# The Forest King

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17509988).

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## The Forest King

by drawlight

### Summary

In a single night, all magic disappears across the world. Harry receives a strange and yellowing letter that there may be an exception, that one wizard may be yet living, isolated in the little town of Cokeworth. As Severus Snape begrudgingly assists Harry with unraveling the mystery of the loss of magic, they sink into a world neither had ever dreamt of, learning that there are many things shrouded in history and legend, that some of those things do not wish to be found.

### Notes

To a woman who once cooked me things.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“God knows I never sought anything in you except yourself.

I wanted simply you, nothing of yours.”

Héloïse, The Letters of Abélard and Héloïse

Wait, stop. How do the stories go?

Oh yes, that’s right, once upon a time.
If you had asked Harry Potter, age sixteen, what a day in the life of an Auror looked like, he
probably would have mentioned words like race, capture, danger, cursed artefacts, risk, blood,
sweat, and adrenaline. Harry Potter, Auror, now instead age twenty-five (still always blackhaired
and green-eyed, though fitted these days with a squarer jaw and a dark beard threatening to grow in)
would tell you that all of those things are certainly present, yes. However, the biggest word that
makes up his day is paperwork.

Merlin, he hates paperwork. It is well after six o’clock, well, well after quitting time. And here he is,
still squarely behind his desk with one restless hand buried in an unruly birds’ nest of dark hair and
an ink stain rapidly developing on his right palm. He could really blame Herod Waterfield of Exeter
for this one, who had kept a cursed toilet seat in his home to show off to unsuspecting Muggles.
Now, thanks to old Herod, Harry’s about nine pages deep into a mountain of incident processing
paperwork and he’s starting to question whether or not his signature still looks right. He frowns,
thinking fondly of his bed, of three-hundred count Egyptian cotton sheets and a memory-foam
mattress topper. Wait, add a beer, add a hot bath, perhaps a warm-from-the-oven cottage pie. He
groans a bit, flexing his stiff fingers and massaging the cramp in his calf. There’s a particularly nice
bottle of firewhisky at home, sitting right there above the refrigerator. He dreams fondly of tumblers
of amber liquid; he glares at the seven remaining pages patiently waiting for date, name, incident
report.

“Oi, there, Harry,” Ron says, poking his copper-colored head around the corner, “you knocking off
soon? Want to hit the pub?” Bloody hell yes, I fucking do. Harry perks up, Herod Waterfield can
wait, certainly, until nine o’clock tomorrow morning. Sod it.

“Yeah, let me get my coat,” Harry says. He always packs up in a swirl of magic. Accio the coat, a
green windbreaker laid across a table on the other side of the room. Nox the lights. Colloportus the
door. It never matters how long it’s been. Even fourteen years later, it still sparkles when he casts a
spell, as it flows from his skin to his holly and phoenix-feather wand. He gets a rush of tingles from
his heart to his shoulder, down the wand-arm, exploding like an electrical shower from the tip. Magic
is easy, it is like flying, it is as essential as air. It is a simple thing to gather the power, to let it flow
through him, as unconscious as the tight clench of a heart’s ventricle, as the blink of an eye. When he
casts a wandless spell, it sits like warmth in his belly, like a secret he shares with the earth, just
between himself and the sky. Magic is always joyous, incredible, a rush of blood. It is like the first
climb onto a broomstick, the first kick from the ground off into the sun. Up then, and always toward
the light.

Magic. It is, well, magical.

(He wonders where the magic is stored deep within his body. Is he a conduit, does his body pull
magic from the surrounding air, focusing as a crystal might? Is he a generator? Is the magic produced
there, deep within his cells, in some unknown and unmapped DNA code? Does it float from cell to
cell, mixing through the proteins, the cytoplasm? Does it ride on the back of his blood like oxygen?
Where does the magic come from?)
They order rounds. Fish and chips. The pub, The Flint and Tassel, smells like stale beer and peanuts and it’s always a little bit like heaven coming in here, just himself and Ron. The bartender knows them, tosses a nod out from behind the counter and pulls down two pints before they make it over to say hello. It is an old routine, an old pantomime. They’ve gone out once or twice a week ever since getting hired into the Auror department at age eighteen. Harry’s always a bit amazed at how quickly seven years can go when you’re not looking, when the grim spectre of war is not hovering over your shoulder like a bad habit. Time, from our minor vantage point, is infuriatingly constant. It takes time to heal. Rebuilding and recovery are not quick, you cannot indemnify a battlefield. There will always be the memory of the battle, a history of the war. It cannot be erased; all wars leave wounds to remember them by. They are dull traumas, these bruises and lacerations, they have been the same since the first man struck another. Since Cain had taken up against Abel, he sharpened an old shearing blade and driven it there into his brother’s back. There are still scars on the stones of the school, scorchmarks, scratches. There is still blood stuck between the flagstones, dried and dark as dirt, as soil, invisible to most eyes. It has been seven years. The entire student body has rolled over, has reset. Harry had heard once that all cells within the human body die and are reborn every seven years, that every seven years you are entirely new, different from who you were before. The kids at Hogwarts are a bit like that, only the oldest bear memories of the war and most of those are distant as a legend, an old dull poem. The Dark Lord, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, You Know Who, has slipped into the voices of the youngest ones like a poltergeist or a bogeyman, reduced only to schoolyard taunts.

He was real, you know. His skin was as thin as paper, you could see the veins through, the capillaries. His nose was flat like a snake’s but raw, always still bleeding around the edges, as if he’d cut the slits himself. His mouth was always open, ready to swallow you whole, gaping like a skull, pointed teeth and eyes red like Mars, like day-old blood, embers of a dying fire. He wanted to murder, to kill, to torture. He kept the bones of the ones he killed sometimes, their heads maybe, their hands. Sometimes he threw them away. He didn’t use Avada Kedavra much, I wish he had. He liked it when he used his hands. He liked to take a long time to watch someone die.

(Harry dreams often of Voldemort. Of Tom Riddle, who had been a boy once, who had maybe been lonely and desperate for affection. Who had risen through the world on the back of charisma and promise. There had been a point to it all, long before Harry, long before the murderer had just rather liked killing. Dead now, dead and gone. Good riddance.)

Harry and Ron don’t talk about the war. It’s an unspoken understanding. (He keeps that private, between himself and that endless space between good night and falling asleep.) It’s over, we don’t need to keep bringing that old business up again. So what if he knows that they all need a little extra help to sleep sometimes? So what if they run into one another at the apothecary, carrying baskets loaded with several bottles of Dreamless Sleep Potion? That’s just the weight of their year, the weight of their generation. Some kids are more unlucky than others. We all bear our own scars. If we are lucky, we tell their story once or twice to someone who is patient enough to touch them gently, to listen. Maybe they press here, at this one just between the ribs, say tell me this story.

“Think Robards is gonna make us have that awful staff meeting tomorrow?” Ron asks, chewing on the end of a toothpick.

“Ugh, probably,” Harry groans. Gawain Robards has been their direct supervisor for years. A sharp man, a capable Auror, but hell if Robards didn’t love the sound of his own voice. And diagrams. So many diagrams. His fingers twitch for his wand just thinking about the long, long pointless meetings. The young Auror has never been much for talking if he can help it; he’s always been more of a kinesthetic creature. Just let me do it. Just let me get in there, we don’t have to spend forever
planning it. Harry prefers to go by touch, by feel. He learns directions best with his feet. He learns recipes by chopping the parsnips, by stirring the soup. He has to do it, get in there deep with his hands. He knows the rhythm of when to go, when to pause. He knows how to hold his wand tight at a man’s throat, just there at the carotid artery. How to make his eyes flash, how to threaten. The ease of the physical runs through him as easy as air, as easy as flight, as easy as magic.

(There have been times that Harry had trusted in his knowledge of the physical to carry him through unfamiliar waters. Thinking of it now, he feels hot shame slide down his throat, blush through his chest and shoulders. They’d kissed a handful of times, he and Ginny. It had been alright, he supposed. He had figured that the part that felt like flying, like reaching for the stars, would come later as they slipped into bed. It had ended instead with a hug, a lot of internal shame, and his intact virginity. She’s never told anyone, as far as Harry can tell. Ron has never asked. Harry suspects that both he and Hermione already know. Ron’s odd like that sometimes, with a knack for quiet intuition. Harry wonders if it comes from his large family, knowing where to make space, knowing when to leave things be. Harry never dates, not publically; he knows whom to go to when he has needs that he cannot quite reach alone. Sometimes, as he looks back through his own past, he wonders if it’s been there all along, this undue queerness. Some days there are signs. What about Daniel, dark haired and darkeyed? They had been five years old and Harry had given the other boy his juicebox. He would have given him the world. Later there is Oliver Wood, whom Harry studied closely, had memorized his body in the team showers. You just want to know what a good Quidditch player looks like. He is good at telling himself stories.)

It has been a remarkably calm seven years. Harry had lived with Ron for two of them, then at Ron’s marriage, had moved into a single flat in Hogsmeade. He loves Hogsmeade, there’s something about that village that has always made him feel comfortable. It is sewn into his memory, one of the first places he has ever known and loved magic. It is there, adjacent to Hogwarts by hill or by dale, threaded by secret tunnels he’s never forgotten that stretch out like a map of arteries and veins over the Scottish countryside. Hengist of Woodcroft had founded it all those years ago, sometime around the first millennium. There’s a tall, pigeon-stained statue of the old founder in the town square, bearded and seated upon a stallion. Harry loves to come back here at the end of the long day, to walk past the square with its statue, through this warm village of kind faces and thatched roofs, bricks and chimneys.

Hogsmeade, smelling of the nearby river, of the great carpet of forest that surrounds them with birch and pine. In the spring, the village bustles, ever packed with witches and wizards carrying cuttings of Devil’s Snare and flitterbloom, each hoping to win a blue ribbon at the Magical Waterplants Festival (founded 1926, held annually ever since, skipped once in 1998). He loves the creek behind his flat, he loves the wildflowers, the marigolds and searocket, meadowsweet and spearwort. His street is at the edge of the village, where the spacing of the houses widens out into forest and grass. If he keeps walking, there is a line of trees, the beginning of that old forest, called the Caledonian, which had been named thousands of years ago by Pliny the Elder. Magic feels thick here and cloying, the edges of your vision shimmer, always on the verge of shifting between the real world and that strangeness of the fairy worlds. Harry likes to touch the ground, this old site of one of King Arthur’s twelve battles. The trees had been magical once, the ancient enchanter and trickster Gwydion had awoken them with a word. Another magician, more ancient and strange, the old Merlin, had retreated here once after the Battle of Arfderydd. He had set himself down, his staff down, for a long slumber. His magic had soaked into the ground from where he slept. Harry can still feel it now, all this time later.

The Shrieking Shack still sits up there, lonely and quiet. Harry doesn’t like to look at it. He wants to tear it down; he wants to make it a museum. The bloodstains are probably still there, seeped into the wood like Lord Darnley’s had seeped in at Holyroodhouse. The old, vile Potions Master, Death Eater, betrayer, murderer (spy, hero, protector). That black and broken form had lain on the dirty floor, had spilled out his memories like his blood while muttering something about eyes. (Harry had
not given a fuck about his eyes, desperate and leaning into the other man, hands wrapped around Snape’s throat like he had always dreamt of, but this time pushing at the savaged artery, trying and failing failing failing to staunch the blood loss. Harry doesn’t remember breathing, he does not remember how Snape had gotten to the Hospital Wing. Harry has watched the Dark Lord peel the skin from a man’s face, he had never been as terrified as this time, with dusty and dirty knees, a sluggish heartbeat pouring over his own hands.

Snape had lived. He’d taken a week in the Hospital Wing to come to, stuffed to the brim with transfusion potions and antivenin. Madam Pomfrey was an artisan in healing, the way her fingers had prodded the skin, delicate around the canyon tear. Had knit the skin back together with the tip of her wand (eight-and-a-half inches and made of red alder and unicorn hair). Harry had not visited. He had heard, they all had, that Snape had been vicious when he had woken up, raving about the common decency of letting a man die. (Harry has only seen Snape once since the battle. He had spoken at Snape’s trial, the skinny, jutting man a bag of snarling bones and Harry had closed his eyes and counted to ten. Had said Severus Snape is one of us, he was Dumbledore’s. He was the bravest one of us all. Harry had tightened his fists, focusing on his principles. Tell the truth. Snape worked for the good. He deserves his freedom. But God, he’s a bloody miserable, awful prick. Harry believes in right and wrong, he knows now that not everyone who does right is worth his time. It was a odd feeling, he ignores it, packs it away.)

Tap tap tap.

His eyelids twitch. There is a strange rapping at the window. Tap tap tap. He shouldn’t have stayed out so late, shouldn’t have had that extra round. He’ll certainly be paying for it later, probably around three-thirty that afternoon, when all he will dream about is taking a nap under his desk. Tap tap tap. He grimaces, how is someone expected to sleep through that insistent racket?

“Agatha, stop fussing.” There is a soft, irritated hoot from the other corner of the room. A corner of the room that was very much not near the riot of a window. Harry pops one eye open. Agatha, a great barn owl, Tyto alba, sits on her perch in the corner, her feathers slightly ruffled and an expression on her face clearly stating I want absolutely nothing to do with this.

Tap tap tap.

He yawns. It must be a letter. At this ungodly hour? What time is it? He blinks sleep away from his eyes, rubbing knuckles into his corneas. The digital clock reads 5:47 A.M. in bright green. This time should not be allowed to exist. Fine, what do you want? Harry throws open his curtains to the light. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of shiny eyes stare back, unblinking. A sea of owls flutter at the window sash, their black eyes staring back, their beaks pecking the glass, letters grasped within or tied to their legs. He can’t see past the great array of flustered feathers and impatiently knocking beaks. What the actual fuck? God, there must be hundreds of them. He swallows, throws the sash, a sea of wings bustle into him and knock him back. What the hell? He grabs the rolled slip from the beak of the nearest owl and uncurls it.

Harry,
All at Hogwarts have lost their magical powers. You must come at once. Urgently.

Minerva McGonagall

Headmistress

There is the space of a long minute before he parses this. No magic? He grabs his wand, attempts to cast *Lumos*. Nothing happens. Not a spark, not even a fizzle. What the bloody hell? He feels the creep of foolishness in him, into the heat of his face and breath, as he attempts the spell again. Try another, Potter. *Wingardium leviosa*. The letter lays on the desk, entirely unimpressed with his efforts.

*What the hell is going on?* There are dozens of letters, covering the high-pile beige carpet like a fresh snow. He sorts through the pile, cataloging the list of senders. They come from beyond Hogwarts. He reads them from The Burrow, from the Ministry, even from Madam Rosmerta. All of them saying the same thing, sometime around three o’clock in the middle of the night, magic had disappeared from everyone’s mouths, hands, wands. The terrible nothingness had landed, softly and silently as snowfall. It is beyond understanding, Harry cannot fathom it. Nausea wells up at the back of his throat when he thinks of being cut off from magic. Panic knocks. Few things are ever truly surprises. All tragedies lurk there at the back of our minds, we studiously look away. But we can name what the horrors are. This one, as Harry fumbles for the desk, his knees giving sway, his breathing rapid, this one has never been considered.

*Magic is gone. (But how? Where did it go? Who took it and why?)*

The loss of magic is an incomprehensible thing. It has never happened before. He grabs a jar from a shelf, tosses the Floo powder into the fireplace. Nothing happens. *Really? Nothing is working at all?* He scowls, grabs his jacket from the back of the kitchen chair. At least Hogsmeade is not far from Hogwarts. He’ll go there.

The first thing that rises over the hills are the towers. Next is the curtain wall, facing out toward the forest, toward the winding paths from Hogsmeade. Usually there is a shift to the air as the heavy wards of the school check him, read his magical signature, allow him entry. Today, there is nothing. It is absent and empty and he shivers in the space the feeling should have been. Past the portcullis, there is a short yard, then the high Gothic arches of the entrance. Hogwarts had been built in the late tenth century but various parts had been reworked, added and subtracted, in the centuries since. Old Edric the Unburnt, headmaster in the time of Richard II, had been incredibly fond of the Gothic style that had flourished out from France, had added walls and turrets, sharply pointed windows and flying buttresses, had set blind arcades of arches into the stone walls.

Harry steps through the doorway into the Entrance Hall, into the depths of the castle. The familiar wash of joy washes over him, as it always does, when he arrives at Hogwarts. Hogwarts is *home* in so many ways that he cannot name. When people ask where home is, he still sometimes catches himself biting off the school’s name, just beyond the tongue, despite that he has not lived there in seven years. It doesn’t matter. It was the first place he had felt loved. (His mother and father had loved him once, of course, all those years ago. It was back in the primordial soup before consciousness, as distant to Harry as the existence of dinosaurs. All pasts are ancient and
The great beast of a man standing in the hall with a bushy black beard, eyes like treacle, and arms like treetrunks is also, always, a measure of home.

“Heya, Harry,” Hagrid says, giving him a small wave.

“Hagrid,” Harry dives into the half-giant, covered with a hug like an inbound wave.

“I’m to take yeh on up to the Headmistress. Been in a bit o’ a spot there, this mornin’.”

Harry nods. “Let’s go then.”

“Oh, thank Merlin, Harry,” McGonagall exhales, her grey bun somewhat askew, “You’re here.” She sits behind her desk, one hand massaging the bridge of her nose, similarly drowning in a pile of letters. Harry collapses into a very familiar overstuffed armchair.

“What happened?” he asks, “It’s all gone? Everywhere? No one?”

“No one, Harry.” McGonagall says, a loud bit of banging of a hammer interrupting her for a moment. Minerva McGonagall, Headmistress, was an eminently practical sort. Never one to pause nor wring her hands, she had set her shoulders, dusted the surprise off from her robes, and set all of Hogwarts to work in making do. Harry remembers what he’d seen of the staircases as Hagrid had brought him up. When the magic had disappeared, all of the staircases had ceased suddenly in their bewitched movement, some suspended in midair. A slapdash system of ropes and ladders were hung up to allow movement to the affected areas and the sound of construction had rung out through the stones of the halls.

“Fuck,” Harry says. McGonagall quirks one brow and the corner of her mouth. He feels it; they all feel it. The magic is gone from their bodies, erased entirely, but the memory of it remains. It aches where it once was. Harry’s hand still twitches to cast a spell, toss a quick Accio out. Bloody hell, how did I manage before magic? It is an echo like a phantom limb, gone but not forgotten.

“Indeed.”

“So what do we do?” Please, please say you have an idea. Please.

“We make do,” she says grimly,” And then we find out what has happened.” Once more, then, into the breach. Harry groans internally.

“But what about clocks?” the young fifth-year asks, “they only tell the time? Not where people are?”

Harry is grateful for his immersion in Muggle life. Groups of professors and students watch curiously as he teaches them how to use a lighter, a match. How to boil water without a wand. How to use a cellular phone. He is immensely grateful that creatures don’t seem to be affected and that owl post,
when you got right down to it, really wasn’t that magical at all. (The slight charm that owls employed to find the unfindable aside, he could still send a letter to Hogwarts, still dispatch a note to London.)

The reactions range from the disconsolate to the unimpressed. No student could perform magic over the summer, so they had all adapted ingenious Muggle techniques to deal with it. Furthermore, a quarter of the student body was Muggleborn. For some eleven-year-olds, Muggleborn and only a month into school, this was simply a return to the norm. Harry stands in front of the Fat Lady’s portrait. It does not swing open; she does not ask him for the password. The strangest things are not the handtied witches and wizards, ever adaptable. The strangest things are the magical items stripped of their very nature. Paintings do not talk; portraits do not speak. The suits of armor do not move and the books in the Restricted Section do not scream. Everything feels suddenly very, very *ordinary*. He swallows, tries not to panic.

“Hagrid,” he whispers harshly later that afternoon as they all gather for another all-hands meeting, “they don’t seem that worried. Why?”

“Well, ‘Arry,” the groundskeeper says, eyes sliding away. It seems like he is choosing his words carefully. “I don’t rightly know that but I think they’re all countin’ on you ter fix it.” Frustration hits Harry like a train. Can I just ...not? Just once? He could ask why me but there’s no reason to, he knows already. Because he had done it before. The world always looks to its old heroes, never lets them hang up their swords for long. A very, very intense headache nestles behind Harry’s left eye, like an ice pick had been driven there.

Every Hogwarts professor is crammed into McGonagall’s office. He tenses with a hint of claustrophobia, breathing greedily as if the air were limited. Harry looks around the office, takes in the paintings, the old photographs. It is eerie, both like and unlike his memories of the place. He stares at the painted portrait of Albus Dumbledore, it stares back in a flagrant display of naples yellow and cadmium red. Only oils and canvas here. Dumbledore does not nap idly in the corner of the frame, his eyes do not twinkle merrily, he does not jot off for visits to other portraits. I should be able to talk to you. Harry wants to walk over to the portrait, pick it up. He wants to shake it as hard as he can, as if maybe with a jolt, maybe with him just putting some muscle into it will restart the magic like a heart, turn the engine over again. Maybe he can wake the portrait back up.

“Look at this,” Sprout says, puffing and red in the cheeks. A newspaper with blaring headlines slams down on the table in front of Harry. *Great Magical Blight Occurs Across the World, All Magic Disappears.* Harry frowns, fingering the newsprint. The *Daily Prophet* looks remarkably odd without the moving images. He feels like he’s stepped into another world. (It had been driven up the roads to Hogsmeade in a beat-up old car. Humans, even witches and wizards, are always adaptable. *They* may be at a loss without magic but Muggles have done it the old-fashioned way for millennia.)

“The Blight, eh? That’s quite a term,” a quip from the new Defense professor. A young wizard who talks too fast and keeps Harry just on the verge of distaste.

“It’s kind of a big deal,” Harry says. He fingers his useless wand, hidden there in his pocket.

“Do you think it’ll come back?” Asks Professor Vector, somewhere lost in a corner of the room.

“I don’t know,” McGonagall frowns, staring at the coal-black headline. The printed words make it all feel a little bit more real somehow.

“How does magic just *disappear* anyway?” Harry asks. They all look at him. A few shrug.

“We have to do *something.* ”
“Well,” McGonagall says, setting her shoulders back and staring at each in turn, “what should we do?”

The meeting had gone late into the night.

It is well after midnight when Harry finally stumbles through his front door. (It is strange to come through the door rather than by Apparition or Floo powder. It was odd to set the key into the unfamiliar lock, groaning as he twisted it. He’d been in a panic that morning about where he’d put the key, it hadn’t been used in years. He’d found it safe in the bottom of an old bowl at the back of the junk drawer.) He splashes water on his face and a bit of firewhisky in his mouth. *Fuck me, what a long day.* Collapse into the overstuffed easy chair, stare into a corner. Agatha hoots.

“Yeah, I agree with you,” Harry murmurs.

Where had it gone then, the magic? Harry doesn’t even know what to fathom, there is absolutely no precedent for the disappearance of magic. He conjures up a mental image of old Professor Binns dustily haunting the classroom while Harry tried not to doze off (visions of Chudley Cannons and Cho Chang dancing in his mind). Binns had never once mentioned a lack of magic beyond the existence of Muggles and Squibs. No, magic had been born somewhere in history, no one ever entirely sure when or where. Maybe it had come in with us, with humanity, like a silent twin. He sighs, buries his face in tanned hands with squat, square fingers and bitten nails.

There is a sharp rapping at the window. *Oh, great. What do they need now?* (He is immensely tired of letters, of owl beaks. Agatha nips at her feathers, looking similarly peeved.)

An owl pours in through the open window. *Whew, just one.* It is massive and grey, a subspecies Harry has never seen the likes of before in Britain. He stares at it in wonder. The bird shakes its head, seemingly irked at the indignity of its arrival, and drops a curled letter in Harry’s lap. Harry stares at the strange owl for a long moment more before unrolling the letter.

What a curious letter.

It is strangely empty save for a few lines in the absolute center of the large parchment, the surface cracking and yellowed with age. It is odd, parchment is the most durable writing material known to mankind. If cared for, if stored properly, it can last for a thousand years or more. *How old is this thing?* It smells oddly, a strange odor of dust and neglect mixed with something more fetid, more rotten and sour. His lip curls. *It’s only a letter, relax.* Harry feels uneasy. The scrawl is very harsh and stuttered, as if it was written with a great many pauses, a litany of stops and starts. Harry has a curious impression that the writer had forgotten the letters, had perhaps needed to look them up in the middle of the piece.

*Old sorcerers never die. Look for the last in Cokeworth. Where the spinning stops.*

Below the script is a queer little drawing, this one executed in fluid strokes with no hesitation. It is a
great winged dragon. It faces left, mouth open and tongue unfurling out in ferocity. The pointed tail
is curved like a pig’s and one front claw is raised as if to strike. In the vibrant red ink, Harry knows
he’s seen this image before. It is a famous one, the old red dragon. You can pick up a keychain or a
sticker with it, perhaps a sweatshirt, at any gift shop in Wales. He’s seen it on the Welsh flag before,
centered on a background of green and white and facing sinister, always proud. He frowns a little,
not sure why the Welsh dragon would be scribbled on this odd letter.

The letter lays open on the desk. That queer scent of decay and forgetting curls up into the air. Harry
stands up, paces. He runs his fingers through his hair, bites his lip. He gives the grey owl an offer of
a small cracker before it takes off again into the dark, not stopping to accept a response.

Harry stares at the letter. The empty space that surrounds the message unnerves him.

Cokeworth. It’s an uncomfortably familiar place. He’s been to that foul town before. It had stunk of
fertilizer dung and coal dust. He’s fairly certain the sky is never fully clear there, never big and bright
and beautiful with all that grey soot covering the sun. Rotten, awful town. He’s been there once, age
eleven. Uncle Vernon had madly taken a cabin on a rock in the middle of a lake in desperate flight
from a bit of mail. Cokeworth, in some ways, is where Harry’s story had begun. His real story. He
had turned eleven there, in the middle of a storm, sleeping on a damp and dirty floor. A giant had
knocked down a door there, had said yer a wizard, Harry. In some ways, the real Harry Potter was
born in Cokeworth. (He has never been back.)

When we talk about places, it is inherently understood that some are more magical than others.
Cokeworth, wrapped up in soot, wrapped up in coal-dust, in the smell of Tuesday’s garbage and the
piss-soaked gutters outside of its’ pubs, is not a particularly magical place. A wizard or a witch might
be born there perhaps, like an unlucky plant grown in poor and unfamiliar soil, but magic will never
crawl up from the ground or out of the sky as it does near the Giant’s Causeway, where the druids
sleep buried in their bogs. Magic will never seep from the mist as it does near Stonehenge, which
once had drawn down the sun.

(Harry thinks of places that are purely magic. He wonders if the wonder has retreated there, to these
strange lands that he has been promised and has never touched. Heaven, if we consider it, must be
spun solely from magic, from that purest of magic, which cannot be sullied with the word witchcraft.
There is no craft in God’s will, who had dreamt up Heaven on a lark, had placed it on high, high
above the firmament. To cast a spell is to borrow a little bit of that heavenly glory for yourself, to
bury it down, deep in your bones. Harry believes that if you could look at magic simmering, really
look at the thing before it becomes a spell, it would look like a brightness, a pure shimmering white
light. Heaven, which is woven with magic thread, must be a cacophony of light.)

“Harry,” the voice on the other end of the line breathes in relief, “how are you, how is everyone
doing up there? It’s a mess here. Well, I’ve taught everyone how to use a washing machine and
we’ve had electricity run to the house. It took a bit of work, there are no lines to Ottery St.
Catchpole, of course, but there are a few generators-”

“Hermione,” Harry interrupts her, smiling all the same, “um, do you have a minute?”

“Of course.” The clamor of the Burrow rings loudly in the background. She and Ron had settled in
Ottery St. Catchpole near to the rebuilt home. Her voice is as weary as Harry’s is, exhausted from
explaining the nuance of how to make tea with a kettle, to fold a shirt by hand. (It is an unpleasant
thought, the Burrow without the golden thread of magic.)

“So,” he starts, unsure of what to say. *You know how the weird things always seem to happen to me? Yeah, well, they’re happening again.* “I got a letter last night. And I don’t know who it’s from.”

“Okay…” Her voice is faraway and drawn out, waiting.

“It said there’s still a wizard left. At least I think that’s what it means. Wait, let me read it to you. It says ’Old sorcerers never die. Look for the last in Cokeworth. Where the spinning stops.’ Then there’s a weird little squiggle. I kinda thought it looked like the dragon on the Welsh flag.”

“Someone still has *magic*?” She breathes.

“Yeah, I think so,” Harry says, “It *sounds* like it. But I have no idea what they’re trying to say. Where the spinning ends? What the hell kind of thing does that mean?” He pauses, casting off.

“*Honestly*, Harry,” Hermione puffs. Harry can hear her roll her eyes through the phone (some things never do change). “You never pay attention. They must mean Spinner’s End. Cokeworth, Harry. Don’t you see? *Snape* lives in Cokeworth.”

Harry groans, thumping his head on the desk. Not Snape. *Anyone but him.* The memory of the dark-haired man is as violent and fresh as the day they had parted. That grease-stained mop, eyes like dried blood and crushed dungbeetles. That sallow skin, nose like a beak, that permanent scowl. *Are you fucking kidding me, I finally got rid of that asshole.* Harry can already picture turning up on Snape’s doorstep, clutched parchment in hand, having to ask for his goddamn help. He sees it already, Snape will be contemptuous and foul, will find some fresh scab to pick at, some fresh wound to reopen. Snape has always known exactly where to cut with that dagger mouth. Harry’s lip curls, an angry heat curls in his stomach, rises up like bile in his mouth.

It had been different since the end of the war. Harry had argued on Snape’s behalf at the trials. *He’s Dumbledore’s man, not Voldemort’s. He’s one of the bravest of us all.* It was easy to say from a distance, when Snape was somewhere off in one of the dark corners he had crawled out of. It was easy to say when Harry didn’t have to pick him up, the blackhearted snake, and *look* at him. (Didn’t have to ask the question that has sat there for fourteen years. It’s a simple question, always burning at the back of his throat, desperate to sneak out during one of their infamous rows. *What’s your fucking problem, Snape?*) Now, staring down his impending, miserable visit to Spinner’s End, Harry is as hot with loathing and indignation as he had been at eleven years old. *Mr Potter, our new celebrity,* he remembers. *What a goddamn bloody, self-righteous prick.*

He wipes a hand across his face, through his pitch-dark hair. *Why is it always me? (Why is it always him?)*

“Why would *Snape* still have magic?”

“I don’t know, Harry, you’ll have to go ask him, I suppose.” (He wonders if she is chewing on her hair, as she often had when she was thinking.)

“Can’t I just send him an owl?” he whines.

“Do you *honestly* think he would reply?”

*No. The blighter wouldn’t even open it.*

“Argh, why do I have to go?”
A long pause, “You got the letter, Harry, I think it has to be you. And, well, things just always kind of happen to you.” Her voice softens, he can hear a kind smile in it, “And because we need you to.” (Harry will do it, he always goes where he is needed.)

“Alright, alright,” he mutters, resigned, “I’ll leave in the morning. Guess I’d better figure out where the blasted train station is around here.”

In the shadows, things creep that we do not see. They raise the hair on the back of our necks, the gooseflesh of our arms. They hover at the edge of our vision, make us look over our shoulders. There are things we do not know. Things we have not dreamt in our philosophy.

Outside, past the window, past the red brick of Harry’s building, a tall and dark figure in a long grey coat stands in a pool of streetlamp light. He whistles once at the street light, it flickers briefly and goes out. The other lights, as if watching and following by example, do the same. The street is in unfamiliar darkness, far deeper than it is used to. The stars gleam with nothing to drown them out. Perhaps things move, perhaps they do not. On this long night, all men will dream the same strange dream of two dragons, red and white, locked in combat in the dungeon of a decaying castle. They will not remember it come morning. It will go instead somewhere into the dark, forgotten to a kingdom of lost things.
Chapter 2

“To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing.”

Anne Carson, Red Doc

If we know that magic is light, that Heaven is made of light, we must then assume that before is dark. In the Beginning, God created Heaven and the earth (or so we are told, history is an often unreliable mistress). He had said let there be light, and so there was light and that was the first day. So, we can infer that both Heaven and earth were born into the bleak darkness of nothing. Light cannot reach all corners, so there are still dark spots, places we do not show to others, places we do not mention and look away from.

This is, of course, where we begin to talk about legend. Who keeps the legends these days? Most ask how or when, where or what. The scientists ask why? So, we turn to science.

It has not rained in two months. There is a dusty air of desperation to the earth, the trees with their desiccated and withered roots that plunge deeper into the soil, hoping to break through to an as-yet-unknown water table. The dry, pale grass is sparse across the ground too, parched and looking upward to the sky in hope of rain. Severus is not dry, always contrary to a fault. He is soaked in cheap lager down here at The Six-Legged Mare. He has a tab open, it’s one of his lesser bad decisions. It’s a bad ritual, but it calms him down.

He rather hates this pub. It is an easy hate, a comfortable loathing. You can find him here more often than not, a few nights a week, usually perched at the far end of the bar. He hunches over the wooden counter like an ugly gargoyle, frowning at shadows and tearing an unlucky napkin to shreds. Sometimes, he imagines that the napkin is other things. Things he would like to ruin; things he would like to shred. Put my fucking fist through. It is what men do, he has always felt, come back to haunt the places they hate. Their fathers’ pubs, perhaps. This had once been Severus’ father’s pub, so he comes on Tuesdays. Here, he can stare at ghosts in corners and think up all the things he should have once said. (Tobias Snape, died 1990. “Give a memory of him,” the old priest had said. Severus had snarled, “I have nothing to say to him.” That was not, in fact, entirely true. There were novels that could have been said, held back for thirty years. None of them, however, could be said before God.)

He will never get to say them now. Instead, other words float in to his unconscious overhearing. The men at the bar trade stories, about the mill, about their wives. About a new nature documentary about Antarctica. “His teeth froze up there, you know,” one man says. Severus listens in, he often listens in. (He has nothing else to do.)

“Whose?”

“Shackleton’s.”
“I don’t think I’ve got to that part yet. Wait, how do teeth freeze?”

“They’re porous, eh? I guess the water or your spit or whatever can get in there and up there, on the mountain, it’s cold enough to freeze instantly and shatter.” Severus pauses in the methodical tearing of his shredded napkin. That’s a new one to him, the freezing of bone. He has always collected methods of death, the other children had found it creepy. It wasn’t that he wanted to maim, to kill, there was no substance there. Instead, it is this horrible curiosity, settled there deep between his ribs. It is his own death, perched there at the distal end of his own time. How will I die? It is the question all of us try not to ask, that sits there constantly behind our eyes like a bad headache. Severus collects the ways, wonders which one is his own. He had thought he had known once, in that split instant when the snake had launched herself toward him. Death by snakebite, he had thought, his curiosity and fear sated at last. It is not so bad once you know. (It had been stolen from him, the oasis of knowing. Plucked from death and tossed back again into the mess of the living. Go fish. Try again for another death, maybe the next one will be worse. Maybe next time his bones will freeze, the water filling into the porosity of the calcium. Water expands when frozen but bone is solid, it does not bend. To stretch bone is to shatter it. Perhaps, next time, he will shatter.)

Why did I come back here? There is no simple answer to that question. Spinner’s End, already his and empty save for a collection of bad habits, had been the obvious choice in that spring seven years past. He’d woken up with a searing pain in his neck, behind his eyes, the slight blind spot in the center of his vision promising a wicked migraine. Poppy had clucked over him, checking the healed wound. It had taken a good half-hour to truly come to, the slow dawning horror of consciousness, as he floated up from the deep of the induced coma. He’d poked at his skin, grey and mottled in all the wrong ways, stared at a sun through the windows, blinding and a bit too bright. The deplorable truth had dawned on him then, you’re alive, you lived through this. It was dazing and strange. He had never given any consideration to after. His story was supposed to end there, with the war, he had expected to die on the battlefield. And then he’d found himself breathing and sweaty in starched and bleach-scented hospital sheets, stuck for god-knows-how-long and facing down another incoming class of first years. That had been rather depressing.

“He saved you, you know, Severus. Harry did. They found him clinging to you, he’d stopped the blood as much as he could. He wouldn’t leave you,” Poppy babbled in her relief, dipping cloth in water to help him bathe. He would not leave his bed for some days. The indignity of it all. Potter, how fucking dare you. How dare you stop me. How dare you touch me. How dare you presume to intervene in my fucking goddamn fucking life, you had no right. His anger had caught like a wick, burning, spreading. A gas explosion. Minerva would give him a stern dressing-down later for the way he had snapped at Poppy, wishing it had been Potter standing in front of him. Potter hadn’t even had the decency to try to visit him in the Hospital Wing. (Not that he’d wanted Potter to come, you see. Never that. But he’d wanted the brat to at least try. Severus had prepared an excellent collection of scathing insults to direct to the boy if he’d come. He’d never had the chance to use them. A waste, a pity.)

In this town of stinking misery, his father had been a fisherman. Had come home (disgusting, drunk) with the smell of the lakewater and fishguts sticking to him, permeating his clothing, the heavy canvas and denim. He was always perpetually damp, from the seaspray, from the sweat, from spilled beer. It did not matter, to touch old Tobias was to come back with tightened molars and wiping your moist hand against your pants.

His mother had taken the catch, some of it at least, had dropped the dead cod and mackerel onto newsprint. Her filleting knife had been sharp, bendy as a willow-wood wand. Severus had watched, standing on a chair, as she slid the knife against the dorsal fin, peeling the flesh from the bones like opening a favorite book. It had sounded like a xylophone, his mother and her knife, as the blade thump thump thumped along the rib bones.
This is the first time that Severus, nine-years-old with a shiner on his cheek, who heaves in hatred at his father, (who waits hopefully, aching for a kind word) considers death. He looks from the fish to his father and back again. The principles are the same. Flesh, blood, bones. He knows, as he had touched the fillet, that once the skin is removed it is simple to put your finger through muscle, pull it apart. We are not made of such sturdy stuff. His father stares at him from the kitchen doorway, “Go clean your fucking room, Severus”. Severus goes, hissing in secret, thinking all that time of where to cut.

They are easy to hate, these common folk, these Muggles. He could have been one of them too easily, could have wound up stuck in a boat, hoping to reel in a mackerel. Could have worked for thirty years at the old sawmill, abandoned now, dead of a heart attack at fifty-one. He thinks of his secret, the secret of all witches and wizards, distinguishing them. The gold swirl that floats in his blood, gathers like static electricity. Magic. Nothing has ever brought him more pleasure. Some wizards develop their magic out of a desire for power. This is not, in fact, a driving force for Severus. He collects every grimoire, every spellbook. He learns all the potions, all the charms. It is pure and desperate curiosity, he aches for the expanse of magic like he spreads wings into the sky. Magic is pleasure and joy and wonder, his curiosity is never sated, his gnawing want. He needs to know.

He has never been good at holding his liquor. It comes on a bit fast, the drunkenness, he never realizes exactly how far he’s gone until he stands up from the barstool and his knees slightly sway. In this inebriated state, he concentrates more than he usually would, very deliberately putting the coat over his shoulders, carefully counting and gathering his small things. Keys perhaps, a leather wallet. Pay the tab, of course, so he might come back again tomorrow. Worst of all is the ruddiness that settles on his cheeks, his nose, the tips of his ears. If he hiccups, he is furious. Angry and vicious and drunker than sin and fucking bloody hiccupping, of all the miserable indignities of the world.

Focus. One foot in front of the other. (He is not certain if his efforts are helping or hindering him from hiding this regretful drunkenness.)

Thus, angry and furious and goddamn hiccupping (Because what universe isn’t laughing at you, Severus?) he begins picking his way back to the small house. An odd fog lays low and heavy against the earth. He stumbles as a figure steps suddenly into the middle of the path back to the rows of brick council houses. He curses the interruption, the unexpected cretin standing flagrantly, standing offensively in the middle of the stone path. Severus is rigid, shoulders and legs stiff. He stares at the shabby man in horror. There is an unpleasant smile to the twist of the lips, the yellow teeth, the jaundiced skin. The grey coat is threadbare and moth-eaten, the tattered hat belongs to another century. "Get out of my way," the once-Potions Master hisses. Severus has never been accused of much patience, it is worse yet now, his little self-control locked up with several downed pints. The smirking, abhorrent figure strikes against a grey sky, thick with low-lying stratus clouds, heavy as a blanket. Everything is grey but for the new arrival, who is dark and dissonant. The grey rocks, the grey clouds, grey lake. Even the mist, which never seems to completely leave the town, is grey. The wretch ambles closer, gliding, swaggering.

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“Now, now, I’ve come to tell your future,” the creature drawls. A fortune-teller, how goddamn delightful. The figure pulls long and pointed fingers from his pocket, sways close to Severus, plucks an invisible bit of lint from the old professor’s dark coat. Severus stiffens immediately, choking on his thick revulsion. Get the bloody fuck away from me or I swear to God that I will cut you. (He says
nothing, it is strange how the words do not come as bidden to his tongue.) The Seer laughs, swaying like he is on waves, like there is an unearthly equilibrium to him, placidly ignoring how Severus’ fingers twitch for his wand, how Sectumsempra sits unswallowed on the tongue. A cool wind rips through the tops of the trees, ash and pine. The distant caw of a carrion crow. (He feels then suddenly and uncomfortably sober.)

_Merlin, if I could only smite you off this planet._ Severus has never liked fortune-tellers. This one does not fit his experiences of Seers, practitioners of that old and ancient imprecise art of Divination. He is used to old bats like Trelawney, simpering and useless. There is something menacing about this one. The tattered black hat covers most of the man’s face, which is lean and deceit-stained. Long hair comes down in tangles like snakes, black as cobras. If he were more of a fool than usual, he might chance to say something about the man’s state of neglect. He does not, less out of kindness than an uneasy awareness of his own shabby clothes and oily hair, hanging stringily down in his face. (He has never been good with hygiene. It is worse lately, alone and forgotten.) If he says something, something may be said in turn. So Severus keeps his mouth shut. He is a master at self-preservation. The man places a long finger against his own mouth, indicating silence, and pulls a stack of tarot cards from the pocket of his long grey coat.

“Now then, how does it go?” The fortune-teller idles, dancing his fingers with their dirty fingernails over the spread cards. “That’s right. Einy, meeny, miney, moe.”

“I do not need my fortune told,” he sneers at the Seer. An unnerving smile dances on the other man’s mouth. Wider than it should have been, like the deathly grin of a flayed skull. The teeth he chances to have are as yellow as acid rain. A deep and visceral repulsion beats in Severus, primal as fire. He wants to pull away, escape the cruel grin, the strange and foul smell that rises from the man’s breath. He does not want the Seer to see him flinch. (His mother’s words crawl through him, calling him _coward_, saying _do not let them see you blink._)

“You do not get to decide that, you know,” the nameless man says. He pulls an oxblood-colored card, holds it between his spindly fingers, “What do you think it is, Severus Snape?” He waves the vellum card before his face, turns it over in his hand. _It’ll be Death, of course. How utterly pedestrian._ Severus sneers.

It is not. The reversed Emperor stares up from the bone-white of the card’s front. It is a deck Severus has never seen before, old and woodprinted. It appears perhaps medieval, dusty with centuries. The Emperor stares out from the woodcut. A gaunt face with unseeing eyes, surrounded by crows. “These are interesting times, Mr. Snape,” the man says, his breath foul as a plague, “Do you want to know what they say? They say _the king is coming._”

“Who are you?” Severus demands. The miserable brother-wizard closes his eyes.

_“Once before and once again, _

_At Virgo’s earthly end, _

_He rides a crown, a storm of crows, _

_beset upon by a dead rose. _

_Dragon come, dragon go, _

_the end to be ever-slow, _
A shiver spikes through his unwilling body. “Who the bloody hell are you? What the hell do you want?” Severus does not like to be unsure, to be caught unawares. *He is just mad, he is raving, ignore him.*

“No one!” The man calls, jolly and foul. “I have done what I came to do,” the unnamed man bows quickly, gathers his coat about him and turns away down the path.

“Your card,” Severus holds it out, that unseeing Emperor drowning in a carnival of crows. His skin crawls where he touches it. *Take your foul card with you back where you came.*

“No, no, that’s where you’re wrong,” the man calls from down the road, “That is your card, Mr. Snape. It always has been.”

Cokeworth is a miserable place and Spinner’s End is located in the most desolate spot of it all. It is never warm, the chill of northern England comes out of the fog and settles deep within the bones. A long, twisted river snakes through the town, the water slow and thick with sludge. No one touches the river, brown with sediment and refuse. The lake, far to the north of the town, sitting on the edge of the settlement, is the deepest lake in Britain. A glacier had torn it deep into the earth during the last ice age, had thought to even melt there. It is still almost preternaturally cold, as if the ice is still in there, deep at the bottom, unmelting.

Severus had grown up here, in many ways he has never left. It is a gutwrench to be born poor as dirt, a disgraceful stain he’s never been able to vomit up, no matter how far he sticks his discolored fingers down his throat. He cannot pick it out from his teeth. No matter how he holds himself, he is never as at ease as the wealthy are. He stands wrong. Holds his arms wrong. His clothes are always wrong, wrong color, wrong fabric, wrong fit. His voice, no matter how he tries to keep it in check, to affect the pronunciation of the learned and the rich, always slips back into the rough tones of Cokeworth when he’s not looking. *Rough,* the others had said all those decades ago glaring at him from across the Slytherin common room, *dirty,* they had said. *Common* is the worst accusation of all. Severus wants to be something, *anything,* he cannot stand being one of many, being common and forgotten. (He is middling at best, cheap and vulgar, plain and trivial. Why would you pick Severus Snape out? He is nothing, absolutely nothing.)

The sitting room can almost, if you squint at it, be called a library, except that nothing in Spinner’s End is grand enough to include something like a *library.* It is accidental at best, crammed with haphazard shelves. Books cover the shelves, stacked upon every surface, under the coffee table, on the windowsill. Academic journals and papers threaten to spill over and carpet the floor with their pages. To the curious, with their too, too many books, anywhere with a flat surface can be a library.

All of the furniture is left from his parents. There is an old easy chair, he sinks into it, sick with disquiet. The card is still in his pocket, he withdraws it. Holds it gingerly in his long, pale fingers. *I should have thrown it on the ground.* Tossed it away. The trash is not far, he could get up now, drop it in. Consider the fire. Cast *Incendio,* watch the hearth roar to life. The card would curl up,
transmute from vellum to ash, blacken and disappear from existence. He does not. (He is not sure why.) Instead, it remains there in his hand.

The Emperor. Tarot is an old game, an old tool of the diviners. It is a modified pack of playing cards, introduced sometime in the mid-fifteenth century. It had been a simple game at first but the Seers had sought its potential, had added the Major and Minor Arcanas, which can tell a man of secrets. The Emperor is a card from the Major Arcana. The design might vary. In traditional representations, it is always a king seated on a ram-adorned throne. He is old, his beard white and long. He carries the usual trappings of kingship, the old orb and scepter. His rule from atop the barren mountain is always unquestioned, always absolute. To draw The Emperor is to see structure and guidance, wisdom and authority. Honor and discipline always. The Emperor understands the fundamental paradox, that a good ruler is a good servant and that the good of the kingdom supersedes all.

But he has drawn the inverse. The upside-down Emperor. Take a look, read your card, what do you see? The reversed Emperor is abuse, a cruel father figure. Sense of powerlessness. Ache, need, want. Nothingness there, within you, between your skin and bones. Lack of self-control. A need to dominate. Suffering. He cannot stop staring at the unrelenting blankness of the Emperor’s eyes. This is a different deck than he’s ever seen before and the king here does not look like the usual one. This one is younger, unearthly and cruel in his distance. The eyes are black and blank. He is depicted with a beard and wearing antlers rising from his brow like the Summer King, the Horned God, the old fragments of myths and tales of The Forest King, which are lost now to only poets and the superstitious.

The king is coming, the fortune-teller had said. Severus is not sure why it unsettles him. Why it makes him restless. He taps his fingers and bounces a foot uneasily, unsure of how to relax. Tap tap tap.

He glares at the offending window. Go away. It is no use, owls are ever persistent. They always find you, get their way. Heave a sigh, draw a hand over the face. “I suppose that if you intend to make such a racket, you might as well come in then,” he mutters, points his wand at the window. (Severus’s wand, purchased at age eleven from old Ollivander’s shop. Ten-and-a-half inches, made of hawthorn and phoenix feather.) “Alohamora.” The window sash rises and a perturbed barn owl floats in. An unfortunately very familiar barn owl.

“Hello Athena,” he takes the letter from the owl’s beak, unrolling it to see, as expected, Minerva McGonagall’s steady, confident script. The lamp casts long shadows on his hollow face as he reads the letter. Once, twice, barely comprehending. A deep frown settles on the thin lips, his features still and grave. “What the godforsaken devil does she mean?” he murmurs. Think back, when was the last time he had cast a spell? He stares at the loopy scrawl. No magic at Hogwarts or anywhere else reported.

He reads the letter again. Picks up his wand and points it at the lamp. Lumos. The lamp, as it had on every other day of its dull existence, flares into light. This doesn’t feel like a trick. Always suspicious, this one, he looks again at the owl. The bird is indisputably Athena, the Headmistress’ owl and companion these past ten years. He murmurs a mild charm to check for Dark magic but nothing is revealed on neither the owl nor letter. What the bloody fucking hell? The letter, written in common India ink on common parchment, takes on an air of malevolence lying there on the desk. It dawns on him slowly, in quietude, the truth of the matter. If this is true, then I am the only living wizard left. Perhaps he should write to Minerva, correct her, point out that he, Severus Snape, could still coax a spell from a wand. What point would there be? No, he knows, it is better to say nothing, to do nothing. They will all make their own ways
in the world, as the Muggles have. No, it is better to curl up with his magic, to keep it close and quiet and special. His.

At the end of the letter is a short postscript detailing the committee who had come to Hogwarts to help in the efforts against the Blight. Shacklebolt had jumped a train, the Weasleys were in contact of course, and then Harry, who was living a stone’s throw away in Hogsmeade, had walked over in the morning. *Harry came to help*, Minerva had written.

His fists clench. Cut there, into the skin, with ragged fingernails. Perhaps he will bleed later. (Severus likes logic, cool and calm, a precise order of rationality. Potter, blazing and bright and infuriating, is never rational. He storms against Severus, quick as a lake’s squall, pushing Severus into only reactions, only ever catching up. He cannot stay on his feet near the boy, cannot keep his own head, cannot think reasonably. It is only ever fire and bitten tongues and razors in his throat.)

To hate Potter is to be an outcast. Potter is a hero. There’s a parade in his honor every year on May 2nd. There are *statues* of the awful boy. To hate Potter is a sin. (Severus is good at mortal sins. He collects them like trophies.)

*Pride.* He knows there is nothing, really, to be proud of in his miserable existence. He is ugly, his nose jagged and overlarge, his mouth always cruel and curled. His skin is the color of maggots and sour milk. His eyes and hair are both dull and dark as simple char. He’s always greasy and smelling faintly of formaldehyde, a bony ghost borrowing a bit of skin. His accomplishments are laughable. What great things has he done? Accomplice to a mass murderer, a serial killer. A murderer in his own right, even of the greatest wizard of our age. But the pride has been passed down to him by blood, from mother to son. His mother had taught him to keep his chin raised when they mocked him, that anger is better than fear. *Children of the Dragon*, she had said once to him, a very long time ago. *Never let them see you blink.*

There is *wrath.* Wrath, of course, is his favorite. He is powerful in his own anger, strident and lit up in scarlet and crimson. When else does Severus’ heart beat but in the heat of his fury? He is *good* at anger, it is his favorite emotion, the only one that burns him from the inside out, razes him like a forest fire, leaves him fresh and clean and pure.

(He keeps *lust* to himself, though he is sick with it. It chokes him from the inside out, like pneumonia fills up a man’s lungs with fluid, drowns a man in the wide-open air. The sick, revolting *want* drips from him no matter how many baths he takes, no matter how he scrubs at his skin. There is no cure for it. He would take a knife and cut it from his very flesh if he could, pick it off like a scab. There is no cure for this, this horrible desire, so he stops his subscription to the *Daily Prophet*, he looks away from all copies of *Witch Weekly* that sit so flagrantly, offensively on newsstands. They all bear that same revolting, repellent (wanted) face, always smiling and ravenhaired and green-eyed. He comes home after these trips with a tense twitch to his temporal arteries, clenched teeth, and takes a shower hot enough to scorch. If it hurts, then all the better.)

There are few mirrors in the ramshackle house. *I already know this wretched face, why look at it again?* Windows have the unfortunate effect of sometimes reflecting him, letting Severus see how truly foul he is. (*If I have to be a monster, why not give me some damn foolish wings and claws while you’re at it?*) He is as he has always been, tall and wiry, spare-framed and ever-underweight. Rawboned in an unpleasant way, consumptive and cadaverous. His arms and legs are equally long and thin, giving the impression of a spider. He loathes it all, as he loathes most things. (Hate is easy, hate is comfortable.) The hatchet-face and hollow cheeks, the creased skin. The old poets had said of faces like his that they were *February-faced.* Skin as pallid as expired whey. His Medusa-like hair, stringy and dull. He leaves it long as he cannot bother with it to cut it. (He never tells anyone about the strong cowlick that emerges when it is short that no magic can tame.)
Later, he lays in bed, grey nightshirt and grey bedsheets drawn up to his chin like a shroud. Stares open-eyed at the popcorn ceiling. He does not think then of Potter or of magic, of Minerva’s letter, of his parents. The hard-bitten and spectral face of the king on the card floats up to him, empty-eyed as a skull, nestled in a flock of crows. Hears the voice of the old and offputting fortune-teller, who had come too near, nearer than anyone had in seven years, who had smelled of distant and unvisited places. Who had said to him, what had he said? Oh yes. “These are interesting times, Mr. Snape.”

Interesting times, indeed.

His dreams that night are troubled. Mostly he dreams of legends.

Cokeworth is a dreary and unmagical town, yes, that is a rather certain fact. However, the country it is nestled in, old Yorkshire, is steeped in mystic tradition. Severus has heard this for decades. He is bitter about it, that he is surrounded by this wealth of magic and was given the worst of the lot, was born to Cokeworth and not somewhere out there on the moors. He thinks of the old legends, collects them like a pack of baseball cards.

He dreams first of Mother Shipton. Every child in Yorkshire knows her name. That old Seer had been born in a cave on the River Nidd. She was one of the true Seers, not these half-cocked hacks that Severus sneers at, a hot heat in his chest. She could see the future painted on the backs of her eyelids. He sees her reading his cards, looking at the king in his hand, laughing.

His mother had also told him of Semerwater, so he dreams then of that old myth. It is the second largest lake in Yorkshire, out on the dales where one can see for miles, off into places one should never see. Once upon a time, there had been a wealthy city. An angel had come down, had concealed his wings under the guise of a beggar. (Angels were more common then.) The angel had gone from house to house, his hands shaking and face gaunt, begging for food and drink, for a drop of kindness into his gaping pool. He had been turned away from each door, save one, a miserable shack on the outskirts of town. The couple, deep in poverty themselves, had shared their bread, their small bit of desiccated meat. When the angel had left, he had cast the spell, the curse upon the town. Semerwater rise, Semerwater sink. And swallow the town all, save this house, where they gave me food and drink. The lake had risen, the people had huddled terrified in their houses, watching the dirty lakewater climb the windows, rush under the doors. The lake swallowed the town whole. It is still there, if you know where to look, deep at the bottom of the lake. (The angel had looked a bit like Albus; Severus does not wish to ask his subconscious why.)

