Elective Affinities

by Caecelia

Summary

It's 1976, and a strange new transfer student is about to turn Severus Snape's life on its head.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. The title "Elective Affinities" cites a Goethe novel of the same name. The name Adrian Kuhn is a nod to Adrian Leverkuhn, the Faustian protagonist of Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus. Much of the inspiration for this piece comes from Dius Corvus' extraordinary stories, "Tread Softly" and "Ashes of Time" (on ff.net).
A Most Unusual Sorting

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Warnings: slash; disturbing self-experiments; descriptions of sexual activity; character death (neither SS nor HP, but a major death nonetheless); profanity. This story contains DH spoilers, but is not compatible with the epilogue. Also, the story follows a slightly different time line than canon: Snape and Lily are born in 1959, for example.

Elective Affinities

Chapter One: A Most Unusual Sorting

September, 1976

The Hogwarts Sorting Ceremony has barely begun, has barely begun to work its suggestive magic on assembled students and faculty alike when Severus Snape decides that this day - this year - could not possibly be over soon enough. Huddling into himself with a scowl, inured to the long strings of oily black hair that flap in his face, Snape begins to viciously pick at a scab on his left hand. Peeling back the crusty scab to reveal pale, unadulterated skin is a process both satisfying and frustrating to Snape, satisfying because it distracts him from thinking about earlier, disquieting events, frustrating because he finishes off the scab within a few seconds. He's thinking about her before he even knows it - her old grey dress, hopelessly frayed above the knees, weighing from her gaunt shoulders like a burial sack; the combined smell of cigarette smoke and hot skin and dandruff in her brittle, greying hair; the sloppy, badly aimed kiss she gave him before he boarded the Hogwarts Express for (presumably) the last time. The moment she'd lost sight of him in the train, his mother had begun to have one of her delusions, had begun whispering furiously to no-one the sane could see, her eyes narrowing with fear and loathing just as Snape had re-appeared at a window to give her a half-hearted wave . . .

"Alright there, Snape?"

Snape jerks, then looks up at the voice, noticing as he does so that he has dug his nails into his palms, that his palms have small cuts in them and are beginning to bleed. On the opposite side of the Slytherin table, Daniel Avery's eyebrows are raised in an almost mocking expression of concern. Automatically, Snape glances to his left, but Avery's usual partner-in-crime, Cassius Mulciber, seems deeply engaged in a conversation about Quidditch strategy with Evan Rosier, a Chaser. As Snape turns his gaze back to Avery, he feels disgust (with himself) rising within him. Clenching his hands despite the sting, he glares into Avery's round pockmarked face and watery grey eyes, hoping that a sufficient display of contempt will dispel whatever theories the other Slytherin might be building. "Of course," Snape says, in his most dismissive voice.

Avery's eyes narrow, and it occurs to Snape that Avery may have had a genuine reason for inquiring after his well-being, after all: As he does every year, Avery probably wants to 'have a look' at Snape's summer Potions essay. The Potions essay, Snape is reminded, that he wrote in the stifling
heat of his drab, windowless room with Silencing Charms on his door so he wouldn't have to hear
his father's drunken squabbling with the telly, so he wouldn't have to face the sight of watching his
mother converse with the empty air. For a moment, Snape can almost see them both: His mother,
chain-smoking at the stairs, teeth chattering through her nervous whispers; his father, red-faced and
heavy with drink, gesticulating aggressively over an empty wine bottle.

It's too painful too be borne. Snape intensifies his glare at Avery, feeling, for a moment, as though it
were all his fault.

Eyebrows climbing even further up his brow, but clever enough to sense he isn't wanted, Avery
turns his massive frame (he is a Beater, and correspondingly muscular) back on Snape to continue
watching the Sorting Ceremony. Snape waits until it has fully reclaimed Avery's attention before
surreptitiously casting Healing and Cleansing Charms on his hands.

"PALMER, ADELAIDE!"

"...GRYFFINDOR!"

Rodolphus Lestrange is observing him, Snape notices suddenly. To anyone else, of course, it would
look as if Lestrange's gaunt, shadowed face were merely gazing into space, lost in thought, but
Snape knows better - Lestrange is a prefect and therefore predisposed to spying. Snape straightens,
pulling himself together mentally as he does so. The last thing he wants is to look a fool to Lestrange
for, ah, wearing his emotions on his sleeve.

His mother is a problem he will never be able to solve, Snape reminds himself, and therefore a
distraction. His future lies here, in the present, with the associations he builds within Slytherin.
Ultimately this is how he will find the means to protect and help her. If he wishes to (take her
someplace far away from father, to wrap her in the circle of his arms until the emptiness leaves her
eyes and she's well again) dwell on her beyond such considerations, then it will have to be in private.

Perhaps the only good thing to come of being a Seventh Year, he thinks, is that Lestrange has
promised him a room of his own.

"PARKINSON, BRIONY!"

Lestrange, eyes still fixed on Snape, raises his slender eyebrows in an unspoken question. Snape
decides that Lestrange is referring to the Sorting and arranges his face into a smirk. He doesn't even
need to see Briony Parkinson to know what House the Hat will choose for her.

"SLYTHERIN!"

Next to Snape, Mulciber - every bit the Beater, if slimmer and less physically brutal than Avery -
whoops and claps ferociously for Parkinson, the much younger sister of a recent graduate from the
Slytherin Quidditch team. Narcissa Black, who would look as beautiful and smooth as a Greek statue
but for her perpetual expression of contempt, also brings her slender hands together a few times. If
she feels any discomfort at sitting sandwiched between Avery's bulk and her future brother-in-law,
the rather long-legged Lestrange, she has too much emotional control to show it. Snape notes that she
now wears a band of pure silver in her elegantly twisted, white-blonde hair. Presumably it is yet
another gift from Lucius Malfoy, claiming her for all to see as his future (trophy) wife.

As the other Slytherins continue to welcome their newest member, Snape lets his eyes wander across
the queue of remaining First-Years. He isn't quite sure what he's looking for, if he's looking for
anything at all. As expected, most of them look as snot-nosed as the average eleven year old, but
Snape fancies there might be one or two amongst them like himself, thirsting for knowledge and the
chance to prove themselves . . .

Snape's gaze stops suddenly, towards the end of the queue. He narrows his eyes, unsure of what he is seeing. Is the thin, black-haired boy (hair neatly gelled down and combed back, glistening beneath the candlelight) who brings up the rear simply a very tall and mature eleven-year old, or is he rather - what Snape finds more likely - a fairly short boy of somewhere between seventeen and twenty? Snape has never read about an older student being Sorted, however, nor does he remember having ever heard of students transferring to Hogwarts.

As he always does when contemplating a puzzle, Snape lifts a finger and traces it across his lips.

The boy is certainly not from Hogwarts: His robes lack a House crest, for one, and there is something about his manner - something that Snape cannot quite place, but that reminds him a bit of stumbling across an anachronism in a novel - that does not speak of Hogwarts. Then again, the boy may well have visited the school before, for he shows, to Snape's mind, no interest in his surroundings. Unlike the First Years, whose eyes can't seem to take in enough new sights at once, this boy keeps his gaze steadily fixed on the Sorting Hat. A ghost could fly through him, turning his veins to ice, and he would still stare tranquilly ahead.

Snape glances over at the other Slytherins and notes with little surprise that Lestrange continues to observe him.

Their gazes meet; Snape occludes out of practice, not that Lestrange is much of a Legilmens, nor that there's anything to hide. Still, Lestrange has been gifted with strangely pale, nearly colourless eyes; they glint now with almost predatory interest as he leans forward across the table, just far enough to whisper to Snape without encroaching upon Narcissa's space. "Any idea who that might be, Severus?"

Snape shakes his head. "I thought you might know."

"Who do you mean?" Narcissa asks quietly, at the same time that Rosier, seated across from her, snorts through his pumpkin juice.

"Are you talking about the new Defence teacher?" Without waiting for an answer, as if he's been storing up this information for ages and is about to erupt from the pressure of holding it in any longer, Rosier hurries on, "I think it's going to be that woman, the fat one sitting next to Slughorn. Unless it's the other woman - next to Hagrid, the morbidly skinny one." Rosier's button nose wrinkles at some imagined stench as he continues, "She probably hasn't lived under a roof in years . . ."

Lestrange fixes Rosier with one of his frighteningly pale stares. "I think, Evan," he says, "you should consider listening before barging into conversations you don't understand."

Mulciber snickers. This display of disloyalty to a fellow member of the Quidditch team might have shocked an observer from another House, but Rosier is inured and doesn't notice. What he does notice, however, is that Lestrange - monied, soon to be allied by marriage with Bellatrix Black and therefore puissant in their circle - has just implied he is stupid.

"Sod off, Lestrange," Rosier says. "Just because you're a prefect don't mean you get to treat the rest of us like House Elves."

It is fascinating to watch - every inch of Rosier's body screams that he wants Lestrange to like and respect him, and yet he is incapable of preventing his voluble mouth from getting carried away. If Lestrange did not think Rosier lacked control before, then he certainly does now.
As does Narcissa, apparently; her pretty nose flares with anger, as if she feels an insult to Lestrange is one also directed at her personally. Snape decides he knows exactly how to appease her. He smirks and drawls, "I believe you just might be the only one of us to fall into that category, Rosier."

"What did you say, half-blood?"

Snape puts on his cruellest smile. "Nothing your insignificant brain has a hope of processing, I assure you."

Lestrange laughs, Narcissa looks distantly mollified, and Snape settles into himself, satisfied. He decides, not for the first time, that if he can only find a way to propitiate these two gods of blood purity, Lestrange and Narcissa Black, for the whole year, then his future will be rather well provided for.

The best way to measure his success, however, is by observing the way Mulciber and Avery react. Snape does so and notes that both are sending Rosier nasty grins. So, he has clearly won this round.

"You just watch yourself, Snape," Rosier snarls, face contorting with a combination of fury and jealousy - and is it not because, more than anyone else in their circle, Rosier feels he deserves acceptance from the Blacks and Lestranges? How it must rankle him, Snape thinks, to see a half-blood in better graces than himself.

Narcissa sniffs pointedly, and that is the last straw. With a final snarl, Rosier turns to his left, where Terance Wilkes doodles lewd figures onto his cloth napkin for the apparent benefit of his heavily-made up girlfriend Claudia Bramblethorn. Rosier instantly guffaws, as if his display of good humour will somehow make the others jealous, will somehow make them realise their mistake. Snape cannot help but smirk. Such lack of subtlety...

Lestrange catches his eye, and together they turn back to Narcissa, who now wears an expectant look on her face. Mulciber and Avery inch closer, their eyes also glistening with anticipation.

Snape decides to explain. "There is a boy queued up to be Sorted, and not even the prefects seem to know a thing about it."

Naturally, Mulciber and Avery begin craning their necks towards the Sorting queue.

"It so happens, Severus," Lestrange says smoothly, "that I do know a bit more about the person in question than you. His name, according to Dumbledore, is Adrian Kuhn, and he is a transfer student from Germany. Apparently, he has spent most of the summer here at Hogwarts." A brief look of frustration crosses Lestrange's face. "I have not, however, been able to ascertain why."

"Oh?" Snape is curious despite himself.

"As you know, we prefects arrive at Hogwarts two days before the other students. Naturally, once I had heard of Kuhn, I sought him out. To my dismay, he was already previously engaged." Lestrange pauses, mouth twisting on his next words as if they were somehow noxious. "With Hagrid."

"With that giant oaf?" Narcissa asks, clearly scandalized.

Lestrange smiles thinly. "Yes. Don't ask me what he was doing, I presume garden work or something else of the brainless, menial variety."

"Like soaking up manure," Mulciber sneers.

For a moment, Narcissa looks too nauseated to speak; then she recovers, and a determined glint
appears in her eyes. "Kuhn," she says slowly, tasting the word. "Regrettably, I am . . . unfamiliar with the name."

(Avery and Mulciber, Snape knows, can only trace their ancestry back nine or ten generations, all to wizards and witches who live or once lived in Britain. Narcissa, however, has blood relatives scattered all across the Continent, and more - she knows all of their names.)

"He is certainly no relative of mine," Lestrange says coldly.

Snape works on keeping his expression blank. Although six years of living in Slytherin have repeatedly exposed him to such conversations, he has never quite grown used to them. The way Lestrange and Narcissa see Kuhn is, undoubtedly, how they still see Snape, how they will always see him and always speak of him when he is not in earshot. It is hard, very hard, not to hate them. Part of Snape, that part of him that knows he is more than the sum of his parents, does hate them. (For if he isn't more than his blood, what hope does he have?) He hates being reduced to something over which he has no control, and he hates that their words have such sway over him that he, too, has come to reducing others in the same way. To reducing her, in an unforgivable slip of tongue. To reducing her completely.

But even their bigotry is somehow superior, because it is backed by wealth and power. They are strong and Snape is weak. To survive, he must follow them, must assimilate, must use their horrible, objectifying words even if it rips apart his soul to do so. There is no alternative. She will never understand this. But then, she basks in the love of her family, in the power that their wealth and good standing in society have naturally accorded her. He, Snape, comes from the lowest scum. He is materially weak. It is because he is weak that, in some twisted way, Snape even hates that part of himself that hates them.

And they respect him, that must be said. They call him, fondly even, the Half-Blood Prince. True, they mocked him with the sobriquet at first, but then - thanks to Lucius Malfoy's intervention - the tables turned, and now it has become something like an expression of regard . . .

Mulciber elbows Snape out of his thoughts, and Snape belatedly realises that Headmaster Dumbledore (wearing the most ostentatious shade of purple Snape has ever seen) has stood and is about to speak.

Hands raised in an appeal for silence, the Headmaster favours the assembly with a benign smile. Is it Snape's imagination, or do Dumbledore's blue eyes briefly fixate on him, as if to ask for his attention in particular? "I fear you have tired of hearing it already, students both new and old, but - Welcome to Hogwarts! Before we begin our feast, I would ask that you grant me just a few more moments of your time. That is, once our last Sorting is complete." Ignoring the sudden volume of the students' whispers, Dumbledore peers down half-moon spectacles at the black-haired boy Snape had noticed earlier. To Snape's surprise, the boy is still staring fixedly at the Sorting Hat. "I am pleased to say that Mr Adrian Kuhn, of Germany, will also be joining us here at Hogwarts as a Seventh Year. I would ask all of you, the Seventh Years in particular, to treat Mr Kuhn as though he had always been here among us. Thank you. Now to the question of Mr Kuhn's House - Professor McGonagall, if you will?"

Snape let his gaze fall to McGonagall, who has assumed a brisk manner at Headmaster's words. The Sorting Hat grasped firmly in one hand, she beckons Kuhn up to a stool at the center of the Great Hall. As she places the Hat on his head, a wary expression briefly flits across her face, almost as though she fears the Hat might explode upon touching Kuhn's hair.

Snape decides that she must have had some contact with Kuhn over the summer, and that she has come to the conclusion he could exert a bad influence on the other students, or something equally ridiculous of that nature. This is intriguing; it also makes Snape think that Kuhn will probably end up
That being said, now that he can finally see the whole of his face, Snape can't help but think that Kuhn looks a great deal like James Potter: They have the same thin face, the same mouth, the same eyebrows . . .

"Bet on what House he's in?" Avery whispers.

Snape casts a sidelong glance at the other Seventh Years. There's an eager gleam in Mulciber's eyes, and bets usually translate into money, money that Snape could most certainly put to good use.

