver from the cauldron, the potion exploded. The vial of Time Turner sand toppled over, mingling with the spilled potion. Surprise fizzled out as a potion-splattered Memory Severus collapsed to the floor.
Skeeter transformed. After checking his breathing with a conjured mirror held beneath his nose, she took his wand and cast an Evanesco on the mess of silver. Not to vanish evidence, it seemed, but because a great deal of it coated his notebook. Snatching up the notebook, she left him there.

Astoria Malfroy knew where the bodies were buried.

Not literally. Cousin Rita never murdered anyone unless it was a metaphorical slaying via print. Rita had, however, committed all manner of other sins. The most recent of her crimes wouldn't necessarily make people stop believing her stories. Her more dedicated fans might even praise her dedication to uncovering the truth. Whenever she was released, Rita would certainly try to spin it as commitment to delivering stories to her readers, no matter the cost.

Fortunately, Astoria had been preparing for this event since she was seventeen years old. After the war, Astoria had immersed herself in reading about all things Muggle. Sacred Twenty-Eight and Pureblood supremacy her arse; some of the bravest people she'd ever met had either come from Muggles or been raised by them. In her reading, she'd discovered a plant that had been used by Victorian Muggle ladies to loosen the lips of their friends. One tap of the flower into a teacup, and the dusting of pollen would encourage secrets to flow. It was just a nudge, not the blunt force of Veritaserum. A hint. Poisoning the target with an overdose was a risk, but that was why Bezoars existed. Plus, Rita was far too familiar with Veritaserum for that to be an option.

As Ginny Potter read through Astoria's exposé of Rita, Astoria stared out of the window at Diagon Alley. How many times had Draco complained about finding Rita at theirs, sipping a cup of tea? Astoria had enough information at this point for a tell-all book in the manner of one of Rita's scandalous biographies.

Hmm. That was a thought. Rita Skeeter: Fact or Fiction? Perhaps later. For now, Astoria would settle for an article. Just a little thank you card to Hermione. The fact that Astoria liked Hermione Granger had nothing to do with it. She would have done something of the same magnitude for anyone who had tried to help Draco. Even Pansy Parkinson. Probably.

"Rita has been a busy little beetle, hasn't she?" Ginny asked. "Blackmail, bribery, fabrication, plagiarism? I honestly would have only guessed the first three. It's all true?"

"Every word. I'm not entirely sure which reporter she plagiarised, but I suspect Dennis Creevey. She just talked about someone new who was young and nowhere near cutthroat enough to survive. He won't remember he wrote the stories in the first place, though."

Ginny set the parchment down on the table. "Astoria, you know I write about Quidditch, right? Part time, at that. Why bring this to me?"

Both of Astoria's parents were on friendly terms with the Prophet's editor-in-chief, but Barnabus Cuffe did not have a son who was the same age as Scorpius. A son who could help Scorpius shrug off the Death Eater shadow cast by his father and grandfather.

"I thought you'd be more motivated to see that it gets printed, given what Rita has written about your husband, your family, your friends, you. Also, I thought you might want to get your own little revenge."

Ginny chuckled. "Fair enough. I'll talk to Barnabus and see what I can do."

"That would be great, thanks."

Grinning, Astoria shook Ginny's offered hand. There would be time to discuss potential play dates.
with little Albus once Astoria was offered Rita's old job. And if Astoria's own image was boosted by being seen having lunch with her new colleague, well, that would just be a bonus.

"Am I having a stroke?" Hermione asked. "Severus. Severus, look at me. Is one side of my face sagging? Because I thought I just heard you say that Narcissa Malfoy is going to be the new Muggle Studies professor."

"I did say that. Your face is as symmetrical as it ever was."

"Oh my God."

"Don't twist that into an insult. You know I think you're beautiful." Severus swallowed the remainder of the cooling tea in his cup, missing the tiny smile she gave him. "I suspect Narcissa thinks it will bolster her new image of tolerance. Now, would you like to look at the notebook Potter recovered? I've already gone through it, but I would like your opinion."

Mostly, Severus wanted to show her how much effort he'd put into healing her parents. Even before they'd been friends, he'd worked on it. Side by side on his sofa, they opened the notebook to the beginning. Just like when he'd taken the notebook from Potter, the letters untangled themselves at Hermione's touch. It was charmed to reveal its contents both of them.

Throughout the book, Severus referred to Time Turner sand as "powder." Not once did he give the substance its proper name.

**17 July 1986**

*Using Pensieve memories to select a specific point might be a possibility. Interesting effects when using Thestral hair to bind the powder to memories.*

**9 September 1986**

*I cannot obtain the required information. Can I go into this with half of it?*

**31 October 1986**

*C is right. She wouldn 't have wanted it.*

"I got the impression," Severus said, "that I was attempting to go back in time at first. A recovered memory with Charity supports it."

"To save Lily?" Hermione asked.

Severus paused. "Does that bother you?"

"No. She was an important part of your life; that doesn't take anything away from what we have now. If I was in a similar situation with Harry or Ron or Luna or Neville, I think I'd be tempted as well."

He turned the page. "Always sullying things by mentioning Longbottom."

**1 March 1998**

*The powder can be bound to Pensieve memories quite easily. Have stabilised the whole vial with Thestral hair. Might be able to make it bind to other memories when taken as part of a potion.*
Suggest powdered sage, Jobberknoll Feathers, Wartizome, Ashwinder Egg. Test on mice to start.

"Was the Healer wrong about what caused your memory loss?" Hermione asked.

"She may not have had the whole story, but I believe she was at least partially correct. Look at this bit later on: the dose I’ve suggested for an adult human is ten drops of the potion. I got a face full of it. That's more than enough Ashwinder Egg to erase several decades. In that memory from Skeeter, I dropped the rest of the Time Turner sand when the potion hit me. Who knows what effect that had?"

"Maybe it gave you your visions of the future."

"Perhaps. Do the ones I acted out on purpose count?"

"Hmm. Debatable. That business in the shower definitely doesn't count."

"Agree to disagree." Severus flipped through a few more pages. "This whole section here—the bit written during the war—was clearly intended for you, rather than for my own personal reference," he said. "I would hardly have needed to remind myself how to safely test a potion. I must have written it before I left it for you in that classroom."

Hermione said nothing, but brushed her fingers over her heart as she turned to the post-war section.

5 August 2002

I was not brewing the potion, but some of the components appeared in my usual cauldron. Too much powder? Will find out, perhaps, when I next attempt it.

21 August 2002

It was Lupin’s fault.

"What does that mean?" Hermione asked. "How could it have been Teddy's fault? He was only four!"

"No idea. I asked him about it already; he doesn't remember whatever happened."

9 June 2004

Recovery appears to have been temporary. More Jobberknoll Feathers next time. Add some stewed Mandrake as well. The mice from the previous batch still have powder in their system, four months on.

A similar story repeated itself throughout the years. Sometimes the memories stayed, but the mice lost their sight. Once, they lost their lives. It was always failure, every time, until…

31 January 2009

The new formula worked. Ten healthy mice, everything recovered. Replicating it on a new batch before moving on to a half-Kneazle.

"You did it?" Hermione breathed.

"So it would seem."

2 April 2009
Initial experiments with the half-Kneazle have been successful. It recovers faster than the mice, but that is to be expected; it is a partially magical being.