Cast back, further back. The next dream comes, out of his past, out of his mother’s stories. What was the first thing his mother had told him? He had cut his teeth on the tales of King Arthur, who may or may not still sleep in Yorkshire. These old graves are dubious, you cannot trust the truth of the bones of the saints, that the fingerbone in a reliquary is not an ancient chicken bone. Some say that Arthur and his men sleep forever in a cave deep below Richmond Castle, near to the River Swale. (Other places in Britain and beyond argue furiously over the graves. Glastonbury Abbey, deep in Cornwall, claims it and has set up a little shrine. Bardsley Island has a legend too and Mynydd-y-Gaer has written one of their own. Across the sea, the little Channel, the Forest of Paimpont in Brittany tells visitors that Arthur slumbers there too, somewhere deep and forgotten to time. Severus is a Yorkshire man, he prefers to believe that Arthur sleeps in Richmond Castle.) Severus can see Arthur there, slumbering on a bier, pale and wheat-haired.

He forgets the last dream before he wakes. Dragons, two of them. One red and one white and locked
in bitter, vicious combat. Their tails lash the stone walls of the subterranean room they are locked within. Their fire breath fills the choked room up with smoke. The ground and foundation tremble, on the verge of shattering.

The dream passes, he wakes already exhausted at dawn.

There are not many places in Britain where the Northern Lights are visible. Yorkshire, far to the north, hosts a number of Dark Skies National Parks. Cokeworth, near to the moors, near to Dalby Forest, is one of the few places that the aurora borealis is strong enough to be seen (depending on which way the coal-smoke blows). It paints the sky in shades of moss and rot, in grass and lichen. The red lays low against the ground, against the distant forest, as if it has caught fire. This is the background of the land that he sees when he opens the door to a forthright knock, the solid figure casting a dark shadow against the mirage of fire.

*Godfuckingdammit.*

“Potter,” he says, flat as a salt plain. He had somehow known, had somehow been waiting, ever since learning of the disappearance of magic, that he and Potter would cross paths again. It seems to be his always-unfortunate lot in life. At every turning point in life, at every great event, Harry bloody Potter would show up again. He cannot have a chance to breathe. (His eyes gnaw at the boy, desperate to swallow up any changes, new information. The fact of Potter’s beauty sits in the back of his throat, gagging and rancid, like a spoiled peach. He can only look at that beauty, that unbroken skin, from the distance of a familiar stranger.)

“Snape,” Potter says, glaring at him like a challenge. *Oh, do come in, Potter. Show up unannounced at my godforsaken door. Hang your miserable attitude up to dry.* (He does not allow his hands to tighten when he hears Potter speak, it has been seven years without that clear voice. It is deeper now, never as dark in pitch as Severus’ is, but always rich and mellow. Everything about Potter reminds him of summer.)

“All you expecting an invitation?” He grinds out (he hates that he has to speak first, Potter always knows exactly where to bait him). He considers the man in front of him. Seven years is a long time but the changes are not such a surprise as they should be. Potter’s growth has been well-documented by the media, plastered over the *Daily Prophet* at least once a week. If either of them had expected that the world’s interest would wane, they were unpleasantly surprised. Severus has been curious, the entire world has, about Potter’s steadfast refusal to date. He had rather imagined that the boy would continue on down the path that had been laid for him. Marry a witch, have a few kids. The years had stretched on (Potter is twenty-five now), nothing had changed. Severus bites his tongue, loathing the strange need to know.

“You can still do it, can’t you?” Potter blurts out, never one for nuance, for subtlety. “You still have magic.”

“And if I do?” Severus raises one soot-colored brow, scowls at the artless, irritatingly brazen boy. *You disrespectful, pompous brat. You have no right to my life.*

“You have to help us.” Potter’s jaw is set, as it always has been as he had settled upon a course. There is never any dissuading the boy from his chosen path. He is a creature of black and white, right and wrong. (Severus floats in between, bathed in shades of grey.) He considers the insolent
face, the demanding brow. *How fucking dare you, Potter.*

What a glorious feeling it is, standing four inches taller than Harry bloody Potter, listening to the other man beg for his, for Severus Snape’s, help. He can still loom, he finds, if he puts his mind to it. He glares at the boy (not such a boy now). “*No,*” Severus hisses, watching the other’s eyes widen in disbelief. It is incredibly satisfying to slam the solid wood door in the brat’s face. His heart is a drum. His breathing quick. *Fuck you, fuck you.* A dream long-satisfied, to crush Potter where he stands, grind away at that self-satisfaction, that confident grin of expectation. He briefly wishes he had thought to cast a quick spell to see the boy from behind the heavy door, watch the anger and the frustration crest, let wash over him like a wave of pleasure. Instead, he sags against the door (perhaps the boy is still gaping on the other side) trying to catch his breath, cruel pleasure racing from cell to cell, nerve to nerve.

*Good riddance, Potter.*

Suppose though, that in order to have shadow, you must have light. What did the beginning look like then, that endless swamp of nothing? Perhaps it is formless and grey, misty and shrouded. Not all problems enjoy the comfort of an *if this, then that* solution. How many worlds exist beyond our own, where light has never reached, still cloudy and the color of storm sky? The Talmud speaks of Sheol, the place of the dead. The Greeks had known something similar, had named this place the dull and foggy Asphodel Meadows. Ever-grey, ever-dreary, these many worlds sitting right next to our own with roads that go between them in the strangest of places.

The question that is rarely asked in the telling is what are these worlds? We know that paths come and go between them; that they appear from nowhere. Sometimes we hold such a firm distinction between the hard realm of the scientists and the soft of literature, that we forget to ask if they are, perhaps, looking at the same thing. The physicists call this theory the multiverse theory. It stands to reason. All cells are singular, self-contained, yet surrounded by other cells, all singular and self-contained in their own way. The laws of the Universe do not change much, preferring circles and spirals, repetition, so then we must theorize of other worlds, of weak walls between ours and another, one keeping ghosts, the other perhaps the fae.

Other voices, other worlds. Ever similar, repeating endlessly, sitting right next door to our own.
“Shakespeare shook his head and sunk his chin into his ruff, making him look more owl-like than ever. 'I have written about other worlds often enough. I have said what I can say. There are many kinds of reality. This is but one kind.'”
Jeanette Winterson, *The Daylight Gate*

*Cokeworth*

The north is wild. The south is where the legends are buried, yes, but the north of England is where nothing can be tamed. The freezing rain drives out of here. The north is where we put the unwanted. The suicides and the unbaptized, the violent and the damned are buried on the north-side of churches. Harry was not born to the north, here in Yorkshire. He was born in another strange land in the south, gentler and rich with stories of rebirth. In the north, sick with bog and mist, with hills that disappear beneath your feet, the people are marked. They are born to a haunted place, they are haunted men. Harry frowns, touching the sky. *This is Snape’s home.* (It makes sense in an unsettling way, in a way he cannot put into words.)

It is strange being a Muggle again. It is a loss not dissimilar to death. Harry goes to cast a spell in the same way that he goes to firecall Albus Dumbledore, realizing the loss again at the last moment. Loss occurs in these ways. It is never over, never final. We tear open our own scabs every day in our own forgetfulness. Healing will come with time, but sometimes that time outlasts us all. We cannot be promised that we will get to the end, finish the book, heal up from the battles.

He had arrived yesterday. The train ride had been the better part of the day from Scotland to Yorkshire. Trains have always held promise to Harry, the promise of going away, the promise of return. It was a train that had taken him north, begun his real life, there from King’s Cross, from a platform hidden between worlds. This one, this steel Muggle creation, may have been an ordinary train but it was still rich with promise. Wherever you go, it will not be the same on the other side.

He had dusted off his shirt in Cokeworth, grabbed his small bag.

What about last night? Snape had answered the door, had stood incredibly still, as if the tables were turned, as if he were an animal fearing a predator. He had looked like a knife, like a fire. *How do you still hate me so much?* It aches somewhere, Harry is not sure where. It is exhausting. He wonders why they cannot lay it down after fourteen long years of battle, a battle he had never chosen (he has never chosen any of them).

*God, the prick can still get right under my skin.* Time never passes between them. He is still then thirteen-years-old and furtive, passing notes in class. No one has ever left their sight on him like the Potions Master does, piles it upon him like heavy stones. It is oppressive. Pressing. You can die by pressing, it is an old execution method for witchcraft. A wizard had once been killed by pressing. Back in September 1692, far across the ocean. Pile the stones on, one by one, until the bones crack and the breath goes. (The textbooks all wave it away, say *this doesn’t really count, it only happened once.* It had mattered to Giles Corey, dead and flat.) In that brief moment, one wild-eyed and heart-thumping stretch, he had seen the Snape of today. Like a starved animal, a skinny vulture, savage
and hungry and fearful. (Then the most astonishing thing of all. Why had Harry felt that pulse in his arm, that desire to reach out to Snape, who had flared his collapsed-star eyes, his nostrils, angry and snapping? The urge to comfort, to quiet and settle. For a split instant, before Harry’s rational mind had caught up, he had wanted to wrap his suntanned hand around that thin, bony arm and say *hey, it’s okay, I’ve got you.* )

Snape would have hexed him on the spot. A scorchmark would have stood, only that, with the plaque of *Harry Potter died here once.* (It didn’t matter, Snape had slammed the door in his face. Turned back into the dark house, into his box of gloom. All the lights were out or, at least, had appeared to be so. There was no spell Harry could cast to tell him otherwise.)

He sighs, shoves his hands in his pockets along with the coins and lint. His neck aches from the lumpy, flat pillows of the inn. No one ever stays in Cokeworth, so there is only one inn, located near the center of town. Clean enough and serviceable, but the bed had left much to be desired. (Harry invests in a few things, memory foam not being the least of those.) He had lain awake under the scratchy, cheap coverlet and stared at the timbered ceiling. *What now? What next?*

The next day is a bit marginally better after the scant Continental breakfast and a strong cup of tea. The mind is not so separate from the body, so a buttered roll does wonders for his nerve. A bit of sausage straightens out his spine. A couple of fried eggs gives him the idea to ask the innkeeper about Snape’s habits. The town is small, the sort that knows everyone’s secrets. *I can make that work.*

The heavy, melancholy shade of the trees cast over the long street. The clutch of the town huddles together like a herd of nervous sheep in the low valley of the river, between the forest and the moor. The cold and ever-creeping lake is always nearby, looking over the town’s shoulders. Harry kicks at a rock in the middle of the sidewalk. He’d needed a walk to clear his mind, get his head on straight, consider the Snape problem.

*How the hell am I supposed to talk to him?*

It is a fascinating and surreal thing to walk in the shadow of Snape’s childhood. He had thought he’d known the professor well. Harry can read the other man’s mood by the cadence of his walk, the inward suck of a breath. He can forecast the man’s reactions with near-impeccable accuracy. It’s odd to realize that there are chapters he has not touched. The stretch of endless time between birth and leaving his home, when he had ridden a bike perhaps down Stone Street, skinned his knee maybe here, by the giant oak. Harry doesn’t know the last seven years. For some reason, he had expected it to be ever the same, as if Snape had just waited for him, put himself on pause while the protagonist followed another storyline. He flushes with the selfish thought. *I never really thought about him.*

The soil is thick with clay here. The soles of his shoes make deep impressions. Look at the unmended fences, the litter stuck between their slats like baseball cards in bicycle spokes. The thick forest treeline, just past the edge of the town, laden with birds and disquiet. His eyes bound, cascade over the nothingness of the small coal-town. The wasp nests under the eaves of the train station, the trout in the reeds of the putrid river. It feels like the end of everything, like the edge of the world. *Turn around. No exit.*

A dog snarls somewhere.
The Spindle Inn is certainly quaint. Plaques of the history of the town line the floral-papered walls, the dark wood beams. It had originally been built as a coaching inn in the 17th century and the townspeople still talk of the time that Lord Byron had stayed in 1817. The updates have been minimal, leaving it odd to see a flat-screen television in the lobby, a computer before the desk clerk.

The oddest things are the art. Most of the common areas feature engravings from the old witch hunts. Harry pauses at an etching of Alice Nutter, hanged 1612 on Gallows Hill. Probably not what I'd put on the walls, but oh well.

It is easy to remember his lessons here. Binns, that old droning phantom, who had spoken of the raging suspicion of the Yorkshiremen. In 1621, Edward Fairfax had written the Daemonologia, which had put forth the most comprehensive belief in organized covens of witches than anywhere else in the country. They had daydreamed of the rack, of drowning, of breaking fingers. How do you draw out a witch? It is an art here, mostly forgotten. Half-remembered. His frog-colored eyes linger on an image of a woman curling into flames, bound to a stake. It almost seems to move as he watches it. He blinks, long-lashed and unbelieving. The image is still, Muggle as it has always been.

The innkeeper curls over an old counter, long nose deep in a murder mystery novel.

“Excuse me,” he asks, setting his hands on the counter, “Erm, do you know Severus Snape? Do you know where I might find him?” (He had steered by Spinner’s End on his walk. There had been no answer, though he’d had little hope of one.)

“Snape?” She asks, looking up from her computer and tea, “Yeah, that one’s usually down at the pub by now.” She grimaces, her sharp features crinkling in distaste as if he’d presented her with spoiled milk. Her thin face is impossible to read, somewhere unknown between twenty-five and fifty.

“Which pub?”


As he passes, a gathering stops him. There’s a commotion at the river, near where it flows into the deep lake. Harry draws close to the crowd. There is an older woman near him, “Is everything alright?”

“Lad drowned in there.” Harry looks at the dark-haired woman, grey threads shining in the day where her hair parted. Her wide straw hat held in firm hands, her rose-printed dress. The sun wears warm on his head. Beyond the river, the green grass seems to hum in an idle wind. She seems to be outside of both time and fashion.

“Oh.” Harry says (what do you say to that?), “I’m sorry.”

“No one’s ever survived falling in the Strid.” She looks back at the river, sad-eyed. “They’re trying to fish him out now. They’ll have to find him first,” she gives Harry a long look up and down, “Do you know how you find a dead body in a river?”

No, why would I know that? “I don’t know. How?”

“You float a loaf of bread.” Harry furrows his brow. How would that work? She continues, frown deepening the soft lines of her face, “It’s not hard, you know. It’s ain’t really the bread even. You put quicksilver inside. Mercury, you see? The loaf’s there to make it float. It’ll stop over the body.”

“Is that true?”
The old woman shrugs, her eyes pale as a glacier, “Not sure. Done it for years. Need about two ounces of the stuff, quicksilver. The Americans do it too.”

Weird town, Harry thinks, frowning at the river.

He passes down the streets. Threads through quiet houses and their window boxes, their shutters closed against the day. A church bell sounds in the distance. Harry squares his shoulders as he comes near to the pub, grasps the heavy rusted iron handle. Go on then, Harry.

The Six-Legged Mare is one of the stately old pubs of Britain. The usual fare, outlandish name paired with the Victorian redbrick exterior. The colorful tiles, the painted glass, a massive and gilded mirror hanging behind the bar, reflecting half-empty bottles and emptier faces. Harry takes a deep breath when he sees the familiar figure at the end of the counter. There is a wide berth around him. Snape is not dissimilar to a bat, this black smear on a barstool. He is not unlike a crouched gargoyle, spitting out vitriol and rain from the edge of a building. Steady on now.

He takes the empty stool next to Snape, lets the pause draw out, the next battle in the long war of attrition.

“So,” the low voice drawls, “you’ve found me. Should I offer my sincere congratulations? Do you get a star for completing your scavenger hunt?”

“You can’t just ignore me, you know,” he picks up the beer menu with his short fingers, unkempt nails.

“As a matter of fact, Potter, that is exactly what I can do,” he glares into a pint, “I could Disapparate right now. Make myself Unplottable. You don’t have magic, you utter fool. What would you even do?”

Harry holds his eye contact. Look away first, I dare you.

“Then why haven’t you?” He points to the gold liquid in Snape’s glass. “What are you having?”

A curl to the lip. Silence. Typical.

“That’s the number five there, sir. You want a pint?” The bartender knows where to needle Snape; Harry is the gauge of a knitting needle.

“Yeah, thanks.”

As the bartender turns away to pull the tap, a gravel voice comes low, “Why are you here, Potter?”

“Well, magic being kinda in the shitter right now, I rather thought that’d be obvious.”

“No, why are you here? How did you know?”

He’s interested. A chink in the armor, in the wall.

“Here,” Harry reaches for the letter in his jacket’s inner pocket, only slightly rumpled from the journey. “Will you just look at this? I got a letter. This is how I knew about you.” The curiosity in the dark eyes flares, always his weakness. Snape says nothing but he takes the queer letter, the decaying and fragmenting parchment. It is fascinating to see his hands work. What else have they done? Harry
drinks up the professorial touch, gentle and caring. There is a kindness in the hands, in the holding, that Harry has never seen before. Potions ingredients are meant to be rough with. Cut this, smash this, grind that. Books and letters are made for the keeping. It itches between his shoulder blades to see Snape wear gentleness, hot and offputting. Why is that bothering me so much?

He shifts a little, uncomfortable. It should not be so easy to fall back into this pond, this ocean. It should not feel oddly good to trade sharpened barbs with the sour professor. It is like pulling on an old sweater. Perhaps itchy and never a favorite, but old and remembered. He is quiet for a spell, taking in the long and winding nose, aquiline and sharp. The dour mouth. Cruel eyed and grim-faced. Have you ever smiled? It would be terrifying to see the old bat smile. He wonders how it would go, cannot fathom how the other man might wear happiness. (There is a theory he had once heard. The physicists have proposed that all possibilities might exist within the Universe. Perhaps, if he extrapolates, there is a world in which Severus Snape is kind, full of joy. He has a strange urge to start over, try again from the beginning. Get a different ending.)

“Where did you get this?” Snape narrows his beetle eyes. His grip on the unfortunate letter is tight. Bony knuckled and black-haired velvet hands. There is a deep callus at the base of the long index finger. A knife callus, certainly, common to cooks and butchers. Snape uses knives and mallets more than most wizards. Slice the mandrakes and the livers of lizards, crush the eyes of slimy newts, grind dried foxglove into a powder. Potionmaking is the most physically demanding magic. Not everyone has it in them to lean over a boiling cauldron day after day, the heat from the concoction drifting up and condensing on wrinkled foreheads, mixing with the dripping sweat. Not everyone can stomach collecting the little bags of teeth, the putrescent flobberworms, the tiny, moldy fingers stolen from graves. Potions taught to children are the simple ones, the easy ones. Some magic is not always clear, is not always good. Potions, that graverobber, spells built on the bodies of dead things, is a grey area.

“I told you, it came by owl.”

“To you?”

“No,” Harry rolls his eyes, impatient, “to the Queen of England. Yes, to me.”

“How dare you -”

“Please, please ,” Harry interrupts him, “you’re my only hope. What do you want? I can give it to you. Money? You can’t transmute gold. I can get you money. Fame? Please.”

Severus is quiet. Harry realizes that they are both breathing heavily. What is it, Potter? Tally up the evidence. The slight lean to the upright frame, the unshaven chin, glassy and bloodshot eyes, and far more tolerance for Harry’s presence than there should be. Figures, the old bastard’s gotta be an uptight prick even when he’s sloshed.

“You’re drunk,” Harry says flatly.

“So good of you notice, Potter,” the other man spits. Voice like sandpaper. Snape stares at the other for a long stretched out moment. It is like being a butterfly pinned to a board, straight pin through the heart. Harry squirms in the scrutiny, honest in the drink. Stop it. “Why do you bother?” a quiet question in a loud bar.

He shrugs as if he hasn’t tossed this question around so many times, launched in the air over and over like a juggler. Why bother? Why is this my problem? Start over, start again, somewhere else entirely. A little town on a little shore, quiet and peaceful. “I don’t know, sir,” he says, “I guess because no one else does.”
A man interrupts Harry on the way back from the bathroom. Harry keeps his eye on Snape, still casting dark scowls at the innocent taps.

“Be careful of that one.” The man’s eyes flicker, dark. He is older, grey-haired and spotted with sun. The interloper’s mouth twists in disregard and revolt when he looks past Harry toward Snape. Harry tries to place his body in the field, cut off the line of sight, buffer the sound. The professor is not so far away as to not overhear. Snape gives little indication of his awareness but for the thin press of the mouth, white lips.

Shove off. “I can handle myself fine now, thanks.” (A flit of memory, eleven years old and on a cold night in Scotland, standing before a pale, pinch-faced boy saying I think I can tell the wrong sort for myself now, thanks. When had Snape become the right sort?)

“They call him the son of the wolf here. That family is cursed.”

“Piss off.” Harry elbows past the drunk. Snape’s shredded coaster heavily resembles confetti.

“Sorry about -“

“Don’t.”

Harry nods, finishes his drink. Orders the both of them another round. Don’t wait for thanks, ‘cause we’ll be here all night. Actually, if you don’t get to the point, you’ll be here all night anyway. A swallow, clear the throat. Harry looks at Snape. “You gotta admit that some really weird stuff is happening.”

A hesitation, the eyes flick over. “You’re just daft.”

“I saw that look. Why did you hesitate?”

“I did not do anything of the sort.”

“Something happened.”

“No.”

“It did, I can tell.”

“It’s ludicrous.” Snape looks furious with himself for mentioning it.

“Tell me.”

“No, you’ll -” Snape pauses, “You cannot take it seriously. I certainly do not.”

Despite his refusal, the professor’s tapered fingers fish out something from a pocket and he wordlessly passes it across the oak counter. Their history stretches between them. Everyone gets it wrong. It is not as dismal as it seems, it is not a suicide note. They still cling to the cliffs, refusing to drop. It is a record of their survival. Harry looks at Snape, who is pulling away, drawing back into the shadowy wall and pulling his drink with him, who is watching the younger man with narrowed and suspicious, seeking eyes. Perhaps the cruelest betrayal to offer Severus Snape is to laugh at him. Not to cut him, flay his skin, insult his mother, burn his house to the ground. No, just to laugh at him.
Harry swallows everything down. *I won’t laugh at you. (Don’t you dare laugh at me.)*

It is a tarot card. A very *unusual* tarot card.

Harry studies the piece. Slightly larger than a pack of playing cards and printed by woodcut on thick vellum. He’s seen things like this before in the Hogwarts library, magical artifacts are rarely so different from item to item. However, the imagery is uncommon. It is clearly centuries old but his experience doesn’t inform him of much past that. The back is washed with simple dark red. The front is a woodcut of the unseeing king and his raven army done in a harsh relief of only black ink on bone white. There is an awful, sick smell drifting up from the card. He wonders for a moment if the back of the card had been painted in blood. Flip it over. No, too vibrant. Only ordinary ink.

He looks up at the other man, who watches with inquisitive eyes, “How did you get it?”

“A godforsaken fortune-teller accosted me on the road,” Snape says, the usual sneer, the common disdain.

“And that’s *not* unusual?”

Snape waves a hand in dismissal, “For the appalling cretins here, no.”

Harry wets his index finger in the beer, draws it in a slow circle around the rim of the glass. He nods, “It’s definitely been interesting here. The pictures in the inn are a pretty weird, erm, *thing* to have up.”

A smirk from the other man, “Ah yes, the witch trials. The owners are rather overly fond of those. I understand that a miserable ancestor was one of the accusers for the Pendle trials.” Harry pictures the medieval witch trials. Up, safely tucked into Hogwarts and protected by ward and spell, they had become a bit of a running joke. He had never considered the ones who had actually perished in the hunt. *Had they been witches and wizards or just unlucky Muggles? Had Snape’s family died in the hunt?* Picture the rack, nails and stretchers, the ropes, the rusted iron. Death can come from a thousand cuts, draining blood from a man a pint at a time. Confess, the torturers would say. (They could not be blamed, they were doing God’s work.)

“Was your family part of it?”

“That’s beside the point, Potter.” Harry nods, shifts. The urge to learn more about the other man grows. He aches for anything to quench his thirst. Reaches for the closest volume, turns the page open. *What about this town? Are you from here? Has your family always been here?*

“Has your family always lived in Yorkshire?” He ventures, bright eyes looking over.

A grunt, neither assent nor dissent. Then a low voice, “Some of them.”

Harry thinks of the books of ancestry he’s paged through, trying to reclaim what was stolen from him. (Hermione had helped, never one to let a line of academic curiosity go. She had shown up with a six-pack and several heavy record books borrowed from the library in Diagon Alley. “Sit,” she had said to Harry, who had recently bemoaned his lack of connection to the past. Ron had shown up a few hours later with curry takeaway and jokes about Archibald Potter, born 1876, who had invented a *very* creative charm for keeping toilets warm.)

He had learned he is a child of the south. The West Country, where King Arthur had been born centuries before.

His father, dark and pale like himself, like most men from Cornwall. The records had shown that the
Potters stretch back for centuries in the West Country, in Cornwall and nearby Devon. Far enough back, where the long line of births and baptisms and deaths had become muddled and unreliable, where he had started to feast on more consonants than vowels, had started to see the names of the old Welshmen mixed in. That is his father. His mother’s side had been harder to trace. The Evans family had been firmly established ever since the time of Victoria, the records before that are mostly lost across the Irish Sea. They had read back to Diarmuid O’Neill, who had taken a boat over from Dunleary to Anglesey in 1847. Before that, the trail is cold.

He studies Snape’s gaunt, sharp face. The deep furrows, the parchment skin. Snape has always seemed a proper Englishman to Harry, as much as they all were. He has read it from the crisp tongue and the orderly precision, all things definite and discrete, measurable and quantifiable. In a shift of the light, there is something very different to the knife-nose and the belittling mouth. Something crueler still lurks in the lines of the face, the jaw, the little of the pale neck rising above the severe and starched dark collar. The hair is too dark, eyes too dark. Something unfamiliar lurks there, Harry cannot place it.

One spider-colored brow arches as Snape notices Harry’s distracted gaze. Harry looks away, heat behind his ears, his neck.

_God, I must be getting drunk._

“Yes,” Snape’s black voice is laced with a thread of amusement. (Harry gapes, surprised at having spoken aloud.) “You certainly are, Mr. Potter.”

Snape turns to the left-hand path, toward the river.

“Where are you going?”

“It’s a shortcut, Potter.” _Oh, okay then._ The prospect of following the polluted river doesn’t delight him, but he goes all the same. The river hums with deceptively calm water. The rocks surround it, covered in mold-colored moss and lichen. It is narrow, only a few yards across. It does not appear to harbor any danger yet no man has fallen in and survived. The river is not wide but it is incredibly deep, set with deep and hidden boulders to smash a man to pieces, to break a neck. He thinks of the boy who had fallen in. Wonders if he had been found.

He follows after Snape. _Of course, he can make a regular coat look like a cape._ It must be a gift.

“Stop following me,” the man flares, speeding up the pace of his walk.

“Look,” Harry says, scowling at the former professor. “I’m gonna follow you until you help us or until you Disapparate me to Kathmandu.” A gleam in dark eyes.

“Don’t tempt me.” _Did you almost smile there? I think you did._ (Harry smirks a little to himself, thinking of making the dour man laugh.) Out here, not far beyond the thick of the village, the brush grows wild, the forest comes quickly. It is the sort of land that fairytales are spun about, talking of magical swans and witches hiding in gingerbread houses. The river is always loud and present, the rush of water like the constant rush of his breath. If you go too deeply into the forests, the trees grow close together, the wood clutches and the thicket tangles. Branches grasp like hands, it is too dark to see. Be careful. Watch where you step.
As they walk, Harry begins to realize that the shadows are wrong. They are not as long as they should be for late in the day. Instead, though the light is low, they seem as short as those of high noon, when the sun passes directly overhead. Harry looks up intuitively, searching.

There is no sun in the sky. A coldness pulses in his veins, like the coming of winter. Looking back, the familiar treeline is gone. These are not friendly, these elms and rowans. Bring back the pine. Beyond there is a black moor, bleak and mossy pool. The air is a blanket of condensation, as if rain would materialize without having ever fallen. Tall stones stand in the distance, unexplainable. They are ready to have stories woven for them.

Their footsteps echo off of the stones. They stop walking. The underbrush rustles.

“Did you count the footsteps?” Snape whispers, heated and urgent.

“No, was I supposed to?”

“I don’t know.” Snape peers at the sky, searching. There is a snap in the thicket, the sound of dry wood cracking underfoot.

Snape’s hand shoots out quick as a dagger, grips him by the elbow. Harry sees the same realization dawning on the other man’s face. A wind pulses through the trees, bitter and cold. Moss grows on all sides of the trunks. A fallen log, rotten and hollow. An animal’s skull, half-buried. Lichen grows on it, flowers, red and white. A copse of elder. They inspire disquiet in all magical men, these poisonous trees. Elder trees mark the close of the year, mark death. Mothers tell their children, do not sleep under the elder tree.

“Where are we?”

Snape frowns deeply, looking with horror at the trees, searching for the source of the sound. “I don’t know.” There is a bird call in the distance. It is usually a comforting sound but it bears no comfort here.

“Snape -”

“Turn around, Potter,” Snape hisses urgently. There is a very hot, very simple terror in his eyes. “We must go back now.”

They run. Harry’s blood pounds, rushing from his heart to his lungs to his head. The end of the path emerges somewhere near the river. The steady river, thick and polluted. The grassy tussock. The sun bears low overhead, steady and sure as always. Back again. Safe. He doubles over, hands on his knees, heaving to catch a starved breath. Snape’s throat catches at the air like a drowning man, the sharp Adam’s apple bobbing as he grasps at oxygen.

All worlds have their edges, sometimes we find those liminal spaces. Rules are different there.

They crest the hill, look down the long, sloping road of identical brick houses. The first night that Harry had arrived, it had been somewhat difficult to spot Snape’s house. Had been difficult to identify Spinner’s End in that long lineup of interchangeable semi-detached houses. They had looked all the same. It had reminded Harry a little of a shabby Privet Drive with its’ cookie-cutter homes and his skin had crawled at the comparison.
This time, however, there is little question of which house.

Spinner’s End crouches at the end of the road, second to last, and is nearly completely obscured by a riot of ink-black feathers. Blotted out. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of birds have descended upon it, all crows and ravens and magpies. Their eyes shine like the exoskeletons of beetles. Their raw caws echo into the night as the two men approach. Harry stares up at the shivering mass of birds in wonder. It is like approaching an old monster. A Cyclops, perhaps, or Goliath.

Ravens. *Corvus corax*. Always otherworldly and ominous. It is like they straddle the divide between the careful worlds of the living and the dead. Harry thinks of ravens. It was a raven that Noah had released from the Ark to test the waters, to see if the world still held death on its surface. Old Solomon, wisest of men, had borne hair as black as a raven. Those news-bearing ravens, Huginn and Muninn, had flown each day from Odin’s side, bearing back tides. Morrigan, the goddess, had transformed into a raven following the hero Cuchulainn’s death. They are the favorites of Bran the Blessed, they make up the spectral army of Owain.

He remembers then an odd tale. Ravens hold the fate of all England, of course. There are six of them, kept with clipped wings in the Tower of London. Should they ever leave the Tower, the old legend goes, even if one of them leaves, all of England shall fall. (Legends are shapeshifters; we do not know what is true anymore.)

Harry looks at Snape. It is one of the few moments when the hollow face is not eaten up by scorn or disgust, no lip curled in sarcasm. Instead, Snape displays pure and simple surprise.

“‘Well,’” Harry says.

“‘Well.’” Snape agrees, gathering himself together. It is not often that Snape shows open surprise. *I guess that’s only fair. It’s not often that your house becomes a giant bird’s nest.* “It appears, Mr. Potter, that something is terribly wrong in the state of Denmark. And magic is somehow bleeding out.”

“Er, sir. We’re in England.”

A roll of the eyes, “You philistine, have you ever read a book?”

“Hey, I read plenty of books, sorry I’m more focused on the fact that you’ve got a bloody Hitchcock movie in your front lawn.”

“‘Well,’” Snape repeats, there is a long pause, “I suppose I am to have no choice in this matter.”

Harry blinks, looks up the four inches between them. He is becoming intimately acquainted with Snape’s jaw. (More angular than it should be for a man of forty-five and evidence of more than a few skipped meals.) “And what was your devious plan for dragging magic back, Mr. Potter?”

“I didn’t really have a plan,” *I wasn’t really sure I’d get this far*. He shifts slightly in his discomfort. The birds chatter. The musical gurgle of the raven, the scratch of the crow. The rasp of the magpies. (Beyond it all, the strange hush of feather against feather.)

Snape rolls his eyes, voice like ash and lemon, “As usual, barrelling in with no actual intent. What did you think you would do? Cast *Expelliarmus* at the sky until it gave in? Tip at windmills? Knock it over the head with a club?”

“Look, I was hoping you could help me come up with an idea,” Harry snaps, “this isn’t exactly something that’s happened before.”
“No,” Snape muses, “it isn’t.” He pulls the long, dark wand from his inner jacket pocket. Points at the house and mutters something. The birds alight toward the southwest, rising as a single group like a waft of smoke. Mossy jealousy spikes through Harry at watching the deft hand work the spell, knowing the spike of magic like static electricity, staring at a painting as if he has suddenly lost the ability to see. It is like missing a sense, a dimension that should exist. The world is crueler now and flat. I want that back. That's a part of me and it's been taken. I want it back. The house is still more of a disaster than it usually is, riddled now with birdshit and long black feathers. He wonders what Snape thinks of Spinner’s End, of Cokeworth. He could go somewhere a lot nicer, couldn’t he? (He doesn’t know, his portrait of Severus Snape is built on spit and assumptions.)

Snape wrinkles his nose slightly, “You may as well come in then. Don’t touch anything.” He looks repelled at the idea.

Inside is a masculine room. There are books lining the walls like wallpaper. Parchment sits loosely on the small desk. A book is shoved under the short leg to prop it up. A small cauldron sits in a corner on a spelled fire, ready at a low simmer. There is a rush of comfort at the magical accouterments, he’s missed them these past few days. (It has seemed like a lifetime.) Candles sit on the side table, smelling of sulfur. Nothing matches between Snape and the house beyond the cauldron and the books, the reading glasses, the unidentified vials and philters crowding a little shelf. Not these little plaid chairs, dingy and sunworn, depressed in the center from decades of use. Not the hopeful yellow curtains. Not the crucifix on the wall. Harry thinks suddenly of a drain catch, all garbage lands here eventually, nothing in common but their unwantedness.

Hesitation in the doorway, a snatch at looking around. See there, the iron horseshoe nailed to the lintel. The unusual rug, woven in a pattern of black and white and red, embroidered with geometric shapes not unlike snakes and fangs. The amount of books shoved into the small space are remarkable. A sharp temptation pulses in him to peer at the titles, pad out his portrait of Severus Snape. He can see a few names near to him. Advanced Potions Quarterly. A replica copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio. Machiavelli’s little treatise of The Prince. He doesn’t pry further, certain to be rebuffed.

“Should I take my shoes off?”

“Why?” Snape growls, “You’re not staying.”

“God forbid. Can I at least sit down?”

“Sit, Potter.” A glare. Harry picks the armchair closest to the door. Snape settles in the other like a nervous cat, primed to jump up at any provocation.

His house. His younger self had dreamt up so many possibilities for Snape’s living arrangements. In his Third Year, the entirety of Gryffindor Tower had been convinced that Professor Snape either slept hanging upside down like a bat or in a stone sarcophagus. (Seamus had even taken bets on it. Harry wonders for a moment what had happened to those wagers.) The reality is remarkably normal. He can spy some dirty dishes left on the counter. A pile of unread mail next to the door. A hand-crocheted blanket is folded and set on a wooden chest. Human, after all. (It is an unsettling feeling to realize that monsters are never monsters at all.)

A headache starts to knot itself within the nerves behind his temples. It has been a long few days. Snape casts a fire in the hearth. The comfort seeps out of the fireplace, through the molecules of the air, deep into Harry’s bones. It is magical and wonderful, a reminder of everything he does not have and did once. It does not burn lower. It eats at real logs, yet never consumes them. No smoke leaks from the flames.
“So,” Harry says, breaking the spell. He rests his head in a hand, rubbing at his temples. “We need to find out where magic went. Or you can just carry on insulting me, because that’s clearly getting us somewhere.” He hears a snort from the chair to his right.

“I think, Potter,” the older man says, slowly and deliberately, “that you are asking the wrong question.” Harry looks at him again, the pinch between the brow, the burn of curiosity in the coal eyes, “Consider, it is not where did magic go?” He pauses, looks at the fire. (It is uncomfortably warm on Harry’s face.) “It is where did it come from? And why did we have magic at all?”

Cast back, through all of the lessons of History of Magic. These were questions that had always been danced around. No one could answer them. It was uncomfortable to think of magic as not being a part of their lives. The existence of magic was a very simple fact, of course, no one dared question it. There was no beginning, there was no end. Magic is timeless, immortal. It will outlast us all. (Won’t it?)

“Um,” Harry says, blinking. “How do we look into that?”

“Think, Potter,” the sardonic voice drawls, “Use that soup for brains of yours. Who was the grandfather of all modern spellcasting? Merlin, obviously.”

Merlin? Like big white beard, sword-in-the-stone, probably-not-real wizard to King Arthur? “But he’s dead.”

Snape smirks, “Details. Has that ever stopped us before?”

I suppose not. “But how do we find him?” Harry frowns, picking at a thread on his jeans.

Snape quirks a coal-colored brow. “We go to the last place he was seen, even you can work out basic deductive reasoning, or was your logical function capability stolen along with your magical ability?” Harry flushes. Don’t react, he’s baiting you. You need him.

“And that was where?”

“France,” Snape frowns, he points his wand, stokes the fire with a quiet spell. Harry shivers with desire for the magic. “As far as I can recall, the legends say that Merlin was last seen in a forest in Brittany, trapped by the Lady of the Lake. I am not aware of anything past that but they may have records that will unearth something.”

The firelight catches the severe features, more pronounced now, with age and neglect. Harry swallows his comment on the heavy bags under Snape’s eyes. The increased wrinkles at the mouth. God, what’s happened to you? (He swallows down the greatest shame of all. You know if you were nice to me, even once, I would help you in any way I can. It is a horrible and strange thing to crave Snape’s approval. It will never come.)

“You should go, Potter,” Snape says, nearly a whisper. (Tight hands on wood arms.) “We’ll leave early tomorrow.”

Why else do we like the potential of other worlds if not to start over? We look at other worlds with
obvious and craven desire. The romance of the conquistadors, the astronauts. How do we not look at the moon or Mars if not with a desire to stake our claim, make our little cities, our little farms? *We’ll get it right this time*, we say to ourselves, *yes yes we will*. Tear the sheet from the notebook, crumple it up, start again. (Do not look at this New World, we’ve messed it up. We’ll learn from our mistakes, of course. Next time will be different. We’ll get it right.)
Cokeworth

Travel is an extraordinary thing. It is the closest experience we have to seeing other worlds. Consider that you can enter through a door, sit patiently for a period of time (through land, sea, or sky) and come out through that same door somewhere entirely new. The customs and language different, the trees unseen, the food untasted. To board an airplane, to get in a car, to sail a ship, all of these are adventures.

He wakes. Always too early and long before the sun bothers. The prior day seems like a half-forgotten nightmare. It is not until he stands at the kitchen counter, the meager grey light starting, halfway through a cup of tea (Earl Grey), and a piece of un buttered toast that the full weight looms of the queer forest and the awful monolith of birds. The irritating fortune-teller seems like years prior. His skinny fingers curl tighter around the unlucky cup.


He throws the cup against the far wall, exploding it into a burst of ceramic dust. Severus blinks slightly, almost surprised. (The pieces stay there for the remainder of the morning. He spells away the shattered remnants just before Potter arrives.) It is nearly a full hour that he sits there uselessly, as the grey dawn shifts into a shabby morning. Scowling there at the little oak table, staring at ghosts and stewing in his own inertia. His brows knit, eyes dark, as he counts up all the little scars that the table bears. The table has always been here, he doesn’t know its story beyond these chapters, the chapters of his parents, the chapters of himself. There is a sharp divot where his father had once stabbed it with a steak knife during an argument; there is the green acrylic paint from one of his school projects (he’d never been able to coax it out of the woodgrain).

It had been a long night that he’d lain awake, listening to the ghostly sounds of branches brush against the house. A long night of silently cursing, of dreaming of spells and potions to change anything, anything at all. Why had he said yes to helping the cretin? He doesn’t know. Potter hadn’t known either, that much was obvious. Remember the slow blink of long spider-lashes on fair skin; remember the shocked and open mouth, the tongue coming out to wet the lips. Potter had looked so surprised. (Worse yet, Severus realizes, is that he does know. He admits it only just before sleep finally comes crawling into bed with him. Under the covers, between the sheets. Because Potter needed me. Because I am wretched, damned thing. I have never been able to say no.)

God, he’s a useless, spineless creature. (Potter hates him. He’s in good company, Severus has been here already for decades, hating himself.)
The boy arrives just after nine. From the looks of it, he’s not particularly a morning person. Severus does not allow himself to linger on the heavy eyelids, the pillow-tossed hair, the yawn stifled by a stiff jaw. A brief flash, you with your head buried in pillows, in sheets and blankets. Perhaps you are on your stomach, shirtless. Your back revealed and open to the sky like a plain to be ridden. Shoulder blades like mountains. Your spine like a valley, a canyon. Who touches you? Who knows these lands? He has never been interested in cartography until Potter. Now, he would like to map everywhere the light touches. Would like to memorize where the light does not. (It is a measure of some small comfort that Potter has steadfastly refused to do a shirtless photoshoot for Witch Weekly, despite the periodical’s best efforts. He can muddle through not knowing, it would be worse to know.) “Sorry,” Potter says, “I overslept. I’m not quite used to this alarm clock yet. Got used to the spell, y’know?”

He spares one dark brow, arched like an aqueduct. “No, Mr. Potter, I wouldn’t know.”

Harry blinks slightly, clearly still waking up, then cottons on. “Oh,” he murmurs, “Oh, right.” It stretches between them, the curious question of Snape’s magic. Why does it have to be me? It is a reasonable question, one he’s hardly had the chance to consider. If magic should have fallen, retracted from the entire known wizarding world, why should Severus Snape still have it? Of all the emotions that a man might have about sheer power, he is remarkably irritated. Once again embroiled into a ridiculous game with Harry goddamn Potter. Potter, who had sat in his parlor (his mother’s parlor) and had let his eyes drink up all the shabbiness, the secondhand furniture and the faded rug. That is not, exactly, how he’d intended any reacquaintance with Potter to go, that is if he was to be forced into such godforsaken familiarity at all.

“If you are quite finished with fussing about?” He holds out a small letter-opener, “Here, grab the other side.”

“Where will it go?” Potter wears hesitance like a heavy cloak. Runs one hand through wild hair. Sleep still lays heavily in the few lines of his face, in the heavy eyelids, the rumpled shirt. Do not think about Potter in bed, sprawled out with limbs everywhere like a starfish. (Perhaps the comparison is apt. A starfish will regrow its arms if one is lost. Potter could probably regrow his arms, a leg maybe. He is a survivor.)

“Come now, Potter, don’t you often grab Portkeys from strange men?” The other man turns a little pale, a hiccup in his movements.

“Goddammit, Snape, what the bloody fuck?” Severus watches the tic in the boy’s right eyelid, the narrowing of his eyes. Suddenly Severus remembers a scene on a Quidditch field, a young boy clutching a corpse, terror painted in his shell-shocked face. (He hadn’t meant to evoke this, he hadn’t meant to be this cutting this time. Not this time. Honest.)

He is quieter in his response. Not able to smooth anything over, not able to offer kindness (it is not in his nature). “Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. From there we’ll take a train to Paris and another to Condate. A city in Brittany not far from the ludicrous forest in question.”

Harry nods, swallows. It is the same look the blasted boy has worn every other time he’s put forthright grit and foolish bravery before his own instincts for comfort or for his own damnable hide. Severus loves it (Potter is a beautiful creature); Severus hates it (danger will surely follow).

He scowls, urges the letter opener at the boy. “Do try and keep yourself entertained while traveling, Potter. I’m in no humor to amuse you.”

Potter rolls his eyes, re-shoulders his canvas bag. “Right, because you’re just a barrel of bloody laughs.” Still, he reaches one hand out for the Portkey, sealing around the coldness of the stainless
steel, completing the spell like closing an electrical circuit. A familiar, sickening hook curls around Severus’ stomach and the world disappears from under his feet.

Travel, for a wizard, is not particularly difficult if you’ve considered it well. The trouble, of course, is that to Apparate or to create a Portkey, one must know their destination well. With Potter unable to work a spell and with Severus’ half-forgotten memories of France (it has been forty years), they are unfortunately limited to that worst of travel, by Muggle vehicle. They may travel to the train by Portkey, but the rest is either by broomstick or train and the sky is too bright to dare risk flying. Portkeys always leave Severus miserably nauseous. He loathes the way they hook behind his navel and pull him through. It is nearly instantaneous, being here one moment and in King’s Cross the next, yet he still always panics. What if it doesn’t work? What if the spell fails while his atoms are scattered, never able to be put back together? He is nervous for his body, turned to nothing but invisible building blocks. All atoms are identical. When he is taken apart, there is nothing to say Severus Snape was here.

It is late by the time they come to the city. We will call it by its Roman name, so to dissuade the sort of imprudent romantic who follows misfortune around with a map. So, we will call it Condate. Art and history paper the stone walls of the ancient buildings, they stick between the cracks of the sidewalks. A river flows through the city, like a backbone with streets like ribs splaying out from it. (Rivers are the backbones of all cities. We crave their water; we need their movement.) It is late when Potter’s stomach rumbles, echoing off the stone bridge they are passing. A small grin curls the boy’s mouth, a translucent blush paints his cheekbones.

Severus frowns, “I’m not sure what delicacies you’re accustomed to from your war hero banquets, Mr. Potter, but there is a cafe just across the street. If you can attempt to stifle your current death by famine, I’m sure it will suffice.” Potter had rolled his eyes yet pushed them over to the cafe, settling into a dark corner.

“God, I’m starving. I could eat a hippogriff, wings and all,” Potter had propped the menu up before his face. Severus watches him drink in the dishes, stymied only by choice. “What are you getting?”

“The stew.”

Potter wrinkles his nose slightly. “The fish stew? Do you like seafood? I’m not big on it myself.”

“Potter, if I am to be cursed with your asinine chatter, do attempt to keep it at a minimum.” He does not say my father was a fisherman, I can tell a cod from a mackerel by the way they smell fresh out of the ocean, by the way they smack against the earth while dying.

“God, why do you have to try to be so fucking infuriating?” Potter hisses, flushing again. Their eyes meet and hold for a moment before the younger man looks away. God, making small talk with this idiot is as pleasurable as corn stuck between my teeth. (He collects the image of Potter’s face bathed by candlelight. There has always been a draw to the other man, like a dowsing rod to hidden water. It is sharper now with the hard-edges of the adult face, the twenty-five-year-old square jaw, the black stubble growing in. Keep this moment, this memory. He knows he will visit it later, certainly, in those cursed moments without self-control. I should drown myself.)

“I don’t have to try at all.” Good, like that, Severus. Calm, measured. Cold as a glacier.
They had walked a good deal of the city once arriving. Down curved streets paved in grey cobblestones. Past the Breton market, smelling of the ocean, loaded down with langoustines and sea urchins, scallops and crabs. Severus is a keen man, he had watched Potter’s interest pique at the farmstands, laden with their inland offerings of cauliflower, peas, and cabbages. The artichokes were remarkably plump, ever so pleased with themselves. There was a hot smell of freshly butchered meat, lamb steaks and pork chops. Garlic sausages had hung from hooks. Fresh milk stored in glass bottles. There had been the famous Argoat apples and, next to the fruit, the Calvados distilled from them.

Condate is a modern city but, like all cities in Europe, it is built upon the bones of the past. It had been founded two-thousand years ago, in the time of Christ, in the time of the Romans. The Bretons are French, yes, but in a Celtic way. They have been touched by those unearthly stories in the same way that the English have, the Irish, the Scottish. To speak the name of King Arthur means something here, he had claimed these lands once. (In a way, they are still his.)

Severus has been here before, curiously enough. His mother had taken him for a holiday once, just the once, to the seaside in Brittany. They had stayed in a small cottage on the coast, in the department of Finistère. “Do you know what Finistère means, child?” She had said. He had shaken his dark head, had stretched out his arms and tried to climb up into her lap. “It means the end of the world.” It had felt like it. He had never understood why they had gone. Why they had traded one coastline for another, traded one edge of the earth for another. They had stayed a single night in Condate. He remembers nothing much beyond a man who had played the accordion and the vichyssoise soup he’d been served for lunch. Soft, creamy, and strangely, addictively cold.

It is a peculiar thing to come back. It had been early fall then too, when he had come here with his crow-faced mother. It is an odd feeling to see the trees bear the same touch of gold to the edges of their leaves, the slight browning of grass, the death of summer flowers. He has been gone for so long, shouldn’t the earth bear witness to those decades? The flora looks the same, static. Frozen in time.

His mother is frozen in time. Dead now and gone. He’d been fifteen when she died, drowned in the lake. His memories of her slip away as the years mount like debt, like criminal charges. He remembers her here, in Brittany. Her proud face, the dark eyes staring out at a rocky shore and a lashing sea. The smell of her perfumed lotion, her face powder. He had pressed his child face into her side, into the denim of her dress (the color of the angry sea). Had studied the peaks and whorls of her fingerprints, the folds of her knuckles, the lines of her palms. He had wanted to be everywhere she was, had gone everywhere she went.

He knows what everyone thinks of her. How they remember Eileen Snape, who had been Prince, who was mother. Remember her proud face, always turned up to the sky. Remember her sneering tone, a brave face on an unsteady self. They had teased her for the strange food she brought, that she sometimes smelled like. For the odd lilt to her voice that she had later deliberately trained out. But to him, to young Severus, she had whispered stories of her mother, of where her mother had been born, in a little town deep in Romania. He had learned the recipes by heart, though he makes them only rarely. (His favorite is tocitură. Let the meat brown, add the garlic and the wine, always a little more than he’s supposed to. Let it become fragrant. He likes the tinny smell of the tomato paste, the warmth of the paprika. Poach an egg, set it on top. Break it apart like stabbing the sun.) She had taught him how to eat milk thistle. To pop each part of the blossom off and suck the sweetness out like a straw. When his father was gone, he would climb into her lap every night. Her heartbeat like a drum against his back, she distractedly paging through a magazine and eating sardines from a tin. He had sat with her so often that it is still a surprise when he looks and she is not there, he can still smell her perfume, still remember her body in the way that all demanding children do, as if it is an extension of their own.
The food comes. Potter spares no time in laying waste to the offerings of Brittany, glutting himself on roast chicken and cider. Mercifully, somewhere in the past seven years, he has learned to chew with his mouth closed. Watching him relax, to take pleasure of something while in the company of Severus Snape, brings other things into sharper relief. They have never been so close so willingly, sitting across a small round table, separated only by a candle and bottle of Beaujolais. Severus shifts uncomfortably, his sallow hand like a greasestain on the linen tablecloth, the whiteness of the fabric setting him off in an unpleasant way. He puts his hands under the table when he can, where they are unnoticed.

“So, um,” Potter says, triumphing over a particularly large bite of roast potato. “What’s our plan?”

“Tomorrow, Mr. Potter, we will go into the forest,” he pauses, considering his literature lessons. “It’s not far. It’s spat out more than its’ share of stories. Other than the tomb, the Val sans Retour is said to be there, where Morgan le Fay cursed her miserable husbands.”

“There’s really a tomb then? All proper-like?”

“Useless stones. Although, I understand that the magical signature is strong there.” He fiddles with his napkin (cloth, he cannot tear it). “We’ll see if we can get any ideas there.”

“Do you think Merlin will really have answers?”

Severus glares slightly (at Potter, at himself), “I can’t think of a better person to ask about the unheard-of disappearance of magic, but if you have a better idea, please, Potter, do share with the class.”

“Fuck, if you weren’t trying to help, I swear to God, I’d - “

A sharp stab of interruption, a flash of beetle-black eyes. “You’d what?” Potter’s dark brows furrow, anger seeping from him like spilled wine.

In the background, he notices a man approaching their table. Severus dusts off his particular favorite scowl, the one that strikes fear into the hearts of First Years (and had always kept their irritating chatter to a minimum for the first few months of class).

“I couldn’t help but overhear,” the man says, smiling like an oil spill. Severus’ lip curls at the unwelcome approach. The visitor is tall and tanned, somewhere in his late-thirties or early-forties. The hair is slicked-back, white in a premature sort of way. Harry leans in as the interloper speaks, as if his words hold any consequence at all. “You are interested in the legend of Merlin, are you not?”

“Yes, very much,” Harry says. Is he not aware that he wears every godforsaken emotion on that irritating face?

“I am Henri Aglie, Comte de Saint-Germain.”

“Harry. Harry Potter,” Harry presses forward, offering his hand. Severus loathes the easy smile that dawns on the boy’s face, turned up toward the offending Aglie. “And this is -”

“Professor Severus Snape.”

“Ah, I see. An academic interest, then?”

“Yes.”

“Of course,” Aglie says, sitting at the empty chair of their table without an invitation. Severus bites
back a harsh word as Harry pays the rudeness no mind. Aglie leans back in the chair, his white suit irritatingly pristine, a comfortable smile on his face. He drums his long fingers against the tabletop. Severus takes a sip from his wine to conceal his grimace. “Well, as you both almost already certainly are aware, the trail of Merlin ends in the forest of Brocéliande. Most scholars believe that this is not far from us, scarce thirty kilometers, in Paimpont Forest.” Aglie looks up, light catching his pale eyes, “Have you yet been to the forest?”

“No, we haven’t,” Harry says, turning toward the Comte. “We’ve only just got here today.”

“Well then,” Aglie grins widely, “Are you both free tomorrow? In a most convenient manner, I am quite familiar with the forest and can accompany you. My home is not far from there.”

Harry lights up. The candles reflect in his eyes. (Severus certainly does not notice, certainly does not grit his teeth.) “Yes, can you? That’d be amazing.”

“Of course,” he says, hands spread in invitation. “Your wish is my command.” (Severus chokes his grip around the stem of his wine glass.) “Are you staying around here?”

“Yes,” Potter, that betraying creature, says quickly. “Do you really think the forest here is Brocéliande?”

Aglie pours a glass from the bottle on the table. He swirls the liquid slightly before lifting it, inhaling once, and taking a sip. “I do, but I’m no scholar. I grew up not far from the forest though. Everyone who has spent much time in that forest has seen some strange things. Most of us here are believers.”

“Tell us about the forest,” Harry says. It is like a Portkey had been left on the table, the way Severus’ stomach lurches. Unpleasant, miserable, queasy.