"Hufflepuff, by the looks of him," Mulciber says, and to Snape's satisfaction pulls out two Galleons and sets them surreptitiously on the table. A sneer forms on Mulciber's lips as he adds, "He looks like he's about to wet his pants."

Rosier snickers into the sleeve of his robes, which, Snape notes with a pang, look new and custom-tailored, and tosses a few Galleons onto the table himself. "Mulciber's right," Rosier says between gasps. "Hufflepuff all the way."

Narcissa looks vaguely disgusted. Next to her, fingering a Galleon of his own, Lestrange's shadowed face grows cunning. "Given that Kuhn cannot possibly be a pure-blooded wizard, I'd put my word in for Gryffindor."

There is a moment of silence as the others digest this piece of information. Snape resumes his observation of Kuhn, who for some reason is gripping the edges of his stool as if holding on for dear life. This is not very Slytherin behaviour, Snape admits to himself. The thin mouth that reminds Snape so much of Potter is wordlessly moving up and down, as if Kuhn were speaking to the Hat. Interestingly, the Hat seems to be responding; it shifts on top of Kuhn's head like a set of oscillating scales, weighing possibilities.

Although Snape has seen the Hat deliberate before - it did so in his own case, when deciding between Ravenclaw and Slytherin - he has certainly never seen it take such a long time. Although loathe to place a bet, for he has honestly no idea what to make of Kuhn yet, Snape is fascinated by what he's seeing.

(The Hat mentioned Gryffindor, not Ravenclaw, but Snape is so mortified by this that he always says he was considered for Ravenclaw to anyone that asks. He almost believes it himself.)

Out of Snape's sight, but within his range of hearing, Wilkes speaks up confidently. "Well, I think he'll be a Ravenclaw."

"You think everyone's going to be a Ravenclaw," Mulciber jeers.

"Only because everyone is smarter than he is," says Rosier, grinning nastily.

Snape raises an eyebrow, but keeps his focus on the Sorting. Strangely, Kuhn is reminding him less and less of Potter now. The cheekbones are all wrong, as is the chin and the nose and especially the eyes. Kuhn had kept his eyes carefully shut when the Hat was first placed on his head, but they're open now. Even at this distance, Snape can see that the irises are green.

A strange feeling bubbles up in Snape. It is almost as if he has witnessed this scene before. Suddenly he realises he is thinking of her - of that fateful, unmentionably horrible day when she was Sorted into Gryffindor.

(Snape could have followed her, but then he had imagined the look on Grandmother Prince's face
and begun pleading with the Hat. It was, in hindsight, quickly persuaded.)

Sucking in a breath, Snape decides he has seen enough, and looks back at the Slytherins. Lestrange is wearing a haughty expression, as though everyone but Narcissa at the table is beneath him.

"I tell you, he'll be a Gryffindor," Lestrange says to Wilkes.

"I'm not seeing that," Wilkes declares.

"You don't see, ah, that expression of inane determination he's wearing, Terence?"

"I'm with Lestrange," Avery says immediately.

Snape glances back at Kuhn and finds that he disagrees with Avery and Lestrange; although Kuhn indeed looks as though he is concentrating very hard, there is something new, almost cunning about his expression. Snape doesn't think he's imagining it; and even if he were, Kuhn must possess some modicum of cunning to keep the Hat preoccupied for this long.

"Determination . . . Anyone can be determined. Especially a Ravenclaw!"

"Keep your voice down," Narcissa commands.

Rosier thumps Wilkes loudly on the back. "Yeah - you don't want the Ravenclaws to actually hear you, mate. Might ruin our excellent reputation."

Snape shakes his head - Rosier is an imbecile - but keeps his eyes on Kuhn. The Sorting has now taken an inordinate amount of time, surely the Hat will come to a decision within the next few seconds.

"What about you, Snape?" Avery asks suddenly. "You haven't made a bet."

"What about me?" Snape muses, thinking of Kuhn's strange way of communicating with the Hat, of McGonagall's telling reaction. Suddenly he is hit by inspiration. He turns in his seat to look directly at Lestrange, thrillingly aware that six pairs of eyes are trained on him, awaiting his next move. It's enough to make him smile. "I happen to think he will be in Slytherin."

There is a collective, disbelieving pause.

"Only a half-blood would be that blind to what's right in front of his face," says Rosier, nearly knocking over the table with the wild gestures of his hands, meant to convey just how completely off the mark Snape is. "Everyone else here, and by that I mean everyone, can see that -"

And then, just as Snape predicted, the Hat makes a decision. "SLYTHERIN!" it shouts, to the dumbfoundment of apparently everyone in the Great Hall but himself and probably Albus Dumbledore. (Snape has not forgotten the brief moment before Kuhn's Sorting when their eyes seemed to lock.) Curious despite himself, Snape cranes his neck towards the Gryffindor table and catches glimpse of Potter in his Head Boy's robes looking absolutely gobsmacked. Black, of course, is wearing an outraged expression. It's clear the Gryffindors were also betting on Kuhn's Sorting.

For a moment, Snape thinks he also sees faint disappointment on her face, but if it was there, it is swiftly replaced by a look of complete indifference. Since Snape himself is completely indifferent to her emotions, however, he thinks no more of it, and simply turns back to the Slytherins.

"What is it, exactly, that everyone else can see, Rosier?" Snape asks, a smirk spreading across his face.
Kuhn makes his way to the Slytherin table accompanied by scattered Gryffindor boos (their source undoubtedly Black and Pettigrew) and loud cheers from the Slytherins (egged on by Mulciber). The other two Houses, perhaps unable to make up their minds, are silent.

"Well," Rosier splutters.

Lestrange has already recovered from his slight judgment lapse and is pushing the pile of Galleons towards Snape. "You ever continue to surprise me, Severus," he murmurs. Unsure how to respond, Snape silently gathers the Galleons into his pockets.

"Ah, it was just luck," Rosier says.

"No, that was more than luck," says Mulciber, clapping Snape on the back in a not entirely unfriendly manner. Snape tries, but does not entirely succeed in holding back a wince. "I reckon it takes talent to make guesses like that."

Avery, who has been faithfully watching Kuhn's approach, turns to them suddenly and hisses, "Quiet, he's coming."

As if on cue, Lestrange assumes a mild, friendly expression that fails to mask the coldness in his eyes. Narcissa automatically raises a hand to the back of her heavy coiffure, although every hair is still perfectly in place, and lifts her nose in a superior expression. Unconsciously, Mulciber also reaches up to his hair and begins to smoothen it - being on the Quidditch team has made him vain, Snape thinks with disdain. Rosier, on the other hand, sinks sullenly into himself. Wilkes alone does not seem to react to Avery's news. Claudia Bramblethorn's head resting securely on his shoulder, he continues scribbling randomly on his napkin.

Kuhn is mere feet away when Lestrange stands abruptly, hand extended and smile in place. "Welcome to Slytherin. Rodolphus Lestrange, at your service."

Kuhn looks at Lestrange in surprise before shaking the proffered hand. "Er... thanks. I guess you already know I'm Adrian Kuhn...

His English is accent-free.

Introductions are made as Snape watches from his corner, the furthest end of the Slytherin table. Wilkes grunts a welcome, but does not cease scribbling; Rosier on the other hand, unable to leave his gregarious nature denied, rouses himself from his sulk and demands, "You any good at Quidditch?"

Kuhn blinks. "I'm nothing special," he says after a pause, and has the grace to look apologetic when Rosier huffs with disappointment. He's not like Potter at all, Snape decides.

"It doesn't matter," Mulciber injects, capturing Kuhn's thin hand in his iron grip. "That's what's so great about Slytherin; you don't have to be a Quidditch star to find respect. Look at old Snape, here," and Snape feels the heat rising to his cheeks, the last thing he wanted was to be singled out before the other introductions could be made, "He can't fly to save your life. Isn't that right, Snape?"

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Snape is in the midst of preparing a scathing reply when Kuhn turns green eyes on him and smiles, a genuine smile that lights up the irises like the underbellies of leaves when the sun shines through them and you're gazing up breathlessly from beneath. Snape feels that his heart is caught in his throat, because he knows those eyes, because his world has revolved around those eyes since he was nine... And then they shift, move on to someone else. Snape realises that he never answered Mulciber, and
that it's too late - Kuhn must have catalogued his silence as an affront and has now moved on. He speaks to Narcissa now, those impossible eyes are on Narcissa now, and they smile at Narcissa as they once smiled at Snape. Snape is too flummoxed to think; as if in a fog, he registers that Kuhn has impressed Narcissa by calling her "Miss Black," that the ice princess of all people is actually smiling, if in a self-satisfied and completely unattractive way . . .

Impossible. And yet, there it is.

Suddenly Lestrange is taking Kuhn by the elbow and leading him to Avery, who shakes Kuhn's hand; then they are zeroing in past Avery onto the empty space in front of Snape, the free corner of the Slytherin table Snape has always kept reserved for his books. There is even one resting there now, which he has just enough presence of mind to scoop up before a plate for Kuhn can materialise on top of it.

A second later, and no more, a plate and a tottering, overfull goblet of pumpkin juice appear on the very same spot. Snape hugs his book tightly, horrified by the fate it almost suffered, before realising how strange he must look to anyone that can see him. He kicks himself mentally. Hogwarts is not his room at home, where he could at least let his mind wander in whatever direction it pleased. (Where he could rage and mope and dream of her without anyone ever noticing.) Hogwarts is the bastion of the enemy, where even the slightest slip on his part can land him in utter ruin. To survive, he must always remain on his guard. There's no getting around it. He is not alone, and it would be mistake of catastrophic proportions to forget that in such a friendless environment as this.

The first day back at Hogwarts is always the worst.

Snape concentrates until he can picture his mental defences: A redoubtable black wall, preceded by a moat of terrific proportions, so deep and wide it would seem impossible to ford. In front of the moat stands a dense, ramose labyrinth. To this date, no Legilmens has succeeded in getting past the labyrinth.

Kuhn and Lestrange are standing before him, he notes with little more than passing interest.

"As you have already gathered, this is Severus Snape," Lestrange is telling Kuhn, who smiles at Snape, if less genuinely this time. "He is, I might add, the only one of our number who guessed that you might end up with us here in Slytherin."

Kuhn seems astonished by this news. "You did?"

"It wasn't exactly a feat of intelligence," Snape says dismissively. His book suddenly feels heavy in his arms, and he scoots over to make room for it on the bench, then sets it down.

Kuhn also sits. Snape glances to his left and sees that Lestrange is back at his place and already squabbling with Rosier. Mulciber and Avery, on the other hand, are following Kuhn's conversation with interest.

As Snape turns back, Kuhn immediately launches into, "I'm still surprised that you guessed. I wasn't sure I would end up in Slytherin."

Snape narrows his eyes. Kuhn seems eager to take him into his confidence, which is strange. At the same time, Snape himself wouldn't be averse to hearing an explanation of the unconventional Sorting he just witnessed. His strategy, he decides, will be to feign complete indifference.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. For some reason, the Hat was really intent on Gryffindor." Kuhn shakes his head, green eyes
absurdly, almost childishly wide. "It took some convincing for it to see things my way."

"I noticed." Keeping his face devoid of expression, Snape asks, lazily, "Why did you want to be in Slytherin?"

"Yeah, mate," Mulciber says from Snape's left, as Avery moves closer to Kuhn in order to hear better. "What's your reason?"

Kuhn draws his shoulders down and crosses his arms on the table, then leans forward slightly, which gives him a conspiratorial air. The look on his face, however, is pensive, as though he is still thinking through what he wants to say.

"I suppose it was the result of a process of elimination more than anything," he says slowly. "I knew I wasn't cut out to be a Ravenclaw, or a Hufflepuff for that matter - I'm neither studious nor particularly hardworking. As for Gryffindor, all that stuff about 'courage and chivalry' seems to be just another way to describe really self-satisfied, priggish people."

"You can say that again," says Avery.

Kuhn glances at him in mild surprise, as though he had forgotten he was there, then smiles ruefully. "Yeah. I guess I learned that the hard way. You see, I came a few weeks early in order to get some extra tutoring before the year could start. Since my background is so different from yours, the Headmaster thought I could use the help." Kuhn shrugs, and Snape can't help but think that something about this story doesn't quite add up. Normally, the Headmaster could care less about divergences in the backgrounds of his students.

"Two days ago," Kuhn continues, "I had the distinct pleasure of running into the Head Boy. I have to say, I've never met a more conceited person in my life." Kuhn looks down at the table for a moment, adding quietly, "It was kind of disappointing, actually."

"Potter's a right arse," Mulciber says with feeling.

Snape can't help but find it odd that Kuhn is speaking of Potter when Snape has spent so much of the evening thinking about how much they look alike. For a moment, he is tempted to ask whether they are related. Something, however, tells him the question should wait. Not because such a question might injure Kuhn's feelings - Snape couldn't give a toss about Kuhn's emotional state, despite knowing first-hand just how emotionally devastating an encounter with the supercilious, swaggering Gryffindor can be. (Although he can't quite imagine Potter doing anything to Kuhn, not with his reputation as Head Boy at stake. Kuhn is also neither ugly, as Snape is, nor an obvious Slytherin. It doesn't quite make sense.) No, Snape decides to wait because he wants a proper answer out of Kuhn and senses that he wouldn't get one at present.

(A niggling part of him also wonders whether Kuhn met the Head Girl. Would she have changed his mind about Gryffindor?)

"In any case, meeting him made clear that Gryffindor was the last place I wanted to be. After that, all the pieces kind of fell into place. I spoke with Professor Slughorn about Slytherin, and he told me it was a good House for people who liked to think outside the box, for people interested in more . . . experimental forms of magic. That sounded good to me." Kuhn pauses, takes in a breath, then smiles with his eyes. "And that's what I told the Hat."

Mulciber and Avery look underwhelmed by this account, but they offer Kuhn insincere smiles.

"All good reasons, I suppose," Avery says, but his eyebrows are raised in a manner that suggests he
thinks Kuhn incredibly naive.

Snape himself is less certain of what he thinks. If Kuhn's account was sincere, and Snape has some reason to believe so, then he is perhaps the only Slytherin in Snape's acquaintance who was Sorted for purely intellectual reasons. Most Slytherins come with to Hogwarts with a preinstalled set of biopolitical prejudices, but this doesn't seem to be the case with Kuhn. It is . . . refreshing, if suspicious. Could Kuhn really have no concept of the standards of blood purity upheld by his new House?

For a fleeting moment, Snape almost pities him. Fortunately, he is prevented from deepening that thought by the resounding voice of Albus Dumbledore, who has begun speaking to the assembly.

"And now, students, if I might test your patience once more, a few announcements . . ."

Kuhn straightens to attention, watching the Headmaster with every sign of willingness. Snape decides that observing Kuhn is more interesting than listening to one of Dumbledore's rambling monologues. The green eyes are wide and calm as they take in a monition about the Forbidden Forest, then the introduction of two new members to the faculty.

(Rosier, incidentally, was correct: The stolid woman sitting next to Slughorn at the staff table, a Professor Salvage, will indeed teach Defence this year. As for the other woman - Dumbledore calls her Professor Trelawney - the thin one beside Hagrid with unkempt hair and thick rings beneath her eyes, she will apparently be teaching Divination.)

"Too many women," Mulciber mutters under his breath.