A big spodge of ink marked a spot where his quill had paused, waiting for him to decide his next words.

**Will continue monitoring the half-Kneazle for side effects. All being well, I will seek G’s assistance next month and move on to the final stage of testing.**

That was the last entry. His accident had taken place on the 24th of that month. Severus chewed on his thumbnail before catching himself. A possible explanation for his accident had been looming over him ever since he'd viewed Skeeter's memory—an explanation that had nothing to do with sabotage.

"Do you recall a woman named Thora Monkstanley?" he asked. "I mentioned her to you, once."

Hermione trapped her lower lip between her teeth as she tried to remember. "Oh, she was on your list of former partners, wasn't she? The only one you could remember apart from that very clever Muggle girl who taught you how to kiss. Did you ever find out what happened to her?"

"Thora died protecting her Muggle-born lover towards the end of the first war."

"Oh, no. I'm sorry."

Severus had lied to Hermione. Not a huge lie, or even an intentional one, but he'd told her he'd not cared at all for Thora. He hadn't loved her—not even close—but upon hearing the news he'd still mourned what she could have been if her life hadn't been cut short by a senseless war.

"As am I," he said, "but that isn't why I mentioned her. Thora had an older sister who was astonishingly brilliant. I have honestly never met anyone else as skilled at the creation of spells, and I include myself in that. In spite of her talent, I'm told that she was killed by one of her own experimental charms."

The rest of Severus's train of thought went unsaid. *No one is infallible.* Hermione went quiet for a long time, stroking her fingers back and forth along the arm he'd wrapped around her. Then she got that look on her face—the same one he'd seen in memory right before her hand shot up into the air.

"This sister... was her name Pandora?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Did she happen to have a nine-year-old daughter who witnessed her death?"

"Err. Yes."

She pressed her lips into a thin line. "You lost your virginity to Luna's aunt?"

"You lost yours to Ronald. Glass houses, Granger."

Hermione laughed. "I wasn't throwing stones, you dunderhead. But... Harry's mum, Luna's aunt. Dare I ask about your past with Molly?"

"You really are insufferable sometimes."

"Hey, Molly is a fine woman. You could do a lot worse. Also, I notice that wasn't a denial."
"We had a torrid affair that spanned decades," Severus deadpanned. "Ginevra is actually mine. Can't you see the resemblance?"

His chuckles mingled with hers as she swatted him with a cushion. Mirth faded when his gaze once again fell on the notebook. Such a waste.

"I could do it, you know," he said. "With some Time Turner sand, I'm certain I could fix them. I had it. That was the formula."

With the gentlest of touches, Hermione pushed his lank hair off of his face. "It means the world that you tried."

The anniversary of Severus's accident came and went. Hermione started marking the days in her head, watching him for signs that the end was drawing near. When the time came, she knew Minerva would follow his orders to pack him off somewhere secluded. Hermione tried not to think of that Swedish wizard who had accidentally vanished his own house when the bridge had been built between his buried memories and those he'd borrowed from others.

On their last morning at Hogwarts before the summer holidays, they lounged in bed, nothing in particular to do until it was time for the students to leave. Tucked up beneath Severus's duvet with his body curved against hers, Hermione felt content. Safe. Like uncontrolled magic could never intrude into their little bubble.

With a soft sigh, she murmured, "I love you."

Severus tightened his arms around her, the same way he always did when she told him she loved him. Hermione smiled. That little squeeze—that silent acknowledgment of her words—was one of her favourite things. Hearing it in return would be nice, but she knew—

"Marry me," Severus whispered.

One of Hermione's hands flew to her mouth as she sat bolt upright. She knew this scene. She'd felt the devotion and rightness before, when she'd looked into a younger Severus's eyes and had fallen into his thoughts.

"Is the idea so objectionable?" Sitting up, Severus tugged at the duvet until as much of his bare skin was concealed as possible. "You look horrified."

"I'm not. It isn't—not at all. Oh, Severus, that isn't what I… It's just that I'm a bit stunned. Floored, really. You proposed to that mystery woman exactly like that. I saw it in my first Occlumency lesson."

"What? Show me."

"Will what I saw in your mind even show up in the Pensieve, or will you just see us staring at each other?"

"I'm not sure. If you focus, I can use Legilimency." The duvet slipped back down as he rummaged beneath his pillow for his wand. "Don't let your mind drift to other memories of me."

Unlike that first Occlumency lesson, Severus waited for her nod before he went in.

"Legimens."
Memory Severus aimed a wand at young Hermione's temple without warning, not even allowing her to sit before he attacked. A cold, sinking sort of fury clung to him, just waiting for an excuse to seek revenge.

"Legilimens!"

The nervousness was definitely Hermione's contribution, but Severus thought the sudden wash of surprise came from both of them. Layered beneath it all was a contradictory burst of the sort of warm security Severus felt in the present day when embracing his Hermione.

Narrowing her eyes, Hermione pushed back. Severus had felt her gentle attempts at Legilimency since losing his memories. It shouldn't have worked. And yet…

Everything flickered and banded itself in silver as she entered Memory Severus's mind. It was just a few seconds: a brief impression of love and soft skin. The woman's face was not visible in his thoughts; he lay spooned up behind her in bed. His current bed. Her curly, dark hair tickled his nose and blocked out most of his view, the same way Hermione's curly, dark hair always did.

The woman sighed Hermione's sigh. "I love you."

His answer was the same one Severus had whispered to the present day Hermione moments before. "Marry me."

Memory Severus stumbled back as he kicked the young Hermione out of his head. The anger flowed back, but quieter this time—more like a question.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Hermione babbled as he glowered silently at the ceiling. "I didn't mean to. I had no idea I… Are you going to end our lessons?"

"No." Memory Severus cleared his throat. "But if we are to continue, we will do so with the understanding that I will Obliviate my memories from your mind if I deem it necessary."

"As long as you're better at it than Professor Lockhart, I have no problem with that."

Snorting, Memory Severus raised his wand. "Again." A flinch from her halted his approach. "It will not be comfortable or pleasant, but I will not hurt you, Miss Granger. Not any more than a Headache Relief Potion can remedy."

"OK. I'm ready, sir."

"Are you? Make your mind still and calm. Legilimens."

Severus's temples throbbed as he withdrew from Hermione's mind.

"I don't think that woman's identity is a mystery at all," he said. "I'm fairly certain that was you."

"Yeah, I got that impression as well. Seer it is, then?"

In spite of the fact that even the thought of asking the question a second time was more nerve-wracking than any memory he'd received, Severus said, "If I was a Seer, I would have used my powers to divine the answer you still have not given me."

Silence. Good gods. Was she trying to kill him?

"You really meant it?" she whispered, shifting closer.
"Of course I bloody meant it. Should I have taken Weasley's advice and mentioned that I know how to cast all three Unforgivable Curses as part of my proposal?"

Hermione's lower lip trembled as she let out a quiet gasp of laughter. "It does give you a dangerous, mysterious air. I—"

Doubling over, Severus clutched his head. Burning silver filled his vision. Hermione—Miss Granger—Granger—Hermione called his name, but Severus barely heard her over the roar in his ears as rapidly flickering scenes of everything—everything—took him.