That night, as he lays in a borrowed bed one door down from Potter, Severus fantasizes about snakes. Anacondas kill by squeezing their prey to death. He pictures a massive anaconda curling around Aglie, squeezing out all of his breath.

As promised, Aglie is waiting in a red coupe the next morning. It doesn’t take long to get to the forest but Aglie drives aggressively, either quickly speeding up or suddenly decreasing. Severus regrets his bit of toast and eggs, sitting in the back in a miserable, dyspeptic humor while Potter carries on. His magic curls about his fingers, his twitching hands. How many ways could this be bent to a way that he would prefer? There is no one to stop you. (The vastness of possibilities stretches out before Severus. It is laid out endlessly before his gaping mouth, his greedy grasp. Take what you want. He is there, standing on the edge, held back by careful fear. I could kill you, make you disappear, make you both forget you’d ever spoken to each other. Potter, I could compel you to do anything I wanted, you would not be able to resist. You would not even know that you wanted to. What stops him? It is the hesitation of the diver, staring out at the expanse of want, unsure about how to fall.)

It gets stronger in the wood. I should have guessed. (Brocéliande Forest is the heartland of all spurned lovers. Morgan le Fay had trapped men here, somewhere in the veil between worlds. This is where Viviane, Lady of the Lake, had imprisoned Merlin to keep him a slave to her love. Magic swells here, thick with promise and treachery.) Not all woods are friendly. As they weave their way further into Paimpont Forest, old stories of disappearances surface in Severus’ mind. Not all travelers
come back. There is an air of malice to the trees, arching tall above. Uneasiness creeps through Severus, into the marrow of his bones. It rushes through his capillaries. Keep an eye on the branches. Keep an eye on the roots.

“This is familiar,” Severus muses, head tilted back, bleak eyes cast at the bleaker sky. The sun marks their progress, steady and certain. The broadleaved trees, oaks and beeches, grow more densely as they penetrate deeper.

“Ah, have you been in one before?” Aglie smiles, Severus imagines knocking all of his teeth out. Imagines casting a spell to cover him with boils, festering sores. There are so many ways to ruin a man.

“Been in what?” Harry asks, casting a look backward.

“One of the King’s forests, of course.”

“I have no idea what insipid nonsense you’re on about,” Severus bites. (Think then of a strange wood with a stranger sky.)

“How can an Englishman not know his own history?”

“**Legend**, Mr. Aglie, not history.”

Aglie shrugs, an easy roll through his straight shoulders. Light glints from his pale hair. “It’s all the same thing.”

Harry frowns, “What’s that? A King’s forest?”

“Well, you have naturally heard of The Forest King,” Aglie starts. Harry shakes his head, dark curls tossed with the movement. Aglie mimes being stricken.

“My, what sort of education did you receive?” Severus considers tearing the other man’s throat out. “English schools, I suppose. Never mind now. Let me correct that oversight.” Their guide frowns a bit at the pale sky before clearing his throat to begin.

“The Forest King is said to be the original king of the British Isles and Brittany. Ireland too. All lands that a Celtic eye touched. It is unclear if he and King Arthur are the same, the stories diverge slightly. And, of course, there are arguments that Arthur never existed at all but as a twelfth-century tool for English state propaganda. But The Forest King is said to have died once and that he will return again. That is where the similarities end. It is said that he was born as a boy with a star set upon his brow, that he stole magic from the gods. Most of the stories have been found to come out of southern England, near to Cornwall.” Aglie pauses, “I have a few books with copies of the tales in them, should you have time in your visit, you are welcome to come and review them.”

“That’d be amazing, thank you.”

“It’s just a tedious nursery lullaby,” the irritation paints his voice black. **You ignorant fool.** “We are here for Merlin, not old rhymes.” (He thinks then of the queer tarot card, the image of the empty and unseeing emperor. The dark, night-colored riot of his corvid army, not unlike the one Severus had seen two nights ago pecking at his door, at his windows, at the bricks of his walls. A small, unsettling shiver shoots through him. It rambles down his spine, through the tips of his fingers.)

“I would be careful not to doubt the Forest King in his own wood,” Aglie says, then points off into the distance. “Come, the tomb is not far.” Crows caw riotously, unseen and darting through trees. They sound like they are tearing something apart in a slow way, not even hungry. Tearing at prey
just for the pleasure of the kill.

The tomb appears in a clearing. A ruin of a ruin. In 1892, there had been a dozen stones but a greedy landowner had sought gold beneath them, destroying the stones in the searching. There had been nothing. It was empty. It is still empty. What are they looking for in an empty tomb? Why did we come here? It had been his idea, yes, but he hadn’t been certain of where to start. Now, staring at rocks with no voices and a grave with no body, he feels a bit foolish. Anger licks up at him, in the set of his shoulders, the tips of his ears. He loathes feeling foolish. His teeth bite the inside of his cheek until it is tangy and metallic with drawn blood, like sucking on a coin.

He stares at the pile of stones, the pile of earth. He had often read in textbooks that the tomb was well-known to be empty, only an odd marker, but that this was one of those strange spots on earth where magic is unusually strong. Even a Muggle can inadvertently cast a spell if they say the right words at the right time. There is a rush within him, as if he had once been empty and is filled up again. As if this is a fountain and he has drunk deeply. I wonder if Potter can still feel it. He looks up at Potter’s melancholy face. I suppose not.

“I have done some reading on the legend,” Aglie says, “As a matter of personal interest. Modern archaeologists believe this to be a Neolithic gallery grave. Originally, as I understand, it had measured twelve meters long.”

“Wasn’t Merlin supposed to be immortal?” Harry asks, letting one wheat-colored hand graze the stones like he might touch a lover. A clutch of hawthorn and holly trees with their mouth-red berries grow near the grave. Hawthorn, for cleansing. Holly, for sacrifice. (It is an uncomfortable reminder, holly. Those born in the height of summer are consecrated to it. Potter was born in July, he will never forget that. Potter carries a holly wand. Severus had been born in the dead of winter, given instead to the birch tree. The tree of renewal. It is a miserable irony, he’s never been able to start over.)

“He is supposed to be afflicted with that particular curse, yes.” Severus mutters.

“You wouldn’t want to live forever?” The younger man’s expression is careful and unreadable. Severus says nothing, they lock eyes for a long breath. He looks away first. (When had he begun doing that? He has never looked away first before. Not with Potter. Never with Potter.)

Look instead at the sky, which his mother had stared at once. This same Breton sky. (The color of chromium, the color of veins on the underside of a wrist.) Look at the birds with envy. He does not have wings but would like them. Wings, to all cultures, represent freedom. He can fly on a broomstick, can climb inside of an airplane, but these are not the same as throwing your body naked and empty to the sky, of commanding flight, demanding freedom on your own terms.

There is a small plaque to the side of the stones. He brushes away some of the overgrowth.

The Tomb of Merlin

A legendary figure and one of the greatest sorcerers, Merlin is best known for dwelling at the court of King Arthur. It is now believed that most tales of the historical Merlin are a combination of the warlock Merlin Caledonius, a madman of Northern England, and Myrddin Wyllt, a Welsh bard. Merlin is famous for engineering the birth of King Arthur through magic, for the creation of Stonehenge, and for his immortal prison here, where he was betrayed and imprisoned by Viviane, the Lady of the Lake. Viviane, in her grief, was said to be later housed and given comfort by the convent of the Abbaye aux Dames.
Potter reads over his shoulder. (Severus’ fingernails are tight in his balled first, leaving half-moons, ready to draw blood.) “What about Viviane?” the boy says, “What happened to her?”

Aglie nods, “A good question, that. No one knows. Some say that she was one of the otherworldly queens that bore Arthur’s body away to Avalon.”

“Do you think that the abbey might have records?”

“I suspect, Mr. Potter,” Severus mutters, “that it is our pathetic lot in life to find out.”

Can all things exist simultaneously? It was in Dublin in 1952 that Erwin Schrödinger first gave a lecture on the possibilities of concurrent histories. We tend to focus on ourselves, we are sick with hubris. We think of the myriad of little ways that our world might change. Perhaps, we think, we might have been rich. Been powerful. Might have lived here or there. Might have learned to cook, to ride a bicycle. Where did it first diverge? At the beginning, before all things. So we must consider wildly different worlds.

How do we test the porosity of our divisions? Can we slip through, like water in a cell wall? What sits next door to our own? If Merlin is trapped in a fold between worlds, how do we slip inside? How do we get him out?
Chapter 5

“There are things that happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been.”

A.S. Byatt, Possession

Condate

If there are multiple worlds, how do we know we are in the right one? Take stock of yourself, count up the blood cells one by one. Blood and bone are our birthrights, the only things we get to keep. Yes, this world is true as hair and teeth.

Are the shadows right? Where did we come from, thrust out of darkness into light? (Back again into darkness at the end, always and ever.) What little shifts and tells can separate truth from falsehood? Do we trust ourselves? (Should we?)

The house is large and rambling, bright stones against a striking sky. They had pulled up at a long circular driveway, carved out of the long lawn in white gravel. It crunches beneath the tires. The house dominates his vision. Is it a house? Is it a mansion? A castle? (He’s never paid much mind to histories and architecture.) The stones and curving iron gates are a tempting exoskeleton, promising luxury within. They pass pale columns and their carved acanthus leaves. Beautiful and massive windows dominate the walls, drawing the space and light. Harry thinks of his little bed-sit, cozy and tight, he hadn’t needed anything more. His plaster walls with their eggshell-white paint have nothing on this ashlar masonry. The house is mainly evocative of art nouveau, but it looks slightly uncommon to the eye, like a magpie of the years gathering up new additions and remodeling, a vast array of disparate architectural styles. Trees ring out in a hollow around the structure, bushes radiating out from the center. The grassy lawn rolls out serene like a mossy sea.

He breathes a sigh of relief on being out of the forest. It was choking, deep and dark as the sea. Magic had always been a comfort, a wonder. It had been his naturally once, it had flowed to and fro, into his body and out again as artlessly as breathing. The magic in the forest had felt threatening and base, something primal and unknown. It is not unlike the sea, beautiful above and terrible beneath.

It is better here, out in the light; he can keep one eye on the sun.

Harry swallows up the luxury in wonder with wide eyes and a solemn face. The high-pile scarlet carpet, the massive windows flanked with velvet drapery. Sumptuousness is alien to him, he shifts a bit from side to side, unsure of how he’s supposed to stand. How are you supposed to address a Count? Despite his uncertainty, he cannot fault the stately home, easy in its beauty.
They had settled into the parlor. Harry hesitates on a chair, holding a cup of tea with unsure fingers. Add the milk, the bit of sugar. *Where should I put my hands? Is this right? Is this okay?* Snape, ever contrary, stands at the window. In his severe and dark clothing, almost monastically cut with perennially high collars and always long-sleeved, he looks like an interruption. Like a black hole against the dizzying lights of a galaxy. For a moment, Harry pauses. Black holes demand attention, if you get too close, they will reel you in with their long tendrils of gravity, curled around your feet like a monster of the deep ocean. Is it so different with Snape? Always popping up in Harry’s life, always demanding *Harry pay attention.* The long afternoon light is golden and lays on the other man’s face in a kind way. He’ll never be beautiful, that one, but for a moment there’s something nearly regal in the proud, harsh face.

Harry looks away.

“This is wonderful,” Harry breathes.

“Ah, I am so pleased you like it. It’s been in the family for centuries, I’ve made only a few changes.”

“I was under the impression that France had slaughtered their cursed nobility,” Snape says, keeping his distance.

Aglie laughs, waves a long, tanned hand. “A hereditary pretender title. I’m a grandson of a grandson of a grandson, nothing truly of consequence. And the title is not French.”

“Oh,” Harry says, “then where?”

“In the east,” he says, “Near the Carpathians.” Harry nods, casting over his studies. What does he know of the Carpathians, that mystical area like a doorway between two lands, the east and the west? It is the land of dragons. Charlie Weasley had lived there for years, still lives there in fact, at a dragon sanctuary somewhere not far from Bucharest. It always had seemed unreal, out of reach. He wonders what it looks like out there. Romania and Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland. He has never been further east than Germany (he remembers that weekend well, spent mostly in Berlin’s nightclubs).

Snape stares at Aglie in the strangest way. Oddly pale, oddly dark. “Where in the Carpathians?”

Aglie shrugs, “It is nowhere interesting, my little town.” He grins then, spreading arms wide toward an adjacent door, “But come this way, here,” Aglie says, “You are here for the library. It is rather a particular pleasure of mine. I’ve spent decades gathering the books.”

“Something to do in your life of idle leisure, I suppose;” Snape mutters. Harry tenses, his sight snapping to Aglie, who mercifully appears to take Snape in stride. Harry flushed, Snape’s dislike of the other man is obvious and embarrassing. Who doesn’t know those bared teeth, that infamous glare, brutal as a cornered wolf? *Cut it out, you prick.* Harry wants to say to the harsh professor. He hesitates, he’s too familiar with Snape to not see the tension in the set of his jaw, to know his nervous tics. There is again the briefest, most ludicrous moment where he wants to put a hand on Snape’s arm, say it’s alright, don’t worry. (Harry would certainly wind up sporting some kind of interesting curse. Boils, perhaps, or coughing up locusts. No one doubts Severus Snape’s creativity.)

All libraries are the beloved of their librarians. Only public libraries, exhaustive in their collections, can stand indifferently, as a monument only to human knowledge. Private libraries are more secretive and revealing. The books we collect betray our innermost thoughts, our hidden fascinations. To
show a library is to expose your heart.

He isn’t sure what he had expected Aglie’s library to look like. Perhaps something grand and mysterious, full of hidden doors and gilt-lined pages. There is some of that. It is high-ceilinged, like the remainder of the house. Velvet curtains again line the tall windows, this time done in a deep mustard. A wool tapestry dominates the far wall, singularly empty of books. Light catches the threads of silver and gold woven into the navy of the background. A pale unicorn sits in the center, white and calm in his fenced-in enclosure and tethered to a pomegranate tree. Harry peers at the care of the design, the obvious love and attention poured into the smallest wild orchid. The library is stuffed with art. A painting of Tristan and Iseult. A woodcut of the battle of Camlann.

Harry steps to the far desk, dominated by an interesting device. A metal arm arches up, suspending a long pendulum. It is simple and elegant simultaneously. The Comte follows Harry’s line of sight. “I’ve become a fan of science in my later years. I see that you’ve noticed the pendulum.”

“What is it?”

“It’s an elegant proof of the Earth’s rotation. The physicist Leon Foucault introduced it in the nineteenth century. As the pendulum swings, it moves through the markers on the bottom and completes a full rotation. They can be used as clocks now, but mainly as a curiosity.”

“It’s a child’s toy.” Snape says, under his breath. Harry ignores him.

Two portraits sit near each other. He recognizes the imagery of one, though it had been done by a different hand in a different style. See there the same spare and empty face. Same dreary crows, a severe wolf at his feet. It looks like the tarot card that Snape had shown him in the old pub. (Harry frowns, remembering a drunken man who had called Snape a child of wolves.) His eyes drift to the other painting. This one is in oils on canvas, a riot of red against a dark background. It is larger but the face is not dissimilar. Gaunt and hungry, hollow-cheeked. Long and black hair, pale and cruel-mouthed. The artist had shown brilliance in the execution, in the mixing of pigment, the application of light. The eyes of the painting seem to follow him. He quavers slightly, just the barest of tremors, and tries not to look at it. There is something in that stare. Something greedy and carnivorous, malevolent and brutal.

*Move on. It’s just a painting.*

So he goes. Past little statues, past little trinkets. Mostly books, always books. As Harry moves through the room, he feels almost like a story is being told to him but it is in a language he does not know, one where he cannot pick out the finer points.

Harry moves deeper into the library. He watches after Snape’s dark back as he completes his own circuit. It is hard to miss the way Snape’s shoulders relax from their hunched position. He seems to breathe the air in, the dust of old books and their pages. Harry smiles slightly, secretly. *I guess I’ve just got to keep you around books then.* Snape stops before the two portraits, each unsettling in their gaze. The older man bends his head slightly, some unfamiliar emotion flickering across the austere face, something like grief, something like fear. Harry aches to ask, to understand, but Snape is not a man to ask questions of. Not these questions. Instead, he turns to Aglie.

“Where did you get all this?” He can hear the wonder in his own voice, it makes him sound infinitely young again. (Eleven years old, looking up at an enchanted ceiling, beautiful as a night sky.) He looks from face to face as they turn toward the sound, each lined with more years than his. Each far more learned than he will ever be.
“Everywhere,” Aglie smiles, pausing in the center of the room, like a conductor of grand impressions. He directs them to a corner, the volumes smelling heavily of dust and age. “These will be to your particular interest, on Arthurian legend. I’m afraid that it’s a bit heavy on French sources,” he smiles. “A matter of national pride, you see.” He turns toward the other end of the room, “I’ll leave you to it.”

It is remarkable how time passes in the presence of a book. Snape has taken several volumes on Merlin and Arthur, piling them like a castle’s defensive curtain wall around him. Harry had done similarly, paging through title after title, unsure of what exactly he is looking for. Snape seems to have a better sense of their goal. Well, thank God for that, at least.

Bored, he gets up, moves along the library wall. It is too tempting, so he moves a bit beyond the shelves indicated. They spiral out into related topics, mainly mythologies and folktales. The bottom shelf has a small run of dilapidated bindings. He runs a finger down a fabric spine of an ancient book, pulls it from the shelf. On The Death of Kings, Robert Teller. Nineteenth-century, perhaps. It smells like dust, the emptiness of air and water, like museums and forgetting. The crow on the front is perfectly, uncomfortably familiar to him. The book falls open to a page, clearly often referenced.

“Primary sources are difficult to locate for The Forest King, leaving historians to wonder if such a man ever existed at all. If he did, we must ask what is legend and what is truth? How do we separate the two and pick the real story out from the rest? There is no grave to excavate, no bones to carbon-date. It is a temptation for the historian, since the basics of the story are similar; to look at the way the King conquered death, to look at the title, and to assume that King Arthur and The Forest King are one and the same. This may be a disservice to the study of this legend, fascinating in its own right.”

Think then of his parents. Had they heard these stories? They had never told him a nursery rhyme about the Forest King, had never whispered little songs in his ears. Not that he remembers, at least. What is he allowed to remember? The violence of a green light, a pale scream. The stories of the Dark Lord have multiplied in his absence, so Harry goes forth now with new and unreliable memories. Do not forget Tom Riddle. (He uses the bastard’s birth name always now, does not give the satisfaction of even Voldemort.) Does he remember the way the monster had tied up his father, had stacked a pile of books upon him while he’d turned on his mother, listening for the sound of falling? Maybe not, maybe that is a story Harry was later told. Maybe he’s made that up. He shivers, scowls at paper and ink. Maybe it’s a terrible dream. A nightmare, ever waking, ever present.

He reaches to put the book back, rattled by ancient things.

Wait, there is a piece of paper stuck in the back of the book. It juts out slightly as the volume is moved. Harry takes the yellowed, disintegrating paper and opens it. A noisome, awful smell rises and then, worse still, the queer drawing that seems almost familiar. The dragons are woven together in the Celtic fashion, one red and the other white. One is his dragon, that vicious blood-colored beast, the same drawing that had been featured on his little letter. The same red ink. Harry looks up over the book. Snape is deeply buried in a treatise of Merlin’s life and rumored afterlife. Aglie is perched at the desk in the far corner, writing. Paying him no mind. Harry slips the letter into his jacket, as if it never was. As if it had never been.

“Potter,” a voice slithers. Dark, a command. (Snape does not ask questions.) Harry startles at the sound. “Come.” A large volume is laid open in front of the professor. Harry follows, irritation
spiking through his skin, through his clenching teeth. He finds himself hovering at the edge of the
desk like a mosquito, reading over the other man’s shoulders.

“Potter, read this,” Snape whispers in a low voice. He stands from the desk, Harry sits in his place.
The wood is still warm.

The most compelling evidence we have for Merlin’s continued survival comes from correspondence
with a canoness of The Abbey of Sainte-Trinité, also called the Abbaye aux Dames, discussing the
logistics of a visitation from an “old friend”, called Emrys, and the transportation of something
valuable to an unknown location. The abbey ceased to function in 1908, from there the trail is lost.
Few other mentions of Merlin in written form remain past 1307, where most documents were
destroyed.

Snape reaches for the book as Harry leans back. The side of the pale hand brushes against Harry’s
arm, warm as a banked fire. Skin against skin, he reels in that brief flash, that nothingness of time.
There only for a moment but the pressure of the memory sits on his skin. Focus, Harry. He stares at
the text, a jumble of unknown language (it had been English a moment before, it is foreign now). He
holds onto the memory of the little touch, replaying it until it is obscured by his own memory, unsure
what had actually happened. Why does it matter? It is an uncomfortably familiar tableau, Harry here
at this desk bent over a book. Snape behind him, dark as a shadow and telling him what to read and
where to look. He flushes a little again, not wanting to know why. Relax, it’s nothing. It’s not him,
it’s just that you probably really need to get laid and there’s someone nearby. It’s just physical.
Don’t worry. Harry frowns, breathes in. Looks again at the text, which has mercifully deciphered
itself once more.

“It looks like the documents were destroyed deliberately.”

“It does rather, Mr. Potter.”

Harry rolls his eyes, familiar ground at last. “I’m twenty-five. Can’t you call me by my first name?”

“No.”

“You know, Hermione’s excellent at research, we could - “

“No,” Snape hisses, violent and sudden. Harry blinks, surprised at Snape’s vehemence. Eyes hold
his, narrowed and questioning. What is the question? He does not know, floating in air, suspended
and out of breath. Snape’s eyes have always fascinated him. Repellent. Bewitching. Distantly an old
voice hovers, bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses. Vision that has always seen Harry, has
always caught him out of place. What creatures have eyes like that? Scorpions with their twelve
eyes, perhaps. Eagles have over one million light-sensitive cells per one millimeter of their retinas.
Eagle-eyed is not an idle phrase of the poets, perhaps Snape has eagle eyes. Part inhuman, part
unreal.

“Alright,” he says, cautious and gentle. It is almost as if he is attempting to comfort a wild animal, a
frightened deer, a startled rabbit. “We won’t invite them.”

“Did you find what you needed?” Aglie asks as he brings them back to the hotel. It feels like re-
entering the real world to be back in Condate. Paved roads, streetlamps, the pharmacie across the
street with its green cross. The hotel is in the northern part of the city, near the Parlement. From here,
as Harry peers down little side roads and across avenues, he can see the traditional and colorful half-timbered houses common in Brittany, looking almost medieval to his untrained eye.

“We found a few things,” he says, looking back at the Comte. “What about Viviane? She put him under the curse, so she should know what happened. I read there might be letters from her.”

Agile nods, “Yes, yes, the witch of the lake herself. She did spend some time here.”

“Where is the Abbaye aux Dames?” He frowns, thinking about the logistics of approaching a convent. Can you just walk in there and ask to talk to someone? Will they talk to men? What about non-Catholics? “Abbey of Women? So, er, a convent?”

“A former Benedictine convent,” Aglie says, nodding, “Now home to a council, I believe, though records may still be kept close by. It is not far from here, in Normandy, although I cannot remember the exact city. A day’s trip, perhaps.” Harry stares at Aglie in wonder, watching the way the light glints off the snow-white hair. How do you know all this? That’s amazing. Snape stands next to him, scowling. For every action, a reaction.

“Was she a nun then?” Harry asks.

“Unlikely,” Snape muses, “The texts do not mention it. It was common then for abbeys and convents to house travelers and inconvenient women.”

He nods, swallowing down the knowledge. The other two seem to have a sound command of the basics, Harry does not. He does not have much to base upon, religion has never been something that was close to him. No one around Harry really goes to church, not with any measure of faith in their pockets. They go then for weddings and funerals, occasionally on Easter Sunday (always thinking of roast and football clubs). Sometimes, secretly, just between himself and the sky, Harry is jealous of those with faith. It seems to wrap them up like a blanket, like warm arms, always soothing in the reminder, you are loved, you are loved. It is a cold existence to be alone. He has friends, yes, but family and lovers are different. He has no one to share a home with, to share a bed. Others go to their ends hand-in-hand, carve their names on each others’ gravestones. Beloved wife, beloved husband.

Harry has no one, not even God.

Up then, up the back steps to their floor. Most hotels in Europe have small, inconvenient elevators. They fumble up the narrow spiraling staircase. Harry pauses to speak. Snape stops short at the interruption, a little too close for comfort.

“You could be nicer,” Harry says, thinking of the razor-edged words Snape had launched throughout the day at the Comte. Words like bitter almonds, with their hidden hydrogen cyanide, explosive in air at high concentrations.

“I am not a nice man, Potter.”

Harry looks back at Snape, pausing at the top of the stairs to their separate rooms. “Yeah,” he says, “I know.” Something passes in those cave-dweller eyes, across the leveled glower. “Just,” Slow down, Harry, take a breath. “Can you try to be somewhat not-terrible to him? He knows a lot about this stuff. We need him.” Snape’s eyes glitter like anthracite. Crow coal. It does something to Harry’s
stomach, pulls out the rug. He draws back the barest of distances, keenly aware of the space between them. Close as centimeters; distant as leagues. Heat from the other man. A proof of humanity, proof of existence, proof of waking. Careful, careful.

“Yes,” Snape says, drawing out the sibilance, “Isn’t it a bit convenient, Mr. Potter, just how much that bit of slime knows exactly about what we are after?”

“You’re too suspicious.”

“You’re not suspicious enough.” They hover at the doors to their rooms, separated by a pile of acrimony. Harry’s hand is sweaty on the metal of the doorknob.

“I’m going to bed. Let me know in the morning what other hunches you dream up. Why don’t you write it in a list or something? Here, I’ll get you started - Aglie is actually the devil.”

Snape’s eyes narrow. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“No,” Harry snaps, “I’m not. Henri has been nothing but kind and generous to us. Basic decency is the least we can offer him, not that you’d know anything about that.” It feels good to turn smoothly from Snape, to pull the door shut loudly behind him. He replays the moment once or twice before shaking his head, collapsing onto the bed, arms outstretched. His heart races, anger rushing like a drug through his veins. A hit, that moment of gaining the upper hand, finally, finally seeing Snape in that moment before he’s figured out what awful thing to say. His younger self would be so proud.

Breathe, Harry. Just breathe. Don’t think about the fucking bastard, don’t let him rile you up. You really held it together today. You’re gonna be fine, right? Once this is over, you’ll never have to talk to the awful prick ever the fuck ever again.

He rolls over, shoving his head into a soft pillow. His room is a relief. Sharp, clean, modern. The housekeeper has fluffed his pillows, turned down his blankets, replaced his little bottle of shampoo. He tries to picture Snape, of all people, in a Muggle hotel room and fails. Yet, Snape is there, just next door. (It feels surreal, this collision of worlds.) I really need to hear a friendly voice.

He picks up the mobile, dials a number. Hermione’s voice is like an open window, like coming into a patch of sun. He wants to wrap the warmth of the sound around himself.

“How is it going?”

“Bloody weird,” he breathes. God, it’s good to talk to you. Really fucking weird. How are you guys holding up?”

Hermione’s exhausted laugh comes through the phone. “Ron’s been very helpful. We’ve been teaching them how to cook without magic. I rather think Mr. Weasley is a bit pleased about the whole thing. He’s been to London twice already to stock up on rubber ducks.”

Harry laughs. The vision is not difficult to picture. A gangly redhaired man with an armful of yellow ducks. Affection crashes through him like wind. God, I wish I was at the Burrow. “I can see that.”

“What about you, what are you doing? I’ve heard nothing from you, Harry. Everyone’s asking where you went, but I haven’t said a word. Cross my heart,” she paused. “Well, I mean I told Ron, but that doesn’t count.”

“You were right, you know. About it being Snape. You know, with magic.”

“Well,” she says. He can imagine her pleased and puffed smile through the phone line. “Are you
“Yeah, I am. We’re in France right now. Brittany. Some strange things happened and, well, I guess we’re looking for Merlin. Snape seems to think he’s either alive, or close enough to it, and that he might have some answers.”

“Well,” Hermione muses, “It’s a popular idea that Merlin died after the Lady of the Lake imprisoned him, but quite a few authors believe otherwise. I was just reading about Merlin a few weeks ago in *Magical Britain: A Wizarding History*.”

Harry smirks, “Of course you were.”

“Oh, hush up.”

“Could you send me a list of some books? We have someone helping us that we met here but I always trust you.”

“With pleasure,” Hermione says. He can almost see her already drawing out a piece of blank parchment, picking up a pen. “Do you need help, Harry? We could come.”

“No,” he says unhappily, “I brought it up, you know? Snape was pretty angry that I even suggested it. I’m probably barely enough for him to tolerate. He probably is stabbing pins into a voodoo doll of me right now.”

There’s a soft pause, “He puts up with you a lot.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, I just mean that he’s usually trying to help, even if he’s a bastard and backward about it. Usually, it’s when you’re involved.” Harry considers. Considers a stone protected by poisons and a logic puzzle. Considers a man throwing himself between a werewolf and a full moon. (A spy, bent on one knee, covered in shame and ache. What had Tom asked of him to prove his loyalty? Snape has never spoken of it, never hinted.)

“Yes,” he sighs. Runs a hand through dark hair. “But it’s just that shit always bloody happens to me.”

A laugh, “Well, that’s true.”

In bed, he stares at the dark. At the ceiling, at the corners. Snape is one wall away, in his own bed, in his own darkness. Other worlds; other rooms. *How long does it take you to fall asleep?* (It is hard for all of them, Snape cannot be any different.) Briefly, he thinks of the way Snape’s hand had touched his skin, how it had jumped back scalded. Those hands, with their oddly gentle touch, light as a moth, which had held his letter carefully, which had touched Aglie’s books with reverence. *I didn’t know you could be like that.* There is a moment, as we drop into sleep, that honest thoughts creep into our minds, crossing the barrier from *no* to *what if*? Harry, sleepdrunk, continues on. *Have you ever been in love? I can’t imagine you in love.* The evil, greasy bat from his childhood was no one’s love. This Snape is the same yet different, emerging into Harry’s mind like focusing a camera, like cutting a gem from rough and wild stone. Bitter and greasy and vile, yes, always, yes. But something else there too.
What would it be like if we had met now? If you hadn’t known my father? Would you hate me like you do? He isn’t me, you know. You should fucking know that by now. It is a bitter thing, the measure of Snape’s hate. If Harry is to be loathed, then do it for his own self. Not for James Potter, whom Harry does not remember. A distant nothing, unknowable and impermeable. You’re just like him, they all say. Once, that had been a compliment. Now it is like the bitterness of an antibiotic on the tongue. Awful, difficult to swallow. Everyone shakes his hand, looks for the similarities. Where they find differences, their eyes glaze over, they look away. Few look at Harry Potter for himself. (It is almost pleasurable, almost, when Snape flashes in white-hot fury over something Harry has done. When he is angry, wretched and heaving, over a choice Harry has made. His choice, his agency, never his father’s, no.)

The breath of September steals through the open window. It is his favorite time of year, the summer cooling like a sunburn in the evening. (He remembers the little garden not far from Privet Drive. He had hopped two fences to get there, had picked berries off the trees lining the little patch. He had filled his hands with wild blackberries, fingers stained with dark red juice, his tongue violet. It was best at dusk, when the fireflies came.)

One hand (not his, never his) moves down his bare chest, rustling the starched white sheets. His middle finger touches his breastbone, long and flat. Moves up then and down, innocent as a dove. There are many places to go but his fingers travel neither east nor west but always and ever south. The fingers (perhaps they are someone else’s, perhaps they are warm with blood that is not his) hover at his waistband, steal under. He is not always patient but tonight he draws out the exposition. A touch here, a tease there. The thighs maybe, the swell of bone above. He clutches his pillow to his body like a warm, sticky partner, his pelvis ground into the palm of his hand. This sick, aching hope that he could conjure up a nameless lover tonight to slip into his rented bed, to run their phantom hands over his deserted chest, his largely-undiscovered skin, their touch fierce and evaporated by dawn.

Go to sleep now. Perhaps, in the morning, it will be over. Just a dream, always a dream.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.”

Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises

Caen, Normandy

The Abbey of Sainte-Trinité, or the Abbaye aux Dames, is nestled on the Calvados coast deep in Normandy, deep in the city of Caen. It has existed for nearly a millennium. It is difficult for us to understand those long stretches, millennia. It is nearly impossible to consider that, by the time Shakespeare had uncapped his pen and written out the tragedy of Hamlet (with all those poor creatures who had either died or rather wished they had), the abbey had already existed for close to six hundred years. That the 1062 founding of the abbey by Queen Mathilda, wife of the great Norman conqueror himself, was as distant and alien to William Shakespeare as the year 1400 and the battle of Agincourt are to us now. All pasts stretch out into ancient and exotic histories, into a swirling mess of before.

The old stones may house the Regional Council now but the history still creeps, still hovers in dust and in stone. In masonry. The pillars still talk, the towers still gossip. The old spires had been destroyed in the Hundred Years’ War (they will blame it on England), and later replaced in the eighteenth century with short towers. The tour guide takes them down the few areas available to the public. Beyond a yard, the old convent beckons with its yellowing stone walls and dark vaulted roof. There are no sisters here now, one hundred years later. No black woolen habits, no starched white scapulars.

Severus hunches his shoulders as they walk the nave of the Romanesque church, plainly ornamented and with high round arches. Potter seems as blithely curious as he is to anything in the world, entirely unaffected. He pauses at the edge of the apse, the edge of the Latin Cross. Colored light filters through the stained glass windows and lays like a smudge of phthalo blue on his cheek, looking up toward the crucifix with its doomed Christ like a traveler might. Like a stranger in a strange land. A hot curl of bruise-colored rage races up Severus’ spine, jealous and dark. *You weren’t subject to any of this, were you? You’ve never been lashed by servants of God. (You’ve never been told that you’ve let Him down. You don’t even think about it, do you?)*

At the end, under the choir, he can see the slab of black marble where the Queen rests still, a thousand years later. What grave will I be dumped in? He wonders where his own bones will be in a thousand years. (Death, that great final bleak nothing. He will never know. The future is never our story to tell.)

The old church chafes like an unpleasant memory, a distant cousin. He had not been raised in Catholicism. His father had been an old son of the Anglican Church. His mother had converted, officially, upon her marriage. But the prayers she had offered, the ones she had taught Severus, were
always from the east. Orthodoxy runs through him like blood, like oxygen. He had been born in Cokeworth, had been educated in Scotland, yes, he is English to a fault - yet, still it sits there in his mouth, this unknown flavor of elsewhere, of otherness. He can smell it in his hair, catch it under his fingernails. Otherness. Burn it out. Cut it down.

Severus, still a ball of terror without a shell. Still a child. His father had insisted on sending him to a faith school. “Give the boy a bit of a backbone, Eileen,” his father had said (glare in his eyes, gin on his breath). “Look at him, weak as a dog. Stand up, you stupid coward. Be a fucking man.” (Stand up. Be a man.) He hears it still now, decades later. It sits inside him, festering deep in his marrow as a cancer might. He had been seven years old. It is nearly forty years later but he still flushes when he remembers his father. His father’s hatred. Not good enough. Unwanted.) What about Sister Francesca and her ruler? He walks more quietly in the old abbey, though the religious order has gone, still fearing the presence of God.

This is idiotic. I don’t even believe in God. (A lie, always a lie. He believes, he does not want to.)

“You really hate churches, don’t you?” The question is quiet and not without Potter’s seemingly infuriatingly endless well of empathy. For one brief, terrifying (exhilarating) moment, he thinks that Potter might touch him. Might reach out one of those work-roughened hands and rest it on his shoulder, perhaps. His arm, maybe. Don’t you dare fucking touch me.

(God, he hates everything.)

“I’m afraid that the rest of the buildings are in use by the council and not available to visitors.” The tour guide, at least, has the decency to look apologetic. He feels the scowl starting in his toes, climbing him from the floor. A bit of magic would certainly encourage you. Potter’s grasshopper eyes are bright and skewering in their reproach. Severus has said nothing (he is sure of it), yet Potter stands there laying him bare.

“Perhaps,” Severus says to the girl, keeping his tone deliberately mild and thinking of a list of hexes to try out on the younger man, “Perhaps you can tell us what happened to the library and other documents that were stored here?”

“Oh yes!” The guide says, “Are you doing research?”

“We are,” Potter cuts in smoothly, smiling like the dawn. “I’m Harry Potter. This is Professor Severus Snape.” Severus. Those three syllables warm on Potter’s tongue, pushed forth from Potter’s mouth. Safely accompanied by Professor; safely accompanied by Snape. Still, he picks the moment out of the air to remember later, when his pride runs low.

“Oh certainly, we love to help research projects.” She pulls out a map, crisp and bright. “Some of the collection went to other abbeys and orders. If you can tell me what type of research, I can help narrow it down.”

“History,” Severus says, “The daily workings of the abbey. Personal correspondence of order members and visitors.”

“That’s mostly been transferred to a library here, associated with the university. It’s near the canal. If you go, ask for the head librarian, Nico Lobineau. She’s very good at her job, she’ll get you sorted.”
They walk the short distance from the abbey to the library. Memories of war loom around every corner. Memorials and rebuilding. Rotten bullet holes still hide in statues and walls. No one who comes to Normandy, to Caen, can forget that blood soaked battle, the two months of bitter fighting for control of Caen, importantly situated eleven miles from the Channel. Severus’ grandfather had fought in Normandy, had landed there sometime in June 1944 (only a child). His father had been home, still holding onto his own mother’s hand, listening for the news on the radio, listening for German air raids overhead. Had his grandfather fought in Caen? He doesn’t know, he will never know. (His grandfather had not come back from the war.)

The city had been ruined then, that summer of 1944. Sixteen years before Severus would be born. It would not be complete in its rebuilding until 1962. Enough time for a ruined man named Tobias Snape to grow up, to take up a smoking habit, to father a ruined son.

Who had ever had a chance? (Not him. Never him.)

The university library is not nearly so architecturally impressive as the council offices. It has that blockish, nearly brutal, uninspired look of 1970s concrete design. The head librarian, Nico Lobineau, proves to be both present and remarkably adept at pulling sources. Severus has nearly forgotten that not all librarians are Madam Pince, that sometimes they are younger. Sometimes they hide a laugh or two up their buttoned sleeves. Lobineau hoists a large box of old books and papers into their carrel. Severus watches Potter, counting the breaths per minute, the dilation of his pupils in response to the loose dark hair of the woman. The soft lilac blouse. (It is maddening, to not know. It would have been better to think of Potter the conqueror, bringing home woman after woman. Instead, there is silence from Potter, from his blank bedroom. Severus can only fill it up with his own curiosity. Every person in the margins seeks others there with him, looks for someone patterned like their own self. Are you like me? Pot t er is silent as a vacuum, only an esoteric smile and a pale face.)

Are you like me? Wretched, foul, demonic, (queer)? In the stories, we are from different planets, different worlds. What is the truth? Age fifteen in a cramped coal-mining town, a runty fisherman’s town. Age fifteen, a runaway deep in English trees, on the edge of a maneating lake. Age fifteen and buried in churches and Bibles, nuns and their rosaries, fathers who throw beer bottles at the television. Age fifteen, waking up in a dead sweat knowing that something is wrong, what you ache for is wrong. The wrongness isn’t the outside world, it is you. Within you and without you. How do you handle the wrongness? Curl up around it, swallow it down. Oysters form pearls around bits of sand that creep into them. It grates at them, scrapes at them from the inside out. So they deposit layers of nacre around the sand, form it up into a pearl. Read the stories, the words, all and only nacre. Beautiful, maybe. Still sand, still that old ache and scrape, burning from the inside out.

Are you like me? (Nasty, appalling, blasted, beautiful boy.) You shouldn’t still be so beautiful.

Is it fair? Severus had struggled seven years ago. The shoulders are wider now, the jaw stronger and more square. There is a beauty to the lines, the precious few etchings below Potter’s eyes that hint at sleeplessness, the uneasiness of veterans. (They don’t talk of their mutual scars. Severus and his neck, hidden beneath tall and starched collars. Severus knows Potter had been hit with a slicing curse on the back, that the muscles had been splayed out like a book to read. There has to be a scar there, splashed across the skin. Magic is imperfect. Severus has never seen. Let me see. There might be potions you have not yet tried. )

You’ll ruin me.

He is ruined already. Had gone once more to his destruction that morning, leaning against the shower tile, exhaustion deep in the muscles of his calves, in his back. The water had curled down around
him, unkind and hot. The heat had reminded his body of other functions, primal and unfair, base and wrong. Had reawakened things that Severus’ orderly mind cannot control. (Has he tried, oh God, how he has tried.) Where had his mind wandered this morning? *Potter is twenty-five. He plays amateur Quidditch.* What comes after Quidditch? Plumped and hard muscles, the inability to catch a breath, incandescent sweat. *Do you take yourself in hand, like I am? Do you drag it out, tease yourself? Are you quick and impatient? Would the water run past your face, your jaw, get in your eyes (like you, like me)?*

*What do you think about?* (He had thought then of Henri Aglie, tall and neat. Perfectly clipped hair. Younger than Severus, maybe only ten years older than Potter. God, how repulsively beautiful they would look. The sundrenched skin, the contrast of hair, black against white. Aglie of the turquoise eyes, beautiful as lapis lazuli, not like the dull black of Severus Snape. No. Not like that at all.)

It is tempting to wonder about the maddening creature. Long-limbed Potter, long-lashed Potter. Elegant as a manticore in a china shop. Infinitely bewildering. Thrust once more into Severus’ pathetic life, just beyond a wall of measly plaster and stone. Just across a table. Severus has rarely been so close, close enough to memorize the lines on the boy’s hands, the folds of the knuckles, the dirt beneath the nails. More confusing now, up close. (He had thought that the desire had been bred from the war, from the tension of their tightrope lives. Something beautiful and heroic and obviously doomed would always prove tempting to Severus, some godforsaken grail he could hang his hopes upon. Different now, older. A man, not a boy. Not really. The desire though, just the same.)

*I want you.* (It is humiliating; it cannot be borne.)

It is impossible to not compare himself, self-conscious in his hawk nose, his too-skinny lips. Mourning-haired and funeral-eyed. Severus has no color, no magic, no nothing. Not like Potter, who has skin the color of eggnog, who has eyes like bottle-flies and putrescine. Potter is color; Severus is none.

Sometimes, it seems like Potter stares back. When Severus glances, looks at the corner desk, sometimes that heavy gaze is already there. Something, some wild and desperate want, crawls up the back of Severus’ throat, lays thick on his tongue.

Look away, Severus. There is nothing for you here.

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In the moment that Severus opens the box, he hesitates as Pandora may have. A myriad of directions might lay inside; nothing might lie inside. That old and ever-familiar scent of ancient manuscripts, of dust and disuse, gusts up from the lid as he lifts it. It is seductive to the scholar, bewitching to the academic. In his hands, in this little box, Severus is the master of time. Master of stories, all but forgotten save for these few words borne out on these few meager papers.

The documents are numerous. Old prints and older maps. Little notes and notebooks. Letters to and from the abbey. Lists of books and acquisitions, reproductions by the copyists. He is no historian but he is an academic at heart, thrilling to the hunt of knowledge.

“Everything was destroyed in 1307, wasn’t it?” Potter looks up from a disintegrating document, worrying the edge of his lip. He wears gloves to protect the parchment from the transference of skin oils, hair oils. There is more care for the document than Severus would have expected from the boy. A strange appreciation sits hot in his stomach. He does not give it voice.
“That is the unfortunate rumor. What did you find?”

“Erm, not sure if this means anything, but there’s this,” Potter passes a piece of parchment over. “It’s about something being transported from the abbey to Paris. But it was carried by eight monks.” He tilts his head slightly, the dark hair sweeping across his forehead. “That’s not a usual thing, is it?”

“What was being transported?”

“That’s kind of the thing. It doesn’t say.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” He pauses, considering. “That many men would mean either something important or heavy.” Or both.

Potter rolls his eyes, “Read it. I’m sure.”

Reverend Mother Agnes,

I write, pen in hand and heavy-hearted, to confirm the completion of the task set upon us. May God take glory in what has been done to honor Him. We are resting to-night and will break bread tomorrow at the Enclos du Temple. As you advised, once the evening prayer was over, I spoke alone with the Lord Abbot, who accepted me with the greatest secrecy. From here, our most holy package will be conducted forth, so that even the black curse will not be able to follow. We will rest further tomorrow and continue on again. My brother monks have taken great relief and strength from the performance of a miracle by a statue of the Blessed Virgin, who has been seen twice to weep real tears. We offer humble prayers to her, who might protect us upon our journey. Who might protect our heavenly bundle and keep it safe from evil.

Br. Magnus

The Year of Our Lord, 1307

“Do you think it means something?” Potter asks, chewing on the end of his pen. The black plastic cap disappears somewhere past wet, chapped lips, pink as the dawn. (For a completely absurd moment, Severus wonders if it is deliberate. But this is Harry Potter and he is Severus godfuckingdammit Snape. These are not his moments.)

“Perhaps,” Severus says, forcing burnt-pitch eyes away. Swallow down your misplaced want, Severus. Pack it away. “The passage from Aglie’s library must be referencing this same event and it spoke of the visit of an Emrys. Emrys was Merlin’s childhood name. It seems an unlikely coincidence.”

Potter frowns a little at the etching in another book. Glances up, brow drawn. Severus watches uneasily, the too-bright boy. They are bent over the letter, heads nearly touching above it. Breathing the same recycled air.
“You look like him a little, you know.” The gaze lifts up, rests over Severus. He shifts uncomfortably under the direct contact. Potter has always had that unsettling knack of frankness, of directness. As if no one has ever clued him into the basic human decency of shame, of discomfort.

“And just what are you nattering on about now?”

“The Forest King. I mean, with the hair and all. And the face shape.” Like taking a bath in ice. In liquid nitrogen. Do not ever say that again. You have no idea what you are talking about.

The nursery rhymes and fairy stories had never been told to Potter, whispered to him in the dark by suspicious mothers, by watchful grandmothers. They had tucked him in at night, given him a blanket, a glass of water. The Forest King steals difficult children, Severus. Go to sleep now, don’t be difficult. Perhaps the King and his servants hide under beds, wrap their long, skeletal fingers around children’s fat legs that try to crawl out in the middle of the night. In dark corners and empty rooms, in night-filled forests.

His grandmother had told him most of the stories. She hovers at the edge of his memory, a ghost of another time, barely his to hang onto. His mother’s dark-eyed mother, who had been born on a plain named for snow. Who had been born at the edge of the largest natural lake in the area, in the desolate oak forest remains of old Codrii Vlăsia. The thick forest is mostly gone now. It had been the protector of the Romanians, those Wallachians and Translyvanians, like his grandmother and those before her. In the age of the voivodes, armies had retreated into the forest or darted around it, depending on their friendliness with the trees. In 1456, Vlad Tepes (Dragon, Impaler, hero) had used the forest to defeat the invaders, the encroaching Ottoman army that had swelled like a fist out of Istanbul. Most of the forest has been cut down, destroyed. Make way for agriculture, for progress, for industry. (Some places keep their secrets, keep their forests. Snagov keeps theirs, like Romanesti and Comana around it. They don’t cut down the trees.)

He tries to not think of her. Of his grandmother. His mother. Of his miserable coop of albatrosses. Instead, he sharpens his tongue with a grindstone and steel, dips it in oleander poison.

“You’re more of an idiot than I realized.”

“Is it common? Having pictures of him about? I’ve never heard of him until now and Aglie -”

“No,” Severus says, “It is not common. Most think it’s bad luck.”

“Oh,” Harry says. “Yeah, both of the portraits in the library crept me out a bit.” He makes a face, an exaggerated grimace.

“Both?”

“Well, yeah,” Harry says slowly, “The etching and the painting. They were next to each other. I know you saw them.”

“They were not of the same man.” No, certainly not the same man, although Severus has never considered the similarities in their severe faces. He thinks of that painting. He knows it well, the image of the Impaler, though he does not keep it in his house. All Romanians know it, are born to knowing it. Severus would know the image in his sleep, he has known it from birth, printed on the backs of his eyelids. The Carpathians run a long length and Aglie had not said exactly where he was from, but there is little chance of anyone from other than Romania to have a painting of Vlad Tepes, the Dragon, the Impaler, in their home.

“Then who was - “
“Leave it.”

He pauses, the usual feeling of dread not dissipating as it usually does in the dull linoleum tables and fluorescent lighting of reality. It is a few more minutes before even suspicious-eyed Severus Snape realizes that the pale-faced man at the nearby table, who had brought a stack of books over on medieval and early modern European history, had not written a word in nearly an hour. And had also not turned a page.

Severus glances at Potter, who is humming softly, one foot tapping and his nose deep in a ledger. But Potter doesn’t catch his eyes, only pushes a bit of folded notebook paper over toward Severus. “I’ve made some notes on this.” Scowling, Severus unfolds the page, confronted by the younger man’s ever-loopy script.

"Don’t let on that you know. He’s been watching us the entire time. He came in about ten minutes after us. Don’t say anything important or mention him. We should try to leave unnoticed."

He frowns. *I am always careful, you blasted fool.* He had not survived as a spy for no reason. It is a careful art to shift the wand in his jacket pocket, to mutter the words of his little spells. Concealment is as easy as breath to him, weaving the magic that makes the words rearrange on their pages, the maps reveal other places. No longer is there the description of a Parisian temple, a secret pilgrimage. Instead, the words talk of travels to the Indus River Valley and ancient irrigation methods. Potter, to his slight credit, seems entirely nonplussed by the change in reading topic.

“I have a question for the librarian,” Severus murmurs, loud enough to be heard. “Come with me, Potter.”

Once they round the corner, out of sight of their uninvited guest, he grabs hold of Potter’s arm. He focuses on the image of his hotel room safe in Condate, and draws the magic around the two of them like a veil. It starts in the breath, between the shoulders, the back of the neck. The library fades out, the hotel room edges in. The spell swirls in the belly, tingles down the arm, rings the crown with sparkles.

“Fuck, I miss that,” Potter says, catching his breath. There is a long moment before Severus realizes his hand is still on Potter’s forearm, still feeling the shift of the muscles below the warm skin. He jerks it away.

(When has he touched Potter? He should not be allowed, it could become a dependence. Skin to skin? Only once, barely a memory. Potter, with terror clenched between his teeth. Potter, his cold fingers pressed harshly against a ripped neck. There is nothing to remember of Potter in that moment. There is only the biography of black, the story of black. Darkness had edged in, framing his vision, fading in like ink. In that singular moment of his life, there had been no fear. Only exhaustion, only the ache to close his eyes. To sleep. He thinks of animals. On the verge of death, they find dark places to hide, to curl up, to give on over into sleep. You cannot take anyone with you into the dark, you must always go alone.)

“He was there the entire time?” Dark voices for dark questions. Potter looks up from straightening his jacket and sits on the perfectly-made bed. Severus’ bed. *Fuck.* (This is an image he did not need, Potter on a bed he has slept in. Potter’s face upturned, eyes catching the light.)

“Yeah, came in some time just after we did. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen him before too but I wasn’t quite certain.”

“When did you see him?” He hisses. *You absolutely foolish idiot. You could get us killed.* The boy’s nervous hands splay out over the bedspread, smoothing it down over and over again. Those fingers,
like and unlike Severus’ own. The same shape, the same bones and skin. Potter’s are smaller than Severus’, rougher and more callused. The lines are there too. The same lines over his face, at the corners of his mouth, are there on the back of the hand, in the knuckles. They wear their years like a glossary of little pains and little hurts. A mask of too little; a mask of not enough.

“At the cafe, when we met Aglie.” He pauses, “There’s something in the face, isn’t there? I can’t quite put my finger on it but it isn’t quite right.” Something, yes, Severus privately agrees. He remembers the strange face. Too pale, perhaps, but Severus is not one to cast that stone. Perhaps it lay in the careful concealment of expression, the too-still hands, the too-frozen face.

“Are you completely unconcerned about your own hide, Potter? These are dangerous games, you could get us killed, you bloody imbecile.”

“I know what I am doing, Snape. This is my fucking job.”

“Owls and crows are natural enemies, Potter,” Severus says, picking his words carefully. He wants to drill a hole into his skull, just there at the temple, to relieve the pressure of the impending stress headache. “Do not forget that Merlin’s symbol was an owl.”

“What does that mean?”

“Think, you daft wit. How many crows have you seen? When was the last time you saw an owl?”

He watches as Potter’s eyes widen. A fool but perhaps a bit sharper than Severus gives him credit. “Do you think,” he says, almost comically obvious in his remembering, casting back, “Do you think we’re being watched? Like properly by someone?”

“And you’re the best Auror of our time,” Severus says flatly, “I feel so entirely reassured.”

Potter flushes in a remarkably interesting way, glaring all the same. Severus breathes imperceptibly faster, a rush to his blood, thinking of this same angry face, furious and spirited, glowering at him from over a desk, from over a cauldron. “This is a bit different than cursed toilet seats, Snape.”

Severus frowns, “We’ve been watched since before you got to Cokeworth.”

“The letter,” Harry says. “And the card. And the crows.”

“Yes, that should have been obvious to any First Year. How on earth did you manage to graduate?”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. Not yet.” Severus says. But I have my horrible suspicions. “If you can manage to think of something in that empty, brainless skull beyond Quidditch for a moment, do try to keep me informed of any other unusual activity.”

“I was fully aware of what was going on. I was handling it.”

“You were putting us both in danger, Potter. I understand that you might have been too busy staring down the librarian’s blouse but try to keep your wits about you.” His chest heaves, the black coat waving up and down with his breath like the tides of a dark sea.

“I’m an adult, Snape. You can’t just treat me like this.” Potter glares, the low light catching in his charcoal hair. “Not anymore.”

“I will treat you however I damn well please, Potter. Don’t you ever forget that you need me. I do
not need you.”

“You don’t ever do anything without a reason, Snape. Don’t you dare think I’ve forgotten that. You need something, I just don’t know what.” Eyes narrow, suspicious. “And I don’t really care what it is. But I know what you’re like.”

Potter flares with anger, rising and swelling like an explosion. Sparking from an electrical outlet. Downed power wires. He draws threateningly close to Severus, back straight and shoulders square, scarce inches away. His body heat pulses. That long carotid artery throbs. His breath staccato. (So many permutations of reality stacked upon this one, next door to this one. All possibilities. In one possibility, he must have shoved the boy up against the awful, florid wallpaper, sunk mouth to mouth. I need you. In one possibility, he must have drawn his switchblade, the little one there in his pocket, driven it into Potter’s chest until the hilt hits bone, until Potter cannot breathe. I do not need you.)

We are always aware of rules. There is a limit to personal space. How close you can get, how long you can look, linger over something? Severus knows they have broached past the limit, have walked into this liminal space of what next? You cannot get within six inches of someone else’s mouth without touching it, without a fist or a kiss. They are dangerously close, tightened by cobwebs and the nothingness of silence. Say something, the voice in his mind sounds. Do something.

“Get out, you wretched brat.” Get out, get out, get out. I do not trust myself.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Potter spits, “I’m going.”