If he hears Mulciber, Kuhn makes no sign of it; his eyes remain as unwaveringly fixed on Dumbledore as they had been on the Sorting Hat only a few minutes before. Snape wonders if this is some kind of coping mechanism. Perhaps Kuhn needs to simulate stability in his mind in order to adjust to what must seem to him a completely foreign environment. Despite his perfect English, Snape has come to the conclusion that Kuhn knows little else about the ways British boarding schools, Hogwarts in particular, work.

Well, Snape does not intend to show him the ropes. If Kuhn wants to survive Hogwarts, he will have to do so on his own.

Dumbledore's speech ends with the usual nonsense - "Cabbages and sealing wax!" - the cue for the feast to begin. As their plates instantly fill up with meats, sauces, salads and other heavenly foods Snape can't wait to try after a summer of privation at Spinner's End, Kuhn smiles.

"Guten Appetit," he says.

Snape stares, then decides two can play at this game. "Bon Appetit yourself," he says, before stabbing pointedly into his roast with his fork.

Snape has barely finished two bites when Kuhn speaks up again. "What are you reading?" he asks with real curiosity. Snape glares at the interruption, but notes that Kuhn has barely touched his own food. Given how thin he is, this is not exactly an encouraging sign. "I saw you had brought a book," Kuhn adds.

Thank you for stating the obvious, Snape thinks, making a point of cutting his roast for several seconds before answering. Kuhn is looking mildly disappointed, and ready to turn back to his own untouched plate, when Snape finally spits out the answer.

"Paracelsus."
"Much to Snape's astonishment, Kuhn immediately brightens. "The alchemist?"

"Yes," Snape says slowly. An idea hits him. "I presume you know of him because he is German?"

"Well, there's that, but I also read up a lot on him for what he says about antidotes." Kuhn makes a face. "Paracelsus is loads easier to understand than Golpalott, is all I can say."

Snape is having a little trouble believing that they are actually having this conversation, so he is almost grateful when Narcissa interrupts by calling Kuhn's name. "Adrian," she says sweetly, "Do tell us about your family."

For a moment, thoughts presumably still on potions-making, Kuhn doesn't seem to register what she has said. Then he straightens, expression grown careful. "My family? Er . . . both my parents were wizards, if that's what you mean."

"Were wizards?"

"Oh?" says Lestrange. From the sudden look of alertness on his face, Snape thinks he must have also caught upon Kuhn's deliberate use of the past tense.

Narcissa gives what she probably thinks is an encouraging smile. "And?" she prompts.

"My father was a pure-blooded wizard. He descends from the Tonkuhn family, perhaps you've heard of them? The line includes Johannes Faust. As for my mother," does Snape imagine it, or do those green eyes flicker back to him? "She was a Muggleborn witch."

"I see," says Narcissa in a manner that implies she does not 'see' at all. "You are not a pure-blood, then."

"But still a lot better than Snape here," Rosier just cannot resist from saying.

"Why would that be?" Kuhn asks. Snape is surprised by the frost in his voice, and also a little alarmed; Kuhn, he thinks, is going about all this the wrong way.

But Rosier is too bent on revenge to notice he has hit an apparent sore spot. He grins evilly at Snape, then blusters on, "Snape has a Muggle for a father. An actual Muggle! His mother's a witch of course, but there's no denying the fact of his heritage . . . so unfortunate . . ."

"Thank you for that scintillating piece of information, Rosier," Snape says. "I am certain you have just ruined Kuhn's appetite for the next several years."

"Enough on that topic, I think," Lestrange says lightly, although Snape can easily see that the prefect intends to interrogate Kuhn down to the last detail about his family sometime in the near future. "Tell us more about your interests, Adrian. Do you like politics?"

"Sure," Kuhn says. If there had been light in his eyes before, Snape thinks, this question has completely snuffed it out.

"Perhaps you might, ah, elaborate?"

"I'm very interested in German politics," Kuhn says with a forced kind of smile. "And what I've heard about Britain is certainly fascinating. Very fascinating. But I'm not what you could call an expert on wizarding politics in Britain, if you know what I mean."

"Certainly," Lestrange says coolly. "But you would not be adverse, I take it, to learning more?"
For a moment, Kuhn looks almost sullen; then his face goes blank. "No," he says.

"Good," Lestrange says. There is a pause. Then Rosier begins to pontificate about Quidditch line-ups, engaging Mulciber and Avery in a loud argument, and the conversation is over.

Kuhn does not speak for the rest of the meal, and Snape makes no effort to engage him.

"Severus, a word."

Snape, who has been reading his book since finishing off his plate ten minutes earlier, narrows his eyes up at Lestrange. He shuts the book carefully and stands. Lestrange beckons him into a corner.

"What is it?"

For a moment, Lestrange's pale eyes flash at Snape's sullen tone. Then he smiles one of his horrible, leering smiles. "There are not enough rooms for you to have one of your own."


"I did not anticipate Kuhn's arrival."

Snape's mouth twists of its own accord and his hands bunch at his sides. "Why me?

"Mulciber and Avery are already sharing, as are Rosier and Wilkes. That leaves you and me. As a prefect, I am entitled to a room of my own. Therefore, I am sorry, but Kuhn must room with you."

"I suppose I don't get anything out of this," Snape says bitterly, brutal images of Lestrange impaled on a pike appearing in his mind.

"On the contrary." Lestrange continues to smile, but the leer has been replaced by something conciliatory. "I have a task for you, Severus. Kuhn, you must have noticed, is hiding something. That, combined with the facts of his heritage and all-too-liberal upbringing, makes me disinclined to trust him. I would like for you to watch over him. Teach him our ways, if you can, mould him as is appropriate, but above all - make certain that he doesn't try anything stupid. The last thing we need is a spy amongst our ranks."

"He's too naive to be a spy," Snape scoffs.

"Perhaps you are right," says Lestrange, smile still eerily in place, "but I am not so sure. In any case, Severus: Do this for me and you shall be appropriately rewarded, when the time comes."

Snape shivers slightly. There is no question as to what Lestrange refers. "I understand."

"Good. Now, if he is to ask why we were speaking at such length, you are to tell him only about our little argument concerning your rooming arrangements. Understood?"

"Naturally," Snape says, unable to hold back a sneer. Lestrange isn't nearly as clever as he thinks, not by half.

Lestrange only seems amused by Snape's reaction. "Excellent." His expression shifts suddenly to anger, presumably for Kuhn's benefit. Privately, Snape doubts that Kuhn has been watching them at all. "That is my final word on the matter, Snape."

"As you say," he mutters, turning back to the table. As he suspected, Kuhn's head is still hanging. Most of the food on his plate remains; he prods it listlessly with his fork. Suddenly he looks up, the
blunt force of his miserable green gaze directed squarely at Snape.

I'm never going to be able to do this, Snape thinks.

He wishes this day had never begun.
Since Snape's return to the Slytherin table, Kuhn has not spoken once. True, he seems content, playing around with his pudding like an overgrown infant, but Snape knows better. Kuhn wants to speak with him. Snape is as certain of this as he is certain that the illusion of night sky projected onto the ceiling of the Great Hall isn't real. No, there is doubt in Snape's mind that Kuhn is desperate to speak with him, the one member of Slytherin with (a brain) an actual Muggle for a parent. Yet like a petulant child, Kuhn feels that he has already made his friendly intentions towards Snape clear, and that it now behoves Snape to take up the mantle. Kuhn's entire display of silence and misery, Snape is sure, is but a pretence to manipulate Snape into feeling sorry for him, and thus into voluntarily beginning a conversation. Snape, however, has no intention of feeling sorry for the boy who will soon be breathing up his room. He therefore steadfastly maintains his silence, hoping that Kuhn will crack in the meantime.

This soon devolves into an extremely frustrating charade, for Snape is actually impatient to tell Kuhn about their new rooming arrangement, if only to make Kuhn as unhappy as he, Snape, already is. As the time stretches between them, only one good thing comes of their mutual reserve: Avery and Mulciber are bored into moving elsewhere. They now make rounds of the Slytherin table with Rosier, greeting fellow members of the Quidditch team and most important, giving Snape and Kuhn a semblance of privacy.

Eventually the desire to aggrieve Kuhn wins over Snape's sense of pride. " Aren't you in the least interested in hearing what Lestrange had to say? " he spits.

" It's not my job to pry into other people's business. Besides, if the matter concerns me, I'm sure you'd let me know. " Kuhn's voice is suspiciously dispassionate as he spears his serving of spotted dick.

Snape narrows his eyes and hisses, " And if I were not so inclined? "

Kuhn shrugs with what Snape decides is purely spiteful indifference. " Then I would just have to live without that information, wouldn't I."

Snape sneers. " Don't think I haven't seen through your little game. However, it so happens that I do have news concerning you personally. " Snape pauses, waiting until Kuhn's eyes have met his before delivering the devastating blow. " Lestrange has decided that we are to share a room."

" Really? " That got him, Snape thinks gleefully. The green eyes are wide, the fork and spotted dick forgotten. Snape himself has almost forgotten that he will also have to live with Kuhn. " But . . . I thought everyone would be in the same room. You know, all together."

" Communal sleeping arrangements are for Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, " Snape says, waving a hand dismissively. " Ravenclaws and Slytherins have the option of rooming alone or in pairs beginning in their fifth year. " Not that Snape has ever benefitted from this arrangement. Every year he has applied for a room of his own, and every year he has always been stuck with someone else: First Avery, then Mulciber, now Kuhn . . .

" Well . . . OK, " Kuhn says, clearly at a loss for words. He carefully rubs the bridge of his nose, almost as if expecting a pair of glasses to be resting there. " I hope you weren't expecting me to jump up and down with joy. Not that I mind rooming with you, " Kuhn quickly amends, presumably at the sour look on Snape's face, " but it's just one more thing about this school I didn't expect. "
"I assure you, Kuhn, that the prospect of our sharing a room together leaves me even less enthusiastic than you."

Something like anger flashes across Kuhn's pale face. Snape feels an answering anger awaken in himself, and is therefore somewhat disappointed when Kuhn's eyes suddenly shift colour and temperament, when the black of a roiling sea suddenly lightens into the green of calm and sunny shallows. Kuhn's eyes radiate understanding, and it irks Snape, who finds himself understanding Kuhn less and less with every passing second.

"You were supposed to have a room of your own."

"My, your deductive capacities are certainly impressive," Snape sneers.

Kuhn's mouth twitches. For a moment Snape hopes that he has succumbed to anger again, because this at least Snape could respect - but no, now that he looks closer it is clear that Kuhn is simply trying to suppress a smile. "I'm going to take that as a compliment," he says with an infuriating lightness.

"Never heard of irony, have you?"

"I have," Kuhn says, even more amused, "and it definitely applies to this conversation."

Snape keeps his sneer in place, but can't help feeling he has lost his footing and that, if this round were to be judged, he would not be its winner. Fortunately, no such judgment takes place. Before Kuhn can smile or gloat further, the stentorian voice of the Headmaster interrupts, announcing the close of the feast.

Collectively, the prefects begin preparing to lead the students to their respective Houses. Lestrange stands foremost amongst them, pale eyes glittering ominously in the faint starlight of the enchanted ceiling as he gestures for the other Seventh Year boys to follow him out of the Great Hall. Snape gets reluctantly to his feet, book cradled in his arms, and hopes that Kuhn does not decide to engage him further on their way to the dungeons. His wish is fulfilled: Wilkes, no longer obliged to entertain Claudia Bramblethorn, shows sudden interest in Kuhn. They immediately launch into a conversation about Germany. Although they hang back more than the others, Snape manages to regulate his pace so that he seems out of earshot while remaining very much within it.

"- I have some family in Germany. They live near the Blocksberg," Wilkes is saying.

"The Blocksberg . . . that's amazing." Kuhn sounds genuinely excited. "I've only been there once myself for Walpurgisnacht -"

"Walpurgis, really? Is it true that the witches . . ." and Wilkes whispers something, probably lewd, into Kuhn's ear, for Snape can hear Kuhn blushing as he softly stammers an answer. Wilkes doesn't appear to notice Kuhn's discomfort. "Wicked," he says with relish. "I'll definitely be going next year, no matter what my mum says."

"You'll enjoy it, I'm sure," Kuhn says, his excitement already extinguished, replaced by a flat, cautious tone.

He's learning, Snape thinks.

Wilkes proceeds to ask Kuhn a barrage of questions about the Walpurgis festivities, mostly with regard to its apparently naked female celebrants. It is an unrevealing and rather pointless conversation, in Snape's opinion, although Kuhn's increasing discomfort with the topic does do a little in the way of compensating for Snape's earlier unspoken defeat. Nonetheless, Snape is relieved
when Lestrange stops before the wall leading to the Slytherin dungeon and the salacious conversation is given license to end.

"Magic is Might," Lestrange tells the wall, which immediately transforms into a passageway. Lestrange enters first, followed by Rosier, Mulciber and Avery. Snape follows at a greater distance. Kuhn immediately strides up to his side. Silently, they make their way into the Common Room. It's just as dank and ghoulish as Snape remembers: Green light pours out from elegant glass lamps placed beside skulls, making the dark leather of the sofas and armchairs glisten eerily, and the low-hung ceiling is moist with condensation from the lake above. Snape had been somewhat bewildered by the decor as a First Year, although it now appeals to his sense of humour. For Kuhn, however, the room seems to hold no surprises: As far as Snape can tell, he doesn't spare a single glance for his new surroundings. Snape is beginning to think Kuhn is either unobservant by nature or extremely depressed.

Lestrange holds up a hand, bidding them all to gather around him. They do so in silence. "Your rooms are located in the leftmost entryway. Severus, I've put you and Adrian down at the farthest end of the hall. Cassius, Daniel, the two of you are next to them. That leaves the remaining room, Terence, to you and Evan.'"

"As far away from the Muggles as possible," Rosier says cheerily.

Lestrange's eyes narrow. "There are no Muggles here, Evan."

Rosier grins nastily at Snape. "Might as well be."

"I hope I need not remind you all of your first duty to each other as members of this house," Lestrange says coldly. "Loyalty. Step out of line again, Rosier, and Slughorn will hear of it."

Despite the palpable threat, Rosier looks unrepentant. He knows, just as Snape does, that Lestrange has only stepped in because Snape's - and possibly Kuhn's - loyalty is currently useful to his family's cause. The moment that usefulness is outlived, however . . .

"Come on," Snape mutters to Kuhn, pushing past Rosier towards the leftmost entryway. Kuhn follows wordlessly.

Snape steps into their new room first. It's much larger than any of his previous rooms. Two four-poster beds hung with silver and green hangings stand to the left, and two long mahogany desks with matching chairs and lamps stand across them to the right. Snape notes that there are shelves built into the stone walls (though not enough for all of his books) and two small mahogany wardrobes for hanging clothes. Naturally, the room has no windows, although someone thought to enchant a crevice to give a view of the lake.

"This is . . . nice," Kuhn says, looking for once pleasantly surprised by his surroundings. He makes his way to his trunk, which stands at the foot of the bed nearest to the door. Snape heads for his wallshelf instead, where he rests his Paracelsus securely against a stone bookend. Once satisfied that it will not fall, he turns to his own trunk.