The Granger woman was still shouting at Draco. Lucius sighed. This was what came of doing a good deed.

Peering at the arguing pair from behind a tree, Lucius wondered if Granger might strike Draco as she had when they were children. Instead of lashing out like a Muggle, she sank to the ground as Draco marched away from her.

Lucius waited. And waited. And waited. For the love of Circe, she didn't intend to remain there the whole time, did she? What if someone saw?

Perhaps Lucius could owl Potter to collect her. Then again, would she consent to going with her friend? She'd probably just start doing her impression of a harpy again, and then Potter would get his little feelings hurt, and Lucius would be burdened with two morose Gryffindor garden ornaments instead of just the one. They would clash with the peacocks.

Well, fine. Lucius approached the trespassing witch. Granger stared at his feet.

"Nice shoes," she said.

"Thank you." Lucius beamed. "Do you intend to stay down there for the entirety of Severus's convalescence, or can I persuade you to join us inside? Tea in the drawing room, perhaps?"

At the mention of the drawing room, she tilted her face up to shoot him a venomous scowl.

"Ah," Lucius said with a wicked grin. "There she is. Come now, Miss Granger. Get up."

"Just for the record," she said as she clambered to her feet with all the grace of a dairy farmer, "it is always going to be too soon to joke about the last time I was in that room."

"It made you stop sulking on the ground, did it not?"

"I wasn't sulking. I was plotting."

"Something better accomplished in comfortable surroundings, in my experience. Shall we?"

Granger scoffed at the arm he offered her. "Aren't you afraid I'll muddy your robes?"

"My elf is a very thorough laundress." Lucius waited until her hand was tucked in the crook of his elbow before he continued. "Why don't we go to Astoria and Draco's house? I'm sure Astoria would like to see you again."

And Astoria and Draco's house was as far as possible from the little Secret-Kept fortress the elves had built for Draco's... new lifestyle. At the moment, that fortress was serving as Severus's hospital room. Both McGonagall and Severus had been very clear in their orders to keep Severus isolated until the danger of uncontrolled magic had passed.
"Draco assures me everything is progressing as it should," Lucius said. "He has a monitoring charm in place to track Severus's vital signs at a distance. Which he might consent to show you, if you cease speaking to him in the sort of voice that can only be heard by Crups. What has you so convinced that Severus is in imminent danger?"

"This." Granger nodded towards a faintly lit charm on her bracelet. "The fact that it's reacting means Severus is hurt. It's linked with one that he wears."

Severus's intention had undoubtedly been for him to be the one rushing in to save an injured Granger. *Depressingly noble strikes again.*

Lucius opened his mouth to say that her jewellery was merely responding to headaches and severe emotional distress. Merlin knew Severus had plenty of distressing memories. The little star-flecked stone charm halted the words by burning brighter.

Tightening her grip on his arm, Granger gasped. "Mr Malfoy…"

"Everything is fine," Lucius said in a calm, even tone. "We've simply reached the end. That's all. Severus will be back to sneering at all of us and remembering every single reason behind that sneer within the hour, I'd wager."

"Stop treating me like I need to be sheltered and coddled. I really, really don't. You know I don't. It's demeaning and—"

"If everything wasn't fine, Draco would be doing something other than standing at that window over there, wouldn't he? Look. Does he seem concerned?"

He did, actually. Lucius couldn't blame him. Far across the grounds, the fortress that Granger could not see glowed silver.

Chapter End Notes

Though I didn’t name the plant, the Muggle method that Astoria used to loosen Rita’s lips is a real one (according to the guide at the Alnwick Poison Garden, anyway). Please do not follow Astoria’s extremely bad example; it earned its place in the Poison Garden by being (surprise) poisonous. Bezoars won’t do a thing to cure anyone, so leave the playing with deadly flowers to Astoria.
Remembering

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Vitellia, who helped me out with a decision on the final scene of this chapter. And thank you to all of you for reading—especially those of you who have been with me since I posted the first chapter back in May. This is the final chapter; I'll be posting an epilogue in a few days. And for those who have asked if I intend to write more SSHG: absolutely. I have a few chapters of my next fic written. It's set mostly during Percy's first year at Hogwarts (there is time travel on Hermione's part, and she decides to attempt to befriend a young Potions professor), and it'll be called The Poison Garden.

Albus stumbled into Hermione's shins as Scorpius advanced on him with a sword. Fortunately, the blade was made of foam, so it bounced off of her knees when Scorpius's blow missed its intended target. Albus hissed.

"Scorpius, please be careful," Astoria said. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

"No, it's fine." Setting aside the thick manuscript she'd been reading, Hermione ruffled Albus's hair. "What are you two playing?"

"I'm the snake, and he's Uncle Neville," Albus said. He hissed again.

Neville blinked. "Blimey."

Draco mouthed something that looked like for fuck's sake.

"Yes, well, you look very heroic, darling, but let's keep the Sword of Gryffindor from slicing into our guests, shall we?" Astoria said. "Unless it's Aunt Daphne and she's being a cow."

Hermione had no idea what Draco had done to deserve Astoria. Not only had Astoria opened her home to Hermione's herd of Gryffindors (plus one Ravenclaw) while they waited for Severus to wake up, she had offered Hermione a draft copy of her biography of Rita Skeeter as a distraction.

Hermione stroked the now quiet charm on her bracelet. Draco had said it was best to let Severus wake up in his own time, and that time was taking ages.

"Here," George said, depositing a grinning Lily onto Hermione's lap. "Have a cuddle. It'll make the wait go faster."

"Is this a trick?" Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes at him. "Does she need her nappy changed, and that's why you're handing her off to me?"

George laughed. "Would I do such a thing?"

"Yes. Frequently."

The only response George gave was to drop a kiss first to the top of Hermione's head, then to Lily's before he abandoned them to help Albus and Scorpius cause mischief. Hermione sniffed Lily.
Hmm. Seemed safe—just the powdery scent of a clean baby. And Lily really was a superior snuggler.

By some silent agreement, Harry and Ron plopped down on either side of Hermione. She offered them a smile as they both put an arm around her. Wrapped up in the comforting familiarity of her boys and the soft newness of Lily, she continued to wait for Severus to come back to her.

1980

Severus marched down the rain-slicked path away from the Hog's Head. If only the barman hadn't caught him before the end. Urgency fizzed in his veins. He had to tell the Dark Lord what he'd managed to overhear. He—

An explosion of silver in his head sent Severus stumbling forward. As his face met the cobblestones with a painful thunk, that silver retreated to the edge of his sight to frame a series of visions. Each little flash dissolved before he could examine it too closely, giving way to the next one, and then the next one.

A blurry woman with dark curls hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Severus," she said. "I know how private you are. I won't pry too much... OK, I will, but just let me know whenever you need a break. And I promise—"

Severus stood on the upstairs landing of his house and listened to someone in the shower sing a Muggle song—though singing was a generous term for it. He stepped forward, and—

He lay in an unfamiliar bed with that same curly-haired woman, smiled at her indistinct face, and said, "I am a curmudgeon, though?" His stomach did a flip when she told him she wouldn't have him any other way.

Another bed materialised, this time in a room with vines climbing in through a window. Placing his hand on the woman's shoulder, he leaned in and touched his lips to hers in a brief kiss.