It takes hours for Severus to fall asleep. Rattled by a touch of skin, simple epithelial cells. Undone by biology; undone by a flash of green light. I know what you’re like. Of all the barbs, why does that one cut to the bone? When he sleeps, he dreams of an old tale his grandmother had once told in a quiet voice and a quieter room.

Once upon a time, a child was born, golden-haired, deep in a castle of the south. On his seventh birthday, the old enchanter (who had been born already wrinkled, already ancient) predicted his ruin by another child, born on the same day and the same year, dark-haired and from the north. The Queen, the boy’s mother, had clutched the boy to her chest, petted his flaxen hair. “Will he be killed by this man?” The queen had asked. The enchanter had stroked his long, white beard. “Worse, perhaps. His ruin will be the ruin of us all.”

“What can be worse than death?” The queen demanded. But the enchanter had already disappeared. She had held the boy tight, swearing vows against Northmen.
Apologies for the slight delay in posting. Daylight Savings Time rather ruined me this weekend.
Chapter 7

"He was cold, aware that he was Nowhere.  
Under thousands of frozen centuries,  
On an ashy trace where generations had moldered,  
In a kingdom that seemed to have no bottom and no end."

Orpheus and Eurydice, Czeslaw Milosz

Condate

If you had asked Harry Potter, age sixteen, what a day spent with one Severus Snape would look like, he probably would have mentioned words like awful, disgusting, boring, dull, and obnoxious. (Who, after all, would want to spend a day with the old, greasy bat?) Now, age twenty-five with bags beneath his grassy eyes and sleeping in a Breton hotel bed, he would select very different words. Words with a different nuance, a different shade of meaning. Frustrating, difficult, impressive, busy, sharp and tense. It is the tension that is the sticking point, the thread that weaves them together, as strong as a spiderweb. Tension emanates from them like magnetic fields, pulling them together, pushing them once more apart. He fumbles at the words between them, ever clumsy, ever unsure. (Like moving between worlds, this invisible transition from child to adult. From hatred to something wilder. Drifting by osmosis through invisible walls.)

He has had a dream.

Harry wakes up thinking about Severus Snape, cut off from the fever world of his subconscious, the non-Euclidean geometry of a world out beyond the confines of his own. Strange. What had he dreamt of? Let us ask him.

A grey sky, clutches of black trees barren of leaves. A dry, cold wind. A land both like England and unlike England. Rock formations that seem to defy the very natural laws of this Earth’s gravity. Though it was day, he had looked to the sky and found no sun. What else is there in that bare, lonely land? A throne of wolves. The song of crows. He had dreamt of a man who was not Snape, who had never been Snape. A man who bore a sharp face, raw and stinging. Wasp-eyed and curious, wearing a crown of bone and antler over long black hair. Harry Potter, a distant voice like the sound of an echo in a cave, Do not let go. As Harry had stared at the face, the eyes had caught fire, lit coals, lit charcoal, as the mouth began to either speak or scream.

Then, the surfacing of waking. Sheets damp and sticking to his back, his chest, wrapped about him like an infant might be swaddled. In his fear, there is the quick grasp for someone else. (Snape, his mind reaches for, wants for. There is a strange safety in the presence of the buttoned-up man. The old protector, silently holding back against the sea.) He fumbles for his glasses on the side table, the half-full glass of water. It is still early yet, still dark. The month had slipped from September to October while they were here, the sky out past the window shows that there is no moon to light the night. The empty room presses in, malice in the quietness.

They are being watched. They have been watched before. Only now, however, does he realize that even sleep may not be safe.
For once, Harry is the first to rise. He waits in the hallway outside of their adjacent rooms, pacing back and forth along the unfortunate brown carpet. When Snape pulls the door to his room open, his face betrays a lick of surprise.

“I was unaware that you knew of a time before ten o’clock, Mr. Potter. If it is of interest, I would be happy to advise you of additional morning hours that I suspect you are unlikely acquainted with.”

The vulture-dark voice is controlled, even cautious. A Snape-drenched apology, not dared in words but offered in the absence of acid. The dismally dark hair is still damp from a shower. There is a hint of color in the eggshell cheeks, the bridge of the nose, brought forth by scaldingly, punishingly hot water. Perhaps still, the smell of soap. A trace of citrus and ambergris, of vanilla and musk. The high-collared shirt (black again, black always) buttoned to the top, with no room to swallow.

Harry swallows.

“I had a dream,” he says, “The Forest King was in it.”

Snape looks at him as if staring at a particularly inept Neville Longbottom. “It is not unusual to dream of what you think about throughout the day.”

“No,” he shakes his head, “No, you don’t get it. It wasn’t about him, he was inside of the dream.” His eyes snap up to meet with the professor’s own. “He’s a wizard.”

A wizard. A man. Something more than only legend. (A name, perhaps, somewhere out among the forgotten past.) The black eyes sharpen with interest. Snape looks around the hallway. A housekeeper gathers towels from a cart. Exit signs blaze their cherry-colored letters at the ends. “Go downstairs,” Snape hisses, “We’ll discuss it somewhere else.”

At the table in the lobby, a familiar sleek-haired woman sits. The librarian. The gentle Tungsten lamps of the hotel’s lobby are kinder to her than the fluorescent lighting of the university library. Her face is handsome. Heavy yet elegant, with fatigue painted in the shadows of her eyes, at the corners of the mouth. Pale-skinned but with the promise of oliveness, of tan following the sun. Not like the sallowness of the professor, who stills at Harry’s side. She looks up at their approach, sharp as a knife.

“Mr. Potter,” she says, soot-colored eyes and soot-colored hair. “Mr. Snape.” She stands as they approach, wiping invisible dust from her skirt in the process. Her clothes seem oddly out of time, cut in a classic fashion and made from heavy fabric. Leather blazer, simple and clean.

“Wait, you’re the librarian,” Harry says. “We met yesterday.”

“Yes,” she says with an impatient wave of her hand. “Nico Lobineau.”

“But why are you here? How did you find us?” Harry wonders, shifting his weight to the other side, crossing his awkward arms. It is one thing to be followed, it is another to be so obvious on the trail.
“You two are about as subtle as a circus,” she says. Snape stiffens beside him. “But, I’m here to warn you. And pass on information.” She looks around. “Come with me. We can’t talk here.”

“And we should just blindly trust you, Ms. Lobineau?” Snape asks archly. There is something genuine about the woman but sands have shifted in odd ways before. She reaches into her leather satchel, passes a small token to Snape. He takes it slowly, almost reverently, his large hands hiding it from Harry’s view. Harry tries to crane his neck to see, but Snape curls his long fingers around the item. His voice, when it comes, is ash. “How did you get this?”

“How did you get this?”

Snape nods, frowning. “Very well.”

She leads them along several narrow streets to a small cafe, looking over her shoulder periodically. Harry wants to ask, to find out who they are watching for. A murder of crows, a parliament of owls. A glaze-eyed, pale man, perhaps. He is not sure, cannot put a name nor a face to the danger. (It is worse to not know. To not be able to name the dread.) What did you give to Snape? But Snape is silent, focused as a laser, a beam of light from a mirror. Nico orders breakfast in rapid French. Café and croissants. Sticky, sweet apricot jam. Rich, yellow butter. Single-varietal honey. They drink for a moment in silence. Snape sits still, reticent and awkward as he had ever been at the High Table during meals. Harry takes two croissants, three jams. Snape takes nothing, making only an exception for tea. (He is an Englishman, after all. There is always time for tea.)

“I think,” Nico says, her brown eyes narrow over the steaming ceramic cup of espresso, “That you will both need to tell me exactly who you are.”

Snape arches one coal-black eyebrow, “Not until you explain yourself.” He leans back slightly, raising his jaw in that infuriatingly imperious fashion, dark against the windows, dark against the traffic of the modern world just beyond the simple panes of glass.

“Since I know what your goal is, I believe that I am holding the cards here, Mr. Snape.”

Snape takes on a casual sneer, curling his nose and lip. A look, pointed between the table and the woman. In the breath of a wind, the wax candle bursts to light, born into flame. No words spoken, no wand drawn. *Bit showoffy, eh?* Harry thinks, frowning and looking up at the professor. Still, there’s a strange sort of pride within him, watching Snape smoothly manipulate magic, at the self-satisfied smirk on the other man’s face.

Nico, to her credit, seems strangely nonplussed. “A wizard. I thought as much.”

“Are you a witch then?” *How would you not know who we are if you’re a witch?*

“No,” she says, pulling a cigarette from a small pack. She lights it with the candle. “Though I know of them.” She pauses, “I’ll stop with the cryptic words. My name, as you know, is Nico Lobineau. I am a librarian and archivist. That much is true. I am also, or was until recently,” she looks up, “a Steward of The Order of The White Owl. In the service of Merlin.”

“How did you-?”

She shakes her head, “I can’t tell you, unfortunately. We haven’t seen him in decades. No one has.”

“How did you-?”
“You seriously don’t think you were the first to come looking for him?” A sly smile, “However, you are the first to have been followed. That is what I am really here to tell you. Both of you are in grave danger.”

“Who’s following us?”


“I didn’t think he was real.”

“Why would he be less real than Merlin?” Nico says, clear disapproval twisting her features, “No, he is very real. And very dangerous.”

“Then who the bloody hell is he?”

“That is a very good question. The Order has some records that I have seen. He is a man. Or rather was a man once. We know that he lived in the north of Britain in the mid-sixth century, probably near Orkney. We know that is also when the Order was formed, charged mainly with monitoring his activity. Some early documents refer to him as Edward the Black, but after the end of the 7th century, that disappears.”

“And he is known as the Forest King thereafter,” Snape says, curious and considering.

“Yes.”

“He’s been alive this entire time?”

Nico nods, drawing an idle finger around the rim of her cup. “Yes.”

“How is he doing it?” Harry asks.

“I’m not sure. Honestly, I’m not sure the Order knows either, based on what I’ve learned.”

“And you’ve left the Order. Am I to assume that it was not on excellent terms?” Snape asks flatly.

“Correct, Mr. Snape.”

“Why?”

She stares into the distance for a long moment. Shadows and dark strands of hair falling across her face. “We have guarded something very precious for over a thousand years. It has never been opened, no one knows what it is except the head of the Order. The night that magic disappeared, it was moved away from Paris. I have my suspicions about where it was moved and why.” She looks back at them, catching Harry’s eyes in her own. “I would be pretty surprised if the two are unrelated. And then you two showed up, looking for Merlin with a dead man in a cheap suit on your trail. I don’t know what the King wants with you. Or why he wants to know. But I do know that you’re not safe.”

There is only one question on Harry’s tongue, shaped like a bullet with a core of dread. “Dead? He was dead?”

It is Snape that answers. “Didn’t you see the eyes, Potter?” Cast back, back, to a pale man sitting in a library breathing no air, turning no page. Look at the eyes, the ghostly white and pallid eyes. *Inferi.* Even in the warmth of a bright day in a bustling cafe, even with a cup of hot coffee in his hands,
Harry shivers with the knowledge of the living dead. He looks outside to the sky briefly, hoping for an owl, afraid of a crow.

“What we want to know is why has magic disappeared?” Nico frowns, a sharpness in the jaw. “And why do you still have access to it, Mr. Snape?” Harry can almost see it in the lines of her face. *What is different about you?*

“You and us both,” Harry mutters under his breath. He’s wondered that himself. Snape, unusual, yes. Different, certainly. But in what ways as to separate him from the rest of the world? What is so dissimilar of this gaunt, austere creature? Is it in the blood, the bones? Is it in the secret history, the unspokenness of what had passed between old Tom Riddle and Severus Snape, murderers each (different shadows, different stripes)? Perhaps it was some strange potion spilled on his hands, had penetrated through down to the helical twist of his DNA and remade him?

*Why is it you?*

“Why are you helping us?” Harry asks.

“I have questions of my own that I’d like an answer or two for,” Nico digs a piece of folded paper from her jacket pocket, hands it to Harry. He looks at the neatly printed words. It is an address. “I have to get to my train. Meet me here tomorrow morning.”

*Cafe d’Alsace*

*9 Rue Temple*

*Paris*

*10 o’clock*


“We’ll be there,” Harry says. The talk dries up like the sea melts into the sand at low tide. The two men sit in silence for a long interval after Nico’s departure, their drinks growing cold and the sun moving between its stations in the pale blue sky beyond. “Do you trust her?” he asks finally.

The dark hair moves as Snape looks up at him, bathed in reproach, “Potter.”

“Oh, right, you don’t trust anyone. I remember.”

“See to it that you do.” *Is that, maybe, a joke?*

“It is interesting.” Snape muses, not looking up from the table, “That the Order was founded in the 6th century.” There is a pause, an expectation of knowledge.

“Erm, why?”

“Do you *deliberately* not pay attention to any of our national founding myths, Mr. Potter?”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Been a bit busy. Catcher of Dark wizards, remember? You’d be amazed at what people can hex. Go on, what about it then?”
“King Arthur was said to have lived and died then.” Snape looks at the window. “This would have been in his time. It cannot be unrelated.” He seems to muse in silence, his fingers worrying the threadbare little edge of his black sleeve. He turns to Harry, reminded of something. “Your dream.”

“Yes?”

“You are entirely certain that he was in your dream?”

“Absolutely,” Harry breathes, “He said my name.” It had been a queer sensation, not unlike the visions of the Dark Lord, who had shared his mind, shared his soul with Harry’s body like a zebra mussel attached to the hull of a ship. Infected ballast. However, this had felt wilder, stranger. Less parasitic. A tremor in his spine as he thinks of the King’s dark mouth beginning to open. What would have been inside?

Snape leans his forehead into his hand, rubbing his temples. Draws the long fingers across his forehead, through the now wild and rumpled hair. He collects his breaths, his thoughts. Something has changed but Harry cannot put a name to it, cannot put a finger on what. They linger on the moments before words, each careful not to unbalance the oddity of their moment. A long, frustrated groan, just under the breath.

“You’ll have to be watched while you sleep. We’ll need to take shifts.” Snape glares at the floor as if trying to curse it with a silent Unforgivable. “I expect this little adventure will only get more unpleasant, rather than less.”

Harry blinks. “You mean - share a room?” You and me? In the same room? Sleep while you watch me? (Watch you while you sleep?)

“Yes, you dull twit, though I assure you it is infinitely as repellent to me,” Snape glares across the table. “If you snore, Potter, I will absolutely ensure that you do not breathe by morning.”

“What do we have to?”

“No, you complete dunderhead, if you fancy both of us likely dying a miserable death. I am absolutely delighted by the idea of spending my nights watching you drool and trying to sleep while you inevitably watch some ridiculous show or whatever other moronic thing it is that you do in your spare time.” Snape pauses, breathing quickly. Tension in the face, the jaw, tight as a cord. “You have no magic. As such, you cannot practice the meager knowledge that you do have of Occlumency. There is a danger.”

Harry nods, swallowing. Danger. That old, familiar thing. Once again, always the promise of slipping from a cliff, a dagger in the night, poison in the drink.

Are they so different now, the two of them? Soldiers abandoned by their fathers, staring down a battle they cannot begin to hope to win? When they close their eyes, who does not remember the dead on the flagstones of Hogwarts, the scarlet blood like poppy petals, run in rivulets along cracks, had stained fingertips for weeks? (Harry had found it beneath his fingernails, behind his ears, in his hair. Blood, blood, everywhere. His stomach churned, the sick quick and fast in his throat.)

They had told him to pray. He had not prayed. He has never prayed, no one had ever shown him proof of God. He does not pray for the dead of Hogwarts, for his mother and father. Where do the dead go? What is at the end of the road? (No one knows.)
They had spent the remainder of the day in the library at Condate, searching for records of Merlin, records of Emrys. Perhaps a mention of the secreted item would be hidden away somewhere, tucked into a book like a pearl into an oyster. When it was moved, magic had disappeared. Harry had never considered the source of magic before, had never thought that perhaps it flowed from something physical. He had always assumed that his right to magic came to him as naturally as he held his arms, as natural as the teeth in his head, the spit in his mouth. What is it really? He aches to know.

The Comte had called late in the afternoon to invite them to dinner. Harry had taken the call in the library’s hallway, keeping his voice low enough to be absorbed by the plush rug runner. “No, not tonight,” he had said to Aglie, “We’re trying to get to Paris as soon as we can.”

When he walked back into the main room, Snape’s glare would have lit wildfires. “Was that him?” (He did not need to say whom, they both knew the him.)

“Yes.”

“What the bloody devil did he want?”

“He was asking us to dinner.”

“Us,” Snape says slowly, dripping thick with viscous poison. Poison like aconitum, popular in 17th century China, boiled until dense and syrupy, smeared on the edges of arrows and blades. Dripping from a tongue. (Cut me.) “Or you, Potter?”

“Us.” Harry rounds the little table, sits carefully adjacent to the other man, who has a snowfall of papers and documents spread out before him and an inkstain on the side of his left hand. The books with a collection of dust on their pages, so thick that a pen sat upon them would sink like a stone through a grey sea. He looks at the violent face. God, you don’t have to be such a goddamn prick. There is something in the way Snape hisses, angry as a polecat. If Harry was a bit simpler, he would almost smell jealousy on the other. Snape, the sunless eyes flashing at the mention of Aglie, fantasizing of one-hundred-and-one ways to subject the Comte de Saint-Germain to medieval torture. The rack, perhaps? What would Snape favor? Strange potions, ones that Harry has never researched. Ones that peel skin away from muscle, that keep the victim alive the entire time.

He’s jealous. Harry doesn’t understand the nature of the jealousy, where it germinates from, the source. But it seems suddenly possible. What is this, this cascading of understanding? Things shift into a new position with the sudden dawning of Severus Snape’s jealousy. Upside down, inside out. Instead of repulsion, there is a curious wanting. Harry would have never guessed that he would want to be possessed by Snape, but in the bare fact of Snape’s green-tinged jealousy, the option presented, it is clear as a bell. (It is likely only a simple jealousy, a desire to keep something away from Aglie. Perhaps there is a still more basic reason, for with jealousy comes want. Harry does not let his mind idle there. Ridiculous notion, that.)

Snape, who had stood before Aglie in the man’s own house, a sneer curling the thin lips, the stain of mottled anger flaring at the edge of the black collar. The sheen of sweat on the brow, furrowed inky glare. That hair, long and charcoal, unfashionably limp, sticking to the side of his sharp face, the shadow of his beard. Aglie, who is, by all manner of rational accounts, attractive. The square-jaw, the pale hair, eyes like an ocean. It is not Aglie that Harry had wanted to step in front of, odd and protective, like Snape had once thrown his body between Harry and a werewolf.

Sharp as possession. Snape is his past and so, seems to bear on ceaselessly into his future. Calm down, he wants to say. Wrap his arms, his solid frame around that skinny dark magpie, soften
Snape’s sharp parts with his own muscle, his own skin. Hold onto me, I can be solid for you. (Snape would never take comfort in his touch. He knows that, it has never before dawned on him. It has never been a concern. Now, suddenly, there is a strange ache to that knowledge.) Calm down, don’t worry about Aglie. Don’t panic. You’re okay, Professor. You great, big, ridiculous bat.

“Come on, let’s have a drink.”

“I am in no mood to tolerate your insipid company, Potter.”

“Oh buck up, you need one. So do I.” You’re as bristled as a cat. You definitely need a drink. He guides the reluctant form out of the library to a nearby restaurant. Past the crowded clutch at the front to the table at the back, quiet in a shadowy corner. A black-colored nowhere. The waiter brings a bottle of wine, house red. A pair of glasses. Drink up then. To your health. Snape’s long fingers, skinny as reeds, fumble idly at the stem of his glass. They do not still, they cannot. Harry tries not to be obvious in watching the rattled man, laid bare in his discomfort.

“Aglie means well,” Harry says quietly.

“Potter.” The voice is dangerous as black ice. Move carefully, Harry. Get out the bleach, road salt. You can melt ice in freezing conditions with an exothermic chemical reaction. Okay, let’s talk about something else.

He casts out, trying another topic. “It’s been a bit nice, you know, being here despite everything. It’s not a holiday, of course, I’m not that hard up. But it’s nice.”

Snape falls into an empty sneer. But there is, perhaps just behind the lines of the other man’s face, behind the arched brow, a hint of gratitude for being tossed back ashore, once more on familiar ground. He uncurls slightly from the hunched position, disdain once more in the cut of the rawboned jaw. “Surely both of us can find something more pleasant than suffering each other’s wretched company.”

Harry pauses, considering. “No,” he says quietly, “Not really.” A sharp, horrified look on the dark face. “I mean, I know you have something better to do. You hate me. I know that.” Harry drinks, flushing behind the glass, grateful for dark bars and low light.

“I don’t. Hate you.” Snape does not look at him. Does not look anywhere in particular but at an unfortunate point on the white tablecloth where his clenched fist lies, staring with distraction. Dread, maybe. Fury, perhaps.

How can you say that? Consider hatred. A flash of fury, the cutting, scathing wounds of Harry’s past. Seven years of torment. Papers torn to shreds by a vitriolic, vicious professor with a heavy voice. Potions spilled upon the floor. A mind that can jump between the icebergs of Harry’s mind and pluck out the deepest aches, hold them up before the class, write them on a blackboard in spidery script, in white chalk. Harry Potter, our new celebrity.

You don’t hate me. How is that possible?

“Do you think we might have been friends if we’d met now?” Harry gestures, a hand passing from himself to Snape but touching neither of them. He wishes for it to be otherwise, wants for it to be otherwise. It is the curse of all living things, to want. We are never satisfied. Once we possess a little thing, we reach for the next.

“No,” Snape says, quiet voice in a shadowed mouth, “No, we would never be friends.”

(It shouldn’t hurt, this old enemy. So then, why does it feel like he cannot breathe?)
Night, as it always does, comes too quickly. Harry’s heart in his throat, counting out the seconds until his sentencing. He is still pink and damp from the shower, gripping the edge of the countertop.

He stands at the little sink. Porcelain. Ceramic. Fills his hands up with cool water and scrubs at his face with cheap soap until it is tight and shiny. There is a strange silence in the room, heavier than the quiet he has lived with for years. It’s inside him, climbing his throat, his esophagus, like a scream. *Get it out, get it out.* But what? What is it? He doesn’t know. He had not felt so empty before, but now he knows that he is nothing but an empty cabinet. An empty house. Knock on his chest and it will be hollow.

_Snape._ And there it is, in the flesh. The man himself, sitting at the little desk in the hotel room, just beyond the bathroom’s wooden door. The emptiness is less when Snape is there, elbow-to-elbow, filling the spaces up with his scathing words, his razor eyes, quick tongue. Electricity sparks at the base of Harry’s neck, his fingertips, across the breadth of his shoulders. _How am I supposed to sleep tonight?_ His body crackles. There is nothing between them but Harry has not slept in the same room with another person since leaving Hogwarts. He and Ron had shared an apartment but never a room. After, once Harry had taken his little bedsit in Hogsmeade, he had never let anyone stay the night. (He had never stayed the night in other bedrooms, in other beds.)

“*You’ll need to be watched while you sleep.*” A shiver at the memory of the words. The intimacy of sleep. He pulls a white shirt over his head. His mouth full of mint and anxiety. *You must be mad if you think I’ll sleep alright with you in the room.* (Watching him. Scythe-eyed and punishment-mouthed.)

*What if I kissed you? What would you do?*_ The very height of absurdity, these notions. He can already imagine the old professor and his scalpel tongue. There would be nothing of Harry left standing, only incinerated ashes. (Behind it all, another vision. Reciprocal pressure, a wave of *something.* The inability to speak, to move, heart like an earthquake. It starts then with a chink in the wall. A statistical improbability. The want to be wanted. *I want you to want me.*)

A small horror settles in his chest at these unfamiliar (strangely familiar) thoughts. Like a memory from a dream, as if he had visited before and had forgotten once. Only a small terror, the idea of Snape is a mercurial thing, shifting constantly from light to light. *Weird things always happen to you.* What would this be any different?

A strange lightness in his chest, a dizziness in the crown of his head. Like the faint brush of drunkenness, of hypoglycemia. Is this how those unfortunate lovers had felt, sitting across from each other at a table. Abelard and Heloise? Heloise and her dark hair, Heloise and her questions posed to God, questions no one in Paris could answer but the young theologian. Abelard and his dark eyes, his severe features. Twenty years the senior. Teacher and pupil. Familiar story (all love stories are the same).

Not all attractions are celebrated. We don’t always tip joyfully over into the arms of those who are best for us. Heloise and Abelard had not, had been forcibly separated. When they had continued to meet in secret, had conceived their only son Astrolabe, Abelard had been set upon in his bed, castrated in violence. What about Iseult and Tristan? They had drank the love potion while aboard the ship, had taken the love story for themselves that had been intended for Iseult and her new husband, had built something up where it did not belong.
Harry looks at his unfamiliar attraction, holding it up at arms’ length. It does not belong. “Alright, Harry,” he says to his reflection. To the lawless, dark hair and the clover eyes. The strong, straight nose, the cupid’s bow of his nervous mouth. The square jaw. *Breathe, Harry, just breathe.* He washes his glass under the cold tap, putting it back up on the little warped shelf. Walks slowly to the door.

Go on then, through the door, through the dim room. Descend into the sulfur-scented underground with your little lyre, your stories of the light. Charm the three-headed dog, face whatever you find there.
“To feel anything deranges you. To be seen feeling anything strips you naked. In the grip of it pleasure or pain doesn’t matter. You think what will they do what new power will they acquire if they see me naked like this. If they see you feeling. You have no idea what. It’s not about them. To be seen is the penalty.”

Red Doc, Anne Carson

Paris

The first things we ever know are the delineations of worlds. There is the dark black sea of your mother, wet in the womb, floating in a starless sky. There is the cold wind then and a sharp light. Pain and dryness, cracked lips, cradle cap (soft blankets, warm arms). We begin to separate things, make our categories and fill them up. We learn day and night, up and down, in and out, hot and cold.

The strangest thing we first know, other than the light and the dry and the cold - is hunger. That first crack of sound, our wailing, blind and confused, terrified, our little hands and their sharp fingernails stretching toward the sky, aching for something. We have never yet eaten, we do not know to ask for milk nor food. But still, hunger creeps.

Still, we beg.

“Stop fussing.”

“I’m not fussing.”

“You’re shaking the table like a goddamn earthquake, Potter.”

Nervous energy. A tapping foot. The other man stills, glancing up behind wire-framed glasses. (Severus has learned that in sleep, when the glasses are removed, the little red divots where they had sat remain.) They’re early to the cafe. The air is clean, fresh. The trees and their curling edges starting to look pale with gold. The red-sapped elms in the parks, along the streets, their sticky liquid like the blood of Christ. The black locust tree in Viviani Square, flourishing for over four-hundred years. The Lebanese cedars. Paris, city of lights; Paris, city of trees. A modern city, a place of contrasts and
survival. The wrought-iron balustrades, the graffiti on industrial 1970s buildings. The forgotten homeless, stretching out signs and cups. A brush of strangers, camel-colored coats, black leather shoes. We dream about Paris, remembering it as we might a ghost. The Parisians themselves stretch out their long necks, take their shopping home, living in the truth of the modern era while we only want to visit a never-there past. (All great cities are subject to becoming legends, to hosting histories that never were.) Europe, nostalgic for an idealized past that never was. The Americans, nostalgic for an idealized future that never will be.

It is October now, autumn settling into the cracks of Paris. It blows through the narrow closes between buildings, past the metro stations, past the corner cafes and their lit signs. Whistles through the curling art nouveau architecture and along RER trains to Marne la Vallée and Versailles. Past a cathedral on an island in the middle of the Seine and those that travel there to light a candle and say a prayer. Paris, founded by Celtic men thousands of years ago. The Romans had come in 52 B.C.E., had settled on the Left Bank all that time before Hemingway and Djuna Barnes would discover it. The Romans were not so unkind to the land, gave it a forum, a few baths, an amphitheatre. Saint Denis would come bearing Christianity, talking about a man and a cross, three days in a cave. He would lose his head on Mons Martyrum, Hill of Martyrs, later Montmartre - known for dead men, known for little shops. A cafe or two. Paris, weaving lives between those of the past, knowing our graves will be built on top of those already there.

Harry yawns. It had been a long, uncomfortable night, trading sleep in shifts. Four hours on, four off. Keep the light. Harry had paged through a book after his shower, his hair still damp, skin still pink. Severus had studied the stark black and white cover from over the edge of his own book. Harry Potter, twenty-five. Seven years passed, what has changed (what has he never known)? What damned surreal nightmare is this? Potter, in his bed in a French hotel room, reading Isherwood’s The Berlin Stories by lamplight. (Did someone tell you to read that? Are you just trying to avoid me?)

Potter, finally asleep, oak bark skin against a stark pillow. Hair soft, shining in the low desk lamp. Severus had always assumed, had hoped, that if he could finally look at the boy without his eyes burrowing under the boy’s clothing, could finally breathe without the sick clutch of desire, that he would feel an immense freedom. Free as the birds casting their wings into the air. He had looked at the man, instead of the curiosity of skin, there had been only an infuriating impulse to brush the boy’s hair back, to turn the light off, to not disturb him while he sleeps. He had scowled, toyed with the little glass paperweight. He wanted to throw it (he did not throw it).

He kept the light on.

I shall see thee, ere I die, look pale with love. (Shakespeare, you old monster, who always gets it right.) Not love. Anything but that, please God. He had imagined that love is only kindness, but his eyes were hard on the sleeping man, bitter, frowning. How had God felt about Adam when he made him, cast him forth from the dust and the clay? The God of the Old Testament had never been kindly, he had looked upon Adam with a fierce possession, a wrenching pride. Want, maybe, of a sort. To own, to possess. Mine mine mine.

Potter had slept last night; Severus had not. Later, when the alarm alerted the end of the first four-hour shift, the boy (twenty-five now, not a boy any longer, Severus) had pulled the covers off like an orange peel.

“You can take the bed.”

“The chair is fine.” Hard-backed and stiff (his spine will regret it later).

“You’re going to sleep in your clothes?”
He had. In his black jacket; in his black boots. He had hovered in that space between worlds of waking and sleeping, reality had stretched out into long shadows of strangeness. That dissatisfying space of almost-sleep that makes nights seem to stretch forever. Almost. Not-quite. Keep the eyes deliberately shut. (Potter, sitting up in the bed. A turning of the page, keeping the breath deliberately slow.)

He looks out now across the street, away from the younger man and the busy cafe. A dog snarls somewhere. Men and women pass. The air is warm, still early in October, but nothing about Severus is warm. There are only degrees of cold. It seems to center in him, in his chest, a block of ice. Potter’s foot starts tapping again; the table shakes.

His stomach growls.

Nico arrives at exactly ten o’clock. Dark hair pulled back, dark sunglasses on her nose. She drinks one espresso and takes them across the street to the park. The Square du Temple isn’t a large park but it’s carefully landscaped. The grass rolls out like a velvet wave, like a tongue poking into the cultivated trees and flowers. They stand outside the gate, watching people sit on the grass, lay back into the warmth of the sun. Past, further past, see the gazebo, the little playground. See the hazel, the goldenrain tree, the Chinese quince. In this place of quiet and beauty, there is always a lurking past. All places are the same. This is where the royals were jailed before losing their heads in the Revolution. This is where eighty-five lost Jewish children are honored.

“This is where it starts. My part of the story, that is,” Nico says. “I joined the Order ten years ago, it was passed on by my father, who was a member through his life. You know then, that we have gone centuries with only two tasks. We watch and record activity of the King and we keep vigil over something.”

“What is it?” Harry asks. Severus scowls.

“Well, that’s the trick of it, isn’t it? No one knows but the Order Master. It was sealed away in a room, called the Sanctum. No one ever went inside.”

Severus looks at her. At the sharp set of her jaw, “You obviously must have a reason for sharing this.”

“Well, it’s been moved and the room is empty, and I looked myself. But the night before, two members were found dead just outside of the door.” She pauses, grim-mouthed, looking back at the greenness of the park. “Their eyes and tongues plucked out.”

“If it was the Forest King,” Severus says. He studies the silver earrings, the necklace at her throat, trying to make sense of the woman. “Wouldn’t it make a modicum of basic sense that it would be safer to stay with the Order?”

“That’s the thing, I’m not sure it was him. There have been unusual things lately. Strange visitors. Rumors. A cobra in my bed. I found some strange discrepancies in the accounts. And two months ago, a friend of mine, another Order Member, was acting nervous. I was supposed to meet him to talk but he never appeared. He committed suicide that night. Jumped from a window.” She hesitates, “The glass was broken from the outside.”

“But that’s -” Harry lighting up, ready to fight an unseen enemy. Always the hero. More guts than
“You are not the only ones in danger here,” Nico cuts in, “I need to know where Merlin has gone and why the King is after you.”

“We don’t have all day, Ms. Lobineau. You said this is the start,” Severus says, raising an eel-dark brow. Back to the story.

“Yes,” she nods, “The Temple. The Templars,” Nico furrows her dark brow, looking back toward the park. “A Catholic military order from the twelfth century to the fourteenth. They grew quite wealthy and incredibly powerful, until the French king, that is Philip the fourth, ruined them. He was, naturally, very deeply in debt to the Templars. They had their headquarters here until they were ruined. The Temple stood until Napoleon had it taken apart.”

“How did Philip destroy them?” Harry asks.

Nico frowns, “The usual, rumors of blasphemy and conspiracy.”

“Were they blasphemous?”

“No more than anyone else,” Severus murmurs. Who wasn’t blasphemous in someone’s estimation? He considers the time of the dueling popes, the Babylonian Captivity, sniping at each other from Rome and Avignon, who had excommunicated each other (and thusly had excommunicated the entire world).

“What about the conspiracies? Were they part of them?”

“Well, that part’s probably true. But then, who wasn’t?”

The temple, which had come from nothing and was once more reduced to nothing. It had begun in 1137, as King Louis VII had bequeathed a house on a terrible marshland to the Knights Templar. It was in the northern part of the city, of what had been the city then, just past the stone walls. The Templars were inventive, creative, armed by God and might. *Fortiter et recte*. They had dried out the swamp and built the Enclos du Temple. A fortress of crenelated walls and flying buttresses, imperious watchtowers, a long drawbridge. They consecrated their church to Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Weeping.

Can there be a mystery in Europe without the long shadow of the Templars? Their long fingers, which had arched into every corner, into every crevasse, leaving more questions than answers in their long absence. The Temple, destroyed now, but we know its name. We know the names of the Temple men. It’s easy to kill a man; it is easy to disassemble a building. Fire a bullet between the eyes, gut him groin to neck, take the stones apart. Easy to destroy the past, but not to erase it.

“And how is it related?” Severus asks finally, after a long beat.

“This is where the item was stored,” Nico says. “Whatever it was.”

“I thought the Temple was destroyed.”

“Only above ground,” she frowns, fiddles with her mobile. The light catches in her molasses hair. “It sits on top of an arm of the catacombs that was well-sealed off. We met there. Come on, there are things I want to show you that I took. There are tables here.” It is a strange electricity in Severus, the hunt for knowledge. The unknown dangling in front of him, the promise of a secret, an unknown woman saying *I have manuscripts*. He is awake now in a way that he has not been, suddenly certain
that they are on the right path. It had not occurred to him that his search may yet plunge deeper. It is no surprise that the Templars have touched it, their greedy and secretive hands. *Into every conspiracy, a little Templar blood must fall.*

“In the open?” Harry says, surprise in his face.

Nico shrugs. “There are listeners everywhere. You’re safer in the open, Mr. Potter.”

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She pulls a wooden box with a large carving of a red dragon out from her leather bag. Her long-fingered hands spread the tissue-wrapped documents out over the stone park table. The sight of the left-facing dragon, red as rust, drags an uneasiness out of his bones, up along the back of his throat. His lip curls without thought. How many times has he passed this simple image? On a Welsh flag, a lighter, a little tin? More sinister now. More than abstract.

“This box,” Severus says, his long dead-fish fingers creeping out to touch the inlaid dragon, bedeviled by curiosity. *It murdered the cat, it'll get you too.*

“I took this from the Order’s archives,” Nico says, “Before I left. I think this is what you were looking for in the library.”

There are letters, not only with the smell of dust and paper like the library but with the must of hiding places, of damp corners, the ghost of rot. Instead of books, instead of scholarly articles with dry mentions of the academic, an odd reality floats up with the dust. Real words, real lives. This very strange perfume rises up, tangling in his mouth, his nose. Addictive, repellent. He knows it from libraries, from books on Dark Arts, from potions and poisons heavy with hellebore and dragons’ blood. From the tarot card still in his jacket pocket, with a spectral face and given by a madman on an English road. The scent of rotted meat, sticky clotted blood, cadaverine. He wants to lean into the repulsive scent; he wants to hold his breath and never inhale.

“Put these on,” Nico says, handing them gloves. (Smell of vinyl, smell of powder.) There are letters from old Masters, letters torn off without names, letters that say Galahad and the Venerable Bede. Severus studies a map with no names. A stretch of mountains, what looks like a river. A pass through, with no other way in or out. He cannot place it, he has never seen this place before. An island in the center. A sketch of hounds with bloodied limbs in their mouths and terror in their eyes like Goya’s Saturn, devouring his own son.

“What is this place?”

Nico shrugs, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear, “I’ve never been able to figure it out.”

“What is this?” Harry asks, pushing a letter forth, “Do you think this could be to Merlin? It’s Viviane.” Severus leans forward, peering at the old vellum page. Eyes as black as the iron-gall ink on the parchment, consuming the tight scrawl written by the touch of a quill. The medievals had preferred goosefeathers, the five outer-wing pinions. This parchment, the stretched and bleached side of a sheep, written on by geese and witches. Potter’s vinyl-covered thumb still on the page, his breath trading past Severus.
Each time I see my name written in your hand, my eyes retrace the ink where your fingers were. It seems so impossible to me to be apart from you while my own hands touched something that you have touched, where you have put ink to page and changed it with your knowledge of me, written my name again and again. Viviane, Viviane, Viviane. My heart aches for the writing, what foul news you spare me. Agravain and wormlike Mealeagant and their bitter plans and the malice he will suffer at them.

You are right, my love. You are always wise, star upon your brow. For England and for himself, though it is bitter and it is my bitter heart. It must be done. Speak no more of it, you have my blessing, if not my joy.

Viviane.

Severus looks up. Potter is already there, studying him, eyes wide with the same awe that creeps behind Severus’ ears, between his shoulder blades. Viviane’s correspondence. A sudden awareness of history, as real as the grass under their feet, as real as the backfired car on the road. The other man leans in by a fraction, by the width of a page of parchment, the width of a soft goosefeather quill.

Potter, Potter. What are you doing?


It is worse now. Severus had thought, had known, that the worst of all things was this sick, invisible love. No, it is worse now, exposed and betrayed. Potter is a sharp man. They have switched languages when Severus wasn’t looking. Moved from words and the abstract to the suddenly physical. Severus knows words, knows the careful nuance and inflection. Knows how to dip a sentence into deadly nightshade, to sharpen the edges of a phrase with a whetstone. Potter has always been clumsy with words, has always been blind in a dictionary, but never with the physical. Severus betrays himself with a language he does not know (a language Potter speaks fluently). His tight hands, his quick breath, the way Severus’ sneer turns up his jaw, angling away in fear and not-not-not quite disdain.

Potter knows.

The boy looks up at him (not a boy any longer), scarce few inches away. He is too close; they are too close. Eyes (the color of mold and lichen, the underside of logs) catch on Severus’ lip. Severus is inexperienced, he is not blind. If you touch me, I’ll die. If you do not touch me, I’ll die. The two of them heading riotously to their destruction, burning the world as they go. It is worse to know that it will happen. (Where? When? How?) Look at the man, twenty-five-years old. As beautiful as Ganymede had been when Zeus had abducted him from the earth, stolen him for the sky. The strange perfection of youth, the sunkissed skin.

Not here. (Is that what he is reduced to? To begging? Damage control. Not here, Potter. Severus Snape, skin like gooseflesh below a dark jacket, sitting with old papers in a park built on the graves of old men and their foul temple, a pipe bomb barely under control.) Don’t. (He hurts without meaning to, leaves wounds, little burns on others. He may as well mean it.) Strange hunger, a prickling of skin, the feeling of falling. What does he want? He doesn’t know.
Let’s think about hunger. He had always been a hungry child, wanting and needing. His mother had had no patience for him, stealing her books, little pieces of her cooking, always asking why why why. She had sent him to bed without dinner.

It happens often. Eleven-years-old. Bone-thin, skinny as a bat, a railframe, a piece of butcher’s twine. As *Praya dubia*, that long siphonophore deep below the sea, navigating through the murky abyssopelagic layer, the hydrostatic skeleton held together by the pressure of the thousands of tons of water above it. No one had ever discovered the creature, long and whitish, until the 19th century. When we dredge them up in our fishing nets, they lurk in little puddles of goo and gelatin, exploding at the absence of pressure.

He has never been without pressure.

Eleven-years-old, waiting waiting waiting for the release of pressure, for the release to Hogwarts. (He had gotten it months ago, crisp and cream-colored. Stained it with jam. *You’re a mess, Severus*, his father had said. He is so hungry he might explode.)

His mother and her strange hunger that summer, begging her fisherman husband for oysters. *Just a few from the rockpools*, she had said, tugging at the workshirt. A few never satisfied her, eating them up, one after another. She hadn’t hesitated, working the knife between the shell and turning it like a key. Severus watched with wide eyes as she never paused to shake the dirt out, the bit of grit. Swallow it down, slimy and soft, salty and tasting of the sea. Swallow it down in one go. *Another, another*. His mother had never preferred sugar nor fat. Always too much brine in her, she had given birth to a skinny little thing without a speck of fat, too salty for his own good.

Their hotel is in the 20th arrondissement; Potter suggests a shortcut through the cemetery. They walk through the sprawling graveyard of the acres of Pere Lachaise, observing names carved by Dremel and chisel into stone. Severus’ pitch-dark eagle-eyes pick out the famous dead. Colette, Oscar Wilde, even Jim Morrison. Severus staggers their walk, moving in silence. Trying to thread his needle with silence, not with the *something* that weighs between them. He pauses, surprised by an open tomb with roses laid at it. Interrupted by an unexpected nothing, an open door. Evidence of visitors. The living still thinking of the lost, still sweeping the stone streets of the necropolis, all this time later. Who would lay roses at his? Who will build him a grave? Save him space in a sepulcher? (No one.) It is strange, churches are oppressive but in the space between the dead, God fills him up. He stands heavily, too much of himself, carrying both his own weight and God’s.

“Are you coming?” Potter, standing in a graveyard, holding a hand out to Severus Snape. Ridiculous to imagine. He brushes the hand away.

They walk. The sun in the distance blushing, coloring with grenadine, blood, red ink. To keep his mind clear, Severus silently recites recipes for red ink. Vermilion is mercuric sulphide, mixed with a bit of egg white, mixed with a bit of gum arabic. Some spit sometimes, to make it dilute. Brazilwood chips make red ink too, if you mix them with white vinegar.
“Snape,” Potter says, walking next to him. The tone odd, hesitant and tight. The words echo off of the stone tomb of a man named Lasceaux, died 1834. Potter, looking up the few inches between them. Potter, daring to break this careful truce of never goddamn talking about it. Severus and his tight fist. Severus and the tense cord of his neck, the stress pulsing of his trapezius. Ascetic and spare, he has never been good with moderation. *I will ruin you, I will destroy you. Do not, do not, do not.* Severus looks up, they have stilled in their walking. Potter stubbornly determined, that swallow at the throat, the fisted hands. The set of the mouth says yes yes yes we will talk about this. (Severus has never had a choice.)

“*Do not,* Potter.”

“Severus.” (How does it go again, drowning?)

Close the eyes, still the breath. In and out, in and out. *Don’t you dare call me that.* (He wants to snap, lash out. He does nothing, he trusts nothing. He has never been good with restraint, with *want.* Severus as a boy, skinny as a crow, hungry at the table, taking *too much,* never knowing where to stop. He had always embarrassed himself. Potter now, shoulders back, mouth open, open invitation. Severus will take too much, embarrass himself again.) Don’t look. Potter and that shadow in the iris, under the eyes, at the jaw. It makes Severus afraid.

“Don’t call me that.” (Yes, yes, yes say my name again.) Severus closes his eyes again, wanting for center, opens them once more as Potter comes slowly closer. Potter is a survivalist, yes. He knows all the tricks. How do you approach a wild animal? Potter, gentle as a handler. Listen for grunts and growls of warning. A shift of the weight, strange half-circles. Look at their eyes, the whites and the pupils. Don’t make direct eye contact. Don’t go in a straight line. Keep your hands out, palms up. Potter steps forward, one foot at a time, listening, eyes lowered with darted glances up. Sideways first and then back again, his hands out, palms up as if to say *tell me if this isn’t okay.*

*It isn’t.* *Not now.*

“Not here.” (Not ever.)

“Then at the hotel.”

In some kindness, it waits until after dinner. Severus would like to wait longer, stretch it out long past the day, the night, the week, the year. Let us consider hunger. He is used to it. Wake up with stones in the belly and grey morning light. Wake up with aching knuckles and a mouth of cotton, the throb of rain in the right knee. *Let me stay right here.* The moment before joy, before the hourglass is turned, before the clock starts ticking. It is easier sometimes to toddle through quotidian dullness, through little miseries, fumbling toward joy. It is worse in the presence of happiness, one careful eye on the clock, waiting for the end.

“You said we need to talk.”

”There’s nothing to talk about.”

”You’re deliberately forcing me out, Severus.”

“What the hell do you think you’re on about, you wretched brat?” How dare you?
"You know what I’m trying to say. Do you have to be so goddamn difficult?"

"You will likely need to write me a bloody fucking thesis, Potter. Explain." Severus has never accepted anything at face value, always sick with questions, why would this be different? The boy is a question mark. Severus folds his arms tight across his chest, thinking of the Veritaserum sewn into the pocket of his luggage. Thinking of the Occlumency that the other man could not perform. Truth could be outed (the truth in his arms, the truth in his voice). There are many questions, we are always defined by our questions. Harry is defined by what, aching to know the details, the surroundings, context and landing. Severus is defined by why. He needs to know reasons, secrets, the little stories. Swallow them up, bitter as a pill. (Why does he not reach for the Veritaserum? Cast Legilimency? Afraid of that worst possible thing, that Potter speaks the truth.)

"I like you," the other man says, shrugging his shoulders artlessly. Impossible.

"Let me assure you, since you appear to be laboring under a delusion - the feeling is not mutual." I hate you. (Does he? Who hates the sun?) Severus Snape, sailor, old Ironclad. He has prayed always for west but has steered his ship in the opposite direction. It is hard now to slam the rudder, to alter course for the sun.

"Yeah?" The other man comes closer, bright-eyed and warm-breathed. The screw of the vice slowly dialing in. His world reduces to six desperate inches.

You’re still so young. Do you know how I want you? Do you have any fucking idea, Potter? It’s not right. It’s too much. It’s unfair. Like a hurricane loves the sea, trying to pull it into the air. Like mountains love the sky, trying to touch it with their stretched, rocky fingers.

Potter, let me tell you a story. Don’t interrupt me (I cannot stand it). I do not keep your picture, I will never be reduced to that. The newspapers publish it all the time, I do not have to search you out. I only take up a little of your life, a distant memory. A story to tell about an unpleasant old man. “Did you hear the one about my Potions professor?” You will always have a name with me (I think of you every night), eventually, I will just be that to you. An abstract shadow, story of a sorry monster. Once upon a time, there was an awful old teacher. That’s all.

Fuck, I love you. Exposed skin to the elements, right above a flame, plunged against ice. Raw and raw hearted. (He’d rather die. Give him a cliff to jump from, a sea to drown in, a car to crash. Leave me my little dignity.) His face sweating, mottled red and white, pale and foul as a skinned eel.

He shakes, bristling with anger, a thousand cyanide-painted barbs. Cornered by a man with blacknest hair and Saturn eyes.

His stomach growls.

“I don’t believe you,” Potter says. I will cut you, Harry, I will make you bleed. (Potter’s shrug, simple and easy, as if to say we all bleed sometimes.) Severus and his old ache, born to begging. He had cut his tongue from his mouth to stop the desperate words of please please please but his hands touch Harry against his will, careful at the arms, begging in their own way. Touch is a language, he has forgotten this time and time again. Severus begs. (He doesn’t know what he wants, he asks anyway, ruled by his own appetite.)

“What are you doing?” He asks, as Harry comes closer still, offering his heartbeat, head tilted up already, mouth ready to catch the rain. How does it go then finally? He has always ached, always wondered, but the first time is like nothing he has imagined. And he has imagined so many ways.

At once now, the fatal fall. Over the edge, beyond the event horizon. How does it go? Damnation.
Assumption. Breath like heat, air laying thick over a hot bath. Harry, the old forest fire licking up at the dead wood of his body. Harry, taking Severus’ frozen hands, laden with ice, and rubbing his broad, workrough thumbs over the bumps and divots like reading Braille, over and over again creating a memory. Harry, who pulls one hand up behind Severus’ skull, half-covering the nape, whispering *you know exactly what we are doing* (it has been happening for so long in not so many motions, in not so many words), and showing Severus how to light a match, how to start a wildfire.

Panting, arching back, needing to touch more, to plant his roots, to shoot vines across Harry’s perfect skin. Yes yes yes, finally. God be praised.

Harry is heat, he blows the sun into Severus’ mouth. The warmth of him curling, racing through Severus’ veins like a virus. He is faster with this, Severus is only a reaction but the earth moves eventually and moves longer. *Oh god, oh holy fuck.* Salt and spit, the knocking of teeth, hands gripping at the writhing creature, penetrating to the muscle, leaving little bruises, *yes yes yes I was here.* The woody scent of Harry’s soap, the cleanness of his cotton shirt, the sea-flavored salt of the skin at his temples. His mouth tries to eat it up, to swallow Harry whole, consume the textures of his skin, the weight of his bones. *Want want want, mine mine mine.* Harry’s back hits the plaster wall, his dark spidery lashes of closed eyes on pale skin. Severus moves back in, nosing at the cut of the square jaw, the damp sideburns, the gentle stubborn growth of Harry’s late-day stubble burning Severus’ mouth, his chin.

*You will ruin me.* (He is ruined already. There is a broken sound. A moan echoing against the wall. It is his, perhaps.)

And then, the northern lights over the Yorkshire forest. Like the ones he had seen in the Dark Skies National Parks, the illusion of fire laid against the ground. Green light towering over. A clutch of wild dark hair like wild dark branches. Abalone skin. Effortless beauty (studied care, open arms, empathy like a well). Harry and his easy smile; Harry and his extra bit of cloth, pressing at the raw parts of Severus, at the sharp ribs like razors, the hips like knives. Covering the wounds, regrowing the flesh, these certain magical acts.

“Turn the lights out,” Harry says. Should it be dark? Severus doesn’t know. His little heart, his clumsy hands. He shakes, Harry tight against him, whispering *it's alright.*

The King is coming, they say.

You’d better seal up your windows and your doors. Listen to your mother, listen to the wind in the trees. The groan of hunger in the branches, the dark caw of the birds (ready to pluck out your eyes, nip the skin off your bones). Careful of the crows, who had once been boys asking too many questions. Beware of his trees, who had once been girls that had stayed too long in the woods. Keep your wits about you, keep your eyes on the dark. Don’t let your feet touch the floor at night. Don’t look under the bed.
Chapter 9

“I will tell you something else, King, which may be a surprise for you. It will not happen for hundreds of years, but both of us are to come back.”

T.H. White, The Once and Future King

Paris

Once upon a time, I kissed you. Once upon a time, you kissed me back.

Harry has been kissed before, this one had been nothing among the rest. Severus and his rough skin, Severus and his sandpaper chin. He had tasted of ash, of quicklime. Bitter melon and radicchio. Battery acid. No, Harry has been kissed before, this one had been nothing among kisses. He tries to remember the names and faces of the men he has touched before. They fade together, into a mishmash of softness and dull brown hair. He cannot remember the smell at the juncture of neck and shoulder, cannot remember the exact moment on a stopped clock when their lines had finally crossed. (Severus had smelled of castor oil, of dittany, a ghost of bergamot. The time had been 11:34 p.m.)

He had always imagined that he, Harry Potter, and that sharp-edged Severus Snape were parallel lines, always running next to each other, striking for similar goals. No overlap, no intersection. He has been wrong all this time. (Harry has been kissed before, this is the only one that matters.) Come to bed, Harry had said. They had backed into the bed. Harry against the pillows, a wolf at his throat. One hand shoved up beneath his thin cotton shirt. The stillness slowly encroaching into Severus as his mind catches, as paralysis ascends, spreading like a toxin, like a botulism infection. Stop, stop overthinking this. Fingers stilling at his sides, hooked into his jeans.

“Is it because it’s me? (Worse yet, is it because of him? James Potter, like aconite in the well.)

“You should sleep,” Severus says, pushing back up from the bed, still leaning over Harry. The long hair against Harry’s face. He reaches up a hand to touch it. Coarse. Wiry. Irongray at the temple, beginning to thread through the rest. Harry thinks of the medieval tapestries at Hogwarts, lining the long corridors. Thinks of the fenced-in unicorn on her dark wool, threaded with bits of woven silver.

“I’m not tired.”

“Well, I am, so get on with it and think about someone other than yourself for once.”

“Fine, you take the first shift. I’ll stay up.”

“Potter.”

“Don’t you dare.” Harry lifts his jaw, still laying back against the pillows. Narrows his eyes. A battle in five seconds, two champions at the joust. Severus looks away, a concession. Harry then. The other man clicks his jaw back and forth silently, never a good loser (never a good winner). Talk about something else then. Yes, yes, Severus in the sea, asking for a bit of rope. A dry mystery, get in, get in, get in the boat. Harry casts at the question floating in his mind, “What do you think then? About Viviane’s letter. What did she mean by it must be done? What was done?”
The ridges smooth out a touch, Severus looking up at the ceiling, at his fingernails. “That is the core question now. Though, I fear we have more questions now than answers.” Paris, keeper of secrets and mysteries.

“What about the murdered Order Members? Who killed them?”

“The dead man, I imagine,” Severus murmurs. Dread memory, that Inferi.

“But to pluck out the eyes? That’s a strange thing to do.”

“It is also, Harry, one of the darkest curses, intended to silence a man even after death.” (Severus would know. Does know.)

“I’m getting pretty sick of dark wizards.”

Severus snorts.

“What do you think he was like? As a man, you know, a normal person?”

“I don’t know if normal is the right word for the Forest King. Do try a thesaurus.”

“You know what I mean, you prick,” Harry says, “He’s a Brit and he lived around the time of King Arthur. And he’s loopy for crows,” Harry frowns, leaning back, studying the ceiling. “I guess I usually forget that King Arthur was real too. He seems too much like a myth. You know King Arthur, Zeus, Hercules.”

“He’s very real. Or, rather, he was.”

“And will be again, if the stories are right.”

“Yes,” the voice agrees, “That’s the rumor.”

“Why is the Forest King so bad? Did he do something?”

“I don’t know,” Severus says, frowning, the parabola of his downturned mouth. Harry fumbles with the idea of the black-eyed king. Why is he dangerous?