It opens with a flick of his wand - and a blast of heat knocks into him, smelling of summer at Spinner's End. Snape closes his eyes and lets the heat wave run over him, not caring how bitter, how piss-sour it smells. The room is silent, yet filled with memory and thought. Snape has nearly forgotten Kuhn's presence. That smell - he can almost hear his mother singing nonsense to herself, almost feel his hands tightening around her thickening waist. It's been years since he hugged her last, he thinks, and his eyes open of their own accord, snapping him out of the memories.
Snape waits until the scents have nearly faded before bending down to pick up one of his books. He had wrapped them carefully in his uniform robes, knowing that he would never get the wrinkles out (Snape is terrible at household charms) but that his books, at least, would arrive at Hogwarts undamaged. The first book is his Potions text, the one full of basic errors that he inherited from his mother and has been secretly improving upon during class. He flips it open to a random page - dust motes scatter into his eyes - and, blinking, scans through Libatius Borage's instructions for making the Draught of Living Death. Snape's own notes blacken the page, rendering it nearly illegible. Someday, Snape thinks, he should copy his notes down and send them in to a publisher. The worth of the royalties alone . . .

A cough is uttered on the other side of the room. Snape pretends not to hear Kuhn, despite just having lost his train of thought, and flips forward through the book towards the potions he has yet to test. His gaze settles on a particularly complex potion - Veritaserum - noting ingredients, brewing times, cutting techniques, temperatures and wand practices. As usual, Snape finds the printed text misleadingly vague; it claims, for example, that one should add the aqua fortis and spirit of salt to the monkshood, yet fails to specify in what order. Borage can't possibly intend that the aqua fortis and spirit of salt be added to the monkshood at the same time! The spirit of salt, Snape muses, should probably be added after the aqua fortis, although he would have to set up an experiment to determine just how long the interval between additions would take. Without looking up from the book - if he had to guess, the aqua fortis would need three clockwise stirs to bond properly with the monkshood before the spirit could be added and absorbed - Snape conjures a quill and notes down his ongoing thoughts in a margin.

Yet this is child's play, he thinks with a pang. Annotating the school curriculum is amusing, certainly, but hardly a real challenge, hardly what Snape would call cutting-edge science. Frowning, he snaps the book shut and places it next to the Paracelsus on the stone shelf in the wall.

His other textbooks are less interesting; these he simply levitates up to the shelf without opening. Eventually, he uncovers The Power of Dark Magic, a translation of Grindelwald's Die Macht der schwarzen Magie that Lucius Malfoy gave him as a birthday present earlier in the year. Snape has perused most of it already; it contains a few highly interesting Dark spells and some curious anecdotes, but is for the most part a boring political treatise. Should Lucius ever visit him, however, it had better be on display.

There are a few last titles: The Chymistry of Isaac Newton, a book containing some of Newton's most brilliant potions; Machiavelli's Prince and Plato's Republic; then the quintessential reference books, De occulta Philosophia, Moste Potente Potions, Curses and Counter-curses, Advanced Rune Translation, Magick Most Evile, Secrets of the Darkest Art and Beyond Self-Defensive Spellwork. At this point, Snape has to cast an Expanding charm on the shelf to fit everything, and yet he is almost disappointed that he doesn't have any other books with him. Books are expensive, of course, but they make up, in an essential way, his very identity. Naturally, the moment the library opens he will check out the titles he misses, bring them here and arrange them comfortably around himself like friends come for a long stay. At present, however, he feels almost . . . bereft.

Kuhn coughs again from behind. Snape continues to ignore him, peering deep into his trunk to see what's left. His Potions utensils - cauldrons, knife sets, ingredients, storage and measuring flasks - glint up at him reproachfully. Had he a room of his own, he would have set up his own private lab in the space Kuhn's bed now occupies. Theoretically, there is also enough space between Snape's desk and the wall to set up a second table for experimentation, but what if Kuhn disapproves? Given that experimentation is strictly forbidden in dorm rooms, the risk that Kuhn might tattle is great . . . and Snape remembers how poorly Avery and Mulciber reacted when he had asked for their permission in the past . . .
"Kuhn," Snape says, still gazing at his equipment. "I would like to set up a little laboratory next to my desk for some private brewing. I would naturally surround it with odour and sound protections. You would never need notice it. All the same, I must know whether you have anything against the idea."

"You're going to brew in here?" Kuhn asks, just as Snape had feared. Deeply disappointed, Snape looks up from his trunk and sends Kuhn one of his more potent glares.

But Kuhn, wonder of wonders, actually seems excited, not suspicious or upset at all. "Do you mind if I set up a few wards myself? You know, against explosions and so on . . ."

Snape blinks. "You mean you don't mind?"

"Not at all." Kuhn is actually grinning, which leads Snape to wonder whether some ulterior motive is at work here. "I think it's a brilliant idea."

Something lightens within Snape, and he feels his mouth twitch. Suddenly much more inclined to accept Kuhn as a roommate, even if he has an ulterior motive concerning Snape's lab, he lets their eyes meet briefly - an almost electric sensation, given those eyes - before turning back to his trunk.

Right. Snape is finding it hard-pressed not to smile, the thought of his own laboratory is so powerful and wondrous. He shakes his head in final disbelief, then squeezes his eyes shut and concentrates. A moment later, he has conjured a second wooden table with drawers and a bottom shelf next to his own desk. It's a bit rickety, not quite as solid as he'd imagined in his head, but with a few adjustments it should do the job.

Slowly, carefully, Snape unpacks each individual instrument onto the table. He puts cleaning supplies in one of the drawers and several new rolls of parchment for note-taking in another; gloves, protective goggles, his knife kits, cutting boards and cauldron are set in particular place on the tabletop. With another wandwave, Snape installs a cabinet for ingredients above the table. He sorts the jars and packets of precious ingredients methodically before placing them, one by one, into the cabinet.

Behind him, Kuhn mutters long strings of words in German. His laboratory set-up complete, Snape turns to watch as Kuhn points his wand in a complicated series of movements. Kuhn is not simply warding against explosions, Snape realises, but creating a highly advanced system of wards.

Eventually Kuhn drops his arms and ceases muttering. There is a small pop as the wards settle into place. Snape can't help but raise his eyebrows at the unexpectedness of it all. "Not that I have any objection to extra wards against intruders and detractors, but don't you think this is a bit of an overkill?"

"No," Kuhn says shortly.

"But why?"

"Since we're in Slytherin, I think you'll agree that wards against eavesdropping are pretty much a must. I put in three. As for the rest," Kuhn gives Snape a strange look, almost as if, for a moment, he expects to see someone else, "I guess I thought it might be good to set up a few defences against thieves, given your laboratory."

Snape cannot quite prevent a look of disbelief from forming on his face. "That was . . . considerate of you."

Kuhn shrugs, but there is a smile in his eyes. "In any case, no-one will be able to enter the room
Snape thinks back to the long, German strings of words and the pointed wand-movements. "Might I inquire after the spells you used? I thought I heard you speaking in German . . ."

Kuhn colours slightly. "Those are spells I learned in Berlin," he says. Snape wonders if Kuhn actually intended to let slip that he has lived in Berlin; if Kuhn were any other Slytherin, Snape would say yes. But Kuhn is very different from the boys Snape has lived with over the past six years. "I don't mind showing them to you," Kuhn continues. He looks at Snape appraisingly. "You don't happen to speak German, do you?"

"Of course not," snaps Snape. Anyone with eyes should be able to see that he doesn't come from a family with enough money to afford a private language tutor. Even the Muggle school Snape attended until he was eleven was too poor to support a language program. Most of Snape's linguistic energies have since been concentrated on eradicating the horrible Manchester dialect he learned from the other children at that school.

"That's alright," Kuhn says thoughtfully. Snape wonders if he in the midst of figuring out that his dishevelled, greasy roommate comes from a poverty-stricken household. If he is, he at least has the courtesy to keep his face free of contempt or pity. "I can show you the wand-movements at least. Here," Kuhn brandishes his wand, points it aggressively at one corner of the room, then makes a grand sweeping motion. "It's important to fortify each weakness - corners, seams, crevices, doors, windows. I mostly focused on the door."

Snape examines each movement as Kuhn makes it, then copies it himself. Admittedly, Kuhn's technique isn't very elegant, but what it lacks in grace it makes up for with power. Kuhn exerts an admirable control over his wand, a kind of control Snape has rarely seen in wizards his own age. Snape has always thought himself skilled and quick with a wand, but watching Kuhn makes him aware that his own wand (ebony and unicorn hair, 13 inches) has never responded to him so instantly and without compromise as Kuhn's.

It's demotivating, if somewhat fascinating to watch oneself be so completely outpaced by a boy who does not even seem to realise this could become a contest, who does not even seem to think in such terms. Snape's face heats with embarrassment at himself, not only for his (in his mind) inferior wand technique, but also because a part of him can't help but resent Kuhn, although Kuhn by no means deserves it.

He takes a good look at Kuhn's robes, but they are neither hand-me-downs, as Snape's are, nor as obviously expensive as Rosier's or Lestrange's. They seem to merely be the standard robes Madame Malkin sells.

They have pretended to ward all the corners when Snape decides he's had plenty and lowers his wand. "I think I understand the movements sufficiently now."

Kuhn nods. "Would you like me to teach you the incantations?"

"Perhaps some other time."

Kuhn nods again, a guarded look on his face, but does not comment upon Snape's sudden loss of interest in his spells.

Grateful to be let go without hassle, Snape ejects resentful thoughts about Kuhn from his mind and prowls back to his own trunk. Various items of clothing - his robes, nightshirt, pants and Slytherin scarf - lie discarded inside from where he tossed them after unpacking his books. Feeling a bit ill at
the sight of the crinkles in the fabric (he can already imagine what Potter might say), Snape attempts
a Smoothening Charm (it barely works), then presses the remaining rumples down with his hands
just in case Kuhn is watching (Snape doesn't think he is). When the tedious work of hanging it all up
is completed, he slams the wardrobe door shut and decides that he has unpacked enough for the day.

Kuhn, he notices, also seems to have finished. This strikes Snape as strange; all of his previous
roommates had taken much longer to unpack than Snape, despite his extra books and potions
equipage. Avery had brought a record player and an appalling poster collection of scantily clad,
famous Dark witches; Mulciber, a tangled heap of pornography, Quidditch magazines and
photographs of his family and friends. Both of them had also owned more clothes and hygiene
products than Snape - robes in more than one colour, including dressier ones for the girls, Quidditch
gear, sport deodorants, perfumes and shampoos . . .

Who is this Kuhn? Snape wonders. why is he at Hogwarts and not in Germany? Why did he ask the
Hat for Slytherin? What happened to his parents? Is he rich or poor? Why does his English lack an
accent? What happened between him and Potter? Why was he so thrilled at the idea of Snape's
miniature laboratory? . . .

Merlin be damned, Snape is going to find out.

An hour passes by, in which Snape paces and reads through his summer Transfiguration essay for
errors, one finger tracing past the contour of his lips, when -

"OW!"

Snape whirls to face the door and is astonished to see Mulciber, in dress robes, standing before it,
hopping on one foot and clutching his nose. He glances at Kuhn, who sets down his own
Transfiguration essay on his desk and makes a vague, yet recognizably pointed wand gesture.

The wards. Interesting.

"Come in, Mulciber," Snape calls, smirking at the sight of someone as hulking and formidable-
seeming as the Head Beater limping into his room.

"Merlin's balls, Snape, I knew you were a paranoid bastard, but this reaches new heights even for
you," Mulciber mutters, still rubbing gingerly at his nose.

"It's Kuhn's work, not mine." Snape hesitates for a moment, then allows his smirk to widen. "Now,
what was so urgent that you had to race in here without knocking first? Would have saved you some
trouble, you know."

"Now you tell me," Mulciber says, but he's grinning now; like any Slytherin, he knows to respect
good wandwork. "German efficiency, eh?" he says, turning to Kuhn, who remains seated at his desk
with a cool expression on his face. "Could have used you last year, when that little twit Regulus
Black started pilfering the alcohol stores. Speaking of which," Mulciber brightens, "there's a party
on. Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Years only. They're all dying to meet Kuhn here, and I'm sure a few of
them wouldn't mind a glimpse of your pretty face, Severus."

Snape scowls. Mulciber rarely uses his first name except as a taunt. His irritation, however, clearly
pales in comparison to whatever Kuhn is feeling. Snape's new roommate has sprung to his feet, his
expression almost agitated. "Regulus Black?" he asks, his eyes darting between Snape and Mulciber.
"Who's that?"

"A swot of a Fifth Year on the Quidditch team. He's our Seeker," Mulciber explains genially, then
narrows his eyes. "You sure look like you could use a drink, Kuhn. You're almost as pale as Snape here, and that's practically an impossible feat, if you know what I mean."

As Mulciber proceeds to laugh at his own wit (-lessness, Snape thinks sourly), Snape files Kuhn's reaction away for further examination. Black is no prefect, so he could not have crossed paths with Kuhn here at Hogwarts already; and yet Kuhn's reaction indicates that he knows exactly who Black is. Could the Blacks have something to do with Kuhn's family, even with his parents' apparent demise? Snape thinks back to the excessive deference Kuhn showed Narcissa when they were introduced. Could this somehow be related?

"I'd love a drink," Kuhn says suddenly, green eyes hard and determined.

"Good." Mulciber glances over at Snape. "You too?"

Snape would prefer to prepare himself for his enormous load of classes tomorrow, but something tells him that he should stay close to Kuhn, if only to try and understand more of his relationship to Regulus Black. "I will come, but only for a short time." He pauses, savouring the brief look of surprise that flits across Mulciber's coarse features. "Some of us still have Transfiguration in the morning."

"You poor sod," Mulciber says unconcernedly. An idea seems to occur to him. "Er - you are planning on changing into dress robes beforehand, right?"

"No," says Snape. Kuhn glances at Snape, then back at Mulciber, and seems to come to a decision.

"No."

"Aren't you at least going to comb your hair? Snape?"

"No," Snape snarls.

(He hasn't combed or washed his hair in a day, and it's much too long and tangled in little knots at the back, but there is no way he is going to condescend to do so for the sake of a few pretentious purebloods that could care less about his appearance anyway. What Kuhn's excuse is, Snape doesn't know, but he suspects they think along similar lines.)

"Suit yourself," says Mulciber coolly, turning to exit the door. Snape and Kuhn follow in silence. "So what about you, Kuhn?" Mulciber asks once they are moving down the corridor, voice friendly again. "Loads and loads of courses tomorrow?"

"I haven't received my schedule yet, but as I'm taking Potions, Defence, Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration, I guess so, yeah."

"That's nothing," Snape sniffs, and is about to recite his even longer list of classes when Mulciber cuts him off.

"Yeah, yeah, we all know about your inner Ravenclaw." Mulciber grins - Snape catches glimpse of an unattractive golden molar at the back of his mouth - at Kuhn, who smiles back this time, if tentatively. "I roomed with this one last year, and swear to you, never once caught a sight of him without a book. He even sleeps with them." At Snape's noise of protest, Mulciber adds, "Don't even try denying it, my friend." To Kuhn, he says ominously, "You'll see what I mean."

Snape rolls his eyes, and Kuhn laughs - a pure, clear sound, almost achingly familiar . . .

"There you are," injects a cold, bored voice - Avery, standing at the threshold to the Common Room
in blue dress robes with his arms crossed over his chest. He looks at Snape with interest. "I didn't think you would show."

Snape bares his (yellowed, uneven) teeth, and Avery smirks. "Good to see you, all the same." With a grand gesture of his arm, Avery points towards the Common Room. "Shall we?"