Under a sprig of mistletoe, no bed in sight, Severus clasped the woman to him as he kissed her in a way that was anything but brief. She tasted of coffee, honey, and cinnamon. Clutching at his shoulders, she returned his kiss.

Back in yet another bed, Severus trailed his mouth down the naked body of a woman with a mole on her left breast and a charm bracelet on her wrist. Gasping his name, she arched into his touch.

The light changed and their bodies shifted around, but it was the same bed, Severus thought. He lay surrounded by the scent of citrus as a sleep-rasped voice wished him good morning and a smooth hand slipped around his body to touch him. He caught a glimpse of those same curls as the woman nudged him onto his back.

Remorse and alarm replaced the warmth and safety that had been present in every other scene. The woman was still there, but (annoyingly) clothed and facing away from Severus. Her attention was focused on a lake window like the one in the Slytherin Common Room. A strange blond man looked at Severus with Lucius-grey eyes and said, "I need your help."

And then the man was gone—it was just Severus and the woman again, this time in a shower. He sank into her as too-hot water rained down on them.

Her dry hair tickled his nose. They were back in that bed, and the woman told Severus she loved him. Of all the absurd responses to such a declaration, he asked her to marry him.
Groaning, Severus forced his eyes open. Grit dug into a scratch on his face, courtesy of a jagged cobblestone. Even as the worst headache he'd ever had pulsed through his skull, he was left with a lingering sensation of something that was both beautifully comforting and completely foreign. It was like discovering that somewhere he'd never visited felt like home.

None of it could possibly be real. As he hauled himself off of the ground, Severus started formulating potential ways to test those visions. But first, he had to speak to the Dark Lord about this prophecy.

Green, green, green. Every last vision was true, according to the potion Severus had created. Swiping a hand through his greasy hair, he shuddered. Was he a Seer? Who was this mystery woman? The only person in his circle of acquaintances with dark, curly hair was decidedly not a potential candidate.

A different pounding joined in with the rapid thud in his chest: someone's fist against his front door. Lucius stood on the doorstep, regarding him with a grave expression. Beckoning his friend inside, Severus tried to shake off several days of little sleep and constant brewing.

"I apologise for interrupting," Lucius said. "I won't stay long. Have you heard the news? The Dark Lord has discovered an unborn child who will fit the terms of the prophecy. Two children, I should say, but he is only truly interested in one of them."

"I hadn't heard, no," Severus said.

"It's Potter's child."

Lucius would neither express nor feel any regret—not for the loss of a Muggle-born—but his ever-icy exterior did falter, just a little. It was a barely discernible cringe, a near flirtation with sympathy. The warning was meant to give Severus a chance to prepare, so he could more easily bury his feelings upon facing the inevitable blow.

Severus swallowed the bile that burned the back of his throat. His fault. It was all his fault.

"That's reassuring," he said. "No brat of Potter's can possibly be capable of vanquishing the Dark Lord."

As the Dark Lord's hunt for the Potters began and Severus transformed himself into Dumbledore's spy, Severus's unexplained visions of dark hair and contentment were shoved to the back of his mind. They would remain there for quite some time.

1984

"Take whatever might be of use to you," Lucius said, a flick of his wand igniting the torches on the dungeon walls. "Narcissa is insisting I have a clear out."

"Perhaps she has tired of competing with your wardrobe for space," Severus said. In the wavering light, he examined a dusty stack of books.

"Then why not simply build a new wing? She's being unreasonable."

A jumble of mangled gold caught Severus's attention. He had done extensive research on Time Turners in the years since the Dark Lord's fall, hoping to find some way to undo his foolish, foolish mistake. All of Lucius's Time Turners were broken, but the sand was still contained in its
hourglasses. That could be of use. Severus would have to Occlude every moment he was at Hogwarts so Dumbledore didn't suspect his plan, but that would be a dress rehearsal compared to the grand production that had been his final months of service to the Dark Lord. Waiting until Lucius's back was turned, Severus summoned the hourglasses and shoved them into a pocket.

He could save Lily. It wouldn't make her forgive him and want to be his friend again, but she would be alive. It would be enough.

"I knew this would cheer you up," Lucius said upon catching Severus's faint smile. "Books always do."

"I do not require cheering."

"Of course not. You've been a ray of sunshine ever since you began your teaching career. I still say you should let me help you find a position elsewhere. Dealing with ill-mannered children all day would test anyone's patience."

"Perhaps someday. I appreciate the offer, but Hogwarts will do for now."

The ghostly form of a seal bounded into the dungeon. Charity's scolding voice came from the Patronus's mouth.

"Severus Snape! You'll pay for this!"

His trace of a smile morphed into a smirk. She'd discovered that he'd charmed all of the bath towels in her house to turn into clingfilm upon being touched, then. Served her right for interrupting his date by pretending to be his wife.

"Have you made a new enemy?" Lucius asked.

Severus shook his head. "A friend, I think."

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1986

Dragging himself back up onto the threadbare sofa, Severus fumbled around between the cushions for his missing bottle of Firewhisky. He would have to come to this conclusion on Halloween, of all days. The worst day of the year.

There was not enough alcohol in the entire town of Cokeworth for this day.

The idea had been to bind the Time Turner sand to someone else's memory of that night—the night of the prophecy—in order to travel back to that precise moment. Severus couldn't use his own memory; popping into existence next to his former self was a recipe for getting killed by that former self. Better to use Trelawney's memory, appear next to her once she'd left Dumbledore, and Obliviate as necessary.

With his knowledge of their future, Severus could have saved both of the Potters and their boy. Lily and the boy, at the very least. Potter would have likely stormed off and got himself killed just to spite Severus for trying to save his worthless hide.

Everything had started to go wrong the month before, when he'd obtained Trelawney's memory. He'd hoped to get the entire version of the prophecy so he could go into his mission with as much information as possible. He stood little chance of defeating the Dark Lord on his own, otherwise. Trelawney remembered none of her predictions. Where the prophecy should have been, he'd
discovered only crackly static.

So, Severus had created a potion to confirm the date of a memory using a tiny sprinkle of the stabilised Time Turner sand, just in case Trelawney had performed the extraction spell incorrectly. Shoddy spellwork was a constant threat with someone who enjoyed their sherry as much as she did. Not that Severus had any room to talk, given his current state.

Checking the blank spot had revealed not one date, but two. The first had appeared in a steady silver glow: 27 February 1980, the date of the prophecy. The second one had sparkled and blinked in and out of existence: 2 May 1998.

Now, Firewhisky bottle back in hand, Severus took a long swig. The muddling effects of alcohol didn't alter the conclusion he'd reached. Upon seeing that second date, he'd known exactly what Lily would have said.

"Dumbledore thinks Voldemort will come back, right? Well, that settles the matter, doesn't it? That second date must be the day the prophecy will come true. You can't save me. This is way more important than any one person. Protect Harry for me. Help him fulfill this prophecy and defeat Voldemort for good. Risking it all falling apart just for me... Come on, Sev. You know what I'd have to say about that. I fought against him for a reason."

Charity had been right, damn her. Lily wouldn't have wanted it.

Severus's vial of Time Turner sand would have to remain tucked away until 1998. If the Dark Lord triumphed, then Severus would revisit his original plan. Lily could hardly complain about him altering history if her sacrifice ended up being for nothing.