“It’s just stories, right?” The words echo between them, inviting no answer. Just stories.

In the morning, Harry attempts to pull a brush through his hair. It goes about as well as expected, that is to say, it does absolutely nothing. The curls rollick, though he keeps them shorter now. The dark hair creeps on down his face in stretches of sideburns, clusters at his jaw. Like digging out a hole in the sand, the sand keeps piling in, the water keeps rushing in, Harry and his dark beard, growing back by morning. He shaves. Straight razor, bit of foam. Wash it down the sink. He bites his lip; finger through the little hole in his pocket. Cokeworth still on the backs of his eyelids, still in the dust in his ears. Severus, born to Cokeworth, born to stories.

Harry looks at himself, former boy hero, standing at the edge, not sure what to offer. What does he have? A tiny flat in Hogsmeade. Shopping lists still in the pockets of his windbreaker. Chickenscratch handwriting. Neglected children do not play favorites, so Harry cannot name a favorite color, tell a story of his favorite toy. He had played no games as a child (except with the
shadows; except with the spiders). Severus choking on his own hometown, Harry in the absence of one. Where are you from, Harry Potter?

The West Country, I am from the West, the West, the West. The west is where heroes are from, where they go back to. The Americans tell their adventurers to go west, young man. Tolkien had sent his ringbearers to the west. All things west. Harry Potter was born in the west. It is strange to have no claim to the place that birthed you, to the place where you first touched ground, where you first tasted the sky. He was born in Godric’s Hollow, nestled deep in Cornwall, deep in the West Country. He has only visited. Heavy with loss, with forgetting, with never having known. Everything had been unfamiliar when he had visited, it was sour in his mouth. He had picked a bit of Cornish heath there, Erica vagans, and pressed it in a book. That is all he has. He stays away now, deep in the north. Deep in the only place he has ever given that gentle word to. Home. Hogsmeade, which is not Godric’s Hollow (a place he does not remember). Hogsmeade, which is not Surrey (a place he unfortunately does).

I get it, he wants to say, though it is a different flavor of memory. Privet Drive was empty in its pretense. Things that were not his, that he was not allowed to touch. When he burns his eggs in the morning at his kitchen stove, his heart still races, he still looks over his shoulder in a hurry. Hurt children do not forget. They do not disappear at the threshold of adulthood. One year or twenty past, it all fades into scarring, into the past, the scaffolding we hang our lives upon.

Go on then, Harry, focus on the steps in front of you.

They spend the day in the stacks and shelves of the Bibliothèque nationale, searching for dead men, searching for records of Viviane and Merlin, for stories of unpleasant tasks. It is a fruitless and impossible search, all things seemed miserable back then. How does the sixth century go? The story of sub-Roman Britain. The story of the invasion, the Britons nervously watching their shores, the Angles and the Saxons on the move. In 549, a plague. Executions and illnesses, bloodletting and betrayals. His hair winds up more a mess than at the start of the day, as his hands work knots into it.

And then Severus, who has said nothing about the night. Nothing about the knock of them against a wall, upon the bed. Nothing in that superciliousness, the cool surface. Impenetrable ocean. Harry considers that it could have been a fever dream. Maybe I’m finally losing it. Then, hooded eyes, a flash of heat over a manuscript. Harry swallows and reconsiders. No, last night had been very real.

As they return to the hotel, a familiar prematurely pale-haired man is standing in a navy suit, studying the lobby's flower arrangements. Unfamiliar faces, familiar after even a few days. In these short weeks, years have passed. “Henri!” Harry says, “What are you doing here?”

“He’s the old professor!” Aglie grins, turning. A sharp spot in the blue suit against the cream walls. “Visiting a few friends. They own a printing house across the river. Just a little vanity press, nothing much. The Diotellevi Press,” Aglie says, smiling. Teeth like snow. “You might be interested in some of their stuff, I know they did a piece on the history of Glastonbury, a place Merlin was known to frequent.” He pauses, “Is the old professor about? Do you want to get dinner? A little spot of something? I know a wonderful cafe in the 19th.”

“The old professor is right here.”

“Professor Snape!” Aglie moves in to brush cheeks, clearly recalculating his move as Severus only
Crosses his arms, scowling. A gaze moves from Aglie to Harry and back again, like a wave at the shore.

“We can’t today, we’re meeting someone.” Harry spies Nico’s dark head in the distance. He waves her over. Her black boots on hardwood, her brisk walk.

“This is Henri Aglie, he’s the Comte de Saint-Germain,” Harry says, “Henri, this is Nico Lobineau, she’s a librarian we met in Caen.”

“Pleasure,” Nico says, offering no hand, no pleasure in her mouth. She doesn’t remove the sunglasses. Picks a cigarette pack from her pocket, taps one out. Aglie lets the smile beat on, blissfully unaware of Nico’s displeasure.

“Caen, you say? A librarian? Are you connected with the university?”

“I am.”

“Wonderful work,” Aglie continues, “I’ve used their archives many times myself. There was a very fine librarian there not long ago, though it’s been too long. A Monsieur Beaufort, I believe. Incredible mind on that one.”

Nico nods, slow as syrup. “Yes,” she says, pausing, “He was well-loved.”

Aglie claps his hands, smiling again, “Well! Don’t let me keep you with my stories. I will find you later, Harry.”

Watching Aglie take his leave, Harry opens his mouth. Nico raises a warning finger. Severus says nothing, the old spy with his shuttered face. Long after some moments pass and Aglie is well-vanished, Nico turns. “This is bad,” she says, staring at them. “You must get out of here as soon as you can. But wait a day, be careful to not rouse suspicion.”

“What?” Harry says, even Severus, the skeptic, blinks surprise.

“You did not tell me about him. The Comte de Saint-Germain.”

“Have you met the Count?” Harry asks. He thinks of wizards and their Unforgivables. Secret police forces and their thumbscrews. Something has turned sideways. The Comte and his grin looms suddenly suspicious in Harry’s memory.


“Er, so…”

“But I have seen him. In books and paintings. And articles.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Comte de Saint-Germain lived in the 1700s. And your friend Aglie looks exactly like the paintings.”

“He could be a descendant,” Severus frowns.

“I meant what I said. Exactly like the paintings. The Comte was never known to have children and has appeared over and over again. It is either a very good con or something worse. The librarian he mentioned, Beaufort? Died in the late 1800s.”
“But how? Even Voldemort couldn’t -”

“There are different rules with different magic,” she says. “The witches and wizards in our Order have been researching it for centuries, trying to understand. The Forest King’s magic comes from somewhere else. The Comte is connected. He has resurfaced in our history, over and over again, always at times of the Forest King’s activity. He’s used plenty of names but this one is his favorite. He’s used the Marquis de Montferrat, Count Weldon, Graf Tzarogy. Voltaire once asked him how old he was and he claimed five hundred years, even all that time ago.”

“Is there anything true?”

She shrugs, “That is a good question. My guess is even he doesn’t know anymore. He claimed to be the son of a long ago Prince of Transylvania, Francis II Rákóczi. He is remarkable at worming his slimy way into the good graces of all the big names - even Madame du Pompadour was fond of him.

Harry frowns, “Fuck.”

“Your eloquence, Mr. Potter,” Severus and his black voice, “Never fails.”

“What do we do?”

Nico purses her mouth, the brows drawing together. “You get ahead of him. And you get the hell out of here.”

“In the letter from Viviane,” Severus ventures, “She said something had to be done. We can follow that trail.”

Nico shakes her glossy hair, “I haven’t figured it out. She mentioned Meleagant and Agravain in it, who were both known knights of Arthur’s Round Table. I should say they were once knights of Arthur,” her face dark. “They later were cast out for kidnapping Guinevere.”

“I think,” Severus drawls, “That it would be rather expedient if you told us what is true and what is legend.”

“Let’s find a cup of coffee at least. I’ll tell you what you need.”

Nico pours a cup from the press. Smell of richness like soil, earthen darkness, deep roast. “You know the story then,” she begins, “Of King Arthur and his knights. Arthur was born in Cornwall, in Tintagel Castle, to King Uther Pendragon and Igraine. The general story, though there are many, goes that Arthur became king and ruled Britain wisely and peacefully for years with his wife, Guinevere, and his knights, other small petty kings and lords. His most trusted advisor and friend was Merlin, a bard and wizard who was, in every way, already ancient by the time Arthur came about.”

Harry nods. Yes, these familiar stories. The building blocks of Britain.

“Of course, it ends in tragedy. Guinevere and Lancelot and their affair, yes, but mainly the betrayal of Mordred, the younger brother of Gawain and half-brother to Agravain. Agravain, you remember from the letter. The story goes that Mordred was a promising knight of the Round Table who, at the Battle of Camlann, wanted to gain the throne and struck Arthur himself, causing the fatal wound.
Arthur was then brought to Avalon by four witches, and the old story goes that he’ll come back again one day.”

“So what’s the real story?” Harry asks. Severus looks at him. A gleam in night-colored eyes, something approaching approval.

“This is where it gets tricky,” Nico says, pausing. “All of that is largely true, the lies are by mostly by omission.” A stir of the spoon in black espresso. A bird song past the window. “The real key is Mordred. That is one Edward Mordred, called the Black.”

“Wait,” Harry says, mind connecting, a patchwork quilt of facts. Severus, the academic, gets there first.

“The Forest King.”


A motion at the table, a jostle of the coffee. Spill on the cloth.

Sometimes everything happens at once. The man walking past the table, pale-faced and drawn. A familiar face, unmoving. No spirit, no life. The skin dry, tight against the skull, causing the dull eyes to appear larger, the slack mouth to seem redder in the white, bloodless cheeks. The dead man in the library, the Inferi. Harry lurches as the ghoul does, throwing his body out. The grisly hand, more skeletal, more evil in the knowledge than no life animates it. The grisly hand and its’ deadly dagger, flashing in the light. A jab into black clothing, a sharp cry. Severus and his wand, clutching with a hand at the wound, casting a silent Incendio.

The fire bursts, the Inferi is gone. No body to rustle, no corpse to loot. Severus dripping his pomegranate blood, the red sap of the ironbark eucalyptus. His hand pressing against the wound. Droplets like constellations on the ground.

“This is getting dangerous, Severus,” Harry walks slowly across the bridge back to the hotel from the cafe, the long Pont Alexandre. Severus had been careful with his Memory Charms, careful with the Muggles in their cafe. Less careful with himself.

“It was already dangerous, you dolt.”

“How’s it feeling?” Harry points at the bandaged side, ”The wound?”

“It’s fine,” Severus says. The knife had got him in the side. The commotion had distracted the Inferi, the wound was not too deep, though deeper than spells can manage. Severus had cast a small spell in the meantime, keeping the blood staunched, keeping the wound clean. There are potions back at the hotel, back in his leather bag. Harry knows it will be fine, magic is always, well, magic, but worry still creeps and lays steadily in his mind. Are you in too much pain? Should we rest for a moment? “What, pray tell, do you have in mind as we head to our own unmitigated disasters?”

“Look, the Comte is the best guess we’ve got. He’s the closest connection to the Forest King. So, I
figure that we go find out what happened with him, how he got wrapped up in this.”

“What? Just call the prat up and ask him?”

“Of course not,” Harry says, rolling his eyes, “He’ll never be honest with us if any of it’s true.”

Severus arches a brow.

“We go to Romania.” Yes, Romania. All arrows point to Romania. He has never been to the strangeness of that place, shadowed still by the drawn Iron Curtain, the long arm of the once-Soviets. He knows nothing beyond stories, repeated legends like a game of telephone tumbling into Britain. The one about the vampire in the sarcophagus, filled up with dirt. A count, again a count, with a sharp set of tails. Old Dracula, that haunt. Transylvania, home to forests, home to mountains. Only these incomplete images, repeated over and over again in stories and in television, none of them told by the people themselves. The closest he’s gotten is Charlie Weasley, dragon-whisperer. Charlie, who has a place somewhere not far from Bucharest, who brings back bags of candies and handpainted Easter eggs to the Burrow. Bottles of wine. Icons of saints, icons of the Son of God. Harry still has a few items. A bottle of acacia honey. A jar of walnut jam.

The white face, pallid. “We cannot.”

“Why?” Harry asks, “Look, it makes sense. Aglie is from Transylvania. Romania is called the land of dragons. And dragons, if you don’t remember, are what got us wrapped up in this whole mess.” He thinks of his letter, in his pocket. He thinks of the image he took from Aglie’s library, still in his jacket. Still unmentioned. Why hasn’t he said anything? He isn’t sure. “Just cause you’re afraid of a couple of vampires or whatever.”

“I am not afraid, you ignorant piece of twine,” Severus hisses, pressing his hand against his chest like a man with heartburn. Wide eyes, his voice a dry twig.

“Well, that’s a new one for you. Did you know that I have a list of the things you’ve called me?” Harry pauses, raising an eyebrow and smiling, “Well, the really good ones at least.”

“Do shut up, Potter.” Severus says, hesitating over a bridge named for a Russian tsar. Harry rolls his eyes, squares his jaw, leans back against the balustrade. He can hear the river below, the sounds of boats in the distance.

“Your tongue was in my mouth last night, don’t you think you can manage *Harry*?” Silence. “Look,” Harry continues, “If you can think of a better option, then we’ll do that. Otherwise, we’re going to Romania, alright? I can get us a train.”

A long pause. “No need.”

“What?”

“I’ll make a Portkey.”

“Wait, you’ve been?”

“Yes,” a grim mouth. “I’ve been.”

They stand for a moment, Harry looks out over the dark water of the river. The streetlamps lighting in the dusk. Muggle magic, old electricity. He sees the city truly for the first time, white stone and gilded statues, the sound of water, the sound of boats and their masters, people and their city lives. The apartment buildings rising over shops and cafes, their lights coming on behind sheer curtains.
Millions of lives, millions of worlds built within these roughly one-hundred square kilometers, nestled gently next to one another, layers upon layers. All cities are living. Paris and her cellular structure. Paris and her backbone of the Seine. Paris and her bloodstream of streets and avenues.

I want to come back here. Consider everything they are missing, busy with thoughts of lost wizards and a hunting crow. Dead men walking. No, come back to the museums, the Rodin and the Louvre. Come back for the parks, the cathedrals, the ice cream sellers at the parks. Flowers. Iron fences. Give your bit of money to the paper cups, to outstretched hands as you borrow their streets. The graffiti, the ripple of unrest, all cities are monuments to their people. Come back, come back, come back. Wanderlust, it gets us all in the end.

“I should not have let last night happen,” Severus in the quiet, speaking to no one in particular.

“Too late,” Harry says. Severus shifts away, Harry like a stranger at the gate. Touch the long hand, up the long sleeves, up the monastic bleakness, don’t you dare leave me standing here. The hooded dark eyes, those gunpowder plot eyes, let me set you on fire. Harry and his heart, with too too too much to give, had pressed his mouth to the other last night, spilled over into the empty man.

“Stop it,” he says, says, says again, (has been saying all along).

“Stop what?” In the midst of terror and nerves, a hint of mirth. You and that dark laughter. One hand on the chest. They have kissed, mouth against hungry mouth, saying I need you I need this, I need something and I think it might be you.

(Have you ever fallen? Do you know the joy of the wind in your face? The air rushing too quickly to breathe? We do not know how to fly, we are no masters of air. Ruled by the gravity of earth, we are always creatures of earth, we know the art of falling.) Here again, standing in a bridge, standing in the middle of a river, water beneath, sky below. We shouldn’t. It comes again, this time in Severus’ broken glass voice, “We shouldn’t.”

“Why?” A breath, a question, birds on the wind. They stand close together, Severus’ dark-covered arms coming up around Harry like the wing of a raven, Harry’s own around the other form.

“You’re you. That’s enough reason. And I’m .”

“I like you,” Harry says, as if that is reason enough. (Isn’t it?) The irises shake slightly, gripped in focus, the scholar’s study of Harry’s face. A war, the battle of the ironclads. Severus and his want, Severus and his monk’s habit. Something gives in the slight slack of the mouth, the little swallow of air. A soldier’s swallow against the view of the assembled enemy. Don’t fire until you’ve seen the whites of their eyes. Harry is no enemy. (Perhaps that is the danger. A man standing in front of you, no weapons raised, saying I am on your side. ) The slow blink, coal-dark hair like gloom-painted branches, like a forest canopy, brushing against the razor cheekbones. The moment of a diver standing at the shore, considering the depth of the ocean. (Severus, complicated and difficult as a gunner’s knot. The sharpness of decision; the hesitation of a man who has made decisions before, ones that could not be undone.)

Once upon a time, Harry had been kissed before, he has pushed Severus up against wallpaper, mucked up his jacket, sealed his mouth upon the other’s. That is nothing. Once upon a time, Severus leans into Harry, his eyes lined and his fingers white in Harry’s jacket. Pulls Harry tight against him, this old ache. They do not breathe, there is no breath under the sea. They will surface later, instead now Harry’s wide hands range over the angles of the other. Severus is concave where Harry is convex, skinny in Harry’s sturdiness. The sharp hurt of his mouth in tasting the man. Do you know what it is like to put something too salty, too bitter, too much in your mouth? The ache of wonder, of discovery. Want and pain. Joy. Surrender. I want you.
Let us consider this little war. Dark forms, dark fabric, dark hair (bright eyes) against a sky like a bruise, a sky like a mottled plum. The white of the Beaux-Arts bridge, the little angels and the nymphs, a pegasus or two, hovering at the edges, cast in iron and marble. The sun at the daily end, moving below the earth, below to the underworld. The first station of twilight, that perfect blue of the civil hour, the gas lamplights yellow against the sky. The French call it *l’heure bleue*. It is the hour of painters and artists. Crepuscular. It is an hour for new things to wake up and to stir. Cats and mice, owls and crows. Come out, come out, wherever you are.

Severus hesitates in the room, finding the potion in his bag by feel. Dark, they have turned no light on. A question in the flare of the nostrils, the set of the mouth. Questions about vertebra, about fingers, about lungs. *I want to discover you.* They, neither of them, want to break the surface tension of the water, crack the top of the creme brulee, profane the first snow.

Harry’s blood is a song, a rush of water. He is hyperaware of measurements. He measures the distance between them, Severus in the woodbacked chair, Harry on the bed. He settles. Resettles. Settles again. *Act natural, Harry.* (Can he? What is *natural*? He questions everything that he has never considered before. The hold of his head, the position of his hands, the rate of his breath.)

Severus pulls his shirt back slightly. Fishbone skin exposed to the air. In the dark, Harry can see gradations of only lightness and darkness. The wound a stain, a black hole, against vellum skin. Already, little magics run through Severus’ body, passing through the stomach to the bloodstream, racing through veins and capillaries, carrying gold and carrying silver, knitting up the gap that should not be. *Check it all,* Harry thinks. Check the little bones in the ears (*malleus, incus, stapes*), check the orbital nerve, check the lymph nodes. Make sure it’s all accounted for, all correct.

Harry reaches for the hand at the shirt, his own gentling over the blackhaired knuckles, “Glad you’re alright.”

Severus catches his gaze. Harry must reconsider heat. He has always known heat as brightness, fire, the impossible sun, stars in the far-flung sky. Expand your considerations, Harry. The innermost core of the earth is black, the innermost core reaches six-thousand degrees, can melt iron and bone, steel and hair. Severus, Severus is earth. Harry is fire. How did Sappho say it again? Yes, yes, yes, *you burn me.*

“I want you,” Harry whispers. A smirk like a stain. An accusation in the bed. *Do you now? Prove it, Potter.* Severus’ hands are gentler, knocking at his breastbone, at his hips, asking entry. Harry nudges the jacket from the skinny shoulders, the shirt from the narrow back. His own removed in turn, marveling at the strange sameness, queer differences of their bodies. *You are like me and unlike me.* All mountains and valleys share the same basic structure but the detail-work is different. Harry studies details. The hair on the chest, coin-sized nipples, a scar on the throat. Severus chokes on breath as Harry whispers charms into the dark places of him, the little caves and divots. A charm for protection, a charm for luck. A gasp, little inhalations everywhere.

With each new lover, we drag the old ones out from our closets, string them up for inspection. Better here and worse there. Consider their little offenses, their moments. *No,* we say soothingly to the new bodies in our beds, *no, you are better than they ever were.* Sometimes, it is true. Sometimes, it is not. Harry thinks of the men who have called. It is different now. He has been content before, has been wrapped up in their electric blankets and their fuzzy sweaters, comforted in the absence of piercing. Fumbling at passion, a lack of flint and tinder, nothing to catch. It doesn’t hurt, it feels good to be
blanketed. But why cook on an electric stove when every chef will tell you to use gas? Our hearts prefer fire, our skin prefers to be bare.

Severus beneath Harry, drowning in the open air. Harry knows the physical. Knows the edges of his body, how to move his fingers, his thighs, the press of his hips (the rock backward). He presses into the other man, a long grind, steel against steel. Abandon control. Give it up. Severus and his expression, the furrow of his brow, the tightly-closed eyes, parted mouth. Pain and pleasure intimately close, looking the same on our faces. A long-fingered hand snakes down between their bodies, captures them in prayer, pulling, pulling, pulling them both from their clothing.

Then skin, then rapture.

*I am touching you, oh my fucking god, you, holy shit. This shouldn’t be a thing, I shouldn’t be allowed. I want you so much. Why you? Why me? You’re perfect, you absolute fucking bastard, you absolutely ridiculous, beautiful, brilliant fucking asshole. I’m glad it’s you. It was always you. I didn’t know. Do that again, please, that thing with your tongue on my throat. Your fingers on my cock. You’re terrified, aren’t you? (So am I, so am I.) I didn’t know I could do this to you.*

A cry into the night, a moan into a pillow. Hands and mouths and spit and ache. Harry and the dark-soiled earth, carrying the sun, bearing forth the light. What did Eliot say? (Old, mad poet) *In this last of meeting places, we grope together, and avoid speech, gathered on this beach of this tumid river.*
Chapter 10

“Do what he will, he [the profane man] is an inheritor. He cannot utterly abolish his past, since he himself is a product of his past. He forms himself by a series of denials and refusals, but he continues to be haunted by the realities that he has refused and denied.”

— Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane

(Spanish son; Spanish thinker.)

Snagov, Romania

He had meant to come back. It is the bitterest pill to swallow your own words, to turn back to somewhere you had left for good. Harry blinks, looking at the buildings, the alley to the main road, the clear and bright sky. “Where are we?”

“Romania, obviously, you simpleton.”

“I know that,” Harry rolls his eyes. “But where exactly?”

“Snagov.”

“Why here?”

Severus says nothing. He is good at saying nothing. He does not say this is what I know, my great-aunt’s house is two streets over, I used to pick coins out of this fountain as a child. He studies Harry’s face for reactions, he is used to hearing what everyone else thinks of the place. If Harry says it seems downtrodden, if he says the food smells funny, if he dares to say the word Dracula, Severus will hex him in his boots. Harry doesn’t say anything. He lets his eyes wander over the streets and buildings with the same wonder that Severus had once seen in an eleven-year-old boy, looking up with wide and curious eyes at a castle ceiling.

Let us pull back and study the lay of the land. They have come to Snagov, a commune in Romania, a quick drive from Bucharest. We do not know where the name Snagov comes from, but perhaps we can look to the neighboring Bulgarians and their words sneg, for snow, or snaga, for body. Either of them suit Severus fine. He does not care which it might be. Romania, land of his mother, this crossroads of east and west like all Balkan states. Though perched on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, it perhaps feels this the most intensely. There is a gap between stories. The stories of the far-flung, who hear of shadows and of strigoi, folkloric vampires, of nightmares in forests, castles with long-dead counts. Then there is the bare truth of within, of love and heartache, of hundred-year-old bread recipes, of songs about love. The barest truth of all is that the Black Sea is not black at all but sundrenched.

He had not meant to come back, no. It has been thirty years.

He had set his Portkey for the same place his mother had always set hers. She had liked to land in an alley off of the center of the town, unnoticed and quiet. It is a few streets away from their family’s
homes, had given Eileen Snape (called Elena by her own mother) enough time to brush the dirt off and fix her hair. He is here again, always dredging up the awful past. His boots on the road in the center of town. He can make out the white domed cupola of the old church, the Biserica Snagov, from a distance. His mother had taken him there once or twice as a child. (When his father had not come along, when he had stayed back, back in Cokeworth with pints on the mind and fish on the brain.) Severus had sat in her lap, the baby powder smell of her chest close behind him, her arms over him, had listened to the priest and his prayers. Watched the rhythm of the women in their embroidered blouses, giving thanks to Mary, Mother of Sadness, Weeper of Tears. After, long after the conclusion of the service, they had gone back to the house, to the smell of tomato, the smell of garlic.

His mother had always said that their family had lived here for hundreds, perhaps for thousands, of years. Here, in the shadow of the mountains. Here, in the clutch of forests. Here, in the pale of water. He doesn’t know how to map their story back, back, back to the beginning. He doesn’t want to know. His grandmother had spoken of once being part of a great and noble blood. Severus had sneered at that. Not Severus, no, fineness doesn’t suit him. Leave him to the gutters, no one looks for anyone there.

They walk through. The village is like most villages of the former Eastern Bloc. As you walk, the village houses come first, the far-flung old neighborhoods at the outskirts of towns. As you draw closer, on comes the march of progress, the white and bright high-rise apartment buildings. Stark and severe structures from a distance, strangely softened by gardens and clotheslines up close. The old, Western-feared Communist progress. It is easy to paint it without heart. The monolith of the East, a singular focus, inattentive to their own needs, to their own crushed people. How crushed are these people, his own blood, perhaps distant cousins? They carry their sacks of groceries in the buildings, the sun shines on a street where boys play ball. Look at the careful gardens and planted flowers around the base of the complexes, these are no heartless homes. They are like him, their heads up high, the sun bright. He knows this rhythm.

“Where are we going?” Harry asks, his strides shorter than Severus, trying to keep the pace.

“To see someone.”

“Who?”

“My aunt.”

Harry pauses, surprise in the lines of his face, his open mouth (Severus considers that mouth). “You have family here?” Harry and his scrambling to fit the new puzzle piece in, add up the sum that is Severus.

“Yes,” Severus grits, “Is that such a terrible surprise?”

“I just didn’t expect -” Harry fumbles, “Just that I thought you were from Cokeworth.”

“I am from Cokeworth,” he spits the foul name of the place. “My mother’s family is not.” Harry nods, shoving his hands in his pockets, hurrying to keep up. “Just do try to not tell a five-hundred-year-old spy where we are, like you did in Paris.”

“I’m sorry, how was I supposed to know?”

“You need to pay attention, Potter. That is the only way we’ll stay alive.”

“I am paying attention. And it’s Harry,” Harry sighs, offering the gentle correction, pushing his hair
back from his forehead with impatient fingers. “So is this just a social visit?”

“My aunt knows a great deal of folklore,” Severus says. “I am beginning to suspect that the disappearance of Merlin is not of his own volition. Consider the facts. Something was moved. Something *obviously* important, something that men would kill for. That same night, all known magic vanished. We are being watched and, now, attacked by miserable abomination. And Aglie, that confounded wretch, is our only connection to the Forest King, who is almost *certainly* behind the absence of Merlin. He likely has the item as well. Whatever the blasted thing is.”

“Yeah.”

“Indeed. Thank you for your erudite response. We will need to find out more about Aglie and to learn whatever we can about Mordred. Who is Aglie? How did they get involved? However the two damned creatures got wrapped up, we can follow that same path.”

“He’s from here then?”

“Further south. Transylvania, from what Nico said.”

“Where is this?”

“Wallachia.”

Harry nods, his eyes staring off into the distance. “I guess that doesn’t mean much to me. I’m sure Hermione will tell me all about it when I call her again though.” Severus grits his teeth. Harry and his phone calls, Harry and his letters. The injured Wizarding World limps along, reaching out to their favorite son. (No one reaches for Severus.)

He should hate the man. It would be easier. He is used to taking hate with his envy, like one might take milk in tea. Severus feels for the whisper of the wound at his side. Gutted like a fish, the steel of a dead man’s knife. Healed now, thanks to a potion. It could have been worse (it should have been worse). *Harry*. Harry and his quick hand; Harry and his sharp eye. It had been obvious in the perfect fluidity of motion, the boy’s skill at defense, the reflex positioning. Harry might have no magic but he still had not flinched. *You’re so much more than anyone gives you credit.* This is a man who is an Auror not purely for his magical power (though Severus has felt that, he misses the gap where it is in Harry’s body). This man and his keenly honed reactions, his readiness with a deflection. Yes, this is the Auror that Harry has become. Severus understands now why Harry is respected. It is not only his name, no. It is not merely *the boy who lived*. It hasn’t been for years. They have seen him in action, they know that he shrugs at a compliment and blushes at praise. Where is he at home? Harry Potter, who have you become? Severus has never dared to learn until now. In the moment, in the split of a second, with his hands moving and his feet rushing, wand at the ready. Harry Potter was born to adrenaline.

Severus sees it now. Sees the stubble of the black beard, the square jaw, the firm neck. Had seen so much the night before. Harry, laid out on the bedsheets beneath him, writhing at a simple touch. The broad chest, the softness of the stomach, the steel of wiry muscle. Hands pulling at Severus, shifting to roll on top of him. *Why would you stain yourself with me? You could have so much more.* (He doesn’t know, he cannot understand. He will not ask.)

At the end of the road, Severus knocks on the door of a small stucco house. A cottage, really. Out of
the corner of his eye, he can watch Harry straightening up, brushing the dirt from his jeans, fixing his collar. Harry, who has never met a living relative of Severus’, who does not know what to expect on the other side of the heavy wooden door. The path is well-swept, the cottage recently painted. The sun glints off of the red-tiled roof, off the flowers in the garden. Late-blooming dog rose. The trees and their yellow, their red leaves. Autumn comes early in the shadow of the Carpathians, the trees have already turned, the air is already crisp. Winter is a promise.

The door opens, Severus falls back in time by thirty years. “Severus,” the woman says, reaching her hands out to him. Harry and his question mark eyes. Severus pulls out his wand and quietly casts a translation charm, morphing the words from English to Romanian and back again.

“Irina.”

“You never visit,” she says in gentle admonishment. “Who is this?”

“Harry Potter, ma’am,” Harry and his outstretched hand, Harry and his easy smile.

“A ...colleague,” Severus finally offers. Irina takes Harry’s hand with both of her own. Her warm smile, the same dark eyes. Severus can watch Harry melt into her smile, her embrace.

“Welcome.”

“Irina, my aunt,” Severus finally offers, “My grandmother’s sister.” He had known that Harry would like Aunt Irina. Who didn’t like Irina best? Her strong grip, the sun in her face. Her white hair pulled firmly back into a confident knot at the nape of her neck. There are still hints of the dark it once was. She brings them into the cottage, her movements quick and sure, the confidence of knowledge. The coffee goes on. She settles them at the little wooden table. Severus looks around, swallowing the changes in the past decades. Little things only. A new rug at the hearth, different photographs. It is a single room, clean and simply made. A handwoven blanket. Candles, a pile of papers and books. Her wire eyeglasses atop the book, the glass of water at the bedside. They had always been the academically-inclined, Severus and his great-aunt. She had read him poetry as a child. Strange poetry, old prides and old haunts. He thinks then of Mihai Eminescu, one of the greatest of Romanian poets, of his old ballad The Third Letter.

You must come, O dread Impaler, confound them to your care.

Split them in two partitions, here the fools, the rascals there;

Shove them into two enclosures from the broad daylight enisle ’em,

Then set fire to the prison and the lunatic asylum.

“What does Irina do?” Harry asks as Irina busies herself at the stove. She brings down a selection of colorful, chipped mugs. The smell of the coffee, Fort brand, roasted fresh there since 1936, is a strange callback to Severus’ childhood. He knows it will be strong.

He frowns, “She works at the church. Administrative stuff, I believe. Filing.”

“Is your family religious?”

“Yes.” How do you explain that there is no option to not be, that here, in his world, God and the
devil flow through your veins like oxygen? Atheism has never been an option for Severus, born to the prayers of his mother, who had wanted to be a nun. Irina brings the mugs and the coffeepot to the table. A plate of rolls. She asks him little questions, he shrugs them off awkwardly, betrayed in front of Harry’s curious eyes and curious ears.

“You told me stories about the Forest King once,” Severus says, “when I was a child.”

“Yes, the Forest King,” Irina says, “He is a story we tell here.”

“How does it go? I need to remember.”

She closes her eyes, resting her hands on the coffee cup. The steam rises in curls. “Once upon a time, there was a young boy born with too much in him. His eyes were too big, his stomach was too big, he wanted too much. He was alone, an orphan. He had magic in him and hid in the woods. The faeries found him and took him in. They became his family, gave him a cape of feathers and a throne of brambles. He lives in the faery world now but the crows are his eyes and the wolves are his teeth. He keeps watch over his own, you know, orphans and the brokenhearted.”

“I thought he betrayed King Arthur,” Harry murmurs.

“That might be the way it is told elsewhere. This is our story,” Irina says, smiling, “The Forest King is a story of sadness.” Yes, Severus knows, the Romanians and sadness. Severus knows that they are the keepers of sadness. It is often said that it is in the marrow of their bones. (In the marrow of his own bones, in the plasma of his blood.) “He is the keeper of lost things. He protects them. We warn children to not get lost in the woods, he might keep them there, thinking they are his own.”

Severus shivers, thinking of the Forest King. Of Edward Mordred. Edward the Black. Mordred. The traitor of Britain. Yes, retreat to your faery worlds. Retreat to the shadows. Even Dante had thrown him into the very deepest circle of Hell. To wonder about Mordred, dark-haired kingkiller, is to wonder about Arthur. To call a man a murderer is to admit that the dead one was real, that he had actually once lived. It is impossible to sift through history and legend and pull out the truth. Arthur, who were you? Your blond hair, your straw beard. Your castle at Camelot. Did you know that Mordred had kept a knife behind his back, ready for you to stumble? At Camlann, did you call to him for help, watching the Anglo-Saxon enemies approach from the shore? (Severus has been double-sided, has been two-faced. He knows the look of a man’s face when he sees that he is betrayed.)

“Do you think Merlin’s in the faery world?” Harry asks, his lichen eyes looking up at Severus, “Is that why no one has seen him? Do you think Mordred has him trapped?”

“It is not improbable,” Severus feels a sick dread in him, in the back of his throat, behind his eyes. Dread thinking of a man who can manipulate worlds, trap Merlin in a veil. Why had Severus been left his magic? Nothing makes sense. He feels the trails of his strangeness in the tips of his fingers. The golden haunt of power, of magic. Harry across from him, absent from his own self. It is a horrible wrongness, this world without the hint of Harry’s magic woven in at the edges. “The letter from Brother Magnus said that the moved item was very large and required several men to move it. There is a legend that Merlin himself stole magic from the gods.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“It’s only if you assume that Taliesin and Merlin are the same,” Severus acknowledges, studying the grain of the table, “Although I am beginning to suspect as much.”

“How did he steal magic?”
“It was kept in Ceridwen’s cauldron.” Harry nods. They stare into the corner of the room, wondering if the moved item was distinctly cauldron-shaped.

“How do you like the village?” Irina asks, stirring her coffee.

“It’s very beautiful,” Harry says, “I’ve never been here before.”

“You should show him around, Severus. The lake, maybe. The castle. Your great-grandfather had worked in the quarry there.”

“Castle?” Harry had perked to it. That damnable ever-curious creature. Severus remembers being a boy near the castle. Empty, stagnant place. He had thrown rocks from the cliff to the river below.

“It is empty. No one lives there. Nothing to see.”

“What kind of castle?” Harry presses on, entirely ignoring Severus’ rejection.

“Poenari,” Severus says quietly, remembering steep cliffs covered in majestic, dark green trees. (The color of your eyes.) Black locust and grey alder, silver fir and Scots pine. A castle with a bloody history, a castle of desperate lovers torn apart. Heartache and sadness. Poenari cannot be separated from Vlad Tepes and his first wife, Jusztina Szilagyi, who had thrown herself into the Arges River from the cliffside castle during a siege. That she would rather rot and be fish food than be captive. Poenari belongs to the brokenhearted.

“It was Vlad’s fortress,” Irina says. She does not need to explain Vlad further. No, the memory of the dread Impaler nestles at the base of every Romanian son’s skull. He is born to it, like all Englishmen are born to the memory of King Arthur. We call back to our national heroes, imploring them to return, to bring us back to the glory they once bestowed.

“Dracula,” Harry says, wide-eyed. He, at least, must have been awake in a few history courses.

“Yes,” Severus says, scowling, “His castle is not far from here. A few hours.”

“I thought he was Transylvanian.”

“Stoker is an idiot. He was Wallachian.” Severus looks over his steepled fingers. He is not allowed much pride in himself, in his history, so he clings to the stories he does have. His ruthless and ancient leader, who had kept the invaders from their homes. Wallachia does not forget. “The tales are not entirely different, Romania and Britain. Some of our stories beg him to return, that he sleeps like King Arthur does, and that his return will bring glory.”

Irina smiles, holding Harry’s hand within her own lined and sun-spotted one, rubbing her thumb over the tendons of his palm.

“I would love to see it,” Harry says, his eyes bright on Severus’ frowning profile. Irina and her secret smile, looking back and forth. He lurches at the thought of her later questions, her hopeful ways.
The sun has gone past the treeline at the edge of the village. They walk to the inn at the center of town. Severus books two rooms in his rusty Romanian, though he knows one will go unused. He shifts slightly at the thought, remembering bareness, keenly aware of the warm body standing next to him (remembering a face crying out in pleasure). He heats quickly beneath the dark jacket (he has never been good at control).

It begins to rain outside. The smell of rain on grass, on leaves, on the road. Petrichor. When it rains in Romania, it reminds him of his mother. The Argeș River, which had swallowed up brokenhearted Jusztina. Things seem greener here. The wide, fertile fields. The open flowers. There are words that his mother would use that do not translate. Acasă was a word she used often. To be home and to belong. Severus has never had both. His home, his meager address, has never been a place of belonging. It is strange to wonder where your puzzle piece should go, he has often wondered if it is here.

“What is that sound?” Harry asks. Severus listens over the passing cars on the nearby road outside. The pale of a drawn-out song over the tires, over the sound of early autumn rain. It is a woman’s voice.

“Doina.” Harry looks confused. Severus relents. “A type of song. Here, in the villages, they are usually sung alone in times of sadness.” To ease the sadness, yes, but there is so much more. You sing doina when your heart is too full, you sing when you long for something, for someone. You sing when you fall in and out of love with nature, with the forests and the lakes of Wallachia and Transylvania. He does not believe that anyone can look at Lake Snagov, with her white monastery rising from the island in the center of glacier blue water, and not sing.

Harry closes his eyes, listening to the song coming across the grass, beyond fences and buildings. Severus swallows, watching. Yes, this is how I am ruined. It was so much easier when I hated you. They walk further along the gravel path. Severus and his dark leather boots, scowling at trees, at squirrels, kicking at rocks and tufts of grass. It is still early in the evening, Harry had suggested seeing the monastery. The lake. (Severus can refuse him nothing.) “I wish I had this,” Harry says, spreading his hands wide, as if to encompass the world.

“*What* are you talking about?”

“All this history.”

“You do not want it.” (No, no, you do not need this weight.)

“*Severus,*” Harry says. The ache in his voice makes Severus stop on the road, turn to the twist of the mouth, the evergreen eyes. “I have nothing. I don’t know anything.”

He nods. Brief, short. *Not now.* Sometimes he envies Harry, the absence of knowledge. He knows better than to want, he knows the grass is greener on the other side. He knows these pitfalls and traps yet he wants all the same. He is a base, miserable man.

“This place,” Harry says, looking up, “It isn’t what I expected.”

“And what, pray tell, did you expect?” (*Do not say hauntings, do not say monsters, you do not know monsters.*)

“I don’t know,” Harry is quiet, a note of reverence in the rich voice, “I didn’t expect it to be so beautiful.”

Severus swallows, silent. He doesn’t dare speak. He will ruin things if he speaks. His anger balanced
on a razor's edge. No, they continue on. He keeps his long hands in his pockets, fingerling the lint. The little gravel road comes to a fork, fading off into woods in either direction. There is no longer the sound of traffic, of ancient cars that look, to his British eyes, like they should be in museums.

“Which way should we go?” Harry asks.

Severus frowns, staring down the dark paths, “Neither.”

“What?”

The sound of a bird call, the unmistakable caw of a raven, a crow. Dark corvids. Yes, these twisting roots. The terror in the back of his throat, the gooseflesh again. “Harry, do you remember the woods in Cokeworth?” Harry nods, his eyes wide and dark. “Turn around, now.” Once again, here he is at the edge of the world, looking over into another. Do not go further along those dark roads. That sunless sky. We should not be here. They run, boots hitting the ground, kicking up gravel, watching for the sun. It isn’t far before they make it back to familiar ground.

“Fuck,” Harry says, breathing heavily. “Are you alright?”

Am I alright? His heart is beating fast. A rush of blood. The terror of the moment still in him, an aching need for reality. He slams Harry up against a tree, against the rough bark. Long fingers pressing them into it. He needs to ground himself. I’m alive, you’re alive. Harry pale against the bark, pale against the dark wood. Severus and his needs, his horrible needs. He is shaking (why is he shaking), afraid for his life, afraid, always afraid, for the boy. He has never been able to ground himself like this, to touch Harry after one of his brushes with death, to make sure he is real, he is breathing. Yes, yes, he collects the evidence.

Touch. Skin against skin, the tides of Harry’s breath, the chest against his own narrow one. Yes, yes, up and out, in and out. Oxygen then carbon dioxide. Yes, this touch. Smell. The scent of fear woven in by the metallic salts of sweat, dripping from Harry’s hairline, his neck, the small of his back. Severus moves his hands up Harry’s shirt, Harry’s rough fingers at his forearms, the wiry muscles pulsing with a clench and release of desperately seeking knowledge, assurance, familiarity. I need you, I hate that I need you. Sound. The rush of his heartbeat, the echo of Harry’s own. He cannot separate the sound of Harry from what he hears and what he feels with his fingertips. All sound is vibration, some we learn by touch. So then do touch and sound mingle. Taste is the same, mixing with smell. Salt again, dust again. The strange iron of sweat, the dissolved minerals on our skin. Harry tastes like the sea. Like blood. Like a gun fired. Sight. (No, visions can sometimes be false. He sees Harry, he does not trust his eyes. He closes them instead, going by other senses.)

He pulls Harry’s mouth to his own, wanting to leave himself in the after. Some kisses are gentle, trading awareness and giving patience, warmth and kindness. Some ache like a gunshot, like a knife wound in the gut. Severus consumes. I should never have been allowed to touch you, there will be nothing left of you when I am finished. Severus and his hunger, he has tried to bank it, tried to hold back. His fingers shake, he cannot breathe, so he breathes Harry. Harry, the fire in his dark places, warming him, gentling him. Where Harry’s hands roam, Severus breathes easier and longer. So Harry moves his hands over Severus’ chest, where his lungs are hidden. Pushes his tongue into Severus’ mouth, where he keeps the air.

“What do you need?” Harry asks, his neck raw against the bark. Offering his neck to Severus like a lover might to a vampire (Harry has never been a victim, he knows exactly what he is doing). Severus shakes his head, keeps his eyes closed. Too much, no, too much. It is awful, Severus and his bit of stripped wire, too much current in the circuitry. Harry trails his hands over Severus’ spine, counting the vertebrae, counting the intervals between breathing. Lower, lower still. His hand cupping against the ache in black wool trousers (Severus and his needs, take me, ground me, let me
be safe. "I've got you," Harry whispers, his hands disappearing, taking him in hand. Deft, rough hands like a piston, like an oil pump. Severus buries his sweating forehead in Harry's neck, wave to shore, ship to port.

Harry pushes back at Severus slightly, he groans. *Don't you dare leave me here, like this. Don't you fucking dare.* "Trust me," Harry says, gentle, so strangely gentle. Severus dares one eye open, looking at the devious smile, the impertinent brat’s perfect cupid’s bow mouth. Harry and his swift sink to his knees. *Ohmyfuckinggod.* Harry and his dirty jeans, right there in the soil and the moss, the woodchips, the smell of a Snagov forest, the long hint of a past they seek to unravel. What is the truth? How many times has he dreamt of this? In his skinny bed, his sagging bed, his miserable dreams? A boy with a quick tongue? Harry pulls him from his trousers, his hands singing psalms to hot skin. The gust of air, his little breath. The swallow, the dive. (Severus and his scream to the sky.) *You will kill me.* It is imperfect, it is perfect. With the other half of your heart, it does not matter if the rhythm is off, if the mess is wild, if he has to stop to breathe. Who faults an angel in their bed? Not Severus, no, staring down in wide-eyed and desperate disbelief, his hips snapping toward a hungry mouth, realizing that there are soft places to land. *You are perfect, perfect, perfect. Don’t you ever dare, you will kill me. Jesus fucking Christ, I should not.* Severus and the white light, the white ache, the white heat. His cry, his feeble push to move Harry away (Harry’s refusal, gripping at his hips). When he comes, there is nothing in him, nothing but the burnt out cleanliness of the forest after a fire. Washed out with salt. Ache. *I love you, I love you, I love you. (I am so sorry).*

Harry and his warm arms, the smell of his wool sweater, his cedarwood cologne. Pulling Severus into his self, wrapping around him, this starfish hug against a lonesome rock. *Sink into me,* he seems to say. Severus breathes, breathes, breathes. He is allowed, he doesn’t understand (he never will). *When you get tired of this, when you leave, I will throw myself into the river.* (He knows how Arthur had felt on finding Guinevere in Lancelot’s arms. Vlad hearing the death of his wife. How Heloise had felt, torn from Abelard’s arms. Harry has said nothing of leaving. Severus and his fear, Severus and his worry, preparing for eventualities all the same.)
“You don't fall in love because you fall in love; you fall in love because of the need, desperate, to fall in love. When you feel that need, you have to watch your step: like having drunk a philter, the kind that makes you fall in love with the first thing you meet. It could be a duck-billed platypus.”

Umberto Eco, Foucault's Pendulum

Snagov Monastery, Romania

Somewhere in the middle of a lake

It is impossible to walk into the monastery at Snagov and not hold your breath. There is the briefest moment of the connection to a wider something, of the transition between the profane world and the sacred. Harry swallows as he stares, thinking of men in black cowls and bleak wool. The priests in their keep. Severus, the half-Wallachian; Severus, the half-explained. Founded in the 14th century, the white-walled monastery sits in the middle of the placid Lake Snagov. The mountains are always near, offering their shadows. The monastery in a strangely secluded and beautiful opening of the forests. Look at the dark green forest, curled up like locks of black hair against the calm ice water of northern end of Lake Snagov, the sharp monastery and her four polygonal towers rising out like a pillar. Not like a relief, no, instead, it feels like a celebration of this pocket of earth. Yes, here, this sacred space.

It is connected by a little footbridge, this island to the rest of the world. It is not a large structure. No, others may dwarf it in size. Snagov and her quiet beauty. Snagov and her bells, echoing across the surface of the water, resounding back to heaven. As it comes into Harry's view, it fills him with awe. Yes, yes, this final resting place of ancient Rome, this creation of Byzantine beauty painted in a traditionally Romanian manner. Rome, which had been chased out by the Goths, renamed Byzantium, then hustled out by the Turks. It hides here like a virus might lurk in a lymph node, this Romanian pocket of trees and wolves. The Turks had tried to come, Sultan Mehmed II and his army. Who had driven him away? His name is more than a whisper. No, here we thread it through all fabrics of daily life, this strong spider's twine. Unbreakable. Yes, name the highways for the dread Impaler, name the monuments, put him on a stamp. Children and their schools in Bucharest to Arefu, sitting below his portrait, learning that they are dragons too.

Next to Harry, the dark shoulders move back, the chin rises with pride. Harry can see Severus out of the corner of his peripheral vision, clearly relishing his astonishment. "The rumor is," Severus whispers, beneath the ears of the monks, "that Vlad Tepes was buried here."

"Was he?" It is a breathless thing, thinking about legends and monsters. Close enough to touch them; close enough to steal their bones from their graves. More breathless still, this study of recombination. Yes, Severus to Harry and back again. Look at the foundations, what do you see? The floorboards of their relationship have changed. There are new things to learn. Harry knows the map of Severus’ back beneath his fingers; he knows the taste of him in his mouth. He learns that Severus is an academic not only by profession but by heart, that cruel mouth offering up snide asides and fascinating remarks culled from his books. This time though, it is different. Harry is pulled behind the
curtain, let in on the secrets. Severus offers him facts like jewels. This fact, this jewel, of the old impaler himself, perhaps buried right here beneath his nervous feet.

Harry knows this. He is good at reading people. We are all naturals in our own areas. Harry and his body. He knows the flow of his own stride, his shoulders. He is good at dancing, a natural at a waltz. He always bests Ron at arm wrestling without thinking about it (it is not, in fact, a game of strength but constancy). Yes, when he had first put out a hand, first brought up a broomstick, he had loved the air like it was his own lungs. He had taken to the sky like the Cornish red-billed chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, spreading out its glossy wings. (Falling in love is a surreal experience. It is like looking at a mirror, mapping the bits of ourselves. Like to like, yes, but backwards and inverted. Left is right, right is left. Severus does not own his body, he has never been at home in the gaunt, rawboned thing. Severus and the acidic violence of his mind, retreating back past the curtain wall, behind the portcullis, the moat, viewing his body like a siege.)

He watches Severus, wanting to take the long-fingered hands in his own. *Not here*, he can sense it, *not here*. He can still feel the rough of the ground on his knees, Severus' salt-pillar cock hitting the back of his throat. Yes, bitter salt. Little pebbles digging into his patellas, woodchips, dead twigs. The groundscape of Șanțu-Florești scraping into him, pushing the roughness of his jeans into his skin. He colors at the thought. It feels sacrilegious, holding this memory here, while looking up at the house of the saints.

(The first city in Europe was Solnitsata in Bulgaria. It was a salt mine. Is it a surprise that salt, this critical aspect of ourselves, came with us into the world? Is it a surprise that the first time Harry Potter falls in love, it is with an old salt mine himself?) Love. He blinks suddenly.

"Was he buried here? Highly unlikely," Severus says, looking up at the bells, "It was excavated in 1933. Nothing was found but horse bones." Harry nods, strangely disappointed. He looks over the water, this deepest lake of the Romanian plain. The lake brimming with bream and Crucian carp, tench and gobies, eels and pike.

He wonders what to do once they walk inside. Stay quiet, keep your head down. Harry was born without much religion. The Dursleys had taken him occasionally, but only when the neighbors had asked after the queer little shadow of a child they rarely saw. He celebrates Easter and Christmas without much beyond bunnies and old Saint Nick. Yes, yes, you don't need religion. Get out the tree and the tinsel, the chestnuts and the mincepie. It is like having a door closed in your face, looking in through a window. The rudderless either sink themselves or find another boat. Harry and his ship adrift, curious about sailing. He looks up at black-wool Severus, his austere collars, his natural bow of the head when faced with these men of God. Severus is fluent here. It is a queer envy. (Look at yourself, Harry, who are you? How will you fill it up?)

Harry wonders if he would have been a good monk. There is a craving to it. Yes, sign up, put the habit on, pull the scapular over your head. You know exactly where you stand in this life and in the next. Where to go and whom to follow. When to eat, when to pray, what to wear. He chuckles quietly, thinking of his own school rebellions. Sneaking out through hidden tunnels, nicking food from the kitchens, talking back to angry professors. No, he's no natural at obeisance, at quietude, at rote routine. Still, you can love a thing you're unsuited to. You can want things that do not fit. (Hearts have never paid attention to fit.)

As his eyes adjust from the bright afternoon sun into the relative tomb-darkness of the interior, he looks up the few inches between them, wondering if Severus has ever wanted like this. To run away, to throw himself into a monastery. Yes, take yourself out with the trash. In this setting, with the company of the ascetic man's quiet reverence, with the flicker of the candles lit to the saints, it does not seem so strange.
The abbot welcomes them in his audience chambers. Severus is not so unfamiliar to him, Harry can tell that though he cannot follow the language. He can tell from the gestures that the abbot had blessed the professor. With the same kind smile, he shakes Harry's hand. They sit together then, the color still high in Severus' cheeks. A soft flow of language. A younger monk brings in a tray with glasses of cool water, dishes of fried dough. The white napkins embroidered with colorful flowers. Harry remembers Irina's house, the pile of rolls and the strong coffee. "You might have to roll me out of here by the time we get a move on," he whispers.

Severus smirks, "You'll never leave a house hungry here." No, even a house of God. The abbot and the monk trade words with Severus. Harry lets himself float on in the silent wonder of watching the multilingual, the quiet shifts from one world to the next. He trades on respect and envy, wonder and fondness. There is an entire space to the older man that he had never guessed.

"They are interested in our research into the Forest King. I have told them that we have found Templar connections and suspect further. They believe there are some documents here from that time and location that may be of interest to our research," Severus murmurs, pitched low. Only for Harry's ears. "They will take us to their library."

The younger monk smiles, rising from his chair. He signals to the both of them to follow. They walk through stone corridors, around corners lit by stained-glass windows. Past brightly-painted medieval murals in their carmine reds and deep blues, past gold chandeliers. The library is a long and narrow room on the first floor. Another monk greets them there, ushering them in. The monks and Severus talk for a moment, Harry looks around at the library. Books line the walls, some in acrylic and glass cases to be displayed to curious visitors. Snagov, despite its quiet beauty, despite its silent reticence, is still a tourist's town. The bindings surprise Harry. He is not sure what he had expected. Perhaps only ancient things, perhaps only medieval histories. Some of the bindings are modern. Hardcovers and their sewn-in pages, paperbacks and their glue. Libraries are living creatures, constantly evolving. They preserve history, yes, but modernity is only early history, it is food for libraries too.

"This is Brother Stefan," Severus says, indicating the librarian monk. "Follow him." They go past the main room, through a door at the back. It is darker and cooler in the next, lit with a few simple lamps. An icon of the Virgin sits on the opposite wall, her arms outstretched with her sadness. The monk disappears into a further room past. Soon after, he returns with a heavy folio in his arms, bound in timeworn brown leather. Harry inhales slightly as he looks at it. Severus, hungry-eyed and starving-fingered, already reaches to open the pages. Stefan offers a bit more to Severus before taking his leave.

"This folio predates the monastery," Severus says, "it was bequeathed while this was still a chapel, sometime during Vladislav I. Around 1350."

"Severus," Harry says, reaching a hand over to the cave-dark sleeve. “What?”

“Look at the binding.” Harry points to the spine. There, in a small imprint and painted with red ink, is the same curled dragon. It is uncomfortably familiar, this twisted and raging fiend. The image is life-like in a strange way. Harry half-expects it to shiver and move, to roll out the back, swipe those large claws, swing the long tail.
"The red dragon," Severus murmurs. The rich voice, the pitch-dark and lichen-soft voice. (A voice to curl up in; a voice to drape about your shoulders. I want to wear your voice. Yes, like a coat. Somewhere soft and warm, deep and hidden.)

"From my letter," Harry says, "And I found something in Aglie’s library. I forgot to show you.” Severus arches his brow as Harry fumbles for his pocket. He pulls out the folded bit of old vellum, smooths out the queer image of the two dragons, one red and one white, effortlessly curled around each other.