They follow Avery through the stone entranceway into the Common Room, cast this evening in a somewhat less green shade than usual thanks to a swirling white globe of light floating at its center. Tendrils of the unearthly light pry themselves from the globe, which heaves like a star; they stream aesthetically through the room before extinguishing into smoke on the stone walls. Snape suspects that Narcissa, with her deft hand for Charms, is responsible for the spectacular effect.

Beneath the pulsating globe, the leather armchairs and couches have been replaced with a glowing, highly modern stainless steel bar. Snape thinks that the bar looks ridiculous, especially with an already tipsy, garishly dressed Rosier standing behind it as barkeep. The bar, of course, is surrounded by girls.

"Rosier looks even more asinine than usual," Snape murmurs to Avery.

"He's been drinking his own concoctions," Avery says in a low voice. "Personally, I would stay away from those. But there's an incredible Bordeaux - gift of Bellatrix Black herself - and Firewhisky of course, and . . . right, you don't drink. Well, there's even Butterbeer for teetotallers like you."

Snape has never explained why he keeps away from drink; that would involve explaining his home life to Avery, which he would never do. Avery is clever enough to have figured out most of it anyway. "Thank you," Snape says coldly.

"Anytime," Avery says, then gestures towards the bar. "I'm going to get something to drink. Coming?"

"Not yet."

"I'll catch up with you later, then."

Snape nods absently, letting his eyes roam across the rest of the scene. A billiards table occupies the right side of the room. Lestrange stands there playing with his younger brother Rabastan and other Sixth Years. Couches line the remaining walls. Narcissa reclines on one of them with a glass of red wine, silver robes gathered about her like shimmering mercury, while a group of insignificant Sixth and Seventh Year girls makes fruitless attempts to engage her. The Quidditch jocks take up a couch beside them, each of them carrying at least one drink in hand. They keep glancing over at the girls, and it is clear they intend to make a move as soon as the girls give up on Narcissa. Snape takes a closer look at their faces and notes that Regulus Black is not amongst them.

"Mind telling me who some of these people are?" says a quiet voice beside Snape.

Snape does not glance down at Kuhn, but continues scanning the room for Black. "Anyone interest you in particular?"

"Who's that with Lestrange?"

"Rabastan, his younger brother, and if I'm correct - Yaxley and Travers. Don't ask me for their first names, I've forgotten. However," Snape drops his voice to a near-inaudible whisper, "from what I've heard, they've already been . . . initiated."
Snape can hear Kuhn's sharp intake of breath. So, he knows enough about British politics to understand what that means.

Kuhn's voice is shaky when he speaks again. "And those girls next to Narcissa?"

"Claudia Bramblethorn, that's the girl with a black bob and all the make-up, she's Wilkes' girlfriend. Mirelda Gibbon is in pink; her brother graduated two years ago and is probably also an initiate by now. As for the others - they don't matter."

Kuhn huffs. "How can they not matter?"

"How can a simpering featherbrain with no purpose in life but to marry and breed matter? By the time they've finished Hogwarts, those girls will all be married to a rich, pure-blooded wizard, possibly even already pregnant with an heir. They will be used up at thirty, hideous at forty . . ."

"They will teach their children what and what not to believe," Kuhn says stubbornly. "That matters."

Snape scoffs. "They will never teach their children anything but how to marry and breed. You may call that teaching; I prefer to call it brainwashing, myself."

"That's not quite -"

"Severus!"

Snape whips around at the sound of his name - his first name - and feels his eyes widen as Regulus Black of all people steps out of the Fifth Year entryway and begins striding towards him.

"Who's that?" Kuhn hisses, but Snape is too taken aback to reply. Black's face is a careful blank, but for his eyes, which shine brightly in the white light of the starlike orb. Although his pace is measured, Black walks quickly, almost hurriedly. If Snape didn't know better, he'd think that Black had been waiting just for him.

"Hello, Regulus," Snape says. At his side, Kuhn gives a little start.

Black comes to a halt inches before them. His dark eyes glisten with an unreadable expression. "Severus," he says, without sparing a glance for Kuhn.

Snape stiffens. The way Black says his name - softly, almost warmly - is unsettling. Snape does not remember Black ever calling him by his first name before, nor ever giving him permission to use it, for that matter . . . What has changed?

Preferring not to think about it now, Snape gestures at Kuhn. "As I'm sure you already know, this is Adrian Kuhn." Snape pauses, letting a smirk play across his lips. "He has expressed particular interest in meeting you."

Black's eyes had not left Snape's once while he was speaking. They slide indifferently to Kuhn now. "I'm surprised you ended up in Slytherin," he says coldly. "I'm surprised you ended up in Slytherin," he says coldly. "You don't look the type."

"I was surprised myself," Kuhn replies. His green eyes search Black's face with a kind of hunger, as though Black were a long-lost relative he had never hoped of seeing alive again. "Though I have to say, looking the type doesn't play as much a role as you'd think." Kuhn pauses, suddenly calculating. "Isn't your brother a Gryffindor?"

Both Snape and Black instantly scowl. "My brother is a blood-traitor and no longer a member of my family," Black says softly, icily. He steps closer to Kuhn, threat apparent in his stance, and Snape
can see a red tinge to his high-boned cheeks. "Never mention him to me again."

Kuhn does not seem intimidated. "As you wish."

"Although," Black turns back to Snape, expression clearing, "I heard my errant brother tried to attack you this morning on the train. He didn't cause you any trouble, I hope?"

"None at all," Snape says smoothly. "Without Potter and with only that simpleton Pettigrew to back him, his effort failed at the get-go."

Black smiles, looking for a moment almost like the handsome, dashing brother he so despises. "I'm glad to hear it, Severus."

Snape is unsure how to reply, so he doesn't. Fortunately, another thought occurs to him. His eyes narrow in on Kuhn with growing suspicion. "How did you know that Regulus has a brother?" he demands.

"Potter told me," Kuhn says, sounding - to Snape's mind - almost queasy.

"Potter?" Black spits.

Kuhn sighs. "Potter was here early because of his Head Boy duties. He sought me out, knowing I was here for some extra lessons, and told me I should definitely ask the Hat for Gryffindor, because he and his best pal Sirius Black would be able to show me the time of my life." Kuhn shrugs. "I simply guessed that you and he were related, that's all." At Snape's disbelieving look, he adds belligerently, "You know, what with all the constellations for first names . . ."

"I see," says Black in a bored tone, turning his gaze immediately back to Snape. There is a kind of imploring glint to his eyes now, and he edges away from Kuhn, a clear signal that he wants to speak with Snape alone. "Severus, I've been meaning to ask you . . ."

"Meaning to ask him what?" interrupts a cool, feminine voice from behind. Snape rejoices inwardly at Narcissa's timing, which allows him to step away from Black under the guise of giving Narcissa room. "I'm not in a celebratory mood, cousin."

"Well, then?"

"I . . . was merely going to ask Severus for suggestions on how to improve the standard recipe for the Draught of Peace."

It is a lie, and Narcissa recognises it for one immediately. "That hardly sounds like something one would discuss at a party."

"I'm not in a celebratory mood, cousin."

"Yes, I can see that," Narcissa says coldly. "Perhaps you are too young for these things. You should consider heading to bed."

Black blanches, but has no retort.

"Brush your hair, while you're at it," Narcissa adds. "Severus, dear as he may be to us, is not a
proper role model for you in that regard."

Snape is astonished to realise that Black's hair is nearly as long and dishevelled (if not as greasy) as his own. How could he have failed to notice?

"I would appreciate it if you would mind your own business, cousin," Black snarls, his face brick-red and contorted with a combination of embarrassment and rage.

"And I would appreciate it if you would mind your tone," Narcissa snaps. She places a hand on Snape's arm and begins leading him away. "Come, Severus, Adrian, my cousin is clearly too tired to converse with us any further. Goodnight," she tells Black in falsely sweet tones.

Severus can't but help glance back. Black's hands are balled into fists; he looks as though ready to tear the entire party apart. After a moment of internal battling, he turns on his heel and stomps back into the Fifth Year entryway.

"You must excuse Regulus," Narcissa says, once they are all seated on an empty couch. "He has been acting oddly all summer. Most oddly, I must say. My mother believes it is due to stress." She lowers her eyes and voice. "My aunt, as you know, has been encouraging him to be Marked early. It is perhaps too much pressure for such a young boy."

"Perhaps," Snape murmurs, although he somehow doesn't think that fear of becoming a Death Eater is the reason for Black's strange behaviour.

Kuhn makes a disbelieving noise.

"And what do you think, Adrian?" Narcissa asks sharply.

"I think he's in love," he says quietly, without looking at either Narcissa or Snape. Snape is surprised, despite himself, and also dismayed - for if Regulus seemed in love with anyone, then it was with him.

This is certainly an unpleasant thought. Suddenly, Snape is no longer interested in Kuhn's relationship to Black - the much more pressing question is the nature of Black's own relationship to Snape himself.

(Oh, but his heart is taken. Taken by one who will never return his feelings, but taken forever nonetheless.)

"Do you?" Narcissa looks long at Kuhn, considering. "It is certainly a possibility."

"It's a ridiculous notion," Snape hisses. At Narcissa's questioning glance, Snape continues in a low voice, "Your cousin would never 'fall in love'. A crush, I grant you, but nothing more. I am sure Regulus' current malady, should that be the source, will pass by most swiftly."

Kuhn raises his eyebrows at Snape, as if to say that he thinks Snape is in denial. Narcissa, however, seems satisfied with the argument. "Yes, that sounds plausible, Severus." She sighs then, and gazes unhappily at the other party-goers. While Snape and Kuhn had been speaking with Black, music was set up in the background; many couples are now dancing, or making drunken attempts to do so.

"These parties can be very tiresome, don't you think?"

"I couldn't agree more," says Snape. She smiles at him, if distantly.

"If Lucius were here . . . but even then . . ." Narcissa rambles, and she seems to know it. Her eyes - blue as icecaps in a dark sea - close. When they open again, Snape sees apathy there. What could
make a girl of her age so world-weary? "Perhaps my advice to my cousin had merit. What do you think?"

"Bed sounds appealing," says Kuhn with feeling.

Narcissa raises her eyebrows, but there is a teasing smile on her normally glacial features. "Someone is tired, I see." The smile quickly dissolves. Narcissa sits up like a jaded queen, silver robes gathering at her sides, and extends both her arms to Kuhn and Snape. "Do me a service and accompany me to my entryway. I would rather not be intercepted by the other girls . . . their conversation sickens me . . ."

Together, they rise, leaving the party even less enlightened than when they arrived.

Once returned to their room, of course, Snape has no intention of sleeping, but of continuing where he left off in his reading. Kuhn seems to be of the same mind. Much to his own dismay, however, Snape finds it difficult to concentrate. He paces, essay in hand, finding it oddly trying to decipher his own handwriting, envying the ease with which Kuhn simply returned to his desk and his books, and growing increasingly frustrated with each passing second.

Finally, the question can no longer be held back.

"Did you mean what you said to Narcissa?"

Kuhn sets down his essay with an irritating slowness. He equally takes his time turning in his chair to face Snape, and when he does, there is a knowing smirk on his face. "You mean . . . the bit about Regulus being in love with you?"

Snape stops pacing. Hearing it like that . . . well, it's horrible. "You really think so?"

"It was kind of glaringly obvious."

Snape makes a growling noise and resumes pacing. "This is most inconvenient," he tells the air.

"Why?"

"I have no reason to share my line of reasoning with you," Snape snaps.

Kuhn blithely ignores him. "Is it . . . because you don't like blokes, or because you don't like Regulus?"

Snape pauses, assessing Kuhn. His new roommate seems trustworthy, but just how far can he be trusted? The Hat would not have Sorted him into Slytherin if Kuhn were not, somewhere deep within himself, the backstabbing type.

"I have your word that this conversation will remain strictly between us?"

"Of course."

"That's not good enough!" Snape says, nearly shouting. He can feel his legs twitching as he walks, his hands shaking as they do when he grows extremely nervous. "Either swear it or I won't say another word!"

"I swear not to tell anyone," Kuhn says calmly, taking out his wand and pointing it at himself. A white ribbon appears in the air; it falls noiselessly onto Kuhn's thin, small hand and dissipates on the skin.
Snape waits until the ribbon has completely vanished, until he is sure that Kuhn cannot break his promise, before trusting himself to speak. "I am not interested in Black," he says quietly. "This has nothing to do with him *per se*; my reasons are highly personal and do not concern you. However, the real dilemma is a different one. Black has money and power. Should he advance and I reject him, he could quite literally spell my ruin."

"You think he'd go after you like that? Narcissa wouldn't approve."

"No, such relationships are scorned, even considered depraved in pure-blooded society. That is true. And yet - and yet I know what the Blacks are capable of." Snape settles down heavily in his desk chair and covers his face with his hands as if he could thereby shield himself from the memories.

(The werewolf, jaws covered in froth, snapping its large, yellow fangs at his legs . . . Potter holding him upside-down with Snape's own spell while Black insulted him viciously to his face . . . The red of his rage and her hair . . .)

Kuhn is quiet for a long time. Snape doesn't particularly want to know what he must think of his new roommate, or of this situation. In fact, Snape doesn't particularly want to think about anything at the moment, especially not if it triggers *those* memories.

"I don't think you have anything to worry about," Kuhn says finally, in the kind of reassuring tone that brooks no argument.

Snape does not reply, knowing a platitude when he hears one. A part of him, however - the part that desperately needs reassurance - appreciates the words. He carefully removes his hands from his face and dares to glance at Kuhn.

The green eyes are smiling.

"What was your response to the second question for the Transfiguration essay?" Snape asks, the weight almost seeming to drop from his shoulders.
Chapter Three: Myths and Metaphors

Snape wakes to a lit room and the steady chime of his Wake-Me-Up Charm, head feeling fuzzy, eyes unable to focus, mouth parched. For a moment, he is too exhausted to move, and lets the alarm continue to sound. He cannot remember why he set it. There must have been a reason . . . With as little movement as possible, Snape reaches unhappily beneath his pillow until his fingers have closed around his wand, then mutters the counterspell. There is never a reason to be up this early at Spinner's End. The bright light that filters through his bedcurtains seems unusual, out of place somehow, but Snape simply ignores it by closing his eyes and pulling the blanket over his head. It takes a moment for his body to grow comfortable again, but then his muscles begin to relax, his mind to drift . . .

"Snape?" says a quiet voice, a boy's voice.

It's a dream, Snape tells himself. Many of his dreams involve recurring encounters with his schoolmates, so this is not unusual. Potter and Black show up the most, duelling him until he is reduced to spitting soap bubbles from a helpless position upside-down in mid-air, blinded and deafened by the heavy robes that have draped themselves over his head. Less often, Mulciber and Avery invade his dreamspace together with one of their pleading, begging victims - Snape particularly recalls the second-year Hufflepuff with her hair on fire and the homosexual Ravenclaw boy whose arse they once attacked with long thorns. More often than not, she is the victim. Yet instead of thanking him when Snape comes to rescue her, she refuses to speak, green eyes glittering with a combination of accusation and revulsion.

Snape sinks deeper into the bed as if that will help convince his mind to follow another trajectory. But the more he sinks, the clearer the memory of that particular dream becomes. Mulciber and Avery always manage to somehow retaliate, he remembers. They attack him physically, verbally; hex him deaf and blind. He submits himself willingly to their punishments, foolishly hoping that she might be moved to - to what? He isn't exactly sure what his dream-self wants or hopes to gain from her. All he knows is that Mulciber and Avery would never attack her at Hogwarts, which leaves the entire chain of events moot, impossible.