For one weak, Firewhisky-hazed moment, he considered using some of the sand to see whether his visions of that dark haired woman would reveal two dates.

No, the sand was too valuable. He had to wait. Every last grain could be required to save Lily.

The front door swung open. Acting on reflex, Severus hurled a hex at the intruder. Fortunately for Charity, he was intoxicated enough that he missed his target. It was not so fortunate for the armchair a foot to Charity's left. She extinguished it with an Aguamenti.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, as if she wasn't the one barging into his house. "Shouldn't you be at Hogwarts? I thought someone had broken in!"

Severus wiped a hand down his numb face. He was too bloody drunk and weary to lock up his emotions, but he would not cry. He wouldn't.

Crossing the room to stand before him, Charity put her hands on her hips. "The least you can do after scaring me out of my wits is share. Give that here."

She swigged straight from the bottle as she settled onto the cushion next to him. The smoky burn that always made him cough and sputter as it seared his throat seemed to have no effect on her. Passing the bottle back to Severus, she bumped her shoulder against his.

"It's good to see you, even if you do look like hell."

Severus snorted. "Likewise."

She didn't try to get him to discuss it, though she had to know the horrible significance Halloween held for him. As the bottle emptied and Charity's speech grew more slurred, she rested her head on
"Are you going to introduce me to your Muggle anytime soon?" Severus asked.

"Yeah, I think so. You'll like him."

"Doubtful."

Charity simply smiled like she knew something he didn't. Happiness was a good look on her, he decided.

1996

Standing outside the Prefects' Bathroom, listening to Miss Granger screech *that* song, Severus did not for one second contemplate that she was the subject of his visions. Yes, her hair was dark and curly, but she was a hand-waving irritant and a friend of Potter. Nothing more.

That she was of age according to both Muggle and magical laws made no difference. She was his student; the very notion of taking advantage of his position of power over her was repellent. Those silver-framed things he'd seen all those years ago had to have been some sort of cruel trick. A tightness seized his lungs as he scrambled for any explanation other than a prank. He hadn't realised quite how much he'd *wanted* those visions to be true. What, did he expect some sort of happily ever after once his time as a spy was complete? Unlikely.

She'd had a Time Turner once, hadn't she?

Striding past a befuddled Miss Patil, Severus started to plan. He would convince Albus that Miss Granger needed Occlumency lessons. If she knew anything about Severus's long ago visions, he would uncover it.

Severus thought to catch Miss Granger off-guard by casting Legilimens right away in their first lesson. She was more suited to Occlumency than Potter—less prone to overemotional outbursts. Instead, he was the one who ended up wrong-footed. Being in Miss Granger's mind was almost like being in those visions. That same feeling of safety and comfort enveloped him. Someone like Umbridge would not have received the same reception, but to him, her mind was gentle and trusting. *Why?*

Miss Granger shoved back against his intrusion. Fine. Let her attempt to lie to his face and pretend she knew nothing of his visions when confronted with one. The proposal would do; it had a pre-watershed rating while still being personal enough that she would believe he'd never willingly let her see it.

Her predictable litany of apologies did not acquit her. More investigation was needed.

1997

Severus stared, gobsmacked, at Miss Granger. Not only did she intend to erase herself from her parents' memories, she was discussing it with *him*.

"You realise such a charm may be irreversible if you cannot remove it in time?" he asked.

"Yes." Miss Granger's voice trembled. "Better they not know me than be tortured and killed.
because of me. Since I am going to stick by Harry until the end, my life is in rather a lot of danger. And I will carry on fighting without him, should he fail. I am willing to die in this war if I have to, but I'd rather spare my parents the pain of burying their child."

Fear gripped Severus—not for himself; he was as good as dead already—but for Miss Granger. She was far too young to be dragged into this. They all were. Severus wanted to give the whole student body detention for the remainder of the war and lock them up to keep them safe. His Dark Lord obsessed Slytherins included.

In Miss Granger's thoughts, he had felt her terror over and over again. She knew her death was likely, but not once had she considered running away and hiding with her parents. Other wizards and witches of all blood statuses would, but to her, fleeing was not an option. Always fighting for what was right, wasn't she? Any suspicion that she'd had something to do with his visions had long since evaporated.

Severus couldn't run, either. Not now. It was unlikely he would get a chance to carry out his foolish plan of saving Lily in the event of the Dark Lord's triumph. Recalling how Time Turner sand could be bound to memories, he wondered whether it could be used in a potion to remove a Memory Charm from Muggles. A sort of rewind button for their mind.

He couldn't give it to her outright. Not after he fulfilled Dumbledore's request. Nor could he bequeath anything to her in any will that he filed with the Ministry, but he could leave clues to guide her to the sand and a few notes in the event of his death. And if the Dark Lord won the war after Severus was gone, Miss Granger would then have the means to fix it.

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1998

Severus heard the words leave his mouth as he recited the facts to the Wizengamot, but it was as if he hovered somewhere outside his own body, numb and hollow. Blocking out every single emotion he felt about Charity's death was the only way he could survive this particular testimony.

She'd believed in him to her last breath. Astonishingly, she had not been the only one to maintain faith in him.

Severus glanced over his shoulder at Granger before responding to Kingsley's question about the whereabouts of Charity's body. If Severus was allowed to speak to anyone before his inevitable incarceration, he would ask Granger to send Neville Longbottom some flowers on his behalf for killing that fucking snake.

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1999

Severus sighed. Another nightmare. Shrugging into his robes, he headed for the kitchens.

By all rights, he should have given Granger dozens of detentions for wandering the halls in the middle of the night, no matter the contents of her dreams. But she was nearly twenty, for Circe's sake. In a few months, they would be colleagues.

Like every other time, she lit up with a surprised smile when she saw him waiting for her in his usual chair. Even with the Life Debt, she made no demands of him. Which brought him to the real reason he had never docked points and sent her scurrying back to Gryffindor Tower: he did not wish for their chats in the kitchen to cease.
How pathetic that his best friend at Hogwarts was a student.

"The Headmistress tells me you took fifty points from Gryffindor earlier," Severus said.

Granger sat up straighter. "I did. A group of first years were being disrespectful about people who fought in the war."

"People? Or me?" Severus raised an eyebrow. "Didn't I once tell you I am not one of your causes? I thought you too well acquainted with me to buy into the deluded notion that I'm some sort of tragic hero."

"You aren't tragic. And I'm not deluded."

"Your magic suggests otherwise every time it calls out to me during your nightmares."

"So you're claiming you wouldn't help me if I was in actual danger? Right. I think it happens because you make me feel safe, sir."

His cold, blackened heart did not warm at her declaration. Not a single degree.

"If you say anything so blatantly ridiculous again, I'll give you a detention," he muttered.

He didn't. Instead, he gave her a library.

What the hell did she want?

Over the rim of a glass of punch that Granger had yet to sip, she widened her eyes at him. When he responded with a blank stare, she mouthed a single word at him. Legilimens.

Ah. Silently, he cast the spell.

Being back in the safe haven of Granger's mind was the same as ever. Almost. Leaking around the edges of her shields, Severus detected the faintest glimmer of attraction. Not that he had been completely unaware of her recent crush on him, but receiving such blatant confirmation was… interesting.