"Where did you find this?"

"In a book."

"I have seen this before,” Severus says. His forehead furrowed up like an earthquake, like buckling tectonic plates.

"We saw the red one on Nico’s box."

"No, somewhere else. I can’t remember," Severus runs his long fingers over the curves of the dragons, "It is the Welsh representation though."

Harry nods, "I’ve seen it." Yes, always. On t-shirts and postcards, on magnets and stamps.

"What a surprise," Severus says dryly, “that a mystery is coughed on up out of Wales.” (We all know what we are good at. The Welsh and their mysteries to keep.) Harry nods, turning the page. The folio opens under his steady Auror’s hands. His kinesthetic ease. He leans in to read the first lines

_I, Enguerrand of Crecy, must put forth these accounts_

_after the disruption of our order and the charge against our leader,

_the fair Jacques de Molay in this year of Our Lord, 1307.

_May God have mercy on all our souls._

"Wait,” Harry says, narrowing his chromis green eyes.

"What is it?"

"1307,” he flips through the rest of the folio, glancing at the pages, “I think I know why everything was destroyed.”

"And just what the devil are you on about?"

"Look,” he says, pushing the book forward, “Read this. The Templars were arrested in 1307. Suppose that -“

"Suppose what, Potter?"

"Look,” Harry snaps, hissing under his breath, "You don't get to come down my throat and call me Potter on the same day. Take your pick."
Severus glowers, "Go on, Harry."

"Wise choice," Harry says, smirk on his mouth. "Well, Nico said the Order was held in the spot of a former Templar temple. What if the Templars held more than papers?" He looks up, eye to furious asphalt-black eye. "What if, when they knew they were going to be destroyed, what if they moved everything?"

"The Order was still in their ruined temple, even centuries later."

"No," Harry shakes his head, "They were below it. In the catacombs. And the thing they were protecting was moved."

"From Caen. In 1307."

"Yes."

"Go on," Severus says, "Keep looking."

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The Tale of Galahad of Corbenic, who writes as a sinner.

I, Galahad, must write that I was born to mortal sin and deception. My mother was a liar. My father an adulterer. I am saddened to write that I am no better. Yes, it is done and it must have been done. It is a regrettable ache, this harm that we have done. I write now to preserve a diary of our affairs, for I cannot tell what might await us in the morning or next week.

He will hate us when he learns of it. I do not question Merlin's wisdom. He has guided us all these years in the reign of Arthur. We have known peace and harvests. I trust him, though I fear Edward. He has dabbled too long in dark things. He is too curious.

The Angles and the Saxons gather at our shores. We tangled at Badon Hill. It is written as a victory but there is no victory when I can see ships gather off the sea like a stormcloud. They will come. Arthur knows. If what we have done is as Merlin says, for the good of all Englishmen, then so be it.

Though, knowing the things he has dabbled in, I fear that Edward -

[Here the manuscript cuts off.]

Harry fingers the little edge of the document, the rust brown smear. Blood. Unmistakable. Ancient. He wonders who it had been, who it had come from. The blood stares back. He is sick with the idea. It had not seemed real until now, this intellectual puzzle, this strange mystery. People died for this. He looks at the parchment with revulsion, his fingers grown stiff with dread. "They were afraid of him," he says.

"Evidently."

"What do you think he was into?"
"There's a litany of horrible things in the Dark Arts," Severus' voice is reticent. "Take your pick."

What have you seen? There is an ache for sanitation. The Hogwarts curriculum is scrubbed, polished up. They talk of the wonders of magic, yes, pristine charms and earthy mandrakes, clinical transfigurations of toad to cat and back again. It's all very simple, really. Even Defense Against The Dark Arts is oddly abstinent, prescriptive and puritanical. Do not ever dream of these things. These are wrong, this over here is right. Learn the differences, do not ever forget. Potions is the subject that balances the most on the edge. You cannot make a potion without ingredients. Where charms and spells are simple and abstract, pure theoretical application, potionmaking is the bit where you get your hands dirty. Yes, slice up the flobberworms but do not forget that they once lived. There are frog brains to brew the Cure for Boils, pufferfish eyes for Swelling Solutions. Harry is keenly aware of the knife-sharp man next to him, the razor-veined potioneer, who took care with his ingredients like a butcher takes apart an animal. No butcher cuts into a carcass without care, without reverence for the creature who had given up its life for the plate. Severus and his butcher-kindness, never wasting a drop of manticore blood. Yes, it is easy to forget, not all magic has clean edges, even the everyday sort.

There is a lot he doesn't know. There is much he is still curious about. "Did you always want to be a professor?"

“God forbid,” Severus drawls, not pulling his large nose from the page. Harry grins, trying to imagine sixteen-year-old Severus dreaming of working with children.

“Yeah, figured as much,” Harry casts out. “What are you doing now? We haven’t talked about it.”

“You mean you haven’t pried into my personal business.” The mild tone with the aconite bite. It is not, unfortunately, unfamiliar.

“Well, I sort of am your personal business now.”

The black brow arches, Severus stares at him, calculating. Wait, wait. Don’t speak. Don’t say what you might say. Did you only want this once? Just to try it once, get it out of your system? Is that all you need? (I need so much more.) Is it just for the name? To say you fucked The Boy Who Lived? Who are you going to tell? (Worse, is it because of him? Is this the worst thing you can do to James Potter, my father, who left you upside down once and screaming. If you can’t gut him, will you gut me instead? Let it go, let me go.) I need you. Don’t say it.

“Wait, did you just want this to be a once off?”

“What I want and what I expect to happen are different things,” Severus mutters, “We will talk about this later.”

“I don’t want this to be a one-time thing,” Harry persists.

“Not here, Harry.”

Don’t you dare push me away, you obnoxious git. No, Harry and his claws. He has got something, something in his grasp.

Minerva had always had a soft spot for him, for her little lionlings. At the end, even the other staff members of Hogwarts had become gentle, given to misty-eyed, tender treatment as if Harry would shatter under view. The students whispered, asked casual questions, and slowly came to avoid him entirely. It was easier than to be sympathetic. He had tried to ignore it. It is a wretched thing, to be only known for your tragedies. A few catch him, his spitball words, his sarcastic takes. Most like the
story of The Boy Who Lived. Who is he to take that away? He had let them have it. He had tried to fill himself up with other things.

There has always been too much emptiness inside of him. He doesn't have history to fill it up. No, not family, not old stories, not an ancient grudge. Instead, he takes notes on taxonomy. *Homo sapiens. Dendanathema x morifolium*. He loves the way the Latin rolls off his tongue like pearls. In the chaos after the war, he had savored control in classification systems. *What am I?* He hates the amorphous nature of himself, consistently changeable. Amoeba-faced. *Let me become something. Let me become yours. I think I'm in love with you.*

Strange thing, love.

“**There is a man here to see you,**” Brother Stefan says. He steps back, allowing the visitor to enter. Harry blinks, looking up in surprise. Then, in the doorway, an old devil in a white suit. “**Hello again,**” says Aglie, Comte de Saint-Germain. Ice in the floes of his veins, in the chambers of his heart. In this new light, his once-friendly face seems malevolent. The tanned, smooth cheeks, the bone white hair, the glittering eyes. With suspicious eyes, Harry tracks his movement as he presses into the room.

“**Aglie,**” Severus hisses. Harry considers his little knife in his boot, the distance from himself to Aglie, the positioning of Severus in the back corner of the table. Aglie raises his hand and Harry stops breathing, his hand moving to his boot, wondering if this is the end of his chapter, if this is his body on the rocks. But the Comte only reaches to brighten the overhead light, turning the dial. In the brighter light, he is somehow made more severe. Perhaps it is the shadow under his cheekbones, cast under the long brows. There is something distinctly skeletal about the face in the sharp light, unnerving and cadaverous. He frowns, unsure if it has always been there or if he is just looking for it now.

“How did you find us?” Harry asks, staying perfectly still at the table. Aglie pulls out a chair from the opposite side.

"**May I sit?**" He does not wait for an answer, folding his long legs under the chair, brushing imperceptible dust from his white-linen jacket. The Comte shrugs. “**You are on the trail of the Forest King, most find their way to his creatures eventually. Old Vlad was quite active in preserving his history. It was not a surprising stretch. And,**” Aglie continues, raising his brow and smiling, "**the Professor here has been very interested in my own personal story ever since you visited my library.**"

He walks over, his perfectly-manicured nails rifling through the papers with affection. “**Templar papers. After the beginning of their fall in 1307, we took pains to get their documents out of France. Later, he collected them here.**” I must say that they are very good archivists.”

He walks over, his perfectly-manicured nails rifling through the papers with affection. “**Templar papers. After the beginning of their fall in 1307, we took pains to get their documents out of France. Later, he collected them here.**” I must say that they are very good archivists.”

“**That was when everything was destroyed.**”

“Less destroyed and more that it - surreptitiously left their presence. We were rather proud of that coup, if I do say so myself. The French king, that was Philip then, took a bit of convincing before he went off on de Molay. The Templars were Merlin’s, he always had them in his pocket.”

“**We?**” Severus asks.

“Just keepers of information, keepers of the balance. They’ve called us a lot of things. You should hear some of the outlandish ideas, honestly. Truly remarkable stuff,” the Comte says, his pale face set
off by the dark spines of the shelves beyond.

“Illuminati,” Severus says. His voice like an accusation. Like a curse, a judge and pronouncing a sentence.

A wide, white grin steals over the Comte’s face, “Ah, Professor, got it in one. I knew I liked you for a reason.”

"Illuminati?" Harry asks, "I thought - "

"The Illuminati," Severus drawls, "is exactly the sort of thing this loathsome arse would be mucked up with."

"What is it?"

"Conspiracists and busybodies," Severus snarls like a wolf. Spit in his mouth, too many teeth.

"Well," Aglie pauses, "We haven't always been called that. Weishaupt just gave us a very catchy name. Our goal, however, as he stated in the 1776 directive, is to work as a balance against the preeminence of Merlinian magic and his power. Mainly, we are archivists. We keep the books, keep historians honest. The Forest King is a great supporter of underdogs." He pulls some of the documents toward his chest, running his careful hands along the edges of the folio. "History is one of the greatest tools of silencing. It is easy for us to deny the past, isn't it? We manhandle it into something that fits what we want it to say. It's more difficult when you have an eyewitness, you know. That's where I come in."

Severus scowls. Harry frowns. “What do you mean balance?"

Aglie and his wide, strange smile. “There is a very old war, Harry Potter. It seems that you two have rather found yourselves in the middle.”

“Explain,” Severus hisses, “Or I will hex you in your boots.” He draws out his long wand. Aglie waves his hand. Suddenly, Severus’ wand lays innocently on the table as if it always had. As if it had always been.

Magic again. (Harry looks at his own hands, expecting to find it there. There is nothing to answer him.)

“Really,” Aglie says lazily, “Merlin is so much better at marketing.” He crosses his legs. “Have you ever known that you were not wanted, that you should never have been born? The Forest King, Edward Mordred, collects those children. My own beastly mother had been thirteen years old. She had wanted to drown me in a lake. When the King found me and took me in, was that so wrong?” He leans forward, "Should I curse him for that? For all I know, she might have killed me for my blood too."

Harry thinks of lost things, of lost children. He had been caught by Dumbledore’s hands at age eleven. If Dumbledore had not reached out, would he have gone to the Forest King as well?

"Your mother was Erzsébet Báthory," Severus says.

"Yes, the old she-devil herself. You know, she never saw me again. Good riddance."

"Hungarian noblewoman," Severus says quietly to Harry, taking pity, filling in the blanks. "Known as one of the first serial killers. She reportedly murdered young women and bathed in their blood to stay eternally young."
"Ah," Aglie says, "I can fill you in if you need more." Yes, yes, Henri Aglie (is that even your name?) and his records. Tell the tale of the blood countess, Erzsébet Báthory, who had been born in Nyírbátor, a niece of the Transylvanian prince. Tell the tale of her lonely childhood at Ecsed Castle, that fierce and forsaken spot. When she had begun to show, grow round about the middle, thirteen years old and unmarried, the old women had told her to leave the child naked on the cliffside. Wolves will come.

She had not. Aglie sits across the table from them, looking irritatingly comfortable, as if he only needed a glass of wine.

"Merlin and the Forest King are at odds," Severus murmurs. "Why?"

"An old story. Let us cut to the crux of the matter. Merlin stole something of the King’s. Mordred wants it back."

"What did he steal?"

Aglie only smiles. "Come now, Professor. You don’t trust me. I am not entirely ready to trust you. You’ve been cozy with an Order member. That librarian."

"Nico is trying to help," Harry glares.

"Why are you telling us this?"

"I wasn’t lying when I said I liked you, Professor. If anyone has a chance of burying this old hatchet, it’s you two."

"The magic," Severus says. "What happened to it? Why is it left in me?"

A deeper frown on Aglie’s face. "That is a very strange question and one that I can honestly admit to not knowing. I have been in the King’s company for hundreds of years but I cannot say I understand him. He lives often in the faery world, his mind is warped from his time there. He is difficult to understand at times."

"Why do you have magic then?" Harry asks.

"Mine isn’t mine, it’s the King’s. I merely borrow it. It keeps me alive."

"Are we in danger still?"

"Oh yes."

"Then why haven’t you attacked us now? After that Inferi?"

"Consider, Harry, that there are many ways to look at something. You aren’t looking right," Aglie says, "You’re in no danger from me. The Inferi was not mine."

Then who sent it? They are silent in the consideration. Pull back, yes, consider each person in a suspicious light.

There is a long quiet pause. "And you absolutely side with Mordred," Severus says softly, his eyes hard.

"I know the story, I know their history. Mordred was wronged. He saved me and I will die putting it right. It is not right yet, so here I am. I am hoping you two can fix that little problem." He looks at them, his hand rubbing at his glacier-pale temples. "It's been a very long four-hundred-and-fifty
years. Believe me or choose not to when I say that I am very tired and very ready to shuffle off this mortal coil."

Harry bites his lip, fiddles his fingers along the inseam of his jeans. He looks over at Severus, who stares at Aglie with a furious, watchful gaze. Centuries could have passed in this moment. There you are, balanced on the edge of a blade, the razor's edge. *Two roads diverge in a yellow wood.* Which way will you go? The cool glass of the window sits just behind Harry's back, he can hear slight birdsong through the pane, the sound of water. Breathe in, breathe out. In this moment, he should be thinking of ancient battles and bitter divides. Instead, he thinks of the sound of water. Lake Snagov sounds like a lullaby. There is no rush, there is no hurry. No, this body of water is collected. Restful as a grave. He remembers the corrupted Strid in Cokeworth, the fury of the water, the rush. It had been an anthem. Even rain, somewhere in between, this old melody. The air smells like it had earlier in the day. It had rained once. It hangs heavy, the mixed scent of water and clean earth, the threat of rain.

Severus speaks, his voice like a man under a church dome, Quiet but heard. "Tell me why. What do you want from us specifically?"

Aglie leans back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head and smiling that serpent-and-the-apple smile. "Oh, Professor. Don't play games with me. You're a smart man. Don't tell me you don't already know."
Chapter 12

Descend to me, mild Evening-star
Thou canst glide on a beam,
Enter my dwelling and my mind
And over my life gleam!”

And he listens and trembles and
Still more for her love craves
And as quick as the lightning he
Plunges into the waves.

Mihai Eminescu, Luceafărul.

Dalby Forest, Yorkshire

Thirty-six years ago

Have you ever felt like you are being watched? The gooseflesh on the back of your neck, that
creeping sense of dread? Have you forgotten the warning about the witch in the woods? Have you
forgotten to not dangle your feet over the edge of the bed? Trust in science, they say, there’s nothing
to worry about. Yet, new discoveries are made every day. We do not know everything. We do not
know what lurks in the wood.

He throws rocks at the stream. Tears grass out of the earth, throws it in. It floats at first but the stream
is too rapid, eventually even the grass goes under too. He scowls, his long hair falling in his face. He
is long-haired but unmistakably a boy child. His mother calls him her crow-child. Too dark and
curious for his own good. Perhaps each feature individually can be taken as handsome. The deep-set,
charcoal-black eyes. The high, clear forehead. The widow’s peak, the razor cheekbones. Together,
they make up an unfortunate face, too severe by half. (The hooked, too-large nose is never attractive,
there is no hope there.)

There is a rustle from the bushes. A face in the dogwood, a figure in the spindle. Severus looks
curiously at the emerging man in the long, dark coat. His sharp face, his black-eyed stare. The
newcomer stands near Severus’ spot at the edge of the brook.

“There’s better rocks downstream.”

"Who are you?" Severus asks, pointing a sharp stick at the man. Mama had said don’t talk to
strangers. He doesn’t know this man, a stranger.

"Edward." Severus sniffs. He knows the man's name, so Edward is no longer subject to his mother's
rules about strangers. He goes back to throwing rocks. "Who are you?"

"Severus."

"Are you an emperor?" Edward asks. Severus looks up sharply at the words but there is no teasing
there. "There was an emperor with that name once."

Severus shakes his head. "I'm a kid, obviously."

"Gordian the Third became emperor at thirteen. Age doesn't mean anything,"

"Really?"

"Yes."

"What was he emperor of?"

"Rome," Edward says. Severus shrugs. He doesn't know much of Rome but what he does know is bewitching. Time means nothing. He knows it is from the primordial before, though his mother's childhood and ancient Rome seem equally far away in that unknown soup of ages. What he does know is that they had fed people to lions. That sounds fascinating. He would have liked to have seen it. The modern world is so dull now, all he ever hears about are sums and supermarkets, his father's oilskin coat at the door smelling like fish. In the modern world, his father drills him on dead fish, pulling them out of his nets, slapping them on the docks. He is used to this, his father's pop quiz drills on haddock and plaice, turbot and squid. (Sole, to Severus, are the strangest. The flatfish are born normally, one eye on each side of their head, all proper like. But, as they grow, one of their eyes migrates about, shifting to the other. He thinks they're too odd, having two eyes on one side of their head, not able to look behind them.) No, the modern world is too dull these days. No one even throws a man to a lion. Pity, he thinks.

"Are you alone?" Edward sits down next to him. He is flipping a coin in his right hand. Severus eyes it curiously. When it stops, Edward shows it to him. Silver, bearing the symbol of a dragon with a curled tail and beared claws. It faces to the left with a hungry mouth. He wants it. He should have it. He looks up, curious about the shift of the light. The sun is obscured by leaves. One tree is dead, bare of growth. The dark branches look like a scribble against the white, overcast sky. He cannot decipher it.

"Yes, sir," Severus says.

"Do you want this?" Edward asks, holding out the coin.

"Yes, sir."

"Tell you what. Why don't you have it?"

Even nine-year-old Severus is skeptical. "What's in it for you, sir?"

"Just promise, when I come calling for you, that you'll answer. Got that, child?"

Seems fair enough. He's perplexed. It is a strange request. "Alright."

Edward hands him the coin. There is a heady rush to it, gripping it in his hand. It is large, twice the size of any coin he's seen before. Heavy and worn. The edges of the dragon are smooth and touch-loved. He feels powerful with it, yes, he is strong. An emperor with an emperor's name.

"I'll see you later, Severus," Edward says. "Just remember our deal." He heads back through the brush, along the path that he had come. It is only shortly after, when the brook-rush sounds and the sparrows call, that Severus realizes how oddly quiet it had been in his presence.
Snagov Monastery, Romania

Now (Give or take)

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Severus spits. Doesn’t he? The image of that queer day floats up to him. The long, wild hair. The skeletal face and leathery skin. The rough beard. Eyes like an absence.

“Don’t you?” Aglie, the foul creature, smirks. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel it.”

“I have no idea what foolish nonsense you are blathering on about.” It is incredible, the amount of loathing he can dredge up for this man. He has hated him from the beginning, back in a cafe in Condate, budging into Severus’ personal business. He hates the pristine linen suit. He hates the swimming pool eyes. The eel-slime smile, the too-perfect grin. Yes, he even hates the color of his too-white hair.

“It’s you, Professor,” Aglie says, “You’re one of his. As I am. Like the old, doomed impaler himself. Don’t you ever wonder what happens to children who get lost in the forest, who are found days later? You met him in one once, didn’t you? You said you were alone, did you not? Did he ask you if he could come back?”

Yes. He remembers being nine years old. A man with scorchmark eyes, calling himself Edward, offering him a coin. He had lost the coin ages ago. He had known since Nico had shown him the very self-same coin, asking her to trust him. How the bloody hell did she get it? (He had wondered then, silenced by its presence. He wonders again now.) He feels seasick. The boat rocking on a storm-mad sea. Grip onto something, hold tight. A rope will do, the edge of the nailed-down bed. Put your fingers in the pockets of drawers. Hang on. (He thinks of Harry, the places he has put his hands. Hang on.)

“The Forest King’s children.”

“Yes,” Aglie nods.

“What, like an army of dismal misfits?”

The engine-grease smile again. "Think of it more like Peter Pan and his Lost Boys."

Think, consider. The word boys sticks out at him. "It's been decades."

The Comte shrugs, "He comes in his own time. I told you, he's rather, as you might say, unpredictable."

Severus scowls at the table. At the bound-leather folios, the letters and their cramped handwriting. Aglie pushes back from the table. "I've given you a lot to think about. It is not so bad, Professor. There are perks, you know. When you're ready to think about it more, I will find you. Just remember, Professor, Harry, I am not your enemy."

The door closes behind him. It is like cutting a bubble in two. Yes, there are epochs. There is a time
from before he knew he was cursed. Just this morning, awakening in a Paris hotel room (he has lived so long in the interval from morning until now, watching the sun set.) There is after. Aglie and his knife words, cutting the worlds perfectly in two.

He had kept the coin from Nico. It is there, in his left coat pocket. He slips a hand in, feeling the weight of the thing in his palm. *Dragons again.* Harry's image floats up to him, a strange memory of red and white beasts intertwined. There is something he cannot remember. He stares vacantly at his hand, the other one left on the table, flexing and stretching the sinews. Dissociation. It does not seem to be his any longer, but something stone-cold and soaked in formaldehyde.

"Come on," Harry says, pulling at his sleeve. "You're getting lost in yourself. Let's get some dinner."

---

*Knight's Dish*

*Slow-braised veal with seasonal vegetables*

*Boyar's Wish*

*Confit lamb knuckle with mashed potatoes*

*Grilled Seabream*

*Polenta on the side*

*Braised Sour Cabbage*

*Fish Soup*

*(Only on Sundays)*

"Do you have a favorite?" Harry asks. Even the surroundings of the restaurant are comforting. The rolicking of his stomach calms as he takes in the dark wood and vaulted ceilings, the gilt-edged frames.

"The meatballs in tomato sauce."

Harry nods, scanning the menu. "What's this?" He points to a listing.

"Pork with smoked sausages, polenta, and cabbage. It's fairly traditional in the Bucovina area." He looks at Harry, taking sympathy on his confusion. "A part of Romania far to the east, next to Ukraine."

"Sounds good," Harry closes the menu, lays it on the table. "I'll get that." Severus doesn't know why he is surprised. He had expected Harry to go for something more familiar. Roast chicken, perhaps. Fried cod, maybe. He should know better than to assume anything about Harry. Yes, he should
know that by now. Severus Snape, sticking to old habits like a barnacle on a crab. He thinks of Harry with a dish of steaming Moldavian stew. It is a strangely pleasurable image. "Do you come back often?" Harry asks.

"No," he says quietly, more to his wine glass than anything else. "It's been twenty years."

"You're still so -"

"So what, Harry?"

"Comfortable," the other man says, blinking. He waves to the restaurant, to the menu. "Fluent."

"Some things you don't forget." No, he remembers fish from his father but the rest of his dinner was from his mother. You can never get the stink of your history out of your food. He had stood on a stool to reach the counter, her warm arms around him (in the summer, nearly brown with freckles), guiding his small hands as they grated cheese through the wide metal mouths of the grater. She had taken him to the little vegetable patch not far from the house, showed him how to pull carrots by their stems, how to coax the best flavor from tomatoes.

They eat. It is like coming home, yes. The food of his childhood. Chiftele. The tomato sauce is rich and acidic. The mixture of beef and lamb, the thread of garlic. The brightness of dill, of parsley. These are his childhood meatballs, so he knows they are bound not by dried breadcrumbs but instead by taking a slice of bread, soaking it in milk or water. He knows these things, his mother had taught him. (There had been days she would forget him. There had been days she had held him too tight. Not all women should be mothers; not all men fathers. He has lost the lottery twice over. It is a wretched thing to admit, looking back at Eileen Snape, he feels better in the spaces where she is not. He is lighter without her.)

"What if -" Harry says, setting his fork down on his now-empty plate. "What if we're thinking about this all wrong?"

"What do you mean?" He narrows his eyes at the other man. The candlelight is a kindness on something already beautiful. It flickers against the strong cheekbones, throws chiaroscuro shadows under them, strengthening the already strong jaw, the square chin, the fullness of the mouth. Severus lingers on the mouth. He has been kissed by it, touched it. He shifts in his chair, growing heated. It has been hours since the forest but the memory is a sharp shock to his spine, electric in his crown. Forty-five years of ache and who would have imagined that Harry Potter, hero, would lick up his hand in a forest, sink to his knees without question, and swallow one Severus Snape, fuckup, down to his roots?

"What if," Harry chews his lip, distracted, "What if it's not a thing that was taken from the Forest King, but a person?"

"A person," he repeats, stabbing a potato with his knife. "Family, maybe. Or someone they loved."

Yes, yes, it fits. Mordred, who haunts the forests looking for lost things. Mordred, collector and defender of the broken-hearted. Who had picked up Aglie, left to rot by his mother. Who had taken Vlad Țepeș, lost after his love had thrown herself to the river. Who had pulled in King Pedro, after his heart, Ines de Castro, had perished. He had even started a civil war, so much ache in that one. And him, Severus Snape, had dragged his lonely arse out of the muck-gutter of Cokeworth, had said you don't have two hearts to rub together, do you now? And Severus, the unloved, Severus the touch-starved, had tipped over willingly. Yes, Mordred and his lost love. It fits. Desperate lovers are
the most dangerous of all.

Harry goes on, "But how do you take a person from someone?"

"Death, imprisonment, Obliviation, simple politicking and intimidation -"

"Alright, you morbid bastard," Harry laughs, "I get your point."

"The question to ask is, who was it?"

"There was Guinevere, but she had the affair with Lancelot."

Severus thinks. His leg against Harry's below the table. He is warm where they touch. Neither move. "Who would Merlin care about? Want to maneuver away from Mordred? Also, for what reason?"

"Viviane?"

"Perhaps."

"How do we find that out?" Harry has a toothpick in his mouth. It bounces as he chews on it, when he talks, like a conductor's baton.

"That last letter was addressed from Glastonbury Abbey."

"Back to England then?"

"It would appear so," Severus says. He presses his fingers to his temples.

"Good," Harry says, stretching his arms, "I rather miss it."

Severus rolls his eyes. "You miss fish and chips."

"I'm a growing boy," Harry winks.

"You'll grow sideways, you twit. You put down that entire plate and half of mine."

There is a quiet beat. "Godric's Hollow is near Glastonbury, isn't it?"


"What makes me nervous -," Harry says, drumming his fingers on the table, "Well, two things really. We've heard nothing from Merlin. And if the Forest King didn't send it, who sent that Inferi?"

---

The hotel room door locks behind them. Severus breathes in deeply. Harry collapses on the bed, his arms spread out to hold the world. It is a constant surprise to not be on the everlasting end of the other man's irritation. He has seen these wide gestures from a distance, has overheard the wry humor while listening in for detentions to parcel out. Never has it been his for the taking.

"Next weird wizard thing that happens in the world," Harry says, horizontally. "I'm taking a rain check."
Severus snorts. "You couldn't stay out of a bloody mess even if you were locked in Gringotts."

"True," the other man groans. *You're an Auror, for fuck's sake. You go looking for messes to clean up.* "It will be over soon, one way or another. I figure that either they'll kill us, we'll get to the bottom of this, or we'll just say sod off and head for Tahiti."

"You wouldn't have magic."

Harry sits up, shrugging, "I'm adaptable."

"And the others?" Severus raises his brow. A dark look pinches Harry's face.

"Yeah, alright. Back to England then. To Glastonbury. Then back home, I hope."

"Yes," Severus says. "Back to our lives." *Back to Spinner's End, back to Cokeworth.* He can still smell it from here, thousands of miles away. This strange world will burst, this bubble of themselves. Here, now, no one intrudes. It is different during the day.

"With some differences, Severus."

"Don't make promises you cannot keep," Severus mutters. Harry opens his mouth to argue. It is fascinating to watch the boy think, reconsider, gather his long limbs up from the bed. Severus instinctively pulls back. It's as if Harry’s long study of the other man has given him this unnatural knowledge. Harry Potter, whom he has cursed for years for *not thinking*, standing here and using it against him. Harry will not spar with words. He doesn't need to.

"Don't make me shut you up," Harry whispers. Severus stands rigid as a lighthouse, Harry cresting on him like a wave. Hold on to the ship, try not to drown. (He has never been a good swimmer.) The ember-hot press of his mouth to Severus, the press of his body, the push of them backward. Harry turns them, backing toward the bed. Yes, please. Harry pushes him down toward the mattress, the pristine and bleach-white sheets. (Severus does not take much convincing.)

Fuck, *I love you.* Yes, yes, yes. He wants to drown. Covered with the weight of the other. Harry, twenty-five and solid. Can we ever be in balance with ourselves, our bodies and our minds together? He is bailing out the water, his body taking over, losing the tight grip he keeps on himself. Goodbye to reason, hello to abandon. Is there any wonder that *abandon* can be used as a synonym for passion? Yes, yes, here we are unguarded.

"I know," Harry whispers, his mouth here at the temple, then there at the divot of his throat, "what it's like to be told where to go and when. You don't belong to him. You don't belong to anyone. Not even me."

*What if I want that?*

"We're partners," Harry noses into the space between Severus’ jaw and neck. The space a hangman might fondle as he ties a noose, saying *good neck for hanging, you'll snap like a dream.* Harry, strangely, doesn't want to break him. What does that mean? "I just want to be with you. On terms we set, whatever those are."

How do you say yes when the only word you’ve ever learnt is *no*? He moves to kiss Harry, his deficient hands gripping the sinewy shoulders, scrabbling at the waist. The need wells up within him, white-hot like a shuttle launch. In the quiet room with the long curtains, he removes Harry's shirt and kisses the clavicles, where the bones came together to celebrate his long neck.

"What do you need?" Harry's hand pressing at the insistency in his trousers, the urgency between his
thighs. He is aching and wrecked.

"Harry," he says, gasping. Not to the air, not even to his face. He says it to Harry's skin. Sound is not what we think it is. It is a wave of vibrations which permeate through solids, atoms and their covalent bonds. So, his voice is in Harry in a way he will never be. He says it to the bones, to the sinew, the plasma, the marrow. Harry. His fingers at the buttons on Harry's jeans. Harry is always a surprise. He is so easy with his body, so free. Those who are one with their bodies do not understand those that live separately, side by side. Severus is within his body, holding it together with cellotape and glue. Harry and his arms around Severus, pulling them together, saying don't worry, it's just us two. Severus knows the truth, of course. There are three. Harry (who is one with himself) and Severus. And Severus' body. He looks at himself from his pilot's seat of disdain, mocking the miserable aircraft.

"Stop thinking," Harry breathes. Yes, yes, of course.

"Whatever you need, I've got you," Harry says. His hands are strong. Auror's hands, strong, covered with tiny nicks and scars. He is twenty-five, yes, no longer the boy that Severus once knew. It is time to forget. There is a time for remembering, a time for forgetting. A time to keep, a time to cast away. (It is in the Bible, his mother's Bible. Irina's Bible. It must be true.) He casts some stones away, he gathers others together. Harry Potter, travertine-skinned and basalt-haired, he keeps. Harry curls around him, hungry as an eel, sucking at his skin. Yes, they curl about each other, recognizing each other's bodies. Curled together, each a single parenthesis, a single quotation mark, recognizing their completion. It's you, he could point out to Harry, his other bracket, I've been looking for you all my life. (It aches to be a quotation mark left hanging, incomplete. It is like a wound. There is nothing on the other end to stop the words from spilling out.)

"In the bag," he mutters, "there's a jar. Get that." A pause, "And a towel."

"Are you sure?"

"If you don't fuck me into utter oblivion," he says, "I will find a bottle of Scotch to help instead." Harry nods, pausing. He is over Severus, holding himself up by one arm, the other on Severus’ chest. It should feel threatening, this entrapment, this enclosure, this limitation of movement. He knows why cats seek out cardboard boxes, bears in their caves. There is safety when you know the measure, when the walls that come up are warm and dark, whispering I've got you, I've got you.

Harry moves one hand, brushing the long strands of coarse hair from Severus' face. He should hate it (he does not). Hate is a funny thing. Sometimes it is only overflow, catching the too much that spills over from our vessels. When there is something else to carry it instead, hate is unnecessary. It fades away.

"Have you - er, have you ever done this before?" Harry gestures to the towel, the sealed jar.

"Not with a living, breathing person, no."

Harry quirks a lip, "So a dead one then, eh?"

Severus and his best glare, "Don't tempt me to hex your balls off."

"Kinky." The problem with this situation is that Harry no longer seems to even register Severus' scowl. He buries his face in the long, scar-ribboned neck, licking at the strange silvery flatness of the thing. He shivers, his insides rolling. It is strangely erotic to be touched there, at the horror of his scar. Harry is reverent, his soft mouth moving over, a tongue. It seems to celebrate his life, this long worship, this languid apology.
I love you, he wants to scream it. It is a chickenbone in his throat, choking him. Harry, this unexpected island in the sea. That's the trouble with navigation. You cannot plan for a storm, sometimes you are blown off-course. Not all waters are charted. *I love you. Even if you leave, I cannot hate you.* It is a gutting thing to love something despite yourself. To love for what it is, for who they are, against your better interests. *I am a godforsaken fool.*

When he tells his story someday, most of it will be skipped over. We don't tell the dull everyday. You don't need to know about laundry detergent and grocery lists, brands of soap. Yes, most he will jettison, the *flotsam und jetsam* of his existence. This, however, this moment will be the pinnacle. The bright spot.

Harry is gentle. Above him, within him. His fingers scramble at the other man's shoulders, at his biceps like a drunk fool reaching for a dropped bottle. He's tried this before, every handful of years he gets ravenous and curious, fumbles at himself. It is different when there is sweat dripping from a beautiful face, Harry's eyes tightly closed, whispering obscenities and blasphemies. "Oh my fucking god, Severus, you fucking perfect, ridiculous, stupid bastard. How the fuck, oh god, yes, just like that, love. Do it again. Do you like that? Are you okay? Can I stay in you forever? I'm going to keep you. Do you know that? Fuck, fucking god. Oh fuck."

Yes, yes, yes. He has wondered, ached with curiosity. He has needed to know what it would feel like to take the thing you love best within your own body, to hold it safe. He consumes Harry. Is there any other way to describe it? Yes, he takes Harry's fingers in his mouth because he is aching and ravenous, hungry and starved. He keens into the touch, his voice lost and unknown. When Harry cries out to the sky (*Severus!*), he wonders if this is a different world from before, a new Harry, a new Severus, wiped clean of their mistakes like a dry-erase board.

He thinks too much. Harry doesn't seem to mind. That quick hand on the draw, wrapping around him, shutting him up for once, thank god, yes, stop me from thinking. It is quick and hard and he has a tongue in his mouth and sometimes they nick teeth and yes, there will be blood. Oh god, when it comes, he bursts into the sky. Yes, finally, watching the filmstrip of his thoughts run out, the screen plunging into only white light.

*Fuck, I love you.* (In this moment, the seconds before his heart restarts, as he comes down from the sky, the world retracts to almost nothing. A bed and a book, a lamp and a pair of socks kicked off to a corner. *Harry.*)

He relearns breathing. Spread out on the bed like the Vitruvian Man. It is an unnatural position for him, face up and spread out. Usually, he curls up on his side, prefers face down into the pillow. Animals get it, they understand. Keep your belly hidden, the soft bits. Those are your weak spots, keep those hidden away. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can earn their trust, they sleep on their backs.

He does not move. Harry leans over him, running his rough fingers up and down the forearms. He pauses over the Dark Mark, traces the vascularity of the skin like a navigator might pay attention to rivers. Severus cracks open one eye. Harry looks different without his glasses. Perhaps younger; perhaps older. It is hard to tell.

Harry opens his mouth, "You know that I care about you." He pauses, tracing a circle around one nipple, watching it swell, pucker. "I mean, I -"

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Harry looks surprised.
"Don't say it."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stand to hear it."

"Oh," Harry says.

"Unless you are certain, deathly certain. Do not say those words to me." Do not pin them to a rod, dangle them in front of him. It doesn't make sense, how to transfer from one boat to another. He figures someone's got to fall in. How do you move this to the real world? He loves yet he has no inclination to bring flowers to the other, he has no keenness for nights at Italian restaurants in Hogsmeade, spearing shrimp from each other's plates. Saying have you tried the balsamic, it's really rather good.

He'd rather drown.

There is a shift in Harry's eyes. Gentle understanding. The strong Adam's apple of his throat bobs as he swallows. Severus watches him like a nervous cat in a room full of boots. "Alright," Harry says. He lays back against the pillow. Lay back, watch the moonlight dance across the ceiling. He pushes at the flat, limp pillow under his head. Harry next to him, his body warm against his own. I've said the wrong thing. Yes. I will take it back. The seconds march on. He says nothing. Harry reaches out a hand, lays it on Severus' stomach, thumb moving in gentle, wide circles. A gentling of a wildcat, a peace offering. His shoulders relax slightly, he had not known they were tensed.

It is easy to focus on their differences. We are fond of categories, demarcations, little labels. In truth, we are all more alike than we are different. Severus looks at the boy and his coarse, dark hair, not so different from the strands growing from his own scalp. Harry walks heel to toe, like Severus. Packs a single bag for a long, open-ended journey, like Severus. Prefers sunrises to sunsets, like Severus. (He has caught Harry while he has woken from sleep. Their shifts in the night, four hours on and four off. Harry with his gaze ticked off to the sky, watching the infinitesimal creep from black to navy, from navy to pale blue. Yes, they prefer sunrises. Beginnings over endings.)

Harry yawns, one arm drapes over his face. Severus scoops up the image of him with his shovel eyes. The blue Germanic veins under the pale skin; the spread of hairless to forested from his hip to his thighs. As if moving from tundra to taiga. The angular face, pale with strong dark brows. Irises flecked with amber, an ironic curl to the lip. He is Cornish, Severus knows. The land as it always has, calling us back home.

"Do you want to sleep first?" Harry asks.

"You're half-asleep already, you'll get us both killed. I'll keep watch." He sits up in the bed, gathering his book from his bag, his reading glasses. He knows the reading will be slow-going at best, his constant glances over to the sleeping fool at his side. Severus has always been an anxious man, but he has never been nervous. Here, watching Harry's leg twitch as he passes into sleep, he feels the strange tension of those with something to keep safe. Yes, he understands Mordred, out there in the dark. Passing through worlds, looking for something lost. Yes, the aching lover is the most dangerous of all.
“Fold your arms round me close and strain me so that our hearts may break and our souls go free at last. Take me to that happy place of which you told me long ago. The fields whence none return, but where great singers sing their songs forever.”

Joseph Bédier, The Romance of Tristan and Iseult

Glastonbury, England

England again.

It feels like coming home. It is home. The green barrow hills, the grassy fields. There is no weight of his parents’ house in Glastonbury, but they are not far. He knows the land is the same, the terrain is the same. The position of the sky and the land and the sea, written there on his heart. Somewhere scrawled on an atrium wall, graffitied on the inferior vena cava. This old river, this gentle sunlight. Fifty words for green. He is a child of the south, it is written in his DNA. The land, as always, calling its children home.

Home.

Have you ever walked through a field and recognized the air? Have you ever already known the sunlight on your back, known the patterns of the shadows on the ground? He wonders if this is how Severus had felt walking the streets of Snagov, looking up at the dark green leaves of the black locust and the grey alder, thick with chlorophyll. The trees are different here, he knows them before he touches them. They are made out of the same stardust, Harry Potter and the south. Yes, the wych elm and the hazel, holly and downy birch. The hawthorn too, this inheritance of all born here, deep in the south.

He has known magic since a day in a cabin on a seaflung rock in Cokeworth, when a half-giant had thrown open that hope of a front door, had said yer a wizard, Harry. He knows the flavors of magic. The deep and hallowed, controlled wonder of Hogwarts and Scotland. The wild and unrestrained oddness of Yorkshire. Here, in the south, it is not as raw as the magic of the north but it is deeper, denser. Lush as a carpet. A swollen tongue. He has no magic in him to unlock it, yet he can feel it in the air and the grass, saturated as a sponge. Is this how Muggles feel when they come here, when they talk about magic? Yes, magic. Spilling over, brimming past.

The south of England has always had too much of it. It is a magical place. We cannot breathe the words Tintagel and Avalon without the myths of past centuries ringing in our ears, stuck on our tongues, to the roofs of our mouths. In Glastonbury, which claims to be Avalon, the sword Excalibur was forged and King Arthur was taken. Yes, taken to sleep until he comes again, carried on a bier by four witch-queens. Perhaps, in his long sleep, he was buried. Harry knows that it has certainly been claimed here, that pilgrims and the curious have come to see the empty graves of Arthur and Guinevere, nestled side by side.
"Glastonbury," he breathes. "I've never been here."

"I have," Severus grunts, offering no more. The deep-set, nightshade eyes glancing down the road, getting their bearings. Harry can still feel the queasy pull of the Portkey from behind his navel, curdling his stomach with acid.

“I think I need a cup of tea. And to sit down for a bit.”

“The ground is right there. Sit if you must.”

“Severus.”

The other man says nothing, still frowning at asphalt and road signs. His pale hand comes to rest on the small of Harry’s back. A light touch, it could almost be played as nothing. (It is not nothing.)

"How far are we from -"

"A few miles."

"So close."

Severus’ considering eyes, staring at Harry. Adding him up, tallying the sum. "Yes."

Godric's Hollow. His birthplace. The place he had first greeted the stars and the dirt, born during the night in the height of summer. Lion season. He has visited once, in the thick of winter, looking for a sword and finding instead a snake. He remembers the snow. His parents’ home and the plaque in the ground. The engraved statue in the village square. The dark-timbered homes grown close together, like a thicket.

He has been once, he had hoped it would be immediately familiar, immediately accessible. Maybe it wasn't the right time. Perhaps, Harry Potter, it was not. Only seventeen with a world on his not-yet-broad shoulders. He is twenty-five now, his beard grows in by six o'clock, no matter the Shaving Charm. Perhaps, he had looked too closely, at house and ruin, at street and church. He had not pulled back to see the rolling moor, the trees misshapen and unearthly from the driving, unchecked wind. The ponds thick with weeds, the heath and the roses. Lizard clover and brookweed, daffodils and moneywort. Perhaps it is the land calling him home, he had never looked at the land. There had not been time. This had once, a very long time ago, been home.

Home is where you find it. This has not been his to claim for twenty-four years. He aches for his own bed, for Agatha's ruffled feathers and disapproving hoots. For his memory foam mattress and soft white sheets. For his own selection of teas from the shops, his own haphazard collection of jams and chutneys half-finished and half-forgotten in the refrigerator door. For the firewhisky above the refrigerator. For the sound of wind through Scottish trees outside his window and passersby below. The hum of magic in his blood, in his fingers. Home is what you choose, what you make of it. He has made his own long ago.

(Never, though, does he miss the mountains of paperwork. He wonders how old Herod Waterfield is getting on, down a confiscated toilet seat. With any luck, Ron has covered it in his absence.)

"There is an inn in the center of town," Severus says, pushing slightly on Harry’s back, “Come, you can get something there.”
As Severus settles the room, Harry thinks of home. He sits in the parlor of the inn, against a chair with a soft, red-floral pattern, staring up at a timbered ceiling and bright lights. The inn has lit a fire. His shins are warm, his face is warm. He fumbles the mobile from his jacket pocket.

"Harry!" Ron's voice always reminds him of a fire, a hearth, a warm bowl of soup. Yes, warm. There is something cherished in the comfort of two friends that require nothing of each other. They can sit in the same room and never speak, never needing to. Even after moving away, they might go weeks without talking when either is wrapped up on a case, then one will stop in the other's office with a bit of a grin and the mention of a pint, as if those weeks had never existed. Some friends require nurture, the care and feeding of hearts. Others are the scaffolding you build your life around. Ron Weasley, steel and aluminum, tubes of glass fibre, the scaffolding he hangs much of his life upon.

"Ron," he exhales, "God, mate, how are you?"

"Gettin' on, gettin' on. Bit wild here, you know? Mum's a bit beside herself. Did you know how boring Muggle chess is? The pieces don't even move! How are you? How's traveling with the old bat?"

Oh, er, maybe a few things have changed. He flushes slightly, thinking of the once-upon bat, laid out against bleach-starched sheets, moving like an earthquake, ruining buildings with his mouth, his clever hands, his study of a tongue. "Oh, um, it's not - not as bad as I thought, you know?"

Harry can hear the skeptical expression even through the mobile. "It's Snape. You sure about that?"

He wants to say it's different, he's different, he's changed. But that is not it, not it at all. Severus Snape is no different, there is little changed about the sharpness of his words, his hemlock tongue. Still bitter as ash, cruel as a thumbscrew. It is just a matter, perhaps, of seeing. "Yeah," he says, "I'm sure. We've... learned to work together. He's sharp as hell. It's different when you're not his student. He's almost... funny sometimes."

"... You sound like you like him."

"Well, he's not all bad. You know, a bit alright when you get into it. Knows his shit - "

"No, mate, you like him." There is an incredulous laugh on the other end, woven with exasperated affection. "Fuck, I owe Hermione ten quid."

"What?"

"She called it weeks ago. When you called her first. Said I should maybe get used to having him around."

"You're okay with that?"

"Well, yeah. If that's what works for you." A pause, "It does, er, you know, work for you? Yeah?"

"Yeah," Harry laughs, certain of the contortions of Ron's rubber-band face as he had tried to get that out. "It does."

"Wicked," Ron says, "So tell me about all the weird stuff, all I've got here is seventy-one-ways-to-use-bleach and I'm really hoping we can get magic back. God, I never want to scrub a toilet by hand again."
Glastonbury, these rolling fields laid low on the Somerset Levels; Glastonbury, made love to by the River Brue. Who can live as an Englishman without knowing Glastonbury? Though Harry has never been, the stories sit in his skin, between his shoulder blades. They stick, perhaps, in his throat. You could choke on King Arthur here. Glastonbury Tor, which had once been surrounded by water, which had once been called Avalon. That is, at least, the rumor.

The Tor is just to the east of the town. Yes, past the abbey and the town, past the paths, past the trees, past Chalice Well. Tor, an old word borrowed from an older people, a name for a hill. Glastonbury Tor, towering over the neighboring countryside, lording over the river, feels unearthly in its dominance. It strikes out of nowhere in the rolling fields, too strangely tall to seem natural.

They stand outside of the inn, looking up the asphalt road. Past restaurants and pubs, past a bookshop, past a clock.

"We'll visit the Abbey first, before closing," Severus murmurs, "Then up the Tor."

“How long until it closes?” Harry asks, "The Abbey?"

“Six o’clock.”

Harry nods. The Abbey is not far. As they walk, Harry stretching his pace to keep up with Severus' impatient stride, ruined pieces come into view. Bits of walls, remainders of arches. What once had been and never will be again. The Abbey is a national treasure and, as such, charges admission at the front and has an exit through the gift shop. Harry stifles amusement at Severus’ scowl when approached by an unaware costumed guide, offered a map of the grounds. “I’ll take it,” Harry says, cutting in before Severus decides on a course of evisceration, saving the world a new volcano.

“This is a circus,” Severus snipes.

“We’re here for a reason.” What reason exactly? The letter had been addressed from the Abbey, all those centuries ago. But it is a ruin of a thing now, covered hundreds of thousands of times over by tourists and visitors. What can they possibly expect to find here? Who would know about a letter from a monk named Galahad, talking about a deception? If it has been so well concealed for centuries, why would there be anything here? Out in the modern open, nowhere to hide? He had expected a dusty library, a forgotten abbey. Mysteries of the church. Not this, owned and operated by the British government and promoted in travel brochures. It might be a dead end.

He fiddles at the map for want of something to do. The glossy map explains that the Abbey had been founded in the 7th century by a Saxon king, Ine of Wessex. He had built just a little stone church, which now forms the west end of the nave. It had been enlarged and endowed throughout the centuries by various lords and kings, by St. Dunstan and the Normans. By the time the Domesday Book was completed in 1086, it had become the richest abbey in the land.

And then, a fire. All things are subject to fire, all great buildings have burned. The monks had sought to rebuild, had plucked the stones up, cut wood from the nearby forest, dug out the earth. Then, in 1191, they had found the bones. A king and his queen, buried together, on the southern side of the Lady Chapel. King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Lost once and found again.

So the story goes.
They move through the ruin, Harry's hand coming out to graze the once-walls. Is this what Hogwarts will look like, in thousands of years? It is strange to think about Hogwarts as an ancient story. The Dark Lord and the Boy Who Lived, ancient tales for future tongues. How will it be told? Will it be told correctly? Honestly? He looks up, moss-green eyes settling on the ascetic, sharp back. Black wool, black hair, black eyes. A hand the color of the moon, the color of sour milk, coming out to graze the stones of an arch. Will they talk about him? Will they say, the Boy Who Lived and Fell in Love? (It is a bitter suspicion that nothing will be remembered as it was, that no one will choose to remember a man from the north with a hook-nosed grimace and crow-feather hair. No one will say, he was loved, he was loved, he was loved. If no one else will remember, then Harry knows that he will have to tell it himself, over and over and over again, until nothing, not even the trees and the stars, could forget.)

The Abbey is less of an abbey now and more a collection of bones of the original structures. Only a few walls and arches stand. It is a ruin. There are also the two chapels and the Abbot's Kitchen. The Lady Chapel, to the side, is the most beautiful. They wander in that direction after exploring the Abbey proper. It seems to have a gentle sunlight, this church without a roof. It is surreal to watch nature reclaim something built by men's profane hands, it is strange to watch ivy and grass crawl over something that had once glorified God. Yet still, despite the Almighty, it has been taken back again. There is no ceiling to block the sunlight from his face. The long structure is covered with thick, green grass and creeping weeds. There is moss stuck between the ashlar masonry, there is ivy curled in the triple arch at the end. Once, these had been windows. Once, there had been a cross. Once, there had been black-cowled men to give prayer, their heads bowed for the Lauds or Vespers prayer. Chewing on peppercorns to stay awake during Matins, during Compline.

Harry moves past Severus, exploring the west end of the Lady Chapel, trying to imagine the past. The map had said that this had been the old church and, after the fire, the Lady Chapel had been built here. It had been considered the holiest part of the Abbey and dedicated to Mary, Our Lady, the Blessed and Weeping Virgin herself.

"Lovely, isn't it?" A strange voice, an odd drawl. Harry jumps at the sound, looking to see that he is alone in the ruins of the chapel, save for a man with a shabby grey coat and serpentine clumps of pitch-dark hair. A strangely thin and skeletal face, made worse by a too-pronounced brow, a too-sharp jaw. The cretin gives him an awful, yellow grin and removes his tattered stovepipe hat. He bows, deep and mocking. Harry backs away by a step, unnerved.

"Erm, hello."

"It used to be very beautiful, you know. Yes, very beautiful. A very beautiful chapel. Wood and gold, statues carved with flowers and ivy, yes. It was built after the fire. Look at this, you can blame Henry VIII for it, you know. Rotten king. He closed all the monasteries. Hundreds of 'em. Shame, really." The wretch meanders over to the edge of the chapel, picking an ivy leaf from the wall. "Though, nature does find its way."

"Who are you?"

"No one important," the man grins again, "Though I think, perhaps, that you are."

Harry looks for the way he came. Where is Severus? Where is anyone? It seems strange, just he and the oil-eyed man alone in the world. (This is not the first time that the world has seemed quiet. His heart picks up, his pulse rushes. He looks for the lost sun somewhere in an unfamiliar sky. The stones of the Lady Chapel seem to whisper, yet when he tries to listen, he can hear nothing. We know the worlds we belong to; we know the worlds we do not.)

"Are you going? Wait," the man says, grabbing Harry by the arm. He picks Harry's hand apart,
pulling the fingers back, staring at the open palm. "Don't you want your fortune read?"

"Erm, not really." He tries to pull his arm from the other man's grasp. The Seer is surprisingly strong. Harry sees only his own windbreaker-covered arm, the yellowed nails sharp against it. The man pulls at him. Harry catches himself staring at the strange eyes, the wild hair. Panic rises in his throat.

"Do you want to know about your lifeline, Mr. Harry Potter? Do you want to know how long it is? Where it goes?" The black eyes flash. "Your love line, do you want to hear about that?"

"Let go of my hand." (He does not have a wand to clutch so he considers a right hook, balls his fists up. He has always been wiry and lithe, good at throwing men off, good at rolling away. You have five seconds. One, two, three - )

Perhaps the Seer can read his mind. He lets go. "I have a gift for you to give to someone," the foul creature says.

"Give it to someone else, I don't want anything from you," Harry spits.

"Don't you?" That grin again. "You may be surprised. It is for the other. Something lost. Listen." He closes his unsettling eyes and begins to recite in a hollow voice. The words echo off the remnants of the stone walls, the bare floor. (The sound is empty as the room, stripped and bare. Ceilingless and boundless. It brings to mind a place Harry has never been, mountains he has never seen, a windy moor he has never walked.)

"The crow alight, his red-beaked stare, the empty grave, his golden hair."

Crows again. Mysteries again. He glares at the deplorable, shabby man. "A poem?" Harry frowns, "What should I do with a poem?"

"You'll know, Harry Potter. You always do."

"Tell me who you are."

"That's not the important question!" The Seer and his malignant laugh, sounding like the screech of violins, the creak of wooden stairs, movement in places it should not be. "Focus on the important questions, Harry Potter."

Harry frowns, rubbing one hand across his tired face. When he looks up again, the Seer is gone. A clutch of Muggle schoolchildren follow a tour guide about, learning about the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536. In 1536 there were eight hundred and forty monasteries, by 1546, there were none. The lands were sold off, the stones taken to build other things.

He looks back and forth for the disappeared wretch and his tattered suggestion of a coat. There is nothing to be seen. No, only children and sunlight. Only tour guides and their costumes, playing fourteenth-century monks. Their listening devices, their beautifully printed brochures. The ache of centuries distilled down to a couple of lines. The centuries-long story of the Abbey summed up in a few pages. You know, he thinks, turning aside, I am really fucking done with this bloody mystical shit.
He finds Severus standing in the Abbot's Kitchen, frowning at the fireplaces. It is a stone octagonal building with four massive fireplaces located in its corners. Of the entire Abbey, as far as Harry can see, the Abbot's Kitchen is the only structure to remain intact. There is a roof over his head; there is light coming through the windows. Birds call. Clouds pass. Harry stands behind the straight, dark back, watching the way Severus' chin lifts as he approaches, the way the shoulders straighten out, the fall of bleak-painted hair.