"Snape?"

That voice again. Snape finds it impossible to place. Is it Potter? Mulciber? He does not remember dreaming in this particular manner before. For a moment, he wonders whether this is not all a dream and considers getting up; then exhaustion takes hold and he burrows even deeper into the warmth of his bed, shutting his eyes to the suspicions growing at the back of his mind.

(He's not at Spinner's End, but at Hogwarts. Hogwarts - with Adrian Kuhn - and Regulus Black. But no, it's much too bizarre to be real, to be anything but an uncomfortably vivid dream. Sleep, Severus.)

And yet - there is a rustle of fabric, tentative footsteps. Snape forces himself to open his eyes and enumerate the possibilities. If this isn't a dream, who could possibly be speaking to him? An intruder? His father? He's forgotten what the voice originally sounded like. Unconsciously, Snape's muscles tense; his fingers slide under the pillow and flex around his wand.

"Er . . . Severus?"
Suddenly the bedcurtains are being pulled aside; Snape automatically springs up, wand in hand, yet is assaulted by a torrential light that forces him to rapidly open and close his eyes; in the ensuing pain-induced blur he makes out black robes, a Slytherin tie and vaguely concerned green orbs boring in on him from a thin, high-boned face.

The air smells cool, wet; of chemicals, Muggle soap, shampoo, hair gel and boy. The smells are foreign, nothing like at Spinner's End. They make undoubtedly clear that Snape really is at Hogwarts. Yesterday wasn't just a sick product of his own mind, much as he'd like it to be. Slick-haired, uncomfortingly green-eyed Adrian Kuhn, not his father or Mulciber or Avery, stands before him. Kuhn is really his roommate.

"Oh," says that voice, Kuhn's voice, to the tip of Snape's wand. For a moment, neither says a word. And oh Merlin, there was actually a party last night at which Snape learned that Regulus Black of all people might possibly have given leave to his senses and - well, this is not a line of thought Snape is particularly eager to follow.

"Er, Snape, are you going to start pointing your wand somewhere else?" Snape responds by jabbing his wand into the firm skin of Kuhn's forehead. "Right then," Kuhn continues petulantly, "not that I'll get much thanks for it, but I thought you should know that class begins in fifteen minutes."

Squinting into the light - apparently Kuhn found the dungeon lighting too dim, and cast a spell to brighten it - colour and form slowly making themselves known to him, Snape tries to remind himself of everything else that happened last night. Of everything that has made his mind and body this tired.

Transfiguration. He remembers discussing it with Kuhn. There was . . . an essay. Kuhn's response: desultory, half-baked and brilliant, one of the most original approaches to the problem Snape has ever read.

So there had been that. And then . . . ah, yes, around midnight, a completely mullered Avery, presumably seeking to have a look at Snape's summer Potions essay, had run afoul of Kuhn's wards. Snape can't remember if he ever gave Avery the essay. He recalls revising, reading, annotating his textbook, though, remembers thinking about the human nervous system and possible ways to ease the damage of the Cruciatius Curse. Apparently he had also spelled a Wake-Me-Up Charm before falling asleep.

Finally able to put reality together with the images in his mind, Snape lowers his wand and transforms his squint into a glare. "I have no need for a human alarm," he says coldly.

Kuhn looks ready to point out that Snape would have slept through his first day of class without a human alarm to wake him. Snape, however, is quicker at the uptake.

"I certainly hope that you haven't been waiting for me," he continues in a drawl, sliding his feet out of the bed onto the floor as Kuhn backpedals to give him room. The contact with the icy dungeon floor sends shivers running up Snape's spine, but he gives no other indication of his discomfort. No, Snape ignores the displeasure currently felt by his body, sore and tired and freezing, and slowly advances on his wide-eyed roommate, using his significant height advantage to loom over the other boy.

"Why would I wait for you?" Kuhn asks resentfully. There's a look in his eyes that makes him seem older than he is; that makes Snape feel older than he is.

"Oh, I don't know," Snape replies silkily. Their faces are very close; from this distance, Kuhn's pale skin almost looks transparent. Snape can see blue shadows beneath his eyes from lack of sleep.
"Nerves, perhaps, on your first day?" Snape makes his voice very soft and insinuating. "Afraid to go outside on your own, are you, Kuhn?"

(To be honest, Snape isn't entirely sure what he's doing, only that he needs to do it, because otherwise he'll have a roommate who waits up for him in the mornings and follows him doggedly around the school. No matter what Lestrange said about keeping Kuhn under close watch, Snape has to have his breathing space.)

"I wasn't waiting for you, and I'm definitely not afraid of going outside alone," Kuhn breathes. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes shimmering with anger. For a brief, electrifying moment, they simply stare at one another, hardly breathing.

Then Kuhn has broken his frightfully powerful gaze away and is stalking over to his desk, covered in parchment from their revisions last night. A part of Snape is relieved to be away from those eyes. He can't help but watch, though, as Kuhn begins rifling through the sheets with the carelessness of aggression, clearly looking for and not finding something and willing to destroy his entire note collection until it is found. In Snape's current morning state, watching the anger that he himself provoked seems to give him a kind of heady, aroused feeling... a feeling of power...

Snape leans back against a bedpost, somehow eager to watch - to gloat at - Kuhn, despite the clock in his head that tells him he must hurry and dress. It helps that Kuhn looks a bit like Potter.

"I went out for breakfast and my schedule and only came back to pick up my essay when I noticed you were still asleep." Kuhn picks up a sheet, scans it, and then throws it aside in disgust. "Naturally, I was ever so briefly concerned that you might miss class." Kuhn snorts. "Now that I see that my worries were completely unfounded, I'm going to head up to Transfiguration - as soon as I can find my blasted essay, that is."

"You do that," Snape smirks.

Still sorting through parchment, Kuhn shoots Snape a poisonous glare.

Satisfied, Snape straightens and strides over to his wardrobe, from which he pulls out his crinkled uniform. Sliding behind the still partly shut curtains of his bed, where Kuhn cannot possibly see him, Snape pulls off his grey nightshirt. The body beneath is as thin and unappealing as ever, hairless and sickly white, ribs sticking out from the sides, stomach sunken unhappily into his belly no matter how much he eats. Regulus Black, he thinks, cannot possibly want this.

Snape casts the strongest (and most painful) nonverbal Cleansing Charms on himself that he knows. They do nothing for his hair, which settles back into oily strands the moment he finishes, but at least he feels more awake. Rapidly, Snape pulls on his robes, socks, tie; carefully, he ties his shoelaces in a way that will resist the Tied Together Hex.

Fully clothed now, Snape steps back into the open and over to the ingredients cabinet he created last night. Pepper-Up Potion is what he needs... There. He downs it in a gulp. It's better than breakfast.

Finally feeling truly awake, Snape shoulders his satchel, pre-packed last night with everything he would need for class. For a moment, he simply stands before his desk and watches Kuhn. Although his roommate seems to have found his essay, he apparently forgot to pack his textbooks and quills, as he is now frustrated trying to find a way to fit them all into his own satchel.

Snape smirks, and his feet are propelled into action. "See you in class," he taunts, stepping around Kuhn towards the door. If he has planned correctly, then there will be just enough time to pick up his finalised schedule before heading off to Transfiguration.
Without Kuhn in tow... 

He is almost at the door when Kuhn calls out from behind him.

"Ah, Severus, one thing." To anyone else, that voice might sound innocuous, pleasant. Snape knows better. He stops and turns on his heel to face Kuhn, best glare on, and is discouraged to note that his roommate has already shouldered his bag, packing apparently complete. Coincidence? Snape doesn't think so. "I forgot to tell you that I already picked up your schedule for you. It is," Kuhn shakes a piece of parchment and smiles nastily. "Right here."

Snape snarls and attempts a nonverbal Accio, but somehow Kuhn manages to keep a hold on the parchment.

"Manners, manners," Kuhn says. The green eyes are gleaming.

For a moment, Snape is tempted to simply stalk off without the schedule - he already knows the important parts by heart, as the Hogwarts lesson plans are practically set in stone, and how can he even be sure that Kuhn isn't simply baiting him?

"Give me my schedule."

"Say the magic word." Kuhn's grin looks infuriatingly similar to Potter's, even with the absence of real malice behind it.

"Not on your life."

Kuhn mutters a spell, causing the light in the room to dim and finally go out, then sidles up to Snape, that horrible grin still on his face. He holds the schedule just out of Snape's reach.

"Give it here now, or I'll make your life a living hell," Snape snarls.

Kuhn smirks. "I'd like to see you try."

And then Kuhn is heading down the corridor, leaving Snape with no choice but to follow him. They reach the Common Room with Kuhn still in possession of the parchment, despite Snape's numerous attempts to swipe it from him. Snape is so busy fuming that he doesn't notice that the Common Room has been restored to its original condition, that other last stragglers are jostling into him in their haste to get out the door to their classes.

"If this your way of trying to get me to like you, you're doing an atrocious job."

"You mean you don't hate me already? Why, Severus, I'm shocked."

"Don't flatter yourself." Something occurs to Snape, and he decides to switch tactics. "You know what I think?" he asks, making his voice soft, dangerously quiet. "I think you're trying to keep a very close eye on me for some insidious reason of your own. What do you say, Kuhn? Why else would you steal my schedule?"

Kuhn wants revenge, of course, for Snape's treatment of him this morning. Then again, Snape had only acted as any Slytherin would should his roommate a) come to wake him up, b) follow him around as though they were inseparable friends, c) steal his schedule. Kuhn is the oddity here, not Snape, and suddenly Snape is deeply convinced there is more to Kuhn's actions than just the overwhelming desire of a new student to make friends.

"I'm afraid I must disappoint. Interesting as your conspiracy theories are, they're completely off the
"Oh, they are, are they?"

Snape's suspicions are merely confirmed when Kuhn refuses to answer him, instead calling to a hulking Slytherin walking a few paces ahead. It's Avery, looking nauseous and ready to stagger back to bed. "Oi, Avery! Off to Transfiguration as well? . . . Right. Rough night, I see. Sorry about those wards . . ."

There will be no extracting information from Kuhn now, not with Avery present. Speaking of whom, Avery's hung-over lumbering is so slow that anyone walking with him will arrive at least twenty minutes late.

Decision made, Snape pushes past them both and strides off to the Transfiguration classroom at his top speed, robes billowing angrily behind him.

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Snape takes his accustomed seat at the empty table in the back left of Professor McGonagall's classroom and watches as the other N.E.W.T. Transfiguration students settle into their chairs. Potter and Black sit glued together at front right, probably planning some new mischief. Snape pointedly ignores the table behind them, knowing that he'd see her there, talking quietly to bloody Lupin. No, Snape lets his gaze skip over them to take in the other tables on the right side of the room. Claudia Bramblethorn sits there with Wilkes; and behind them, a very vocal, Quidditch-playing Ravenclaw, Charles Fawcett, is just getting into his seat. Fawcett is on friendly terms with Avery, and the Beater will probably join him when he (if ever) arrives.

The left hand side of the room is less populated. Narcissa and Lestrange share the front table, glaring at anyone who dares to glance their way. Chandra Goodhart, a pureblooded Ravenclaw with long, ash-blonde hair, takes up the table behind them to herself. Goodhart is eccentric; today, she wears orange plums for earrings, and Snape catches glimpse of her unblinking, protuberant silvery grey eyes gazing dreamily into the room. Unlike most of his classmates, however, Snape respects her: She's one of the few people he's met at Hogwarts who can think beyond the instructions for herself.

The table behind Goodhart is occupied by a pompous pure-blooded Hufflepuff named Alistair Macmillan and an irritating Ravenclaw know-it-all, Katherine Grudgings. Snape stares at the back of their sleek, brown-haired heads, hoping that Kuhn will have the sense to go sit with Goodhart, because Snape will not be responsible for his actions if they end up sharing a table . . .

A crash sounds, followed by heavy footsteps and laughter. Suddenly the classroom doors fling open - Snape huddles into himself, dreading what is to come - and Kuhn and Avery make their entrance, clearly having raced their way up from the dungeons. (How Kuhn got Avery to agree to such a plan, Snape cannot fathom. In any case, the Beater seems to have recovered miraculously from his hangover.) Exhaling a breath of relief, face pleasantly pink, Kuhn slides into the empty seat beside Snape with a triumphant grin. "Made it," he breathes.

Briefly, Snape considers hexing him on the spot, but then he decides that the loss of House Points would be too damaging. Instead, he carefully moves his chair (although the feet skid and squeak loudly against the floor) as far away as possible from Kuhn. "Just had to make a grand entrance, didn't you?" he sneers, once his new position is secure.

"Nah," Kuhn says, still breathing heavily. The grin returns in full force. "Bet you thought we'd be late."

"You would have deserved to be," Snape hisses, so angry that he misses the tell-tale flash of tartan
green at the front of the classroom.

"If I could have your attention - Mr Snape, Mr Kuhn, just what do you find so interesting back there?"

"Nothing, Professor," Kuhn says instantly, features schooled with practised innocence. So, he was probably a troublemaker back in Germany as well. Wonderful.

"Then you would kindly direct your undivided attention for the rest of the period to me. Tell me, Mr Kuhn, how would you define the discipline that is Transfiguration?"

The slight frown on McGonagall's face reminds Snape of the distrustful look she had given Kuhn while placing the Sorting Hat onto his head. He decides to watch this exchange closely.

"Er . . ." Kuhn seems shocked to have been called upon, as if such a thing shouldn't be allowed in the first minute of the first day of class. To his credit, he recovers quickly. "Transfiguration is art of magically transforming one object into another for a limited period of time?"

McGonagall purses her austere mouth. "Let me see if I understood you correctly, Mr Kuhn. According to you, Transfiguration represents the combined body of knowledge on how our magic can induce temporary ontological shifts in objects. It is, in other words, the discipline concerned with how our magic causes an object to briefly transfigure itself from one state of being to another. Would you agree with me that this is an adequate reformulation of your definition, Mr Kuhn?"

Kuhn glances over at Snape, who stoically ignores the silent request. He has no better idea of where McGonagall is headed with this than Kuhn, but isn't about to admit it. ". . . Yes."

"Good. As such, I think you would agree that Transfiguration has an endless range of applications across many diverse fields."

"Sure. Transfiguration is useful in Potions and Charms . . ."

McGonagall nods, then lets her stern gaze roam over the rest of the class. "This is precisely the insight that shall be tested on your N.E.W.T.s. Over the course of the next year, we shall therefore be familiarizing ourselves with important interdisciplinary uses of Transfiguration. By the time you reach your N.E.W.T.s, you should be able to seamlessly combine your skills at Transfiguration with your understanding of Charms, Potions, Herbology and the Defence Against the Dark Arts. In short, what we are learning now has very little to do with transforming a pelican into a water goblet."

Snape sits up straighter in his chair, takes hold of his quill, and begins taking notes.

"No," McGonagall continues, shaking her head for emphasis, "what we are about to learn this year has very little to do with animals and household furniture. This year will be about strategies and techniques, about methods and practices for approaching the real world. I believe you are all aware that the world beyond Hogwarts does not neatly divide itself into academic disciplines or clear-cut categories."

Snape is writing feverishly now, his nose almost touching the parchment. Stray hairs fall into his face, but he ignores them. McGonagall isn't saying anything he doesn't already know or suspect, but Snape wants to preserve the way she says it - the rhetoric that sends anticipatory chills down his spine.