George spiked the punch, Granger thought forcefully at him. Don't drink it.

This was what he got for agreeing to attend Potter's twenty-first birthday party. Really, he should have known better.

Inviting her into his mind, Severus thought back, I hadn't intended to. It looks like something I would find at the bottom of a first year's cauldron. What did Weasley add?

Just some of that potion that makes people temporarily grow a very Horacey moustache. Should we alert everyone, or do we let him have his fun?

When have I ever let anyone have fun?

Granger nudged a burst of amusement towards him. I have fun with you.

I cannot imagine why.
A roll of her eyes broke the connection. The way she smiled so fondly at him made his pulse kick into a faster pace. Severus kept his expression impassive, even in the wake of a startling realisation.

Granger was pretty. When the devil had that happened?

"I said *leave*, Miss Granger."

As Granger fled, Severus snapped up the box of Charity's letters and transferred it to a new home in his bedroom. How could he have fooled himself into thinking Granger could actually be the woman from his visions? The second his back had been turned, she'd leapt on the opportunity to snoop through his things. Just like Potter.

She wasn't. He knew her better than that, but his rage wouldn't listen to reason.

Raffaella Zabini had flirted with Severus when he'd seen her in Hogsmeade a few weeks before. She was much closer to him in age, and the hair was… close enough. It was far more likely that Raffaella was the mystery woman. If, indeed, the mystery woman existed at all.

Severus went back and forth on whether he thought the visions were true. Draco *did* look remarkably like that blond man these days.

And here he was, using an eye-wateringly expensive substance to cure Granger's parents when he could be using the sand to satisfy his own curiosity. Yet another way she'd imposed upon him. Never mind that she had no idea he was even working on a potion for the Grangers.

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2002

"I think that's the last of them," Granger said, lowering a white mouse into the replacement cage she'd conjured after Lupin's temper tantrum had vanished their original one. "I'm so sorry, Severus. I should have known better than to bring Teddy along."

"Think nothing of it," Severus said. "Accidents with spontaneous magic are inevitable as long as people continue to stubbornly insist upon not being born middle aged."

Chuckling, Granger touched a smooth-skinned hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling all right?"

Anyone else's hand would have been swatted away. Severus let hers stay where it pleased until she withdrew it.

"I'm fine."

He was an imbecile for ever quarreling with Granger and getting involved with Raffaella, but he was fine. And during his foray into idiocy, Granger had taken up with Boot. Someone who had always been on the side of the Light. Someone who deserved her, instead of an aging spy who used to be her teacher. This, too, was fine. That Severus found Granger physically appealing was of no consequence. He would get over it. If all she wanted from him was friendship, then friendship she would have.

"Oh, no," Granger said, peering into the golden cauldron. "Wasn't this a sort of silvery colour before? I think Teddy's ruined it."

The potion had the mouldy fruit stench of spoiled Wartizome, and its colour had shifted to a muddy brown. At a guess, it was missing the memories he'd added. That explained the cloud of
Pensieve memory he'd found in the empty cauldron a few days before, at least. Lupin's accidental magic must have interacted with the Time Turner sand, somehow.

Severus gritted his teeth. A double dose of sand wasted, and he was still miles from a real solution. If he had enough of it to actually complete the potion, it would be a miracle.

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**2006**

Severus's prey giggled. Hufflepuff. It had to be. Before he could swoop into their alcove and strike, a shorter black-robed figure with bushy hair beat him to it. Her technique was… rather familiar.

He lingered in the corridor, listening to Granger deduct fewer House points and assign less time in detention than he would have done. She made up for it by rightly berating them for their less than clandestine choice of location for their assignation. A few moments later, two guilty Hufflepuffs scampered off.

Granger ruined her impression of Severus by squeaking when he stepped in front of her as she exited the alcove.

"Not bad," Severus said.

She grinned. "I learned from the best. Want to join me on the rest of my rounds?"

"Hmm, I don't know. You'll feel compelled to fill the silence with conversation. We will hardly be stealthy."

"I vastly prefer your company to stealth." Granger gave his arm a tug, and her sleeve slipped down to reveal the bracelet Severus had convinced Longbottom to purchase for her. "Come on."

As they walked and talked and caught absolutely no one else out of bed, Severus was reminded of all of the times Granger had mentioned Patronus worthy memories. Laughing with her in the moonlight felt a bit like the wild joy of producing a Patronus. So did the quiet companionship of reading together, now that he thought of it. And badgering each other into a debate, and—

Oh, no. No. Severus could not be in *love* with Granger.

If he could make his moronic heart serve detention, he would.

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**2008**

Severus didn't think anything would happen. Yes, the insufferable Althea would assault them with a sprig of mistletoe, but Granger was fairly new to being single again. She needed time to heal, not some overeager suitor pouncing on her like she was the last mince pie at a Weasley Christmas.

But then she looked positively crestfallen at the news that Hestia Jones had once attempted to kiss him.

"Hestia kissed you?"

"She *tried* to at a similar New Year's Eve party, yes. It was the year after the war. She only did it because no one else was queuing up to do so. As if I didn't prefer it that way. I didn't allow her to follow through. Her breath smelled like Firewhisky and pity."
"Too bad I was still your student at the time," Granger said, inching closer. "I don't like Firewhisky, and I've never pitied you."

Could her interest in him remain, all these years later? It hardly seemed possible. Perhaps he would try to express his affection for her in subtle ways once she seemed ready, see if she responded. Preserving their friendship was paramount; he valued it beyond measure.

Merlin, did he even remember how to flirt?

The expected mistletoe met with the expected Reducto. Severus tried not to be disappointed.

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**2009**

"Thank you, Severus," Granger said. "I know how private you are. I won't try too much… OK, I will, but just let me know whenever you need a break. And I promise I'll let you approve the final copy before publication. Not a single word will be printed without your consent."

It was the same as the vision. Every movement and every syllable. Severus held his breath.

Emily Dickinson hadn't known what the hell she was talking about. Hope was not the thing with feathers. It had teeth and claws. It wasn't some happy little thing that flitted around on wings. It was dangerous. Severus trapped it behind the sort of walls he'd utilised at his trial, locking it up tight along with everything else he felt for Granger—love, friendship, desire, everything.

"I'm afraid I must go," he said. "I have a detention to supervise. I'll see you tomorrow. We'll set up an appointment for your interview then."

His potion for her parents was much more complex than the one he'd used to date Sybill's memory, but it would do the same job. He had some half brewed already. If he started another cauldron of it immediately after he was through, his testing wouldn't be pushed back at all. He knew this was the final version of the potion. All that remained was telling Granger about it and trying it out on himself before administering it to her parents. He had plenty of Time Turner sand to spare.

It was Lucius-level frivolous, using such a valuable substance for something such as this, but he had to know.

Down in his lab, Severus withdrew his memory of the first vision. If the potion revealed the correct two dates, he would try the others as well.

He had no reason to suspect it would react the way it did. As far as he knew, it was an ordinary Pensieve memory—the same sort he'd been using in variations of this formula for years and years. As soon as he added the Time Turner sand, it exploded.

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**2010**

"I still say you should get a camera," Draco said. "Do you know how many Galleons we could get for a picture of the three of them like that?"