"Where have you been?" Severus grunts, turning to inspect a wooden bench. The room is filled with period-appropriate items. Pots and jars, brooms and firewood. There are vegetables set out on the table to further paint the picture of a medieval kitchen, as if a black-habited Benedictine kitchener might just sweep in through the door and light a fire, throw a pot over it, cut up some parsnips for a stew.

Harry isn't sure how to answer. "A man - er, wanted to tell my fortune."

Severus gives him a sharp look. There is a moment of hesitation. Words form in the air between them, never made real. Instead, he says, "You will find plenty of that mysticism nonsense here. It attracts them. Like flies." He turns back, muttering something sour under his breath about *at least not being here during the blasted festival*. Harry snorts, trying to picture Severus surrounded by thousands of people at a rock festival. The image is too absurd, he cannot see it. "Be careful," Severus adds after a moment, after an ocean of thought.

Harry nods. Swallows. *You too. Don't you dare think this is only about me.*

"I'm not sure what we're looking for here."

"The absolutely maddening thing," Severus says, prodding at a broom (it does not fly), "is that neither am I."

"Shall we take a pop over to the graves and then get a pint?"

Severus nods.

It is not far past to the old site of the tomb. The graves had been, as the tale goes, originally found in 1191 as the monks had dug into the soil, seeking to rebuild the Abbey. There, in the dirt, they had struck bone. The graves had been moved, reburied as a tourist attraction of a tomb. Now, it is only a marker on an open field. *Here lay Arthur once.*

**Site of King Arthur's Tomb**

_In the year 1191, the bodies of King Arthur and his Queen were said to have been found on the south side of the Lady Chapel. On 19th April 1278, their remains were removed in the presence of King Edward I and Queen Eleanor to a black marble tomb on this site. This tomb survived until the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539._
"There's nothing in here, is there?"

"No," Severus says, walking the length of the six-foot marker. Harry watches the dark jacket flapping in the wind. It is bright but the seasons have turned sharply. In September, it had been warm in the afterglow of summer, like an ember stoked long after the fire. Now, it has grown into October. The winds are warm but the sharpness of winter looms on their backs. Promising ice, promising snow. "There likely never was. More likely a medieval fabrication to draw money and power to rebuild the Abbey."

Harry nods, crouching at the tomb site. His short fingers spread out over the area. It is a stone rectangle in the ground, that is all. Grass grows within and without. Harry waves his hands over the grass, letting it tickle his palm. The letter had come from here. The connection had to be real, there is something here that they have not yet found. The grave is here, in Glastonbury, settled next to Guinevere's. It is empty. We have excavated it over and over and over again. Like pulling open a cupboard and staring, hoping to find dinner. Still nothing. What are we looking for?

"He was supposed to be taken to Avalon though."

“Yes.”

“It’s said to be right here, isn’t it?” Harry asks. He keeps his voice low, he is not sure why. "But another world. Like the woods of the Forest King."

“Yes,” Severus says quietly, cautious and dark. “The south has always been sick with other worlds. Most of them claim entrances here.” Other worlds, other places, laid right there on top of our own. Harry watches a strange collection of emotion on the other man’s face. He cannot identify it. There are flickers, as if watching something deep underwater float and bob to the surface, sink back to the seafloor. A flavor of regret, strange love. Ache. Severus turns to move past the grave. Harry catches his wool-covered arm.

"Wait," he says. You’re not his. He doesn't get to claim you. Severus pauses, his arm tense below Harry’s grip. The eyes black as a tomb, complicated as a knot, these twin fire alarms. (Harry doesn’t care. He is a creature of his gut and his heart, barging in first and thinking about it after.)

He kisses Severus.

Soft, like ash. Like the velvet lining of a coffin. Soft like peaches left too long in the sun. Bruised fruit, yes, this battered man. There is an ache in Harry’s eyelids, the press of them closed. I am so sorry for it all. Let me take it away. He takes Severus’ veinsick wrist, always too skinny, the tendons sticking out, the bones obvious. The taste of the salt of their mouths, the trade of the hardness of their teeth, their skulls, pressed into each other, the softness of skin and lip and tongue. Pressing together as they might fit into a tomb, only bone and treasure, made for later men to find. Severus' hands grip at him. Tightly controlled ache. (To an observer, it is a simple kiss. A gentle nothing. They cannot feel the desperate press of the fingers, the tightness of the closed eyes, the traded throb from Harry to Severus and back again.)

He pulls away, opening his eyes to the craters of the moon. Severus stands quietly, breathing as raw as the edge of a torn page. His eyes still shut, catching up to the world. Harry and his gentle hands, brushing the few strands of hair back from the older man's face.

Let us be honest. He is never attractive, he never will be. Yes, this ugly anglerfish of the deep sea, spiny and carnivorous, hungry enough to swallow everything in his path. Yes, this rawboned
creature and his dangerous mouth. Nothing on Severus adds up. Nothing is just right. It is not the first time that Harry has run his eyes like soft fingers over the knife cheekbones, the ache of the too-much nose, the too-thin mouth. Standing in the sunlight on the top of the grassy Tor, it feels like the first time. I see you. I'm going to love you. I hope you're okay with that. (I already do.)

That is the trouble with storybooks and fairytales. In them, the prince is always handsome, the princess is always beautiful, the ugly duckling and the swan. We do not fall in love like that. In the deep sea, the most horrifying creatures swim through the blackness of the bathypelagic layer. To see, they make their own light from nothing. Harry is leaning in, brushing the dark hair from the sallow face, loving the bioluminescence within.

A movement gentles them apart. A woman with pale hair and pale eyes, carrying a clutch of hyacinth and ivy. Her eyes wide at the look of them, standing there together at the edge of a medieval grave.

The woman blinks. Her white dress catching in the wind, her hand coming up to hold the hat over her wheat-colored hair. The air has grown colder in the afternoon, as they have explored the Abbey. The chill has sharpened as the clouds have collected, gathered together here above. Perhaps there will be rain.

"You," she says, staring at Severus. Reproach, fear, odd admiration.

"Me." Severus grunts. What the hell are you on about?

"You never come here," she says, frowning. She picks at the flower arrangement, resettling the blossoms. Her long, tapered fingers. Elegant, precise.

"I never go a lot of places," Severus bites. In his irritation, Harry can hear the cheap Cokeworth edge to the shape of his words, the roughness of the rich voice. Severus has not let go of his arm, his hands like sour milk, his black-haired knuckles like glaciers. Her eyes narrow. From a distance, they look like swimming pools. There is something unsettling and unearthly about her. She is pale and nothing is unusual yet Harry can feel the wound-up power within her, settled like a coil. It is not, really, unlike the land around Glastonbury. There is an odd magic to the land (even the Muggles can feel it, they talk of crystals and ley lines). In this white-tinged woman, there is an odd power to her as well.

She comes a bit closer, holding a hand up to shield her eyes from the sun. "Oh, you're not who I thought you were. My mistake."

"And just what delightful miscreant, pray tell," Severus asks, his hands digging in deeper, "did you expect me to be?"

She kneels at the grave, resting the bouquet. The ivy curling like a promise toward the ground, the hyacinth white and violet, against the inlaid stone. She glances up, her hand shadowing her eyes. "Edward."

Severus' hand stills. Ice. Cold. As if she had been Medusa, as if she had worn serpents in her hair. Harry moves forward slightly. "Who the bloody fuck are you?" Severus and his snake movements, his wand drawn and ready. He stands with it concealed in his shirt sleeve, the tip pointing out. A sneak's movement, a spy's movement. The woman glances at the wand, evidently unconcerned.

She stands, brushing imagined dirt from her skirt. Straightening out her sleeves.

"My name," she says, "is Morgan."
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience! Real life interrupted this but the remaining chapters will return to schedule.
Chapter 14

"Our ears hear only the percussion in our blood.

come into the shadows under this red rock.

Let's give ourselves to rhythm, we don't need speech anymore,

we're banging on the boundaries, the frontier fuck.

And I never wanted Bambi in my bed, only this

demonic, demolishing, devastating dance,

out here on the fringes where the instruments don't work,

too far beyond the track to ever find our way back."

Christine Strelan, Off the Map

Reader, stop. Consider the frame of the story, we have drawn close to the end. What do you find here in the dark? What are the edges of you, the edges of this tale? Where are you finding yourself? Here, yes, here be dragons.

Glastonbury, England

"Morgan le Fay?" His crypt-dark eyes thin as a blade. She is pale against the rolling green grass, the gently sloping hills, the grey stone of a ruined abbey beyond. A woman out of time. She belongs to the period before the abbey, she had been old when the first stones had been quarried, set upon each other. Morgan of the Wood, already a myth by the time Edmund Ironside, son of Æthelred the Unready, had been crowned King of England in 1016. Severus tightens his hand on his hawthorn wand. History should belong to history. (Things always should belong to their own time.)

"That's what they call me," Morgan says. The wind has picked up, she brushes the milk hair from her milk face (it is strange, he had always expected her to be dark). "I had another name once, but I have forgotten it."

She is standing at the head of the grave, her feet squarely apart, her arms folded over a violet dress, considering them. Lithe and spare, yet there is nothing slyphlike of her. Severus does not know what he had expected. Someone more ethereal perhaps, but Morgan le Fay is square and stout, more like Juno than any painting of the fae. Yes, Morgan, that half-sister of an ancient king. Morgan, jailer of
husbands. Morgan, called a witch by Muggles, who had tried to tie her up once, to a pile of wood, set it ablaze. (That's the thing about witches. They are very hard to burn.) Morgan reminds him of an inversion of his mother, the same earthy shape, the same sweep of skirt at the ankles. One fair where one is dark. A negative of the other. He does not know which was the first, which had been dipped into the silver gelatin in the darkroom. Which is true - the print or the genesis of it? One world, the darkroom. One world, the open air.

(She has ruddy cheeks. His mother had had ruddy cheeks. He suffers a glare.)

It is Harry that pulls the first card from the deck, lays it on the table. "Morgan," he says, every inch the hero, "why, exactly, did you think that Severus was -"

"They look similar," she says. Harry, despite the tone, quirks his lip, glancing at Severus. Told you, the expression seems to say. (Severus would like to hex it off his impudent mouth, out of those hornwort-green eyes.)

“You know him,” Harry says, wide-eyed.

"I leave the flowers for him," she says. She leans down, fixing a blossom unkempt by the wind. "He never comes here."

"Flowers. From Mordred. King Arthur’s murderer."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Come with me," she says, her iron-spine eyes narrowed, snagging on the look of Severus. His hook-nose, his arrowhead jaw. "This is not a short story."

Woods again. They move through the Willow Walk. Morgan veers them quickly off from the safe, well-known path written about in travel guides and marked by arches and sculptures. The rotblack, rich peat climbs into his nose, into his nose hairs, choking him. He imagines the past, the old druids dead and turning to leather in their bogs. Look for who is watching you here, past the trees. Dark-barked trunks and the things that lurk between them. We are terrified of the wood and what hides within. We are fascinated. Stay away, they say. But who can stay out of the woods?

“There did not appear to be so many damnable trees when we entered,” Severus murmurs. Morgan only smiles. She comes to a stop in a small clearing. Empty grass. Not a bird in the sky. "Is this it then?"

"Yes," Morgan says simply, waving her hand. A small cabin reveals itself. It is nothing from this time, nothing from his time. He wonders if they have stepped into a bubble not just outside of the world but out of the timeline itself. (Severus is uncomfortably reminded of the stories of Broceliande, of Morgan and her Val sans Retour, where she had trapped and abandoned unfortunate husbands to another timeline.) It is a simple wattle-and-daub structure that would not have been out of place in the 14th century. Yes, that dark and woven lattice of wood, the wheat-colored walls made of a strange mixture of sand and soil, pig shit and clay. It is pointed up at the sky like an arrow.

"Go in," Morgan says, crossing the threshold. He is dubious but follows. The inside is a surprise.
What should an ancient witch's hut look like? (He has been in many, this is the first time that he has felt strange.) It should not be lit with electricity, with the soft yellow glow of Tungsten lamps. It should not have apples on the counter and dish soap by the sink. There are shelves with plates of blue and white china, interrupted by odd jars and their ever-stranger inhabitants. He follows along one, comforted by the vial of Acromantula venom, by the stoppered jar of dried lacewing flies, by the strange lightshift of a bottle of pearl dust. He picks up the bezoar from the side table, otherwise crammed with papers and books, scrolls of ancient parchment. Weighs the stone in his hand, considering.

Harry leans against the little wood table, resting his hands on it. "Why do you have magic?" Harry asks, staring at the moon-pale witch in her purple dress, fussing about the kitchen. *Never one for subtlety, are you?*

Morgan and her smile. She opens a cupboard. "I stole it from him. From Merlin."

"Then it is not Mordred's?" Severus cannot help but think of Aglie and his borrowed magic.

"It is not," she says. "Edward's magic is different." She frowns at them, her pale face wrinkled like a blanket, "Sit, I'll make you a cup of tea."

"I am not interested -" Severus says.

"Look, you get the tea and the tale or nothing at all. Milk?"

"No," he grits, taking the chair nearest the door. (Harry next to him, a squeeze on the knee. There is nothing of want in it, only gentleness. Kindness. Severus frowns, trying to parcel out want and affection.) "I am sitting, as you *required*. Why do you bring flowers to Arthur's grave for Mordred?"

She tilts her jaw upward, a proud set. "Severus Snape, why don't you tell me? Have you never been in love?"

Harry blinks. Oh. It comes together, a key in the barrel of a lock. The tumblers shift into place. Mordred and his lost love. Arthur. *He loved Arthur.* It is never impossible to imagine. A man with a face as unfortunate as his own, with boots as dirty as his own. Who had been born somewhere in Orkney, far to the north, had carried that betrayal of the Anglo-Saxons in his very blood. Had promised himself to a king better than himself, had fallen in love with that same golden crown. (It was never the golden crown Mordred had loved, it had been the golden hair. They have gotten it wrong all this long time.)

You idiot, he scowls, thinking of Edward Mordred, king of lost things. Forgotten dreams come, entangled dragons. Severus and his lifetime of dreaming about strange stories that were never his own. Dreams of a lonely child fished out of a stinking river. They hadn't even bothered to put him in a basket of reeds, so no one called him Moses. "He's got an Anglo nose, don't he?" they had said. And yes, he did, so they gave him a name from across the sea, called him *Éadweard*, so that he would never forget where he came from.

"What happened?"

"They fell in love. They shouldn't have. Tale as old as time, you know how it goes." She shuffles in the kitchen. The teakettle hisses.

Yes, I know. He knows how it feels to fall in love, to have it ache all the way down. He doesn't need to look over at the man on his right. Harry. With his idiotically full heart, his foolishly frank stare,
that strange well of understanding that Severus will never understand. “I’m not wrong about you,” Harry had said. What does that mean?

"He murdered Arthur," Severus says quietly.

"Yes," Morgan looks up, "Tell me first," she says, "why you are here."

"You invited us," Severus says, staring at the sour-colored wall. He looks at the knit blanket over the armchair, at the cross set upon the wall.

"In Glastonbury, you mud-splattered fool," she hisses. Yes, Glastonbury, this home of King Arthur and his grave, the quest for the Holy Grail, for the place that Joseph of Arimathea had set his staff down and said yes, we shall build something to God upon this rock. Severus thinks of this green land, these open fields, these windy moors that have birthed the banes of his existence. Arthur and Albus Dumbledore, James goddamn Potter and his infuriating son.

"Magic has disappeared," Harry says, "we're looking for Merlin to find out why. And how to get it back."

Morgan nods, moving over to the table. She clutches a pack of crackers in her arm, a cut of cheese, passes about china cups. A tea kettle. "I thought as much. And you found Edward."

"Erm, well, he rather found us," Harry says, resting his chin on his hand. Severus and his peripheral vision. It is like being in class again, trying not to look. Who can stop looking at the sun? Yes, Harry in the light, his eyes caught by the Tungsten lamps, his hair ever a scribble of a black pen. Severus feels a flush of shame and ache knowing that he has befouled that hair, touched that skin. (Still, deeper, a flush of heat, wanting it again. Can you imagine a man behind a desk, looking at a boy with the world on his shoulders, shifting in the awkward light?)

"Where is Merlin?" Severus looks at her, tired of games.

"Not far." She pushes a full cup at him. He scowls at the grass-colored liquid. (Harry takes milk, Severus is better than milk.)

"Don't be coy," Severus hisses.

"Don't you know where you are?" Morgan and her knife-point glare. "You are sitting on top of Avalon, Severus Snape. Any creature in Britain, Muggle and wizard alike, knows that. Where else would he be? Merlin is the source of magic, he carries it with him. When he sealed himself off in Avalon, that is when you lost magic."

"Wait," Harry says, frowning at his tea leaves, "the source?"

"Well, rather that he carries the source," Morgan says, stirring her own cup. The steam rises up to the sharp A-frame ceiling, gathering in the rafters. "It is held in a cauldron. He'd apprenticed to Ceridwen as a boy and stole it from her." She grins an impish grin, "I drank from it later, so my own powers are not connected to his. It flows out from the cauldron, into anyone with an affinity for it. But once he sealed the doors to Avalon, none can get out."

Severus thinks of his meager knowledge of Ceridwen, that old Celtic witch. An ancient goddess. He is not so certain of the difference between old magicians and gods, the Muggle stories are never so clear. He remembers his old instructors in History of Magic, long before Professor Binns, slowly talking about Ceridwen first being introduced in the Black Book of Carmarthen. He knows that her hair had been wild and that her thoughts had been wild, that she had taken on a devious Merlin as an apprentice. How does the story go? If we trust the Muggles, then Ceridwen had had an ugly son and
had, with her mother's pride, sought to make him wise in compensation. She had brewed magic into a potion for a year and a day, as all good Celtic stories go, had hired a young village boy to stir the potion. (The boy had gotten some on his thumb, sucked it off. Then, in his flash of sudden knowledge, stolen the entire cauldron. What was his name? Emrys, called Merlin, stealer of cauldrons. Thief of magic.)

"That is how you still have -"

"Yes."

"I see."

Harry looks up, "And Mordred?"

Morgan shakes her head, "I never asked."

Severus feels a cold sense of dread. Up the back of his spine, pricking at his fingers. Like dew on summer grass, emerging from nothing. "Why did Merlin lock his wretched self up there?"

The answer comes unbidden, faster than the witch's tongue. Merlin, who has kept watch over something. Merlin, dread enemy of Edward Mordred. Merlin, with his hidden and ancient parcel, too big to be moved by less than six men, hidden for centuries in a convent, in a Templar room, in Avalon.


The witch, to her credit, looks pleased. Harry moves forward, inching along on the chair toward Morgan's crossed arms. "Is that it then? We get Arthur back? That's what Mordred wants?"

"You're a sharp one, Harry Potter," she says.

"Why? Why did Merlin -"

Morgan quirks her linen-pale brows, the color nearly disappearing into her skin. "Can't you see it, Mr. Snape? Mordred's father was one of the invaders. Merlin never felt that he could keep away from his father's interests. He always had a fascination with Anglo-Saxons, always at the shore and watching their ships. Until Arthur. Merlin also did not think an 'unnatural' relationship was the right way to present Arthur in his kingship. You must remember that there was no England then. It was a mess of emergent city-states and counties. 'Vessel' kings that were, quite honestly, far more powerful than kings. Merlin's only interest was in England, creating a power that all could unite behind." She pauses, "It was always England that Merlin cared about, the creation of England as a supreme power. What Arthur may have wanted never mattered."

"The Anglo-Saxons still came," Severus snipes, "And the Normans after."

"Yes," Morgan says.

"So, what's the point of all this?"

She sighs, takes a sip, "Merlin is used to control, I believe."

"Is Arthur still alive?"

"Yes," she says, "and no. Gwyn ap Nudd rules Avalon. He has always been fond of Arthur, they
hunted boar together once, if I recall. When Merlin needed a place to take Arthur, the story has always gone that he was in Avalon, so it seemed like the natural place to bring his body."

"Just the body?"

"Yes."

*King Arthur's body, deep in Avalon, which was Annwn.* He knows. All magical creatures yearn for it, that deep and dark afterworld. Sitting there low, underneath the earth. The Mabinogion has talked about it, the poets and their kingly idylls have alluded to it. It carries many names. Annwn was the first. It is low, ruled by Gwyn ap Nudd, king of the Tylwyth Teg. King of Avalon. These ancient stories, old myths, true at last, mixing together like a river's eddy into the sea.

They are quiet, thinking of the lost king.

Harry doesn't look up. He is quiet, for once in his godforsaken life. Severus gives small thanks to the saints. He watches the other man consider, adding up the columns, subtracting the other. The little swallow at the beard-scruff neck. (Severus and his tongue too thick in his mouth, his weakness for a fast-growing beard.) The bounce of the Adam's apple.

"Into Avalon then?" Harry says. That old conviction, like a boy sent to his death before a monster.

"If your goal is to speak with Merlin, yes," Morgan quietly affirms.

"How do I get in?" Harry leans forward, not looking at Severus, not asking if they will go together.

"We are *not* going in." *I have had enough of you throwing yourself into danger.* (He remembers too much. There is too much in the past. Monsters and their hot oil, torturers and their thumbscrews. Severus and his misery, who could breathe at last, knowing that Harry was alive, safe. The beat of his life counted out by the glossy covers of *Witch Weekly.*) *You will not go, you cannot, you will not dare.* *(Don't you dare leave me here alone.)*

He locks eyes with the other man, this green of dead bottle-flies, this black of necrotic want. Staring across a table and their old challenges dredged up, laid out by an old man's hate.

"We should go," Harry says. They have spent hours going in circles, scrapping at the obvious. Harry and his determination to scale into Avalon. His *wretched-fool* idea to constantly save the day. Severus says nothing, he cannot. How can he dare trust his voice of ruin, a voice that might betray him? It is better to be superior, this cold and supercilious nature. To be above any measure of want. Yes, he pulls his little-left dignity about him like his old threadbare coat, rising from the table in silence.

"Mr. Snape," Morgan says, "wait a moment."

"Should I go?" Harry hesitates at the door.

"Wait outside," Severus says, pretending to look in his pockets, trying to look anywhere but at the long-loathed man and his moss-eyed stare.

"Alright," Harry says. "Don't, erm, do that thing. You know, try to be nice."
Severus arches a brow. Harry nods, a slight smile. He moves slow, shuts the door behind him. Severus stands for the full measure of a minute, studying the woodgrain. He can feel the witch's eyes on him. Their consideration, their judgment. "What?" he finally breaks.

"Just some advice."

"Go on then," he hisses, hot as a cobra. "Spit it out."

"Don't cut off your nose to spite your face, Mr. Snape," she says. "I know your type."

"I haven't the slightest -"

"He's in love with you."

Severus stands still.

"And you're in love with him. Don't throw it away," Morgan says. "That's all."

Love, yes. That has been sitting at the edge this entire time.

Stop, wait. Have I done the worst, this worst of all things? He aches to have a scale like the jackal-faced god of Egypt, to borrow from Anubis and place his little heart upon it. Let us look. May we borrow your heart? Weigh Severus' against it, see how it oozes black and red, see how it drops below, heavy with want and ache. Yes, worse yet, heavy with love.

Here is the worst of it. He has always been hungry, has always been starving. He has always pocketed the ends of the bread, the salt packets and the butter pads. Yes, tucked away in his pocket. Starved children hide food, he has done this for decades. He wants to break off pieces of Harry like the ends of bread, the hard bits of a baguette, save them for another day, another year. Stockpile for the winter to come.

He leaves.

The room at the inn is cold. The vents have been closed, comfortable in their summer disuse. They open them, invite the recent heat in. Old steam pipes and their radiators. Severus casts a spell for a gentle fire, settles it in a cup. He gives it to Harry's white-cold hands without comment, without complaint.

"We have to do it," Harry and his habit of plunging into the bed, flinging words out behind him with little context. Severus grits his teeth, surely losing enamel. He tries to steady himself. His little tricks, yes. Focus on straightening out the spine, focus on unclenching his teeth. On breathing. One, two, three, four.

"Do what?"

"Find Arthur." (Yes, this ice in the folds of his brain, in the blood-brain barrier, in the plasma of his blood. You will not go.)

"Are you mad?"

"No, of course not, what do you mean?"
"We are looking for Merlin. We are restoring magic and not getting involved. That is it, Harry."

"We're already involved! This is all tied together and," Harry glares at him, furious, "It's the right thing."

"I have never given a damn for the right thing."

"Bullshit." Harry pushes himself back up, leaning on his elbows, those absurd, pine-needle eyes threading themselves into Severus'. Severus says nothing. Looks away, cornered. He gathers his breath up like plunging a bucket into a well.

“‘You’re afraid,’” Harry says, soft as a pillow, incredulous.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Just because I have spent my life pulling you from death-defying stunts and dammingly dangerous Dark wizards and that I am bloody tired of it does not mean -”

"I love you." It falls from that soft mouth. That dark-scruff mouth. Yes, there it is out in the world. As intense as taking on saltwater, gulping unexpectedly.

"How dare you say -"

"You told me not to say it unless I meant it," Harry and his bright eyes, the self-set jaw. "I mean it."

"You don't know what you mean," Severus mutters. You cannot say it, do not say it, take it back again. If you say it once, I will become dependent. I will need it, every hour of every day. Yes, say it again. I have no memory, I will lose it, forget it. This is the desert and your 'I love yous' are water. I have drunk of them, my glass is dry already. Say it, say it, say it again.

Harry gathers himself from the bed, little by little, long limb by long limb, until he is fully sitting up and reaching for Severus’ hand. He gives it. He does not know why. (His foolish body, betraying him without thought.) Harry’s hands are as warm around his own as a bath. This bright fool, this starlit face. "I love you," he repeats.

Severus is still, he closes his eyes. Tries to close his throat with them too, his uncooperative nostrils. Why do humans not come with a self-destruct function? He has always felt lost, adrift, like he doesn’t belong. There is a tide and he should be swept out, tossed into the depths, the lower layers. Instead, his feet are wrapped up in seaweed, these long tendrils of green, long-armed black (the fingers of Grendel). He stays put.

To ground himself, he has always collected facts. He has always felt like he does not belong, like he might be swept away. If he can weigh himself down with them, he might stay put. His mother had collected facts, had parceled them out as they walked along the shore of the North Sea. Severus had always come home laden down, seashells in his bucket and facts in his mind.

(A fact: The oldest known shipwreck is on the bottom of the Black Sea, a stone's throw from Romanian waters. It has been there since four-hundred years before the birth of Christ, as alien to the Son of God as Queen Elizabeth I is to Severus. He thinks about this, these strange distances. He thinks about the Greeks who had sailed it, rowed its thirty oars across the glittering water of the sea, who had taken water into their lungs as they had fallen beneath the waves. His ancient forebears, the first of all shipwrecked men. Tell me, looking at the ruin of your ancestors, tell me how you can expect differently?)

Harry reaches out, one hand coming up to trace the curve of his cheek, to run along the part of his mouth. Severus opens his mouth, trying to invite it in. Harry does not go, he hovers, the pad of his finger tracing up, up, up along the nose rounded as Glastonbury Tor, along the scorch-dark eyes and
their nightcovers of eyelids. "I love your mouth," Harry whispers, "and your nose. I love your eyes, I love your hair." Harry and his mouth. Severus cannot see it (his eyes are closed), but the heat is close to his skin, the spindrift humidity of the younger man's breath.

Touch me. You can survive drowning. Drowning is often a death, yes, but everyone takes a little water into their lungs now and again. Who has not drowned who walks on water? Severus there, shipwrecked. His boat takes on water. Lashed to a mast as Odysseus had once been. (Harry has always sung a siren song.)

"I love the way you're difficult as fuck," Harry goes on, singing this gentle rapture, this quiet song. "That you'll never admit to being wrong. I love the way you look when you wake up, your hair all messed up on one side. I love the way you cross your arms when you're trying to think of the best way to insult me." Harry then dipping, his hot tongue licking into the crashing wave of Severus' ear, the hard cartilage, the tender spot behind. "I love you," said from Harry’s mouth to Severus’ ears. He does not know if it is a liferaft or an anchor.

"You have too much ahead of you," Severus says, finally. His dark voice quiet, broken as a shattered vase. "The entire world, several of them, would take you." You could be anything you wanted to be.

"I don't want the world," Harry says. "I just want the bit where you are."

For how long? He thinks of Arthur, he thinks of Edward Mordred. Had they lain in bed trading these same words, these same promises? What good had it done them? Why is it that the most private parts of ourselves are the most obvious? Severus can peel his clothes off, can let Harry and his language of touch consume him. This is different. Hearts and their aches. It is the sound of the world, the sound of collapsing stars. Low-grade radiation. I love you. It drifts around them as constant as the atmosphere, as steady as the quiet light from the beginning of the universe.

How have they made it to the bed? Harry has backed them there, Harry above Severus. How has he needed this? In all of his wonderings, his fantasies, he has ached to possess the other man. Yes, to be above and be within, fierce as a gunshot, his wounding cock ruining the miserable, hated, beloved creature. Yes, to fuck and leave marked and half-wrecked. How is it not like that at all? Severus lays open on the peeled-back sheets, Harry whispering affirmations to his open collar. I love you, I love you, I love you. A need he has never guessed, we cannot always know our requirements. (Please, please, please, I need you.)

"You - I am not an easy man," Severus gasps into the sweat-sheen heat of Harry's shoulder, the open plain of unmarked skin. His mouth at the fountain, drinking, marking.

"I know," Harry says quietly, his hands reaching down, finding the ache between them. His hands, always rough, always the hands of a physical man, curling around Severus' cock. God, fuck, oh my fucking god, touch me. "I don't expect that."

Don't you? I don't believe you. (Harry's face is a challenge, come and find out. Severus and his terrible curiosity, going to his own ruin.)

It is sometimes strange. They have touched. Kissed, fucked. In a forest, against a wall, in a bed. Always half-concealed by clothing and hurry, by dark and nerves. "Leave the light on," Harry whispers when Severus reaches for his wand, "I want to see you." It is different to be made love to by careful hands in prayer. Severus touches Harry, his head bowing into the dip of Harry's neck as if hearing cathedral bells (they do not stop tolling, he cannot count them all.) Let me touch you. He has always been reticent, his hands do not belong on beautiful things. Harry as bright as an offering, as bright as a candle lit on an altar.
I love you. Yes, words like a diving board, hovering at the edge. You cannot dive into all seas. We like to romanticize those that jump off into nothing, trusting only their own landings. No, mountaineers must settle at base camp for a few days, allow their lungs and veins to acclimate to the lesser oxygen levels. No, divers must ascend slowly, allowing the pressure changes to occur gently, without ache, without the bends. The truth is that we are made for sea level, for constancy and quiet, never for extremes. There is no falseness about how we construct this language. To fall in love. To fall. Yes, from sea level to the deep, from constancy to extreme. As we go, we must allow ourselves these gentle changes. Severus at base camp, breathing in the atmosphere, these strange molecules of heat. He must warm up before he can say it: I love you. (It is growing cold. He claws at the boy, this warm-blooded bit of sunlight, trying to remember summer.)

I love you. There it is again, heavy as iron chains. Manacles. Constant as the tides, the thump of his own heartbeat. No one should want anyone like this. The thickness of it. It is too much, it leaves no room for air. He thinks of how his mother had cherished him, pressed him tight with her own arms, pulling him heavy against her cotton-clothed shoulders. Had crushed his face into that smooth space between shoulder and chest, he could not breathe. Yes, you can love something to death. Yes, you can love it into the ground.

I am afraid that you do not understand. You should not understand. I am afraid that one day you will realize the truth, the vastness of this want, the reach of my need. It does not end. I am afraid that you assume that my love will match yours, that it is a simple trade, an easy transaction. Back and forth. You might give me a glass of water, I will give you the sea.

(You will leave. You will be right to.)

Harry moves over him, within. Severus and his clutching, grasping, needy fingers. Fuck, yes, fuck me like that, do it again. It is difficult to not compare ourselves. He worships at Harry's solar plexus, at the spread of his shoulder blades, the ticklish spot in the small of his back. His body around Harry's own, keeping the other man sure and safe and alive. As he worships, he sees where he is wanting. Where is the cover of dark? Hide yourself. Milk against his jaundiced hands, his tallow fingernails. He grows mottled and blotched, nothing is kind to him, age included. You will ruin me. (He had never wanted to be a monster, had never wanted to be so base. So obviously and deplorably human. Here he is with his claws, digging in. Refusing to let go.) Don't you dare try to leave me.

Harry, you have come and asked to be the seafloor of the sea, do not fear the benthic storms. Do not pull away, all the water will spill out. Severus cries out in the dark, sinking his teeth into Harry's neck, sucking a dark spot in, settling into this awful need to claim.

They collapse into the bed, heavy-breathed and sweating. Harry shifting the dark fall of hair from Severus' eyes, wrapping around the long and drumbeat-hearted body, the two gentling between pillows and sheets and drifting off into sleep.
“Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer

Than this world dreams of: Wherefore, let thy voice,

Rise like a fountain for me night and day.”

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*

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Glastonbury

*(Maybe)*

Are you paying attention? What have I told you?

Do not go to sleep.

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They have fallen asleep. Their shoulders bare, the blankets twisted over hips and waists. Severus and Harry, their even breathing, the rain-promise humidity of Harry’s breath on the nape of Severus’ neck, gentling at the dark damp hair. *(I love you. How many times has he said it? Severus is a dirty cup in a sink and Harry has opened his own faucet, pouring it into the other man, spilling out where it is too much.)*

It is late, the night stretches on without end, without direction. The hours of the quiet shift of unconscious bodies, to and fro, together and apart, to the edge again and back again always. Like little eels pulled out of the sea, laid out on the beach.

They sleep, yes, and Harry dreams.

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Let us look at dreams.

It is a forest. Is this the same wood they have been running from all this time? Harry frowns, brushing his ash-soft hair back from his eyes, from his furrowed brow. Harry, twenty-five-years-old. All young creatures are beautiful in their odd ways, he has the bones to stay beautiful for years. The high cheekbones, the rough start of an oil-black beard. The square eyebrows like a marker on a redacted paper. The green eyes like light bobbing across a sea, calling home boats borne ceaselessly. Yes, nervous fingers too, shoved into windbreaker pockets, fiddling with forgotten receipts and
He is watching the dawn. It seems to come slowly, more slowly than usual. Odd. It is impossible for light to change its speed so it must be the Earth causing the trouble, slowing down its rotation. (He has heard that we are always slowing down. The moon and its greedy grasp, the brake pedal of its tidal lock, dragging us into stillness at the rate of a reduced 1.7 milliseconds per century. Maybe this is then a different time? Not a different place, somewhere in the future, somewhere with a longer day? He considers. He does not know.)

This odd wood. He has been here before. (Where is here? When Harry dredges up the vision of a globe, he cannot imagine any place to put the pin.) Scan the earth, the unfamiliar scenery. There is a burnt stretch to the left and a wood to the right. There is nothing of offering in the burnt-bread left, only scrabbles of tumbleweed and ruin. So he goes right. As Harry walks, time passes. (In dreams, if this is a dream, time is suspect and unusual. We cannot count on each minute to last the same, cannot count on our surroundings to be steady. Harry moves through the wood with the suspicion of dreamers.)

Little light comes through the leaf-latticed canopy. Still, he picks through. Lifts his legs over fallen logs and the ants in the lichen. His legs are scraped by the understorey of bushes and shrubs. Little ponds and heath. Through sycamore, through ash. He can hear the hush of water long before he comes to the reed-fenced edge of a river. (It is not a surprise. In the West Country, a river is never a surprise.) Harry leans down, picking up a rock, smooth as a coin, skipping it across the surface. Watches until it sinks. He turns to the nearby copse of trees, unsure of which direction to go. Should he strike left or right? North or south? We never know the best ways. He frowns again. The broad-leaved trees shade the ground; it is dark here.

Something rustles, surprising a hare. A face in the bushes. Harry startles at the movement, his head snapping up. Skeletal and angular, that desaturated skin and wild hair. Dark as a misgiving. The eyes are familiar and yet not, he is used to something else in the eyes. Something more brutal. Here, only wildness, only appraisal.

Harry freezes. (He wishes he had a wand to raise, instead he only tightens his fists.) "It's you."

The man stops, studying him. “So it seems.”

Harry stays still. “I've seen you before," he says, taking in the long snake hair.

“Yes.”

"You brought me here. Before. And now."

“Yes.”

_Goddammit, work with me here._ Harry squares his shoulders, his jaw, his bitten lip and his clenchtight fist. “Alright, so what is it? What do you want me to know? I'm here, you see? I'm in the middle of your damn wood. You brought me here. Tell me what you want.”

He thinks he spies a smile on the other man, an echo of a sardonic cut to the mouth. Mordred sits down on a pockmarked rock, looking out to the horizon. Harry follows the glance. When he looks there, out past the trees, there is a line of mountains skirting the area. A pass set between two peaks. It seems oddly familiar; he cannot place it. "If you want to leave, Harry Potter, you can just go back the way you came. I brought you here, I did not force you to come further in."

There is a haunting caw in the air. An inkstain appears in the distance, set off by a cloud. Like ink in
water, the darkness grows larger, larger still, until Harry can see the shape of a dark-winged bird in the sky. A crow. *Always a damn crow.* Mordred holds out an arm. The crow, red-billed and large, alights. Settles there on the forearm, a familiar old dance. The comfort of falcon and falconer, knowing the other like a page knows its own book. A long-ago sentence repeats in Harry’s head. *I wouldn’t doubt the King in his own forest.* He eyes the dark, skinny man and his crow-touched arm uneasily. (There is another memory in his mind. A man with an angered stare, a hiss of a whisper on the stair, "you’re not suspicious enough." Yes, Severus would say, *it's about time.\)*

"Tell me," Harry says with a too-even tone and too-narrow eyes, "what's going on."

"All I want," Mordred says, "is that which is *mine* . And you, for better or worse, are the only man who can help."

“Arthur,” he is quiet, remembering a story told in a daub-and-wattle hut. Arthur, golden-brown. The king who was once and will be still.

“The same,” Mordred says. Harry can scent him on the wind. Ancient parchment and alkaline fenwater. He peers at Harry very intently as if adding up the measure of him, judging the sum.

“Morgan said - Merlin has him. In Avalon."

"Yes. And that godforsaken tyrant of a man has sealed it up. I *found* the body. He moved it before I could get to it. And now this. I cannot get inside." Mordred looks down at his long, olive-sallow hands. Harry follows, noting the pale scarring on the fingers, the black-haired knuckles. The burnt-ends eyes look up, piercing Harry like a needle. "You can though."

Fuck. No. "Why me? Erm - you know I don't even have magic right now, it's sealed up with him. In there."

“It is the land of the dead. Only those who have died may enter. *I* have never died. Though, *you* did once."

“You’re kidding.” The words fall flat from his mouth, thinking of what he is being asked. *Go into Avalon and retrieve Arthur's body.* Harry remembers a letter from Viviane, from Galahad of Corbenic, speaking of betrayal and machinations. He thinks of Severus, back there on the bed, that bundle of rags, his throat pulsing at the thought of someone interfering with that hesitant unfurling of their start. But a question remains, itching between his shoulder blades.

"But you were the one that killed Arthur," he says. It is the piece he does not understand. *You killed Arthur. Everyone knows that. You were both on the battlefield and you ran your bloody sword through his side. He bled out on the ground, in the dirt. That's how we got in this whole damn mess.*

"I did that foul thing, yes." Mordred and his ovenpit eyes, hooded and dark.

"Why?"

"Tell me, Harry Potter, when you learned the History of Magic in that accursed *Merlinian* school of yours, when they taught you how to turn a rat into a blasted teacup, to take its mind and imprison it into something that cannot move, that cannot blink, did they ever tell you right from wrong?"

"Wait a minute, everyone knows about curses. The Unforgivables are illegal and everyone knows that, not that everyone cares but -"

"More things should be illegal," Mordred growls. "And your beloved Merlin. Tell me, Harry Potter, did you know that he invented those same Unforgivables?"
Yes, that same chill. Down the spine, pricking at his wind-red cheeks. "No." He stands still, watching the way Mordred feeds the hungry crow, offering dead mice to the rust-red beak.

"They were used first in the year 535. At Camlann." Camlann, the last battle. Camlann, where Arthur fell, struck down by Mordred's own sword. Camlann, the first recorded use of the Unforgivable Curses. Harry steps forward without thinking, his mouth slightly open at the firesworn bitterness on the dark-coated man's face. It comes together. An Unforgivable. A lover striking down his beloved. A man who wanted them parted. There is only one explanation, one story, all this long time. Yes, it comes clear now, like land across a long-sailed sea.

Imperio.

"Imperius?" He whispers. It is strange to think of the invention of this foul curse, that it had been dreamt up by a living man, by someone who gets rocks in their shoe and drinks ale, who breathes and screams too. It seems like something as evil, as spine-piercingly wrong as Imperius should be something that is found, discovered, unearthed. That it should not be borne from human minds and human hands. But it is as manmade as a gas chamber, as a Gatling gun. There is a time before us, so naturally, there is a time before imperio. (Someone had to say it first.)

"Merlin cast it. At Camlann, on the battlefield. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. He lifted my arm like it was his own, raised my sword, ran Arthur right through the gut like an accursed wild horse." (The strangest discovery, that the cruelest monsters have two hands, sweat down their skin, hangnails and beating hearts, that they have looked up and loved the same sky.)

“He forced you.” This sweat-cold dread in his crown, down his spine, the small of his back. Tickling across his shoulder blades. Yes, he thinks of his own sword, the one he'd pulled from a hat once, nicking his palm on the rubies. Sometimes things jump into our minds unbidden, images we cannot get rid of. No charcoal scrub will scrape them out. He sees himself with the sword, running it through Severus' side. Cutting through the spine as easy as snapping a wishbone after supper. Torn skin, exposed muscle, the sick bits of fat like those cut off from a steak, a bit of bone-in pork. He chokes on his own spit, sick with the sight. I would never, never, never do that to you.

“Well,” the black eyes like a cave, the light like dripstone, “He tried. Arthur has never quite died.”


“Yes,” Mordred says, “By my own magic, never Merlin’s. Merlin would have buried him happily.”

“If his body is in Avalon then,” Harry says, swallowing, “where's the rest of him?”

Mordred and his considering look. He reaches out an arm, extending the red-billed crow and its fierce-eyed stare. The coal-black wings that have spread out over England, holding the moors and the forests, the lakes and the seas. Yes, gathering all of England up to him like a lord, like a lover. "What do you know about crows, Harry?"

Harry doesn't like the way this is going, not a bit. Crows, Pyrrhocorax, these oil-dark birds and their unsettling intelligence. Crows, which have followed Harry and Severus this whole time, their uneasy stare, their curled talons. Crows, who mate for life, who mourn their own dead, bring gifts to the kind. Crows, yes, and this one, the red-billed and red-taloned creature, is a crow. It is precious to Cornwall. The red-billed chough calls to all Cornish men, flying on their coat-of-arms. It calls to Harry's own Cornish blood, scrabbling at him too.

"What are you telling me?"
Mordred strokes the burnish-bright feathers. "Did you know there's a legend, common in Cornwall, that when Arthur died, his soul did not leave the earth but instead was sealed into the body of a red-billed chough? That the red of the beak and the talons are the red of his spilled blood?"

"What the bloody goddamn fuck. He points at the crow, furrowing his brow. "Is that -"

"The red-billed chough left Cornwall. You know, they also say that its return will mark the return of Arthur. It has returned, recently in fact."

"So, you're saying that you want me to just barge into Avalon with a bloody crow then and what - shove it into his body?"

"No, that would be absurd now, wouldn't it?" (Harry is certain that he can see Mordred's black-beetle eyes glitter with odd amusement.)

Harry can't help but roll his eyes. "Obviously." He considers then, biting his lip, focusing on the heavy weight of the Forest King and his wood, the beaded stare of the crow, asking for his help. Quietly, he speaks. "How do I do it? If I do it, I mean. How?"

Mordred shifts on the rock, resettling his sack, his hat, his blackwing crow. "A spell. The Iseult Charm."

Iseult. He knows that name. Iseult of Ireland, fair and goldenhaired. Iseult, promised to King Mark, who had been ferried across the Irish Sea by the knight Tristan. Iseult and Tristan, those ill-fated lovers who had accidentally drunk of a love potion, ruined against their own will, against their own determined hearts.

The ship had been bound for Cornwall. (Back again to Cornwall, seat of legends and old loves.)

Harry swallows. "How does it work?"

Mordred fixes him with a very steady, dark stare. "It will open any world, shorten any distance, move anything. It is performed only by those in love who have been separated and will tear anything down in its path to reunite them. Severus will cast it and you will do the same from the other side."

"Severus. A storm of disquiet in his stomach. He might be sick. "Then why haven't you done it?"

Mordred scowls at him (it is a familiar look, a familiar feeling). "Impossible without a body, Harry Potter."

"What if it doesn't work?" Yes, that old haunt, that old yellow-tinged sickness of ourselves. I love you, do you feel the same? Let us feel the edges. He closes his eyes, remembering the night before (possibly, as he sleeps, the night even still now). Yes, his mouth on Severus' neck, at the curl-torn interruption of the scar on his throat, whispering I love you, I love you, I love you. As if, with his breath he could peel open the scar again, sink there into Severus' carotid, spill his love like an intravenous injection.

Severus had said nothing back. Harry had waited like a hiker in a canyon, waiting for an echo. None had come. No, the longer it goes unsaid, it is easier to stop looking for the ship in the port. It is not coming. It will not come. If we call marco , there must be a polo. Heartbeats consist always of two sounds, the first and the second. One made by the closing of the atroventricular valves, the second by the closing of the semilunar valves. Yes, there must be one and then the other for a healthy love, for a healthy heart.

He has knocked, there has been no answer. He swallows again (too much, too much, his stomach
uneasy, spit in the gut). Again his voice, quiet and harsh. "How?"

Mordred’s hand reaches out, uncurling the long fingers and their dirt-painted fingernails. In the center rests a single gold coin. The soft-worn design of a dragon on it, hissing at the edge. Mordred offers the coin to Harry. He takes it, still heavy and warm from the heat of the Forest King’s skin. "When you are there, in Avalon, when you have found the body, put this on your tongue."

"And then?"

"We’ll do the rest." A coin, all this time, to make way for the passage of the dead man. A magic coin. Go in reverse, Arthur, come back. See Phlegethon there and Styx again too. Mordred and his bribe for Charon, paying for passage back.

"Where do I go?"

Mordred points to the distance, the mountains and the sky. "That way."

Harry nods, gritting his teeth. He thinks of Severus, sleeping. How long has it been? Does time move differently here? The air is strange. It is the absence of humidity, this sharp and dry wind that cuts like a scalpel in the nose. It hurts a little to take a breath. His bones are tense, his spine is tense, his scalp is tense. Yet, somehow, he is not sure why the tension exists. Perhaps it is the odd landscape, at once familiar and yet not. These rolling moors, the grey, sunless sky. The trees and their finger-branches, trying to draw down the clouds. This spinney of alder.

Look past, to the road where Mordred points. Look to the shift of the sky. Harry can see the progress of atmosphere from the wood into Avalon. The sky in two parts, the bone-pale sky eddies and swirls into the sharp summer blue of the Isle. This swirl of blue and white together like a cataract. Yes, pointing the way then to Avalon.

Harry pauses, turning to face Mordred soundly. "One thing, just one."

"What?"

"Do you love him? Arthur?"

And yes, when Edward Mordred stands up, skinny and wild-haired, his spectral skull of a canvas-torn face, his bleak eyes and bleaker-still hair, yes, Harry understands why he is the Forest King. He understands now why grandmothers warn children to never get lost in the woods.

"More than anything in this world," Mordred hisses, dark as woodrot, "And the next."

Harry swallows, nods. Looks back at the mountains and their pass. Forward as a river then, rivers never flow back.

Let us look at Avalon.

The path takes Harry through the forest, shifting from pine and cedar, hawthorn and elder into apple trees, thick and heavy with fruit. The path, mostly gravel and dirt, is well-swept. The light of the sky grows stronger. The green grows brighter. The water surrounding the Fortunate Isle glitters with the
light. As he comes to the edge of the lake, he can see the Isle. A hill that rises from the water. A castle sits on top, black like a slit in the jaybird sky. He hears owls. A cacophony of owls and their hoots. They peer out of the apple trees as if the leaves have eyes and suspicions.

He keeps on. Comes then to a wooden boat. A woman half-asleep in it, a book laid open across her chest and a sunhat across her face. He looks at her fair hair, her square fingers, her brown-leather shoe.

“Morgan?” He asks. The lakewater jostles the boat. She flips one edge of the sunhat up, peering at him with her mirror eyes. She yawns.

“About time.”

“You were waiting for me?”

“Yes,” she says, "Took you long enough." She gets up, brushing the sand from the folds of her dress. "Are you ready then?"

“Yes," Harry looks doubtfully at the little boat, wooden and brown against the water. “In this?”

“It’s the only way across. I can pilot it to the shore. I would take you the full way but -”

“It’s sealed.”

“Yes.” Morgan, at least, looks sympathetic. Sealed save to those who have the right to it by death. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Had Lived and Died, marked once again by death. Because who can leave him well enough alone to his Hogsmeade bedsit, his cups of tea, his bit of paperwork? To Gawain Robards and his endless enthusiasm for diagrams? To Severus and his acid touch, searing through the skin like a chemical burn? To the way Severus rattles in the dark, Harry and his arms like a blanket, soft and gentle. I've got you, I love you. Let me take care of you. His smile hurts at the corners. He thinks of Severus, that peculiar scent of hellebore and hand-rolled cigarettes. He thinks of his own ceiling, known from nights lying awake studying it, naming the spiders in the corners.

Morgan frowns, putting out a hand on Harry's arm. Her touch is firm and solid, earthy. He feels a wave of gratitude at the old witch. There have been so many stories of Morgan le Fay, the evil temptress, the witch in the woods, he wonders now if any of them are true. "Be careful, Harry, Avalon is a dangerous place."

He shrugs, "I'm okay in a fight."

She shakes her head, "I mean that it's… that not many who go there wish to leave. Be careful. Remember why you are there."

Into the boat. He pulls in his arms, his legs, his uncooperative hair. Into Avalon then.

Where is Avalon?

This ancient and long-raptured place. Let us look then under the bed, peel back the rivers and the sea, behind the caves. Yes, let us look for it there. The old stories, the Mabinogion and the Preiddeu
*Annwfn* argue that it is perhaps part of Wales, in the kingdom of Dyfed, or perhaps an island out of nowhere. Some say it is below the earth, underground. Others still, look at Glastonbury Tor and know that it sits there. We all make our way there eventually (though no one comes back to tell us the details, to make a map, leave breadcrumbs along the way). Harry has been to a whitecast train station once, that haunting version of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. He knows now where the trains go.

To Avalon.

Let me tell you about how it feels to come home. This soft-sloped land and her green-grassed pastures. The cold-lipped blue of the sky. The otherworldliness of the Forest King's wood melts away like running warm water over icy fingers, like a bite of mincepie to a starving man, like peeling back the blankets and crawling into your own bed after a very long day.

The sun is warm here. His boat comes to rest on a mud-sand shore. Long grasses and reeds crowd the edge of the low-lying island. Ancient Precambrian rocks strike out of the dirt, like graves of the past. Schists and shale-grey phyllites. As he saw from the other side of the lake, the castle sits on the center of the hilly island. He can hear the squealing of hogs somewhere out past it. Birds flit over his head, a row of lapwings on the battlements. Owls call too. A roebuck startles as he walks up the rocky path, a dog follows after.

It is difficult, when walking into a castle, to not compare it to another. Castles, these old fortresses, are cut from the same cloth. They wear the same stones that keep the cold in them like an icebox. Harry is an Englishman, he is used to seeing castles in various states of disrobe. He has seen their curtain walls peeled back, their battlements removed. Castles are not unusual. The empty ones can become as nameless and necessary as the landscape. "Where's the river?" you might say. "Up over there," the answer comes, "past the old oak tree and the rock path, past the old castle too." Living castles are different, strange and vibrant. Harry steps up to the castle, lit from within, with silent guards keeping watch.

He has been to a living castle once before. Had taken a deep breath, gotten in a little boat, crossed a dark lake with a half-giant. So here, he gets out of a little boat from the other side of another dark lake, takes another deep breath, squares his green-jacketed shoulders, walks across a drawbridge lit with lanterns, yes, and torches too.

The guards are silent but watchful.

"Erm, hello," he says. They say nothing in return. "Where am I?"

"Caer Sidi," one of the guards takes pity on him. Harry nods, though the name is meaningless. "Gwyn ap Nudd rules here."

"Can I see him?"

"He's on a hunt with his hounds," the gauntleted hand waves out to the edge of the forest, where the trees fade out into a stunted elfinwood.

*Try again.* "Is Merlin here?"

"Yes. He's expecting you, go on." The guards wave him in. It is only after Harry is past the portcullis that he realizes they had never asked his name.
The castle is very quiet. The guards had stood silent at the entrance but here, deep within, there is nothing. It is an unsettling feeling. Harry moves gently through the dark, hesitant as prey. The castle is not so unusual and opens into a large Great Hall lit with torches set within sconces and recesses. Banners hang from the stone walls, there is a procession of long wooden tables set heavy with fruit and meat, ale and wine. The smell of roast boar, the haunt of bread. Harry's mouth spikes with hunger. He thinks of Morgan's warning, "be careful".

There is a fire at the end of the Hall. As he gets nearer, he sees there are two dark wingback chairs set before it. A movement in the one to the right. He is not alone.

There is a very still shadow on the chair. Beyond the chair, the fire sets off the sharp dark bite of the wingback frame. Closer, the bit of firelight begins to open his sight to the face half-turned to him. The lined and vellum-colored skin, the twitch of a tinsel eye. At first, Harry sees a mane, but this is no beast, no lion, no griffin. Just long curls beneath a peaked velvet cap, catching the light.

Merlin.

"Hello there, Harry Potter." A voice in the dark, rich and amused.

Harry has read of Merlin. In myths and legends, they imprint onto our subconscious. We do not have to describe Hercules to paint an image of broad shoulders and blood-pumped biceps. Let's move closer to home. We do not need to whisper Van Gogh to see the nervous, water-colored eyes, the rust hair, the bandage on the ear. So then, Harry has read of Merlin, has formed his mental image without ever knowing.

He is half-right.

How is he right? Merlin turns to face Harry. He moves deliberately in his chair, his movements calculated and careful. There is the feel of gold in him, in the lined face and the liver-spotted hands. He feels like home, like Scotland and Hogwarts, like reason and measure. Like magic, like wildflowers, a gust of wind. How is he wrong? Merlin raises the woodbark-dark eyes to study Harry. The hair is long, yes, but tumbles down in long curls of gold and sunlit brown like afternoon sun on a patch of leaves. See the sharp nose, the heavy jaw, the cruel-set mouth.

"Er, hello."

"And so, you have come to Avalon," Merlin says, a grin on his mouth and in his eyes. "Seeking magic, I hear."