"Reality tends to present us with knotted, complex problems instead, problems that require a manifold of approaches in order to be solved. Only when we can see beyond the boundaries of disciplines, when we can become generalists as well as specialists, shall we be able to create, to
experiment with the magic that we wield. Indeed, it is only when we have reached this insight that we shall be able to truly understand our magic. In short, what we are aiming for in this class is nothing less than the essence of the scientific endeavour itself."

There is a pause. Snape uses it to write down McGonagall's last sentence in its entirety, then underline the words scientific endeavour.

"Today we shall be transmuting aluminium into gold. Mr Kuhn, can you tell me why we might be doing such a thing?"

Transmuting?, Snape thinks, incredibly disappointed. Snape has been transmuting elements since he was twelve! McGonagall's ambitious speech meant nothing - nothing - she was merely pretending self-importance, merely letting him on . . .

"Mr Kuhn," McGonagall repeats impatiently.

Snape sets down his quill and glances over in time to see Kuhn's eyes, dark as roiling seas, flash like lightning in a storm. "For use in certain potions, Professor."

In his current mood, Snape can almost feel sympathy for Kuhn. In fact - the more he thinks about it, isn't it a bit odd how McGonagall continues to single Kuhn out? Snape begins to wonder whether she might even be hoping that Kuhn will make a mistake. No, not just a mistake - it's as if she hopes he'll snap and expose himself as an unstable idiot in front of the rest of the class. But why would she want such a thing? What could it possibly prove?

"In potions based on transfigured elements, to be precise. Would you happen to know the names of any such potions requiring transmuted gold, Mr Kuhn?"

The tension emitting from Kuhn is so palpable that Snape's own shoulders involuntary draw together in a posture of defence. The room is silent; everyone has turned to watch Kuhn. But they don't see what Snape can see, up this close. A tiny muscle ticks in Kuhn's cheek, and the green eyes gaze up at McGonagall with a kind of wounded expression, almost as though she has betrayed him. "It so happens that I do. Felix Felicis is an example."

"Very good. Can anyone else name a potion requiring time-sensitive ingredients? Yes, Miss Evans."

Snape does not take his eyes off of Kuhn and barely listens as she rattles off four different potions. Kuhn doesn't seem to be listening either; his face is flushed, his eyes benighted and glittering.

"Excellent, Miss Evans. Four points to Gryffindor."

Kuhn's mouth tightens. To Snape, it seems that the muscle in his jaw will snap. Suddenly he feels that this cannot go on. Kuhn will snap, exactly as McGonagall expects him to -

Snape hastily tears off a corner of his parchment and grabs his quill. Don't let her get to you, he scrawls. She's just looking for a way to take points from Slytherin. He pushes the parchment over to Kuhn, hoping the other boy will recognise the gesture for what it is: A warning between fellow Slytherins and nothing more.

Kuhn glances down at the parchment, brows furrowed as he reads. After a moment, he trains his eyes back onto the front of the classroom as if nothing has happened. The muscle in his cheek has stopped ticking, however.

Good.
McGonagall waves her wand; the incantation for the transmutation appears on a chalkboard and small samples of aluminium materialise in front of each student. Snape takes hold of his, inspecting it for any defects; it seems pure.

"In order for your transfigurations to be entirely successful, you will need to draw upon your knowledge of Potions," McGonagall tells them. Potter groans loudly, but since he is a Gryffindor, she pretends not to hear him. "Good luck."

Snape grimaces - points his wand - the aluminium is now gold. For a moment, he simply stares at the glistening lump, wondering how he is supposed to spend the next half an hour without dying of boredom. For it is clear that the rest of the period will be wasted on this stupid little spell: At the table before him, Macmillan and Grudgings are practically screaming at their aluminium in an effort to get it to change, and from the grunts, shouts and sighs that otherwise fill the room, Snape extrapolates that they are not alone.

(\textit{She}, of course, will have had no trouble with this task.)

Head jerking at the unwelcome thought, Snape involuntarily catches glimpse of Kuhn, eyes narrowed, wand drawn, muttering the incantation as though it were a curse. Surprisingly, the aluminium in front of him begins to shudder. For a moment, it seems to melt; then it begins to crystallise into a new solid state. Its shimmer is golden, but Snape can already see that the structure of the crystals is false.

Kuhn looks up and catches his gaze. His eyes immediately flick over to Snape's glittering sample, and his mouth falls with disappointment. "Yours looks better than mine."

"That is because I have actually created gold, whereas you -" Snape extends long fingers and snatches up Kuhn's sample without really thinking about what he is doing. He weighs the sample in his palm, taps it against the desk, quickly holds it up to an eye for visual examination; sets it down again. "- have created pyrite."

"Py-"

Snape sneers. "In layman's terms, fool's gold."

Kuhn begins scooting closer in his chair. Snape jerks back and bares his teeth, but Kuhn ignores him, setting his chair down mere centimetres away from Snape's. "Tell me what you did differently."

"There's no way -" Snape hisses; then a thought occurs to him. Why not help Kuhn? It certainly beats sitting here bored out of his mind. He purses his mouth, but can't really find the thought distasteful, then turns to Kuhn with narrowed eyes. "All right, but on one condition."

"No problem."

Snape holds out a knobbly hand. "Give me my schedule."

"One schedule, coming right up." Kuhn's mouth twitches at the corners, but he reaches down into his satchel and pulls out a piece of parchment. "I'm putting it right here," he says, setting down the schedule to his right and out of Snape's immediate reach.

Snape summons it wordlessly, catching it with his extended hand as soon as it soars over Kuhn's head. Kuhn doesn't seem fazed; he merely glances meaningfully at the sample of pyrite. Snape scowls, tucking the schedule away, but turns in his chair so that he is properly facing Kuhn. "Very well then. What do you know about the properties of gold?"
"Er . . ." Kuhn looks embarrassed. "It's shiny and golden?"

An insult to Kuhn's intelligence flies up to Snape's lips; he holds it back with effort. "Shiny and golden. How very precise."

Kuhn scowls. "Well, what am I supposed to know?"

"Melting point. Boiling point. Relative atomic mass. State of aggregation. The fact that gold is the most malleable metal of all." At Kuhn's blank look, Snape lets out an exasperated noise. "Really, Kuhn, one would have never have the impression you passed your Potions O.W.L.s. Don't you realise that you'll never be able to transmute one element into another without some specific idea of what those elements are?"

"But -" Kuhn looks genuinely confused. "Those things you mentioned, those are Muggle measurements. I thought they didn't apply here."

"Didn't you hear what McGonagall was saying about science?" Kuhn makes a face that says no. "Surely you realise that magic is not merely about waving a wand," Snape gesticulates with a hand, "that, in fact, careful measurement and observation of the natural world are essential to controlling and understanding our power?"

Kuhn is looking at Snape as though he were someone else. Someone he knows and intensely dislikes, yet trusts with his life. It annoys the hell out of Snape. For a moment, his eyes stage a losing battle with hungry, unfathomable green seas. Then he lifts his chin, eyes narrowing, and demands, "Are you even listening?"

"I like how you talk," says Kuhn, lips perched upon a wry smile.

Snape puts this non sequitur down to Kuhn's miserable education. "And here I used to believe the German educational system was superior to ours."

"It is." Kuhn flushes prettily as Snape sneers disbelievingly into his face. "In certain things anyway. Besides, you can't blame the German system - I went to an English school."

"I see." This is certainly interesting information. Does Kuhn even realise how much he casually reveals about himself? "Well, your Potions Master must have been abominable." Snape pauses, takes a good look at Kuhn; frowns. "What are you smirking at?"

Kuhn merely smiles, but to tell from his crazily scintillating eyes it's as though Snape has just uttered the most ironic joke in the world. Snape narrows his eyes, suspecting that the joke - and there must be one for Kuhn to be reacting like this - is somehow on him, even if he can't quite see how. "You're making me very disinclined to help you further," he hisses.

"S-sorry," Kuhn says, wiping unseen tears from his eyes. "It's just -" He sobers suddenly, green eyes avoiding Snape's. "Never mind. You were saying about the gold?"

"Here." Snape draws his parchment close and begins listing some basic facts about gold in his dense, barely legible scrawl. He thrusts the list into Kuhn's face. "Use whatever sorry organ it is that you call a brain to think about these aspects while uttering the incantation."

Kuhn studies the list, faint worry lines appearing on his forehead, almost as though he fears that no matter how hard he concentrates, none of this will ever sink in. Perhaps he has a learning disability . . .

A blur of tartan green is moving their way. Snape acts before thinking, grabbing the list from Kuhn
and shoving it beneath his other notes. The last thing they need is for McGonagall to accuse Kuhn of cheating. Thankfully, Kuhn seems to have caught onto Snape's motives, for he says nothing and keeps his gaze fixed on McGonagall's approach.

For a moment, McGonagall merely regards Kuhn with a kind of catlike indifference; then she catches glimpse of the pyrite, and frowns. Snape bows his head so that his hair falls into his eyes, knowing this makes him seem withdrawn, inconspicuous. Surreptitiously, he places a protective hand on his notes.

"Try again, Mr Kuhn," McGonagall says coldly, waving her wand over the pyrite and returning it to aluminium.

Kuhn stares at the aluminium, and for a moment, Snape wonders whether he is thinking something stupid, such as an impertinent response to McGonagall. But then Kuhn nods - stiffly and unwillingly, but nonetheless. "Yes, ma'am."

Snape retreats even further behind the oily black curtains of his hair, wanting no part of the credit or blame for whatever happens next. He barely can see Kuhn now, except that the face so much like Potter's is pale and shuttered. Snape hears a sharp inhalation of breath and then the quiet words:

"Transmutatio metallorum."

McGonagall stoops down to examine the sample, and Snape cannot help his own curiosity: He leans forward for a better look, unaware that his hair is sliding out of his eyes and down his hollow cheeks. The sample, he immediately notices, has an unmistakeable sheen; its structure is perfect. There is faint displeasure on McGonagall's face as she holds the successfully transmuted gold up to the light. "Well."

"Is it really gold?" Kuhn asks, but the look of satisfaction on his face says that he already knows the answer.

McGonagall abruptly sets the sample back down on the table. "So it would seem," she says distantly, without looking at Kuhn. Snape watches as the satisfied expression quickly crumbles into confused lack of understanding.

Kuhn is as easily read as a children's book. It is a trait that would make him a terrible companion in a duel, and yet Snape cannot ridicule him entirely for it; such honesty, he decides, has merit. Although an excellent liar, Snape can't stand being lied to. The idea that Kuhn could never lie to him has great appeal.

"Your turn now, Mr Snape." McGonagall seems determined to ignore Kuhn from now on. "Finite incantatum," she says, causing Snape's gold sample to turn back to aluminium. "Please demonstrate the spell."

Snape straightens in his chair, draws his ebony wand and gives an elegant wave that instantly produces the desired result. McGonagall smiles faintly; whereas Kuhn's success disappointed her, Snape's makes her almost seem . . . proud. "Your understanding of Potions is noted, Mr Snape. One point to Slytherin."

"Thank you," Snape says curtly. In theory, he has always known that McGonagall was impressed by his work. The blatant contrast between her treatment of him and Kuhn, however, leaves no doubt of this in his mind. Strangely, Snape feels nothing at the thought that his stern, brilliant professor holds him in her esteem. Perhaps he might have, once. Now, however, he can only wonder at her obvious prejudice against a fellow member of his House - a member who, to judge from appearances, would
probably have made a better Gryffindor than a Slytherin. Somehow, that prejudice makes her opinion cheap to Snape. To see the hypocrisy of Potter and Black, of Lupin and Evans mirrored in a teacher - it stirs up the old resentments, the blinding hatred. It makes Snape want to see them all pay.

As McGonagall retreats, presumably to inspect Avery and Fawcett's samples, Snape glares at her back. Kuhn watches him glare and for a long time, they are both silent.

"It's not House points she cares about, is it."

"I only wish it were," Snape says.

They don't speak for the rest of the period.

"McGonagall was right unfair to you, mate," Avery announces, draping a thick arm around Kuhn's thin shoulders. Transfiguration is over, and Snape walks with Avery, Kuhn, Narcissa and Lestrange down to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

"I wish I knew why she didn't like me. It's kind of hard to react to dislike when you don't know the cause."

"We're Slytherins," Avery practically shouts, as if this is the answer to all questions in the universe. "Don't worry too much about it."

"Lower your voice," Lestrange hisses. Snape notes that the unnaturally pale eyes are bloodshot, that Lestrange rubs gingerly at his temples as though they pain him. At his side, Narcissa also looks sour; she shoots Avery a frosty glare. Lestrange must have been a useless partner during class, Snape thinks.

"Headache?" Kuhn asks quietly. "Here." He steps in front of Lestrange, who slows to a stop. With a quick, powerful flick of his wand, Kuhn casts a complex nonverbal spell that Snape does not recognise.

"That spell saved my life," Avery says, also coming to halt and looking at Kuhn as though he were a god.

"Hardly, but it did get rid of your hangover." Kuhn peers up at the much taller Lestrange, who snakes a hand down the crevices of his shadowed face as if to make certain they are still there.

"Indeed," Lestrange says after a moment, letting his hand drop. He stands straighter now and there is a bright glint to his ugly eyes. "A most useful spell. German, I take it?"

"Yes."

"Well." Lestrange smiles down at Kuhn - it's a cold and feelingless smile, but an enormous gesture nonetheless, considering the source. Collectively, they all begin walking again. "As Daniel said, I wouldn't worry too much about McGonagall, Adrian. She represents the Gryffindors, and they consider it a kind of affront to their honourable reputation that you came to us, not them. Once the novelty has worn off, I am positive that they will treat you the same as the rest of us."

"I can't wait," says Kuhn sarcastically.

They turn a corner - and Snape nearly runs smack into the backs of Potter, Black and suspiciously enough, ratty little Peter Pettigrew, who definitely was not in Transfiguration a few minutes ago. It's not easy for Snape to stop himself mid-stride, and he trips a bit over the hem of his robes while
drawing his wand with the speed of the desperate and inspired.

Kuhn stands close by, Snape can feel the heat coming from his robes.


Sirius Black slowly turns to face them, Potter and Pettigrew backing him up from behind. Even more so than Regulus, Sirius is boyishly good-looking, with shoulder-length brown curls and bright, playful eyes that narrow the moment they land on his cousin.

"Narcissa. How dreadful to see you. I suppose you've come with fresh curses from my Aunt?"

"Don't you dare," Narcissa spits. "You know exactly how she feels about your -" Narcissa points a sharp finger at Potter, but clearly cannot find proper words for her disgust. She shakes a little, blue eyes wide and accusing. "You were always her favourite, Sirius."

"Well, this is all very enlightening. I'm sure it explains why she threw an Unforgivable at my head last time we spoke." Black's eyes flash, then - Snape tenses - dart over to Kuhn and Snape. A kind of deranged smile forms on his lips. "Oi, Snivellus," he says softly, looking for all the world like a wolf about to feast on lamb.

Snape points his wand directly at his tormentor's eyes, the hatred of nearly seven years already pounding in his temples, veins.

Black offers a feral smile. "How are you getting along with . . . Adrianne?"

Snape snarls and plans to lunge ahead, but is held back by a surprisingly strong hand. "Are you always this immature?" Kuhn asks coldly, stepping forward.