Keeping her eyes closed, Hermione feigned sleep. Her rising and falling pillow wasn't as bony as it used to be, but Harry's shoulder was still a far cry from goose down. At a guess, the snoring weight on her knee was Ron's head. When had they all dozed off? How was Severus doing?

"You have enough money," Astoria said.
"No such thing."

"For heaven's sake. What did I marry?"

"I'm only joking, love. I would—" A vibrating sound cut Draco off. "Ah, about bloody time. Hey, Granger." He shook Hermione's arm. "Come on. Severus is awake."

Waking up was like looking at a picture of a time he'd forgotten and realising, "Oh, yes, I remember that." The memories were his again.

Throwing the sheets back, Severus took stock of his surroundings. There was a disappointing lack of Hermione at his bedside, but he'd requested that arrangement. No windows. The only door looked as if it could withstand a blast from a tank. He wasn't restrained in any way, but the four legs of the surprisingly luxurious bed had heavy chains and manacles attached.

If Severus didn't know of the plan to place him in the building where Draco spent his time as a wolf, he would wonder whether he'd been left to recover in Lucius's pleasure dungeon. Depending on the current phase of the moon, he supposed it was a possibility.

At least he finally had a few answers about those visions. At a guess, the extra Time Turner sand he'd spilled in the accident had stayed in his system and bonded itself to various memories as they were formed. Then, the involuntary outpouring of magic caused by his memories fully returning had activated the sand and sent those memories back in time. Just like when Lupin had ruined his potion with accidental magic.

Severus buried his face in his hands. How humiliating. He'd caused a Potions accident.

Why, exactly, the memory of the vision had caused his potion to explode was unclear. Perhaps because it had already bonded with some of the sand before it travelled back through time? It was hardly something he could test and examine in further detail, annoyingly.

It really had been Hermione all this time. And now they were together. Severus smiled to himself for a good thirty seconds until he recalled that he had infused his voice with innuendo, called her Miss Granger, and mentioned schoolgirl fantasies at one point. Gods.

She'd been right. Extra disturbed, indeed.

Most of the time, it had been as if Severus's emotions were in the driver's seat. His twenty-year-old self had only veered dramatically from what his older self would have done when he'd ignored what he felt. And when he'd tried to act as if he was a seasoned spy, rather than someone who could not even successfully eavesdrop without getting caught. Prat.

The tank-proof door creaked open, and Draco entered.

"How are you feeling?" Draco asked, casting diagnostic charms to answer the question for himself in the manner of all Healers.

"Fine."

"Mm. Seems that way. You put on quite the light show for a while there, you know. The whole building went silver." Draco cleared his throat. "Granger is waiting outside. Do you want to see her?"

"Yes."
While Draco went to fetch Hermione, Severus sprang out of bed and paced the room. Did she truly love him, or did she love the version of him she'd come to know over the past year? Would she want out if he was still the same old curmudgeon he'd always been?

Almost as soon as the door opened again, Hermione was in his arms, asking questions. Were all of his memories back? Was he OK? Did he remember anything that pointed to him being a Seer? Severus kept her in his embrace as he explained all of it, his patience waning with each additional question.

"Wait," she said. "You let me into your mind in that Occlumency lesson? But I spent so much time feeling smug! Honestly, I was almost a little put out with Harry for finishing Voldemort off before I could gloat about it to him."

Severus laughed. "That, I would have enjoyed seeing."

"Do me a favour, and don't tell Malfoy I'm not a master Legilimens. He'll be insufferable."

"He frequently is. On an entirely different subject," Severus said slowly. "I hope you realise I'm not the man who... who wooed you. Not completely."

Even as she snorted at his word choice, the little stone tied to his wrist—the one he'd spelled to alert him when she was in distress—heated.

"No?" she said. "Who built my library, then? I owe him a very belated thank you."

"It wasn't upon the completion of your library that you confessed your feelings."

"Ah." A dangerous swell of hope tried to sink its claws into Severus as Hermione traced her fingers back and forth across his shoulders. "I thought your memories were back. Did you forget that I've been your friend for the past decade? I know exactly who you are, and I love every snarky, cynical, bitter, brave part of you."

Severus held her tighter. Raising up on her tiptoes, Hermione brought her lips within centimetres of his and waited for him to close that last bit of distance. She didn't have to wait long. He allowed himself several slow, soft kisses before he spoke again. It was well past time he said it back.

"I have been half in love with you since I was forty-one years old," Severus said. "More than half." After a pause, he added, shakily, "I have been entirely in love with you for years."

Their lips met again. Had they not been at someone else's home, he would have lowered her to the bed in response to her feverish kisses. As it was, he considered barricading the door and doing it anyway. Draco couldn't get through his wards. Probably.

"Is that part of you genuinely gone?" she asked, drawing back so she could look up at him. "The man who wooed me, as you put it. Are you going to stop flirting with me so shamelessly?"

"As I already told you, I flirted with you before my memory loss. You simply did not see it."

"You'll have to be really obvious about it sometimes, then."

Severus let out a beleaguered sigh. "If I must." There was one matter still unsettled between them. His stomach did a few nervous somersaults. "Hermione?"

"Hmm?"
No sense in doing something unless it was done properly. Taking her hands in his, Severus dropped to one knee.

"I am capable of casting all three Unforgivable Curses," he said. "Will you marry me?"

How she could be surprised when it was the third bloody time he'd asked was beyond him, but he didn't rescind the question. Love was turning him into a Hufflepuff. Clapping a hand over her smiling mouth, Hermione gave him a teary nod.

Before Severus could stand up and sweep her back into his arms, their host returned in a blaze of complaints about Severus's other visitors getting restless. Draco froze when he saw the two of them.

"Sorry," Draco said. "Wait, why am I apologising? This is my property. I'm not sorry at all." A smirk reminiscent of his younger, brattier self appeared as he fully took in Severus's position and Hermione's happy tears. Pivoting on his heel, Draco ran back outside and shouted for his father.

"What on earth?" Hermione murmured.

"I do believe," Severus said, "that Draco has finally won a bet with Lucius."
Epilogue

Eileen's portrait was the only one to notice.

Or, rather, Eileen's portrait was the only one to say something. Even with voluminous robes, Hermione's expanding belly was getting difficult to camouflage. Severus had recently caught a few of their colleagues staring speculatively at her. They had to have some idea.

Ronald, on the other hand, hadn't a clue. Upon seeing Hermione that morning, he had squinted at her and asked if she'd done something new with her hair.

"Hermione," Eileen said as the Snapes left their quarters dressed in Muggle clothing, "are you... I know it's inadvisable to ask someone if they're pregnant unless the baby is actually crowning right in front of you, but you are pregnant, aren't you?"

"I did offer to steal the most recent Weasley spawn so she could skip the unnecessary morning sickness and pain," Severus said, "but she was determined to inflict my nose and her hair upon an innocent child."

"Oh, darling, you should have taken him up on it," Eileen said. "There are so many of them. They'd hardly miss one."

With a laughing shake of her head, Hermione placed a hand over her stomach. "It's a secret for now, OK, Eileen? Apart from us, only you and my Healer know. I wanted to wait until I could tell my parents and have it really mean something to them before we shared the news with everyone."

Eileen's painted smile softened. "Of course. Severus knows I can keep a secret. Oh! Is today the day you're giving them the potion? Is that why you're dressed like that?"