"You were following us," Harry says, tension in his gut.

"I had someone set eyes on you."

"A dead someone," Harry chances a guess.

Merlin shrugs, "Does it matter?"

"It does," Harry grits, "If he tries to kill us."

"He did not aim for you."
"Why?" He looks up, frog-green eyes on the ancient wizard. Seagrass eyes on the old man. It is a question of more than the Inferi's target. \textit{Why did you do it? Why are you still doing this, all this time later? What is the point?}

"What would you do for love, Harry?" Merlin asks, soft as clover. As the skin of peaches. Soft as rotted fruit. As overworn leather.

Anything. Anything. Anything. Yes, an image unbidden again of a spit-sharp man as strangely angled as a moorland tree. A long neck, his sallow skin like gum arabic. Harry thinks of Severus, those knifewound eyes, that hungry mouth, smelling always always always of a bit of tar and a bit of soap, of formaldehyde and salt too. \textit{I love you}, Harry had said. Yes, had said to his mouth and his hair, his knuckles and his knees. Severus had said nothing back. (But Harry thinks of that moment, there in the bed. Severus had gripped at his arms, fierce and tight. The bruises would come later. Had stared at him for the long measure of a minute, an hour, a full revolution of the sun, as if trying to memorize every detail of Harry's face.) \textit{Do you love me?} It aches, he does not know.

"And for love of your country, your land, your people?"

Harry bites the inside of his cheek, soft as a peach. \textit{Anything, I think. I don't know.} He has learned of heroic men. He thinks of Severus, of Vlad Tepes. Severus had showed him the paintings of the old hero, still hanging on the walls of schools and libraries. Had pointed out Poenari Castle, the maybe-grave at Snagov Monastery. He had ruined Turkish lives to save Romanian ones. \textit{He did it to save us, to keep the invader off our shores}, Irina had said. (The old dread Impaler, sticking men on pikes to terrify the Turks. It had worked. Tell me, tell me, how many eggs do you have to break before it isn’t worth it? Before it isn’t worth it at all?)

"Did you have to do it like that though? Imperius?"

There is a long quietness in Merlin. "Tell me what you would have done if you had looked out there and had seen what I saw. The invaders were winning. The army was talking, they knew of Edward in Arthur's tent every night. And then I saw them on the battlefield leaning toward each other -" He pauses. "We would have been lost."

"You ruined them. Their lives."

"I saved many more." He focuses on Harry. Merlin and his long beard, Merlin and his owl-brown eyes. The wizened skin and the liver spots, yes. "Come, sit. Talk with me awhile."

Merlin pats the chair opposite him. The fire is warm, the air is heavy with the scent of demi-glace and pork fat, apples and dates. Harry breathes as harsh as acid rain, rough as driftwood. One hand shoved in his jean pocket, feeling the weight of the coin in his palm, the warmth of his own skin reflected back at him. Severus, out there in a different world laid on top of his own. Separate yet together. This coin, this promise of return. In the metal of the coin, he can feel Severus.

A spell to connect separated lovers. His hesitant fingers, scraping at the hope of gold. \textit{What if it doesn't work?}

Look up, back at the shore. Look at Severus in his sea-tossed bed, starting to stir. The vine-black
tangled hair, the start of sun behind the edges of the drawn curtains. Look at the impatient visitor in the chair, still yet unnoticed, drinking a cup of strongly brewed tea.
Chapter 16

“And a softness came from the starlight
and filled me full to the bone.”

W.B. Yeats, *The Wanderings of Oisin*

Glastonbury

First, the sense of wrong.

It starts with the absence of warmth. Strange how quickly we learn to expect it, how our worlds readjust to accommodate the warmth of skin, the gentle rustle of sheets, soft breath, even a snore. His arms gather nothing. There is nothing there but air, nothing but cotton sheets and their loose threads. Severus looks at the empty-glass side of the bed, long since cooled. He blinks, breathes, turning over an engine. Then, a movement catches him from his peripheral vision. The sound of ceramic on ceramic. He turns and sees then the interruption at the end of the bed, a long-loathed face. Bone-dust hair.

"You know, I was beginning to think you would sleep all morning," the Comte says, setting down his tea, pulling the wrinkles out of his white sleeve (they did not exist). The scent of bergamot in the air. (Severus eyes the tea, the rise of panic knotting in his chest. He would like to knock the cup from the Comte’s hands. Yes, if he can do nothing else, he aches to stain that white suit with Earl Grey.) Severus curls his fingers together in a fist like a general gathering his troops.

"What the Knockturn-blasted fuck are you doing here?" Where is he, where is the goddamn brat? What the fuck have you done with him? Harry? Aglie, I swear on my mother's grave, I will pull the bones from you and scrape them with my teeth. It's no good, we know the sound of war drums, the bit of dread. He looks at the bathroom door, the door to the room, hoping for a tangle of black-bramble hair and a seesaw smile. Nothing.

"Really now," Aglie says, "No sense of hospitality at all."

"Tell me what you've done." Severus' voice is sharp as a gunshot. It is maddening, really, how Aglie calmly continues to stir his tea, refusing to take any bait. Severus fumbles at his nightshirt, at the suddenly aggravating amount of buttons. He needs to get dressed. To get out of here. To find the goddamn idiot who has disappeared. To drop Aglie from a great height. Yes, all of these are priorities. He looks about the room to orient himself. Yes, the awful floral wallpaper. The heavy cherry-wood wardrobe. The shoddy reproduction of a Waterhouse painting above the bed, showing the Lady of Shalott in her pale dress, in her wooden boat, sailing on a river to oblivion. Her wistful face and the water sick with river plants. The pied flycatcher pecking for a scrap of dinner. Bream maybe, pike perhaps. Severus looks down at his hands white-knuckled and blackhaired in the unfortunate sheets. The sheets empty of any measure of Harry Potter (empty of any measure of brightness).

"It's as if you were raised in a barn or something," Aglie mutters.
Severus raises his wand, his voice soft as black mold. "You will tell me what you've done with Potter."

"Professor," Aglie stares at him, a very fixed and measured look. "I am here to help."

"Obviously," Severus offers a nasty smile. He can control the panic in his face but not his conspicuous hands. He fumbles at the bed, at the negative space where Harry is not. The blankets are cold as a tundra, bearing no memory of The Boy Who Had Better Be Living. He narrows his ratsnake-dark eyes, his broom-thin lips, keeping his wand pointed at Aglie. Look for the whites of the eyes. "Tell me, you infernal worm, tell me where the bloody fuck you have taken him."

"I don't have him."

"Well, you'd better goddamn find him. Where the ever-blasted fuck is he? Do not think I will not flay your miserable hide here." Yes, the aconite bite. Take your tongue, Severus, dip it in the wounding poison. If you do not tell me, I will transfigure this lamp into an awl and run it through you. I will pierce you in all the places necessary to stretch parchment. I will flay your awful skin, your miserable hide, from your body and let you watch while I mount it on a rack, awl-pierced and dripping. I will shove strychnine down your throat then and only then, will rub it into the open wounds. Do not think that I will not, do not think I am above this. Tell me what you have done with him. His wand slowly jabbing forth like he might hold a heavy sword, his heart racing, his breath too quick. Belladonna-eyed, wide and dilated.

Aglie looks up, frowning slightly. He has the little decency to look troubled at least, to sigh. False though it may be. "In Avalon."

You God-cursed creature. Severus closes his eyes, drowning in open air. A tension headache in the temples of his skull, the nervous tic of the eyelid. He can feel his carotid artery throb, the tight skin of the scar pulled over it. Avalon. In Avalon, yes, where else would he be? Harry and his foolhearted self, diving in where others hesitate. (Can he expect anything else? Would he be Harry Potter if he did not? A heroic fool’s errand for a foolish hero.) It's my own goddamn fault, I knew there would be nothing else with this imbecile, this impudent wretch, this holy terror of my godforsaken life. I knew better, I knew better, I knew better. (He has always known better.)

"God-fucking-dammit." He is already leaning over the bed, hunting for his rock-scuffed boots and for the impatiently shucked jacket. A thought then occurs. Avalon had been closed to everyone by Merlin, the witch had told them that. He turns slowly to Aglie. "How did he get in? It's sealed. If magic cannot even weasel out, how did Potter get into the accursed place?"

"Avalon keeps her doors permanently open to those that have died, Professor. And Harry once has -

"I know what he's done," Severus hisses. Do not remind me. "Then make yourself useful and tell me how I get in. What, exactly, is your so altruistic plan for coming here? You have a reason. To kill me then? Send my dead self in after the godforsaken idiot? Get a move on then." Why should it be a surprise? Even if he had wanted to be a hero of his own story, it had been beaten out long ago. Heroes are extremes of beauty, skin of milk or obsidian, never this dead fish-belly ache. Never this greasy-haired moan of a man. Perhaps, if he had tried harder, he could have been a hero or at least might deserve to touch one. (He has not tried; he deserves nothing.)

"Professor," Aglie says in that infuriating calm. Severus counts the seconds, hearing the sound of a silver-plated spoon tapping against a ceramic cup. He has not paid attention but now he stands still next to the bed. He doesn't look up, turning his jacket over and over in his hands, twisting the fabric up. He tries to pay attention, beginning to notice the taut cord underlying Aglie's affected voice, the
tension betraying the truth.

“What?”

“Do you still have your coin?” The Comte's voice is very low, too low. As deliberate as worm worked onto a hook.

*How do you know about - never mind.* “Yes,” he feels for the coin in his pocket, the well-worn silver. It is cool and heavy. He has been given it twice, once decades ago and again now, by a nicotine-stained librarian in Brittany. "The coin," Severus says, "The librarian, where did she get it?” It has been gnawing at him. Nico had thrust it into his hands in Condate, asking her to trust him. He had gotten it once in a forest, all those long years ago, lost it once and it has found its way back. This strange coin and its hissing dragon.

"A fortune-teller," Aglie says, "who promised it would convince you."

He sparks. Hot against the flint. "I've been bloody played like a fool this whole time."

"That was not the intent."

"Wasn't it?" A hiss. Snake-spit. He fingers the coin again, his thumb rubbing over the soft relief absentmindedly, like it might have troubled over a pulse point. "Why the coin?"

Aglie stands, cautiously coming closer. "You remember, of course, there was a bit of magic that Tristan and Iseult performed - ."

*Of course I remember.* Every child worth their salt growing up in magical Britain hears the old tales. King Arthur and his promised return. The Forest King and his wood. And the ill-fated romance of Tristan and Iseult, who had been wrenched apart across a sea. “That is not a real spell,” he bites, spits out like a bit of unwelcome gristle. "It’s a fairytale.” (Close the eyes. Remember the story of unlucky lovers. Tristan and Iseult and her witch-mother's love potion, meant to help Iseult love her new husband King Mark. But Tristan and she had drunk of it instead, had fallen in love instead. And the witch-mother had tried to help, had brewed up another potion. Another bit of double double toil and trouble. She'd given them the hell-broth saying, *dip two coins in this and then, if you are parted, put them on your tongue. All worlds will burst in between you like bubbles in the sky. But if you do not have it right in your heart, if you do not have the love to power it, you will pay a price. *)

"It is absolutely real magic. It is not Merlinian magic, that's all.”

The dread again, up the esophagus, the bit of windpipe. He might be sick with it. The horror seeps through his too-oily pores. "And just what blasted thing are you trying to tell me?"

“You’ve always been a bit of both worlds, haven’t you, Professor? Turning to anyone who can help you manage yourself, your thirst.”

“What are you saying?”

“The magic in you. If it is not Merlin’s, then who do you think it flows from? No witch’s cauldron, certainly.”

Severus scowls. He knows. Yes, he has known all this time. How can he live centuries later and still bear the same stark and unfortunate face. (What can you escape from? Not yourself.)

“Mordred.”
“Mordred had a son, yes, from his marriage. Melehan. And that son had had a son, or a daughter. I can never remember, the records get a bit lost and it is before my time certainly.” Aglie and his pale smile. "You carry it in your blood."

Yes, he has known. Yes, all this time. Who can be so hideous and not carry each other? Severus Snape, the flesh and bone of Edward Mordred, cursed with his strangeness. He looks at the join of the floor and wall like a horizon, hoping to steady his seasick self. "It'll tear the worlds open."

"Yes," Aglie says. (There is nothing more to say. Harry, like a ghost; Harry in Annwn, in Avalon, where dead things roam. Severus has already made his decision.)

"He'll come through, won't he?" Severus knows that if it works, if the wretched spell works at all, he will not go alone.

"That is, rather, the plan."

"You need to tell me how exactly he expects this to go."

"It's a bit complicated -"

"Humor me, Count."

Aglie sighs, leaning his hips against the bureau. "You will open a door between the worlds. Mordred will pass through. And his crow."

"What's so special about the dratted crow?"

"You know where Arthur's body is, Professor," Aglie and his white-toothed smirk, "you can't tell me you haven't you wondered where the rest of him is."

"Don't you dare presume to tell me that they've trapped Arthur's mind in a godblasted crow."

Aglie says nothing.

"That is absurd," Severus hisses.

Aglie shrugs, "You said to say nothing, so I said nothing. I only tell you the truth."

Severus touches the gnarled-root scar on his neck, where Avalon had nearly gotten him once. Garrotted by the fangs of an accursed snake, still here roped about one half of his throat like a necklace. Into Avalon then. Avalon, Isle of Apples; Avalon, Isle of Sunlight. The warmth-worn land where we all will fumble toward eventually. Avalon has always been separated by water. We do not know the nature of that water, we discuss it at lengths in our myths and legends. The land of the dead, separated perhaps by a river? Charon and his little boat holding out a silent hand, we get out our bags of coins to pay for safe passage. Geoffrey of Monmouth has argued, in his Vita Merlini, that Avalon is an island cast about in an unknown sea, that we must sail to get there.

Severus looks down at his safe-passage coin, turning it in his hands. "If it doesn't work -"

"If it doesn't work, you know the cost." This is the trouble with the old magic, the magic of the fae. There is always a price. The spell there asking what would you give? Aglie steps forward, his pale hair glinting in the growing light. The tanned and thin skin at the temples betraying centuries-old veins and capillaries, too well-worn, too ready to sleep. A hand rests cautiously on Severus' shoulder. He should shrug it off, bite, snap, wrench away. (He does not, only breathes deeply, cursing like a prayer.) "What would you do for him?"
"If it doesn't work, that fool idiot will never come back. This is Harry's fault, this is Mordred's bloody fault. He did this."

"Harry went willingly," Aglie says, quiet and long. Of course he did. Severus thinks of drowning the brat. Stoning him, little bits of rock crushing that beautiful zygomatic arch. Of tying him to a pyre and burning the fat off. How dare you? He sinks his face into his spindle-fingered hands, cursing (not for the first time) his misfortune of being born both to magical blood and interesting times.

The Iseult Charm. A spell to rejoin two halves of a broken heart. A spell that has been tried and tried again with little success. *I would move mountains for you*, lovers have said, never knowing that they may someday have to. Severus does not need the spell explained. It itches in him, this clogged-sink knowledge. Yes, these two pieces soaked in a potion, two halves of the same thing. Put them both in your mouth, they will remake the world to join back together. The last piece, we cannot forget, is the other side of the coin. The wagered price. Tristan had seen the black sails on the horizon, had succumbed to his injuries. They had wagered and lost. Yes, a coin, a wager. They must court death. Harry is in Avalon, paying the price without realizing. The land of the dead, which does not give up its creatures easily. So must Severus wager too.

“How?” *How should I do it? The razor or the river? Strychnine or cyanide?*

Aglie is quiet, long and thoughtful. “You can choose, of course. Though,” he says, “there are some methods I recommend more than others.”

He is drowning, sick with knowledge. Cokeworth bones know Cokeworth tales. Have you been listening? *How do you find a body? You put silver in it. Float a loaf of bread. Into the river then. He can only think of one that will be certain. One that will be sure. It is too easy for him to fight a current; The Strid has never given up her children.*

“Come on,” he growls.

“Where to, Professor?” Aglie’s dove-winged brows raising. He sets the tea carefully to the side.

“You’ll see.”
does not love enough, if he is not loved enough, he will find himself in one or the other.) His pulse rushes like the river. *Breathe. One, two, three, four.* Look there, Severus Snape in his dark wool jacket, his skinny and rawboned body, his underfed cheekbones and his unpleasantly curled laser-cut mouth. Look at the bubo of the nose that they will kindly call *Roman* after his death. At the maggot-pale skin, the windcolor of his cheeks. There at the violent whip of bleak-dark hair in the rising wind. Yes, standing here on this rock, knowing, biting his cheek, breathing harshly. His hands are white and cold. His terror in his throat, thinking of what here at the end? *If I fail, if I fail, remember me, remember this, remember that I tried. Remember that I lived.* (*Remember that I lived for you. You alone.*)

"Will it work?" Severus yells at Aglie, standing behind him on the grass. His ground-glass voice caught in the wind. "Tell me, will the godforsaken spell work?"

"Put the coin in your mouth, Professor!" Aglie shouts over the rush (it is getting louder now), "You don't get to know in advance!"

He hesitates, staring down at the water, seeing the baring-branches scramble at the sky like a warning.

"Jump, Professor!"

(How are new worlds created? Is it here, at the junction of a choice? Does the world split off now, this little feathered spot, this delta of change? Are there now two worlds? One where Severus jumps? One where he does not? We have only one consciousness to pilot through time, so we will only follow this one. There are other stories out there, untold and secret, of those who took the other path.)

And then, tell me, what does it come down to? This terror of metal, worse than a thumbscrew, worse than the rack, worse than the press of stones, yes. This bit of metal, silver always to the gold in Harry’s hands. Silver is always worth less than gold but there is the bald truth that silver is precious too, that sometimes our measure of worth is wrong, that some love silver best.

*You must do it too. Are you? Will I ever know? Pick up the coin, put it in your mouth. There on the tongue, yes, the metal like tasting blood between your teeth. Do you love me? You have said it. You are too young to mean it. You are too kind to mean it. I don’t want you to know. I love you (you should not be subjected to this.*)

Close your eyes then, Severus, if you must. Put the silver on your tongue. The river waits.

Jump.

How do you find a body drowned?

With a bit of quicksilver, stuck in a loaf of bread. The bread isn’t important, you just need something that can take the silver, the quicksilver, that will float. It will not pull the corpse out but it will find it, it will stop over it. You will know where to reach.

Bodies float.

Put the silver in your mouth, Severus. Throw yourself into the river there like a loaf of bread, you'll stop over him. (I promise, I wouldn't lie to you.)
He sinks. His hands put out to brace the skull-tearing rocks. Instead, it is a moment before he realizes that there is no water. He is not wet. Instead, nothing, something soft. A carpet, perhaps. Death, maybe. Coffins are lined with velvet, this could be velvet. He has landed and it is dry. He does not open his eyes. What is there? What will I find? Are you there? Did it work? (Past him, the sound of wings beating the air. He is being followed. So be it, let them follow.)

Something sounds close to him. Footsteps, maybe. It is hard to tell over his beating heart. (Heart, yes. If his heart beats, he must yet live.) There is a hand on his shoulder, he does not open his eyes. Let me stay here. Yes, stay down here in this blackness of not knowing. This darkness of what if? Did it work? Did it work? Tell me, I need to know (I cannot know). What if it did not? He heaves under that hand, perhaps a sympathetic hand, perhaps a hand in kindness for a griefstruck creature, buffeting the moment before the vase shatters. Before the fall, before the ruin, before the deluge.

Am I dead? (Are you?)

This harsh breath. Severus realizes that he is holding his own, that the breath is not his. That the hand is tightening and releasing in panic, there is a quiet whisper of his voice like a rosary. Severus, Severus, Severus. The hand shakes him, he opens his eyes like the answer surfacing in an eight-ball. He looks up from his undignified position here on the carpet on his hands and knees. What is there?

Dark hair and vellum-pale skin, wide and terrified clover-green eyes, yes. Harry bloody Potter. The Boy Who Had Lived and Had The Sheer Audacity to Do It Again. I love you, you're here, you're alive. Thank God. Severus clutches at the hand. There is only one thing to say. "Harry fucking Potter," Severus seethes, "I am going to tear you limb from goddamn, blasted, fucking, bloody limb."

"Severus Snape," a soft voice says, "what a surprise." He looks up for the voice. The hall shows sun past the windows but the room itself is softly dark, lit only by a fire at the end. Take in the scene. The smell of roast pork and apples, demi-glace and roux-thickened gravy. Artichokes and yellow-pat butter. Long sausages and brined chicken. Boiled potatoes. Duckfat. Wine and Calvados too. Severus rises from the carpet, never letting go of Harry's hand, his wrist. His thumb moves unconsciously in a circle over the other's veinnest at the underside of the wrist, a lullaby to reassure him.

A dark shape moves in from past the frame, outside of the viewfinder. A long, elegant neck and heavy birch brows. The teeth seeming pointed in the shadows, the eyes catching the fire, red as Mars (like day-old blood). The silk cloak, the dark red breeches. Golden bracelets. The man in the firelight is an indeterminable age, somewhere past sixty yet seeming infinitely older. His hair is long and oak-brown, untouched by grey. It is the gold in him, the lure of the magic, calling at Severus like a long-lost home, that betrays him.

"Merlin," Severus says, dark and hard.

"Merlin," echoes another voice. A different voice. They all turn past Severus, eyeing the long table laid out with food. Eyeing the pair of crows settling side-by-side upon the handle of a knife. One with red feet and a red beak, one with black. It is the second crow that has spoken.
"Edward, I presume," Merlin and his quietly dangerous voice, the voice of an old man who has seen too much of the world. The danger of a man who knows best. One of the crows, the oil-dark creature, morphs oddly. The legs growing long and tall, the feathers disappearing, the beak becoming an unfortunately-shaped human nose. Severus recoils slightly at the too-familiar shape, the skinny, spider-eyed man. Tall, gangly. With his long dark coat and his seaweed-black ropes of hair. The glare has changed from the wood, now dark and intense. There is nothing amused, nothing ambling about him now. No, there is nothing humorous about Edward the Black at all.

(Don't stay out too late, his mother had said, or the Forest King will keep you. Severus, swallowing fast. Had he ever stood a chance at all?) Severus tightens his grip. Harry falls back a step, watching the Forest King pull the long hair from his eyes. Severus glares. Yes, the sick in his stomach, in his throat. The uneasy clench around his navel like a Portkey. He swallows. Swallows again, the unsettled repeat of the queasy, trying to keep breakfast down. He closes his eyes, once more the fool. The castle seems to stretch out around him, large and menacing. A ghost of smoke. Echoes of history, echoes of a future that will be a history someday, to someone far away. Yes, tell the story of the fool Severus Snape who played right into the hands of these two, who walked right into Caer Sidi without thinking twice. There is a future and it is not his, it is for others to look back on and laugh at him.

Merlin and his soft smile, disinterested in Severus and Harry now. No, this is a longer story, an older battle, an ancient grudge. "You've come all this way for nothing."

"Like hell I have," Mordred grunts. Severus watches how he moves carefully in front of the remaining crow. He remembers Aglie and his story of a king's mind trapped in a crow. This here, this glossy creature with feet as if they were dipped in battleground blood, must be it. The same. The once and future king.

Merlin is a viper. "Do you want to look then? At him? Once again? For old time's sake, let us say."

"You're a fool to not take me seriously." Mordred steps forward. Leather boots echo on the walls.

"I have always taken you seriously, Edward." Merlin says softly. He waves his hand and a movement occurs deeper in the hall. Severus looks up, seeing that what he had taken for a large stone bench is opening, the heavy top sliding off as if blown by wind. Not a bench. A grave. A sarcophagus. A tomb. A sudden scent in the air. He instinctively grimaces, expecting the usual of death. Putrescence and rot, cadaverine and bile. Maggots and blowflies, carrion beetles and worms always. There is nothing of that, nothing of death but a little dust and disuse. Beyond that, the sound of a quiet bubbling, a soft golden glow. The smell of rain, the sound of doina, the baby powder on his mother's skin, tomato sauce and pork. Polenta, potatoes, seabream. Books and their pages, castle stone, crushed asphodel. The curious color of a forest in late summer sunlight, green and its flecks of gold and hazel, promising of warm nights.

Magic and its curious smell. Severus looks over at Harry, his pale skin flushed, eyes closed, breathing in deeply. The rush of relief, the feeling of true return. Yes, go back to him, fill him back up, truly. He is born to this, you cannot take it from him. Swallow it up, take it all, drink deeply. I want you to have it, I want you to be this, complete and content. Please. What do you smell? (Does it smell like me?)

"Do not mock me," Mordred says, circling Merlin. Merlin only smiles. "I have his soul. Give me his body."

"No," Merlin says, quiet as a knife. "Britain is built on the back of Arthur. You will not destroy his legacy. You wanted to ruin him."
"Love destroys nothing." (Is that true?)

"Be reasonable," Merlin says. "You cannot lie to yourself. If you loved him, you would have spared him."

"Lying to myself," Mordred raises his chin higher, "has never been the issue. You've lied," Mordred spits, "all this time. The dragons of our houses never fought and you have lied about them all this time."

The red dragon of Arthur's house, of the Britons. The white of Edward Mordred's of his Anglo-Saxon blood. Found entangled in a basement room, beneath a castle. They were at each other's throats, Merlin would later say, long after cleaning up Arthur's blood. I am not surprised that Edward betrayed him. (Such a lie, all this time, that the dragons were found fighting. Merlin would brandish the legend into the future, a vision of despair, saying that he had seen the invaders threatening the king's very standard. No, the dragons never curled together in hate. Merlin, what did you find in that basement but only the red and the white and their claws entwined, quietly trading breath?)

"You have nowhere to go, Edward," Merlin says, the fire a glimmer in cruel eyes, in too-wise eyes. "Let the world stay unruffled. Let the people believe in him, let them have their hope. Don't foul it."

"You've always underestimated me."

The wizards step closer to each other, menacing their little worlds. Severus pulls Harry closer, hissing in his ear, "Get out of here." He pushes the other man toward the opening to the Strid, still wide and yellow-skied. Harry blinks at him. Eyes like a river in a forest, choked with algae. Eyes like a river in a forest, reflecting only chlorophyll-rich leaves and vines. Wide eyes looking at the tear in the worlds, the opening in a mason-laid wall of stone, yielding to a polluted river instead.

"Not without you. What are you, completely off your rocker? I'm not going anywhere without you."

Severus whispers violently, "There is no telling what the hell they will do to each other. To this whole bloody island."

Harry shakes his head. "No," he says, "Severus, I think - I think I know."

What? Severus is about to ask but he is distracted by the movement of the crow. The crow, yes, the crow again. Landing on the sarcophagus, pecking at the mouth of the dead Arthur. As Severus watches, the crow slows in its pecking. It is not until the hand of the corpse moves to stroke the bird's head that Severus notices the dead man has begun to breathe.


Merlin has not seen. Instead, he reaches out, never bothering with a wand. Severus reaches for his own, feeling for it in his jacket, watching the spitfoam on the old wizard's lips, the sudden freezing of the body. Merlin's Crusader magic fills the room, pushing forward toward the Forest King. It is warm and bright and gold. Shimmering in the air, this dance of magic and oxygen, of sorcery and nitrogen. Mordred pushes back with his torturer's glare, waves of power emanating from his body. Such unfamiliar magic, nothing of gold, nothing of warm wood, nothing of velvet draperies and stone castles, of hearth. Severus can feel the punch of an awl, steel-spiked skin, magic of oddly-shaped fingers and drowned men, of creatures shaped like seals sometimes and men others. The magic of the Forest King, it has always been said, was given to him by the fae in their own world. There is nothing of expectation here. You cannot know the score.
Mordred's power has grown since they last met. He stills, frozen by Mordred's push.

How does a man freeze? Mordred holds Merlin with boiling-oil eyes, with a whiplash grimace. His power like a generator, Merlin, as if dipped in liquid nitrogen for too long. Yes, he might shatter, might be banished. (Morgan had trapped him once, Severus remembers, in the Val sans Retour. He is not all-powerful.)

Mordred hot as a geyser, cold as the moon. He circles the frozen wizard in a menacing way, the tattered coat flaring out behind him. His scrabble of hair falling in the scavenger face. Severus watches the other man with an uneasy awareness of their similarities, the places they are wanting. Their paltry selves, too little of softness, of kindness. Too much blood. He grimaces at the knowledge, despite the centuries of separation, that they bear the same march of mitochondrial DNA. Perhaps that is where the queer magic is twisted up, the unquiet magic from somewhere unexpected.

"Haven't you always underestimated me?" Mordred's voice like the fall of a boot. War drums. Severus and the lure of possibility, the curiosity of just how deep does it go? (He has always been fascinated by things he should not be. The grimoires of Dark magic. The paintings of witchcraft trials, the stories of execution. Fascinated, yes, and repulsed too.) His spine is taut, he wavers on the wire like a bird in a tornado. What are you going to do?

There is the sound of scraping, nails against stone. Severus and Harry look to the man climbing out of the sarcophagus, the legs carefully swung over the side, the thick arms pushing himself up. Yes, one foot and then another, carefully. A clutch of golden hair and soft sky eyes. Arthur, King of all Britain, rising again golden-haired from the grave. Arthur and his bramblebush eyebrows, wiping sleep from his face, uncapping a rusty voice like a old garden gate to scrape out only a word. "Edward."

Severus watches Mordred sway, finally hearing a long-lost voice. "Good god, Arthur." The rush of the dark-haired sorcerer to the returned king's side, gently taking Arthur's hand, leaning his forehead against the other's. Severus twitches awkwardly, releasing Harry's wrist, rolling his discomfort along the spread of his back. Mordred does not look at them. Severus looks away, too embarrassed by the open emotion. He looks at the tables, at the steam rising from the gravy boats, the clutch of grapes. At Merlin, frozen in his enchantment, his hand starting to twitch.

"Fuck!" Harry yells, pushing Severus to the side. Harry and his forthrightness, Harry and his knowledge of the physical, Harry and his charge against Merlin slowly throwing off the enchantment. He swells like a storm against the wizard, pushing the silk-cloaked man backwards, knocking the velvet peaked cap from the brown curls. Harry's mouth in a grim line, shoving Merlin back against the sarcophagus, knocking the wizard deep below. He is fast, faster than Severus might have been. Merlin moves slowly, murky through the Forest King's freezing enchantment, but he is nothing against Harry. Nothing against the hands that hold him down, that heave the iron cauldron from the stone, brimming with sparks of magic.

Mordred raises a hand, pulls the stone over the top, quietly invoking magic none of them know, words no one has heard. Severus strains to catch the words, his wand ready. There are catches of the Lady of the Lake, refrains of the Val sans retour, the dawning awareness that this is a spell not written by Merlin and his magic or even by Mordred himself. That there has always been the waiting tale of Viviane and the Lady of the Lake's magic, who would someday entrap Merlin in a tomb.

The enchantment seals around the tomb in a bright white flare. A pulse of a star. A laser. An explosion of light off of the shimmer of water. Severus steps forward; Mordred sinks to the ground, spent. It is Arthur that bends over him, wiping sweat from his skin.

"What have you done?" Severus asks, breathless and terrified at the sudden quiet.
It is Arthur who answers. "He's sealed Merlin away. With Viviane's spell." (The once-and-again king shaking out his blond head, stretching his arms out and looking for feathers.)

"I thought Viviane -"

"Viviane's long held a grudge. She wrote the spell. Merlin abandoned her."

"Where is she?"

Arthur looks up. He has a lean face and a wide smile. Strong-chinned like an artist would dream of a king. Straight-nosed and flax-curled. He grins a little, like he is revealing a secret. "Out there, you know. Telling fortunes."

Mordred laughs, never letting go of the hand on his shoulder. A hand given freely, never a claim. (No, Arthur was never for anyone to claim. No one is for anyone to claim, except the ones we’ve given ourselves to.)

Severus looks up, out the windows, out at the quiet. The castle proves to be a fortress set on the side of a hill. They had entered from the south (if there is a south in Avalon, outside of natural earth), but the north shows only cliffs. Only a sheer drop. The vision comes to him like a map once had. A map with no names. A stretch of mountains, a little river. A pass through, with no other way in or out. The spectral hounds of Gwyn ap Nudd, called by the Welsh the Cŵn Annwn, the hounds of Annwn. They of the Wild Hunt, let out on the mountains of Wales, on Cadair Idris just beyond the pass. He knows this legend, that to hear the howls of the hounds on Cadair Idris is to know that death is coming.

Harry frowns, shifting his weight. "Viviane told me a poem." (Severus does not say yes, she told me one as well. I was also the unfortunate recipient.)

"There is more to that poem," Mordred says quietly, reciting something from memory.

"The crow alight, his red-beaked stare,
the empty grave, his golden hair.
Take the hand, the aching heart,
breathe in the wings, seal the part.
The Forest King and Arthur-lost,
back to the sky, ever-crossed."

"What does it mean? At the end?" Severus asks. His stomach tense. His brow tense. His shoulders tense. Mordred shrugs. Arthur only smiles.

"What are you going to do with him?" Harry asks, kicking the sarcophagus. Sweat drips from his brow.

"Let him rot," Severus suggests, the loathing deep in the veins of his voice. The cracks and crevasses, the refrain of him. Mordred smiles a bit, a hint of approval for this echo of him through time.
The light flickers strangely, though it does not come from the fire. Severus turns and realizes suddenly that the opening to Cokeworth is failing, tuning in and out like a television channel. The yellow sky and its clouds coming into focus and out again.

"Run," Mordred hisses, pointing at the tear between worlds. The yellow-tint of Cokeworth just beyond. "Take the cauldron with you, Harry Potter. Run," the Forest King says. There, the portal. It will not hold. Run. There is no time for questions, some things must remain unanswered. We do not always get to know. Severus grabs Harry's firm shoulder and pulls him toward the opening.

Run.

Into dirt and grass. Severus once again on the ground, this time spitting out earth. He scowls, dusting ants and twigs from his clothing. "Where are we?" Harry gasps, flat on his back and trying to shovel air into his lungs. Severus and his tight grip still on the other man's shoulders. Taste the air, yes, pull out a bit of tussock and mud and taste that too.

"Back." Yes, back to where they belong, spit out on the shores of the river. He closes his eyes, focusing on his own involuntary movements. Reason with the heart; gentle the breath. You're safe now.

"Thank God," Harry says, collapsing on top of him. Severus' arms come up without thought, wrapping around him, dark and tight as Devil's Snare. Anger flares in him, the heart and the mind alike. He grips harder.

"No thanks to you. What were you thinking, you idiotic, confounded, godforsaken -" He is a heaving mass, an exploding star, a universe expanding. Where is his breath? Gone, gone, somewhere far away. His fingers wanting to seal around Harry's throat, his glare cutting. *If I drown you, no one else can. (Do not let me think these things, I should not be near you. I will ruin you. Do not let me.)*

"It was the right thing!" Harry scrambles up.

"I don’t give a damn for the right thing, not where you -""

"You’re in love with me," Harry says, pushing back slightly to bring Severus into focus. A preposterous grin inching across the impudent mouth. (Severus grimaces, closing his beetle-black eyes. It is quiet and it is the end and finally, finally, nothing else matters.)

"What?"

"The spell," Harry says quietly, with the confidence of a man with the winning hand, knowing the final piece of the puzzle, driving the last few meters of the race. "It wouldn’t have worked otherwise."

"A trick," Severus hisses, narrowing his viperfish eyes, dark as the stygian nightmare of the deep.

"Severus," Harry says, his hands on the tight chest, rubbing in circles over the tense planes of muscle. The strange way we can make promises with our bodies. A tissue massage that says *I could do this for you every night if you wanted it. I can be there for you. Bring you cups of tea, open the windows when you're too warm. Get the jam you like. (I can love you if you let me.)*
(Nothing holds forever. He breaks.) “Yes,” he says, it is a shattered word, glass upon the floor after a storm.

“Yes?”

“Yes, that.”

“Okay,” Harry says, leaning down to touch his mouth to Severus’ open one, gentle as dawn, “that’s all I needed to know.” (And Harry takes his wide, square hands and gathers up all the pieces up of that word, all the things left unsaid, all of Severus himself.) He shudders, rapid as a wool sail in the wind. Harry’s touch like the broaching of a dam.

“Do you have any idea of what you have done? What you could have -“

“I know.”

“You could have been killed.”

“It was the right thing.”

"Do you not understand? Do you not have any bloody idea, you absolute bastard, that if I could drown you, if I could -“

“I’m okay,” Harry says, one hand pressing to the side of Severus’ face. His fingertips tracing the hollow of the underfed cheekbone. “I’m okay.”

“Don’t you ever dare -“ (Severus and his head sunk on Harry's shoulder, buried in the green jacket, his hungry fingers pawing aimlessly at the synthetic fabric, the polyester, the nylon.)

“I won’t.” The slow hush of the heartbeat under the fabric still singing out with each thud, I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay.

“How can you promise -”

“You.” Harry says, “You’re in love with me. That changes everything, you know.” (Severus says nothing. Our silences are sometimes the most damning betrayals of all.) Harry’s gentle touch running over the bones of his face, the hilly nose, the bent-wire mouth. It is not enough. His hands clutch at the spread of Harry’s broad back. He swallows up Harry with this half-deranged stare, wild and unfettered. “It’s over,” Harry whispers, “it’s all over, Severus. Let’s go home.”

Home. Where is that? Where are you going? (I will go anywhere.) He kisses harshly, punishingly. Do not ever do this to me again, do not ever dare, if you do, I will destroy you. His mouth pressed harsh against Harry’s, that ache of a long moan, that hot iron touch. His skin might burn into Harry’s white cotton shirt, he does not care. I want you to smell like me, I want to burn myself into you. Wherever you go, they will know you by the trail of hellebore and nightshade, by rubbing alcohol and formaldehyde too. I want to dip my quill into the dark ink, the India ink, the iron-gall, write my name in the hidden parts of you.

(Each time we make love, we do not leave marks. Not really. Bruises fade, the long red tracks of our sharpened nails fade from our backs. Love does not leave a scar.) No one should love you the way I love you. It is tempting to want to cut Harry, to draw his own name Severus Snape, in a knife-carved wound on the boy’s thigh. Let me heal my own name into you. Let me cut myself there too, in the same place, on my own thigh, let me write your name. I would like to carry you with me everywhere.

But there is a difference between what we want and our choices. Severus and his hard-won
discovery of right and wrong, he will not write on Harry with permanence, he will never harm Harry

despite his violent need to consume. Instead, his hands are invisible ink. Yes, this secret writing, this
love poem of his touch, no one can see it but he knows it is written, it is there. (Philo of Byzantium
tells us the first recipe for invisible ink, made of oak galls and vitriol. The trick, as always, is to leave
the recipe incomplete. Do not add the final component. Write with oak gall and add the vitriol later.
So Severus and his invisible ink, writing of love. Harry and his vitriol, adding it as Severus goes,
bringing the words into the sun, swallowing down everything Severus has to say.)

He pulls apart. Draws back. Pushes at Harry, his palms against the sturdy hull of a chest. "Don’t you
ever dare to -"

“I won’t, Severus,” Harry whispers. I'm sorry from Harry’s touch, his tone, the modulation of his
voice. (They both know that there is nothing without promise here, this desperate clutch, this
wordless promise of years. Harry will fuck up, yes, will rush off without thinking, tilting at
windmills. Severus will never dull his tongue, will deliberately mislabel eyes of newt and leave them
in the fridge. Yes, human after all. They will fuck up. The promise is never to not; the promise is that
we will try, try to do better, that I will put you first, that I will love you best. )

How do we move from the opening of a song to the bridge, to the chorus? Look at transitions, tell
me about transitions. The move from the first rush of passion to the quiet of long years. They have
neither of them been here before, unfolding this map, mapping the roads into here be dragons
together. (Severus is no fool. He promises forever, demands always. He will be a ruin if Harry
leaves, but he is human and knows that we cannot always know. There may be an obstruction in the
road, a loose boulder. Sometimes we take unexpected paths. But here, the thump of Harry’s heart
under the splay of Severus’ fingers, the younger refrain of his own.)

Harry moans into his mouth. Severus and his greedy tongue, his insistent press. Hot and wanting. (If
they are not careful, they will fuck right here on the edge of the Strid.) Harry and his gold, held in the
palms of Severus' hands.

Too much gold. Strange.

"Do you see that?" Harry asks. Severus looks up at the meager trees, at the spit-clutch river. At the
rocks like teeth and mottled sky like badly-dyed wool. Yes, still the gold.

"Yes," he mutters, looking down about them. At the base of their doorknock feet is the blackiron
cauldron upended, spilling out the magic into the sky and the soil, taken up into roots, bled through
leaves. Seeping down into water tables and wells, the magic again. From the witch’s hearth to the
world, belonging to everyone with the natural touch.

(Isn't this what they have been after? Chasing this whole time? Looking at the spread of Harry's grin,
the hair like tangled wire, he has forgotten.)

Harry pulls his wand from his jacket pocket. Safe and secure, this bit of holly and phoenix, this
something out of nothing.

"Well, go on then," Severus grouses, "see if the goddamn thing works."

And what, tell me what, does Harry do? A chip-toothed grin and a Devil's Snare eye, his hand
wrapping around the skinny-boned wrist of an old man. (A skinny-bones wrist hoping for too much.)
Wraps that gold-bit hand right around, just as you like, and Severus feels that familiar rush of magic,
that takeoff and landing, the calling-away of Apparition.

“Let’s go home.”
(Yes, I will go wherever you go.)

Hogsmeade Again

(A Reprise)

If you had asked Severus Snape, age thirty-six, of what it would be like to hold the hand of the Boy Who Lived, he would have said things like intolerable, infuriating, maddening, grave-hurrying, and absurd. The thing is that if you ask him now, age forty-five, the words are not all that different. It is absurd and it is intolerable and it is absolutely as necessary as air.

He turns the page, the tea growing cold next to him. The empty house, the violets in their cup. Outside, the sky takes on that particular shade of grey that all Novembers offer, sharp against red brick and pine. It is quiet and easy, the simple and expected. Then, a tumble in the fireplace of a common disaster.

"I'm home," Harry dusts his hair off of ash. (He has never found a way to gracefully exit a Floo, always looking like an upended Victorian urchin with soot on his chin.) "God, Severus, there's this guy in Exeter and we just keep getting him for these cursed Muggle objects -"

Severus closes his book, setting the bookmark first firmly between the pages. He puts the silver reading glasses off to the side. He grabs Harry by a fistful of black woolen wizarding robes, pulling the other man in for a hurricane kiss. Spit and teeth and the gnash of them in a clutch. Up then against the bookshelves, maybe on the floor, they find their way. (He is forty-five years old, his back will regret it later.) One leg slipped into the delta of the other, finding steel there. The ache of edge.

Yes, this this this, god, I need you.

Somewhere, Severus removes Harry's glasses, folds them, sets them down on the little side table.

Tell me, what is the measure of home? This world, another? A patch of land across the sea, a patch of land where your grandmothers plucked apples and threw stones? Does it matter where we first saw the sky? Does it matter where we will last? Tell me, down at the atomic level, what is the difference between dirt and skin? Your tongue and my tongue, our mouths like ditches and shovels. Yes, Severus and his careful touch, his terror touch, up over the mountain ridges of Harry, the rockpools and seas between his thighs, the forest of his scalp, his beard.

I will claim you if you let me, I will raise a family in you, bury my dead in you, call down the moon. Have you ever been loved by a wretched fool? I will build monuments to you with my tongue, my clumsy hands, my nothing touch. (Severus and his bits of wood, his shipwreck, washing up to a gentle shore, saying upon this rock, I shall build a home.)

Let us look at rivers and deltas, the sweetwater and salt. Harry is always flowing forward, always moving, hopeful, winding somewhere safe. You can count on rivers, they do not flow backwards. Yes, the river loves its ships and its sailors, taking them on as a promise, I will get you there, you can count on me. And what then, this space where the river ends and the sea begins? This delta of brackish mixture, where we twist and twine and become something new? (Perhaps, Severus, you are less salt than you think. You were born on the edge of the North Sea during a storm. Soaked in salt.
But part of you is from somewhere far, far away, born on the shores of the Black Sea. Yes, Severus grounds himself in facts, steadies himself with the truth. A fact. The Black Sea is the world's largest body of brackish water. Perhaps, perhaps, there is a little freshwater in you after all.)

They will take it slow. Harry's breath at the temple, at the neck. Air that gusts, little interruptions of oxygen. Saying show me what it means to touch you gently. "What do you want?" Harry whispers, his electric eel tongue against Severus' too-hot skin. He will be incinerated certainly (it is worth it).

Severus hesitates, always awkward in his wide-mouth want and his lack of words to ask for it. He had imagined that, at the end, when they were settling, when no specter of ruin hovered over them, that he would want to pick up his fireprod of ruin. But this is not the end, not really. There is no danger of ancient wizards but he is still just as off-kilter when he looks at Harry, when Harry's breath is on his breath, when they kiss and their hair rifles together, black strands unable to be told apart. He holds Harry tightly, nestling into the featherdown of Harry's chest, closing his eyes against the soft cotton of Harry's skin. Let me gather you up to me. Pull you across me. When I sleep, you will keep me warm.

("What do you want?" The old question. "I want you. " Lips opening lips, a tongue knocking on the door to him, "You have me."
)

"The jar?" Harry quirks a brow.

"I brewed more," Severus gasps (Harry and his clever hands), "it's in the usual drawer."

Harry nods. There is a jar then of strangely-brewed things and a sea-salt smell. Slick as seaweed left on a beach. There is a tongue then, a wet line from navel to a devil-grin kiss on the chin. Yes, up, up, up. Harry and his curious fingers, feeding them to Severus, watching him take them in with his hungry mouth, his pale lips. (Severus imagines he is horrific, like Goya's Saturn chewing on a knuckle. But Harry's eyes are always wide with want and wonder, with affection and absolution.)

You will have to forgive me, Severus wants to say. (Harry and his mouth on Severus' knuckles, kissing the folds of them, the mark of age. A mouth that seems to say, there is nothing to forgive. )

Touch me, yes. I want you to. I wish I had something else to offer you. I know that you come to me loving my body, myself, the hangnails of me. But this is not myself; they have given me the wrong book, I am the wrong chapter. A misprint. Fix me. (I will tear myself out, correct it myself. Give me the white-out, the stapler, these bits of tape.) Let me apologize in advance, I cannot offer you something finished, polished. You deserve a masterpiece. I am a bit of printer paper and a binder clip, I am half-erased, scribbled upon. You deserve a work of art. I can only give you this.

There is the kettle, yes, but does it matter? Here in the bed, the sun and the sea. Severus cannot stop looking at the window out to the night, like a crow-dark mirror, reflecting the two of them. His hands where they rove over the swells and dips of Harry, that secret smile, the negative space of the wide plains of his chest, his stomach, his solar plexus. I love you, I love you, I love you. I love the sweat of you and the filth too. Grow a corn and I will heal it. I will set your bones when you break them. I will brush your hair when you cannot.

Lips on the gunner's knot of scar tissue, these ropes of silvery, slightly-raised, and repellent flesh. The Healers has called it hypertrophic, had given him a potion to help. (Severus has scowled, thrown the jar away. He could brew something far better. The thing is, he hadn’t. He’d let the scar heal, had let the little ropes form. The pale winding yarn of the lacerations twists out of his high wool collar. He likes it. The way it looks, the grimace on the shopkeeper’s face. He wants them to stare, to be uncomfortable, to remember. ) Severus wears an explosion on his neck and Harry mouths words he cannot hear over it. The beat of the movement is like a prayer, an invocation, a quiet psalm. Most
scars can be spelled away. Not these snake tears. (He dry-heaves on thinking of his neck an open wound, of the tiny holes in fangs for venom. Could that piece of mottled soul, of trashwater soul, viscous and wrong, could that have been dripped into him? Through the fangs, through the breach in his throat, down into his own marrow?)

_Touch me._ Severus does not close his eyes with Harry above him, moving within him. _Fuck me like I want you to._ Like a book, like a poem, long and desperate, loving. Repeat yourself, the thrust of you. Curl your quotation marks in and the commas too. Feed metaphors like your fingers to the mouth. Come with a burst like a couplet, the final end, whispering _I love you_ like a quote to memorize, to scribble down in a notebook. (Write down your _I love you_ like a favorite phrase, attributed and annotated.)

Harry keeps the eye contact, their fingers threaded. These knots of the two of them. Severus knows the truth, the honesty of Harry's desire. He has to believe the flush of the cheeks and the chest, the spit within him. These blood vessels dilated with simple biology, our most basic wants. He must believe the spell tearing open the sky, pulling them tight. _You love me._ (It is a wild and wondrous thing.) Severus is hard and flush against Harry's stomach, the square hand wrapping around him and pulling firmly, rough swipes against the tip. _I love you._

Say it, Severus. You are safe here. It is like swimming in the Dead Sea. The concentration of salt makes a body float effortlessly. There is no pressure on the joints, on your legs, your shoulders. You can cast your troubles out, out into the sea, let them float too. So it is with making love, finally. Say it, Severus, with your prayer hands. You laid across the little wood-post bed, the sheets turned down, damp with sweat. Say it with your mouth here at the joint of neck and shoulder of the man above you, whispering his _I love yous_ into the cells of your skin and your hair. Say it with your tongue at the cave of hip and thigh. Say it to the sky of shoulder blades, our wide and hopeful maybe-wings. Say it to the forests of our bodies, the underground too. There is no self-preservation in love, whether you scream or whisper or say nothing at all.

Hearts don’t need words; hearts don’t wait for you.

And yes, now, Severus spread open as a book and Harry with his underlining fingers in you, looking for footnotes and citations. While he reads you, while he inhales every last word of you, scribble your marginalia on him. Yes, scrawl your _I love you_ in invisible ink on every surface of him. Harry stutters, clutching desperately at Severus' bicep, grimacing in this beautiful fall. Yes, fuck gently and with violence and breathe out your _holy holy holy_ the whole time. When you finally gasp and stutter, slamming like a truck into him, howling and throwing your black feathers to the sky, lean up into his ear and finally say it, _I love you I love you I love you._

(You are lost already, Severus Snape. Throw yourself to the river, the algae like green eyes. The river is steady and constant. It will catch you, wind you somewhere safe to sea.)

Severus and his hair strewn across his clenched face, his clenched teeth, desperately on the edge, his breath quickening, his flesh thickening, opening into star-death eyes and saying "I love you, god, fuck, yes, I love you."

It is late. The exhaustion in his hair, his spit, his very bones. Harry and his even-breathed sleep, his
head in the space of Severus's arm and chest, yes, in the crook of him. Those square hands splayed out possessively on a too-narrow chest, riddled with hatchmark scars, thin and silver. Severus and his bony fingers threading through Harry's treebranch hair whispering with fingerprints, I love you, I love you, I love you. (I am sorry, I am so sorry, do not let me be the stones in your pocket, do not let me drag you to the bottom of the sea.)

No one watches them, not here, not now. An island to their own selves, this Hogsmeade room. Agatha is catching mice in the dusk. The steeple in the distance, the smell of the river and the loch too, the wildflowers behind the house. The marigolds and searocket, meadowsweet and spearwort. The smell of the Caledonian Forest, spread out just beyond. The red-tinted leaves and their quiet march toward winter, toward the soft call of cold and of snow, hearth and tea. Toward when we open the door and call our loved ones in from outside, come in come in before it gets cold.

The lights are out, the little lamplight from the street fading in, streaming in with the stars. Harry asleep on his shoulder, breath and heart steady as the rise and fall of the riverwater, the tides of the sea. Steady as the rotation of the earth, always light and dark, always promising to turn back around and look again upon the face of the sun.

Sleep now. It is time. It is safe. Severus and his skinny bitten lip, smelling of tar and neglect, the sweat under his arms. The stale and the fresh. (If you take me, you must take it all. I do not come apart, not like that. Two for one, the good and the bad. Yes, if you swallow me, I am the shot and the chaser too. If you insist on loving me, love me for the rot as well.) Harry in his slack-mouthed sleep, his unconscious fingers clutching at Severus (at all of him together). Do not worry, the crows are watching. Two of them, a mated pair and their lifelong bond, in the wall-scratch of barren trees just beyond the windowpane. Sleep, the teakettle safely turned off, the jam put back in the fridge. Sleep, the door locked and lights out, the blankets gentled in. Sleep, that pile of mail, addressed there. Junk mail and circulars, newsletters and paystubs too. A copy of Potions Quarterly addressed here to one Severus Snape, The Upper Northwest Apartment, Number 16 Hawthorn Road, Hogsmeade.

Tell me then, of all the wide and wondrous worlds outside of your front door, which one will you call home?

Reader, now, where have we stumbled, where have we been? You asked me once of why we tell tales? Let me tell you this, that this little bit of nothing, this lovesong story, is only to say (of them, of us, the storyteller and reader too), yes to say, yes yes yes I have lived, hear me.

And now, we have come to say goodbye. Wait, stop. How do the stories go?

Oh yes, that's right.

The end.
A Postscript
(long in the waiting)

I chose, and I think with good reason, to give thanks to my influences after the story was complete. Since so much of this tale is set in not knowing, in mystery, I felt that even acknowledging the works that led this story to be would unduly begin to unravel its secrets. So here we are, at the end of all things, once more saying thank you.

This story was inspired several years ago by a mixture of four books, each of which wound up having a particularly strong influence on the outcome. The first is Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, which entirely helped to form the picture of and cadence of the Forest King himself. The structure of the story was inspired by three books, A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*, Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* and Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*. 
Each deals with unraveling a mystery and seeking a truth. I have taken inspiration for the travelogue component from *The Historian* and a vast swathe of fascination with medieval imagery and conspiracy theory from *Foucault’s Pendulum*. The development of a romance within the pursuit of a mystery is largely inspired by *Possession*. There are nods to lines and devices from all three books here.

Additionally, I cannot give thanks without acknowledging the two characters of Henri Aglie, the Comte de Saint-Germain, and of Nico Lobineau, fierce Breton librarian. The Comte, to the curious and the sharp-eyed, was in fact a very real person, who lived from the period of circa 1691 to 1784. That is, in reality, about all that is known about him. He claimed various ages and birth years and various family throughout his life, including being the son of Francis II Rakoczi, Prince of Transylvania. None of this is known to be either true or false. However, I have heavily based my interpretation of the count on Aglie, a mystical man who heavily implies that he is the Comte de Saint-Germain, featured in Foucault’s Pendulum. Additionally, Nico is largely based on the character of a French reporter, Nicole Collard, who is a prominent character in Revolution Software’s 1996 game *Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars*.

To Irina, based on my own grandmother, who once cooked for me.

As always, to my influences and allusions, dropped in there like rocks in a river. To the stories of King Arthur and the myths of the old Celts. To Anne Carson and Jeanette Winterson always. To The National and Timbre Timber for inspiring several lines or being woven in there. To F. Scott Fitzgerald and his boats borne ceaselessly. To Eliot and Swinburne too. To Romania, always. To Britain.

And finally, to you, the reader, whether you have stuck with me these past sixteen weeks or if you have come recently. Thank you to you too.

(P.S. You can find me on tumblr at https://drawlight.tumblr.com for more general nonsense.)

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