"It is," Severus said.

"Good luck. Let me know how it goes."

After blowing them both a kiss, Eileen lit one of her Muggle cigarettes. Severus's wedding ring clinked against Hermione's bracelet as he slid his fingers down her arm to take her hand.

"You definitely have both vials of potion?" Hermione asked.

"I do."

It had been Boot, of all people, who had located another source of Time Turner sand, though it had taken him months and months of searching. Boot had claimed he would have assisted them even if he hadn't owed Severus a rather large favour, but Severus had his doubts. The Goblins had seen them coming; they'd demanded double the sand's already dear price. Severus would have paid double that again, even if it did mean they'd spend the rest of their natural born lives repaying Potter for the loan.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," Hermione said as they stepped out onto the snow-covered grounds. "I know it works. I know they'll be fine."

"They will," was all Severus said. He squeezed her hand.

Severus's original plan for obtaining proof that his potion worked on humans as well as mice and
half-Kneazles had led to a row. Hermione had been quite set against the idea.

"It's simple," Severus said. "I will learn several phrases in a foreign language. You will cast the charm to modify my memory of doing so, and then—"

"Severus Snape, have you taken complete leave of your senses? No. Absolutely not. We are not testing it on you."

He frowned. "I assure you, it's perfectly safe. Testing it on less significant memories is merely a precautionary measure. It would actually be best to examine the effects on Muggles, but your parents won't consent to—"

"No. I won't do it."

"Would you rather I ask someone else to—"

"I'd rather you weren't so cavalier about playing with your memory. It was difficult enough when we were just friends. If you forgot me again now... No. Find another way."

George had been their guinea pig, in the end. He'd claimed he had decades of experience testing things on himself and hadn't exploded yet, so what was one more little potion? Hermione hadn't cared for that option, either. It had ranked only somewhat higher than Lucius's offer to find a "volunteer."

George had settled the matter by not telling Hermione before he'd had Filius modify his memories. Severus hadn't even been aware of the plan until George had shown up at their quarters, demanding a cure for his recently lost knowledge of Swedish.

A laughing shriek brought Severus's attention back to the present. A now-third year Lupin and his friends were embroiled in a snowball fight near Hagrid's hut. Lupin allowed himself to become distracted by waving at the Snapes, and Victoire Weasley made him pay for it by slipping ice down the back of his robes. Grinning, Hermione waved back at the boy. Severus gave him a nod.

At the Apparition Point, Severus transported the still-fretting Hermione Side-Along to an alley near her parents' house. There was no snow in London, only a thick frost that outlined the branches of the trees on their quiet street. Hermione cast a few concealment charms on her belly before they rang the doorbell. The effect wouldn't last more than an hour or two, but all being well, they wouldn't need to continue hiding it any longer than that.

Mr and Mrs Granger were as jittery as Hermione. As Severus did not excel at comforting anyone but his wife, he settled for moving things along as quickly as possible. Within five minutes, he had them reclined in bed and gulping down the potion.

"I hate this part," Hermione said once their eyelids fluttered shut. "Waiting for you to wake up took ages."

"They have fewer years to restore. It shouldn't take as long."

"Let's hope so."

Back in the Grangers' sitting room, Severus discovered a TV channel dedicated entirely to trivia shows. Extraordinary. Curling up with Hermione on the sofa, he did his best to distract her by answering every question before she could. It almost worked.

The sun had long since set by the time the Grangers woke. Severus cast the diagnostic charms
Draco had taught him, poised to summon Draco himself if necessary, but the Grangers were fine. More than fine.

"Oh," Mrs Granger breathed. "How could I forget you?"

The charm Hermione had used all those years ago had interfered with their true emotions, but now the indifference Severus had witnessed in every other interaction between his in-laws and Hermione melted away. Mrs Granger sobbed as she hugged her daughter.

Mr Granger turned away, blinking rapidly. "Thank you, Severus."

Severus nodded. "My pleasure."

Mrs Granger's face scrunched up in confusion as she pulled back and stared at Hermione's rounded midsection. The concealment charms had dissolved around the time Hermione had swatted Severus with a cushion when he wouldn't stop berating the contestants on Pointless for being dunderheads. Unlike Eileen, Mrs Granger was patient enough to wait for Hermione to say it.

"That," Hermione gave a sniffling laugh, "would be your future grandchild."

Mr Granger failed at maintaining his stiff upper lip at that point. Severus left them to their hugs and crying; that much emotion on display made his skin itch.

If he thought they would appreciate the privacy, he was wrong. A short time later, Mrs Granger ambushed him in the kitchen. Apparently, he was to be embraced as well. Severus tolerated it. At least they'd all managed to stop weeping.

"You're both coming over for Christmas, right?" Mrs Granger asked.

"Er, yeah," Hermione said, glancing at Severus for confirmation. "Sure. We'd love to."

"Bring that book you wrote. It's about time I sat down and read it."

"Mum, it's a textbook."

"So? I—"

"We missed your wedding!" Mr Granger interrupted with a gasp. He turned a baffled stare on his wife. "How could we miss their wedding?"

Hermione hid her smile against Severus's shoulder. "It's OK, Dad, really. We could bring the Pensieve over if you want to watch our memories of it."

It was several more promises of memories to be watched and much talk of all things baby before Severus and Hermione were allowed to depart. Once they were outside, Hermione wrapped her arms around him and held him tight.

"Thank you so much for doing this for me," she whispered.

"I hate to shatter your illusions, my dear, but I did it entirely for myself." He let his hands skim down her sides to rest on her hips. "How else was I to make your parents approve of your marriage to a former Death Eater who is twenty years your senior? My life will be much easier without the unnecessary drama of in-laws who loathe the sight of me."

"Ah, of course. How silly of me. Still, I'm grateful."
Even though they were both far too old to snog outside her parents’ front door like a couple of hormone addled teenagers, Severus allowed her to demonstrate this gratitude for the next several minutes. Her cheeks were rosy from more than the chilly weather by the time he suggested they go home.

"I think George has guessed about the baby," Hermione said as they walked gingerly down the icy pavement. "The other day, he oh-so-casually mentioned what a nice name Georgia is. He also likes Georgina, Georgette, and that old classic: George."

Smirking, Severus put an arm around her to shield her from the cold. "It wouldn't matter if any of those were my favourite name of all time; I still wouldn't consent to naming our daughter after Weasley."

"Hey, he played a pretty important role in what happened today. And you liked him well enough to make him your best man."

"No, Lucius made him my best man when he lost the title in a poker game."

"Mm. I would have let you borrow Harry for the role if you'd asked nicely."

"I am not going to dignify that with a response."

Hermione's shoulders shook with laughter. They walked in silence for a while, the twinkling of fairy lights in nearby trees and windows helping the dull yellow streetlights to guide their way. Muggle Christmas music spilled from an open door as the smiling occupants of a neighbouring house welcomed guests inside. Sighing happily, Hermione tilted her face up towards the cloudy, starless sky.

"I have a name for the baby in mind, actually," she said.

"Oh?"

"I want to name her after someone very brave. Someone who stood up for people like my parents during the war."

"If you suggest we call her Harriet…"

Hermione chuckled. "No." Huddling closer, she kissed his cheek. "I'd like to call her Charity."

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