"Get - get back," Pettigrew stammers, wand out but shaking in his hand.

"I wasn't speaking to you, rat," Kuhn sneers. Snape is a bit surprised by the ensuing reaction: Potter and Black have gone pale - Potter is even gaping - while Pettigrew looks like he might wet his pants. How such a simple insult could disquiet these unflappable Gryffindors, Snape does not know, but it is clearly a sign that Kuhn is a genius.

Or, that he knows something Snape does not. At this thought, Snape feels some of his glee deflate. He glances to his right, knowing that he will see pale eyes, hooded and calculating, fixed on Kuhn. For one brief moment, they flicker over to Snape; he nods once to indicate understanding before turning his attention back to Kuhn.

The hatred being directed from those green eyes at little Peter Pettigrew is remarkable.

"I'm disappointed in you, Potter," Kuhn is saying. "If these bullies are the wonderful friends you told me about, then I can only be doubly glad not to have landed in your House."

"Bullies?" Potter splutters. "Who is standing here outnumbered, exactly?"

"We're only here because you're holding up our way," Avery says, cracking his knuckles in an extremely unpleasant manner.

Black smiles nastily. "I suppose you'll just have to remove us, then," he says, drawing up his wand.

In an instant, all wands are out, even Narcissa's. Snape isn't sure who sends the first curse, but is quick to hex Potter with Impedimenta anyway. He turns to Black, if not quite fast enough - and flies
into the air, into a stone wall, almost choking at the impact . . . His body is alight with pain . . .

"STOP THIS AT ONCE, ALL OF YOU!"

Snape hunches forward from the sheer pain in his back and tries to aim a Healing Spell at himself, but his hands hurt too badly to keep a proper hold on his wand. A shadow crosses over him; he makes a frustrated sound that comes out more like a hacking cough and tries, tries to grasp his wand. The shadow kneels beside him, smelling of hair gel and soap and muttering a spell. A blissful moment later, enough of the pain has receded that Snape can lift his head.

What beautiful eyes.

Snape tears away his gaze from Kuhn and gets to his feet to survey the damage. Narcissa and Lestrange stand cool and collected in a corner, wands already sheathed. A panting, scowling Avery paces before them. Black and Pettigrew are heaving Potter up from where Snape jinxed him to the floor, Pettigrew with disfiguring lumps all over his cheeks from a well-aimed Stinging Hex, Black with a murderous expression on his face. Between them stands the Head Girl, looking more furious than all of them put together.

"I'm surprised at you, James, Sirius . . . Peter," she says quietly, devastatingly, "I thought you'd grown up more than that." Her green eyes flash, and Potter bows his tousled, bespectacled head, almost looking cowed. "Fighting is certainly not the kind of behaviour one would expect from the Head Boy. I'm afraid I have to take thirty points."

"They started it!" Black rasps, pointing of course directly at Snape.

He snarls defensively, but she doesn't even spare him a glance. "I'm sure they did," she says, voice now like ice. "Fifty points from each of you, and ten more for provoking a fight, on the very first day of school no less."

"What!" Kuhn shouts. "That's completely unfair - you don't even know who started it -"

"Five points for shouting in the corridors," she snaps. Behind her, Black grins diabolically.

"You're just as bad as them," Kuhn says, sounding wounded and aghast. They are strange words to hear directed at her.

Apparently, she thinks so too; for a brief, breathless moment her eyes flicker over to Snape. As always, hope - that treacherous feeling - bubbles up inside him. Even though her eyes regard him with contempt, at least she's . . . looking his way.

Please, he tries to tell her with his eyes, his shaking hands, the twist of his mouth; but she's already glanced away.

"If you have a problem with the way I use the point system, take it up with the Headmaster," she tells Kuhn, and Snape stares at her shining red hair, her dispassionate expression, and wonders when she became so cold. "The fact that you clearly outnumbered them, however, makes me disinclined to take up your case."

"If there is anything we should want to take up with the Headmaster, it is how a blood traitor and a Mudblood from the same House ended up as Head Boy and Girl," Narcissa sneers.

"Fuck you, Cissy," snarls Black, but he's holding a livid Potter back with both of his arms.

"Enough! James, Sirius, Peter - I don't want to see another sight of you until class. The same for you
Slytherins. If any of you even think about hexing each other behind my back, it'll be twenty more points on both Houses. Don't make me help Hufflepuff win the Cup."

And then she turns, red hair flipping back over her shoulder, leaving their midst - and Snape's pleading gaze - without a backward glance.

The Defence classroom is already teeming with students when Snape arrives. All of the Slytherin and Gryffindor boys are in the N.E.W.T. class, and there are also a number of girls in addition to those from Transfiguration, such as Evans' best friends Alice Longbottom and Mary Macdonald. Snape keeps close to the Slytherins, hoping that Professor Salvage isn't one of those teachers who try to encourage Inter-House co-operation. He is discouraged to note that she has already arranged the student tables into a giant circle.

"Fucking hell," says Avery, scowling at the circular arrangement. It takes him a second to recover before taking a seat next to a mulish-looking Mulciber. Snape follows suit, taking the empty seat next to Snivellus were the most natural place to be in the world.

Snape purses his lips.

"This place is going to the dogs," Narcissa whispers violently, hands shaking as she puts down her textbook - Confronting the Faceless - on her desk. "The next thing we know they'll be bringing in hibbies -"

"Hippies," Lestrange corrects.

"- hippies, to sing to us about peace and love and brainwash our minds -"

"Much as I share your concerns, Narcissa, I don't think Hogwarts has come quite that far," Lestrange says sharply.

Narcissa hitches in a breath, but her face assumes a calm mask. She does not speak again, choosing to flip randomly through her textbook instead. The exchange with her cousin must have truly upset her, Snape thinks. Some part of him is surprised she can show such depth of feeling at all.

Salvage, a dumpy, grey-haired witch, arrives shortly thereafter. She has a strange walk that makes her robes flop around her like a monk's.

"Hello, class," she says in a loud, grating voice, "I am Professor Salvage, a former Ministry Auror, and I will be teaching you to defend yourselves against the Dark Arts this term."

Salvage takes in a breath, making Snape wonder if she can even breathe properly under all that body weight, then flops over to the single remaining seat in the circle. This, it turns out, is right between Kuhn and Fawcett. As she plunges into the seat, making it emit pained creaks and Rosier nearly double up with silent laughter, Snape catches glimpse of a wince on her normally so sympathetic face.

Salvage scoots in closer to the table, double chin trembling with each movement, ignoring the loud squeaks of her chair against the floor. "I do not intend to repeat the mistakes of my numerous predecessors, nor do I intend to let you skive off merely because you've never had a proper teacher in this subject before," she announces. "This year, we are going to make progress, no matter what - social progress, if nothing else."

Rosier holds up his hand, a fake look of innocence plastered onto his stupid, tanned face. "Social
"I shall explain," says Salvage solemnly, lifting her chin. "In too many seminars, it's much too easy for students to hide behind their peers and desks and never participate. That won't be the case here. My goal this term is to see you working together, speaking to one another directly even in a duel. That's why I've arranged the tables in a circle: To get you to talk to me and most important, to each other. I expect a spirit of co-operation from all of you, especially between the different Houses."

Ignoring the quiet groans from both Gryffindors and Slytherins, Salvage claps her hands. Several printed sheets of parchment speed into the room, distributing themselves hastily between each student.

Snape takes a closer look at his and feels his stomach clench. Independent Project, the parchment reads, to be completed in groups of two, preferably in groups of students from different Houses.

The urge to crumple up the parchment right away is almost maddening. Only Kuhn's slight look of horror - he is probably as worried as Snape about being paired up with Black or Potter - distracts Snape from doing so.

"Now, let me explain the structure of this course, which will be the same every time we meet. First, we will have a discussion about certain theoretical problems of Defence Against the Dark Arts. After this discussion is completed, I expect you all to spend at least twenty minutes with the partner that I will assign to you for your Independent Project." Salvage holds up a flabby hand; at the word assign, Black and Rosier had begun issuing loud protests. "Yes, your partner will be assigned to you. There are to be no further interruptions!" she snaps, glaring at Rosier.

"At the end of each class period, you and your partner shall practice duelling. If I deem your progress unfit by the middle of this term, we shall be setting up extra duelling sessions in your study periods." Salvage lets her eyes - hawkish and dark blue - circulate the room, resting them on Lestrange. Her upper lip curls, just slightly. "Now, if you would open your textbooks to page 154, we may begin today's lesson."

THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES reads page 154. Snape has fingered this page more than once; although they have never covered this material in class before, he knows it by heart.

Next to him, Kuhn begins to fidget.

"Now, who can tell me a bit about the Unforgivables? Come on, don't be shy. What about you over there - could you tell me your name, please?"


"Well, then, Mr Mulciber: Speak up."

Mulciber gives a very brief account of Imperio, failing to mention that he has used it himself numerous times (without ever being caught, thanks to an illegal second wand) and would probably be classified in certain circles as an Imperius Curse expert. His eyes flicker uncomfortably around the room, carefully avoiding Salvage, Mary Macdonald and Lily Evans.

"Good. That is one of the curses. What about another? Yes, you -"

"Evan Rosier." Unlike Mulciber, Rosier is positively eager to spill out his knowledge on the Cruciatius Curse, and he even twists his face and arms in a pathetic attempt to imitate its disfiguring effects on the nerves and body. Eventually, Lestrange kicks him from beneath his chair, and he desists.
"Thank you for that . . . display, Mr Rosier," says Salvage, voice and facial expression betraying nothing of what she feels. "There is still one more curse. Would anyone - yes, Mr Kuhn."

Snape pulls himself up to get a better look at Kuhn, curious despite himself. He hadn't imagined Kuhn as the type of person who would volunteer answers in class.

"Avada Kedavra," Kuhn says dully, eyes slanted away from the other students and facing the ceiling. "The Killing Curse."

Salvage peers down at Kuhn, looking a bit off-put. "So much is clear, but could you tell us a little more, Mr Kuhn?"

Kuhn blinks at her, a faint expression of bewilderment on his face. "What more is there to know?" Before Salvage can answer, Kuhn continues, almost brutally, "That it causes instant, painless death? That it doesn't leave a mark? That it comes down on you in a wave of green light and rushes in your ears like water to a drowning man?" Kuhn's eyes are icy, cutting and old, and his words cause the hairs on Snape's arms to rise. "What do you want me to say? That it can only be blocked with another Killing Curse? That, when it misses, it burns the object it hits? That it only really works if you fucking mean it?"

"Language, Mr Kuhn," Salvage says calmly, ignoring the gasps and whispers of the rest of the class. "That was an adequate description, although I do believe you left out one detail: That, namely, no-one has ever survived the curse in wizarding history."

"That can't be true."

Every single eye in the room is now trained on Kuhn. Strangely, he doesn't seem fazed by the attention; in fact, Snape would say that his awareness of his current surroundings is limited to the ceiling and his own obviously dark thoughts.

As interesting as it is to watch Kuhn, Snape lets his head hang, his hair fall into his face. He doesn't know what to think of Kuhn's outbursts. It's clear that he has seen much more of the Killing Curse than anyone ever should - but how? and why? What does he even mean by saying that people could survive Avada Kedavra? If Kuhn weren't so deadly serious, Snape might think of it as a incredibly tasteless joke.

Salvage is equally flabbergasted. "Explain yourself, Mr Kuhn."

"There are ways to survive the curse." Snape's head snaps up on its own; he stares disbelievingly at Kuhn. "In German myth, for example, a mother sacrifices her life for her son, protecting him with -"

"Myths and metaphors - in this case, a metaphor of love - should not be confused with fact, Mr Kuhn," Salvage injects. "The fact is, no-one has ever survived the curse. We should not confuse wishful thinking -"

"- It's not wishful thinking!" Kuhn shouts, eyes bright with indignation. "It's called recognising that not even the Killing Curse is the last word on everything!"

There is a pause in which the Slytherins, Snape included, stare at Kuhn in open shock.

"Five points from Slytherin for an unwarranted outburst," Salvage says quietly. Next to Snape, Avery lets out a quiet groan.

"Professor?"
Snape swallows at the sound of her voice and immediately goes back into hiding behind his hair.

"Yes, Miss -"

"Evans, ma'am. Lily Evans." Salvage nods, and she continues, green eyes dark with thought, "This is a bit of a tangent, and I haven't completely thought it through, but what if Kuhn is right? I guess my question would be: What is the status of metaphors and myths in our world? Personally, the longer I've lived here, the more I've come to think that metaphors are a kind of magic. This goes beyond being literal embodiments of scenes in a book where, say, the love of a mother for her son creates a protective magic. I would go so far as to say that the metaphor itself has power, the power to connect words that otherwise share no meaning. I guess I'm saying that a metaphor can transform associations almost as we would transfigure an object, and -"

Snape has been listening, mesmerised; he whips his head around to glare at Salvage as she brusquely cuts Lily off.

"Please, Miss Evans," Salvage says, although she offers a warm smile. "The next thing you'd have us believe is that Beedle the Bard's tales were real."

As the others laugh, Kuhn stiffens in his chair. Snape also hunches into himself without thinking about what he is doing. Listening to her, to Lily, as she waxed eloquently, brilliantly on a subject well beyond the professor's head - it's made him ache with regret. Her words, even her words on words, will never be directed at him again. One unforgiveable slip of tongue, and there goes a friendship . . .

"We will continue our discussion of Unforgivables next period," says Salvage. "I'd like to use the rest of our time today to assign each of you to a group for your independent projects. Mr Kuhn, since you and Miss Evans seem to share such an interest in metaphors, I am assigning the two of you together."

Snape lets out a quiet, hissed breath. Kuhn's brows furrow, but he says nothing. Lily merely tosses her head.

As Salvage continues to assign partners (Snape is with Chandra Goodhart), a piece of parchment slides beneath Snape's nose. This is an unmitigated disaster, Kuhn has written.

Snape hesitates, then scrawls, Why? You should consider yourself lucky. Evans is the smartest person in the room.

As he pushes the parchment back to Kuhn, Snape doesn't know whether to be insanely jealous of Kuhn or incredibly grateful for the fact that he will be spared the pain of working together with Lily. In fact, he doesn't really know what to think at all. To learn, in the course of twenty minutes, that Kuhn is not only even more complicated than Snape had thought, but that he's also partnered up with her - it's even more confusing than having Regulus Black fall in love with him. Snape feels that two conflicting parts of his brain have been engaged in a manner that can only end in their mutual destruction.

He does the only thing he can. He Occludes, cutting all thoughts of Kuhn, Regulus and Lily from his mind, and focuses on the immediate task at hand.
Chapter Four: Wahlverwandtschaften

He isn't what she expected, Lily has to admit, watching Kuhn stare blankly into space, pale brow slightly furrowed with thought. Not that she knows what she expected, mind you; Lily knows well enough that not all Slytherins are necessarily the same, at least theoretically, and she also knows better than to judge from appearances alone.

Kuhn reminds her of someone. There's a nagging feeling at the back of her mind trying to get her to remember whom he reminds her of exactly, but it's just a feeling, and doesn't solidify into an image or words.

"– Potter, is it? Well, Mr Potter, it seems you and Mr Mulciber are to be partners," says a loud, grating voice, interrupting Lily's thoughts. Professor Salvage is giving James a pointed look, she notices, and belatedly Lily realises that James has been assigned to work on his Defence project with Mulciber.

Mulciber, the Slytherin who once almost killed Mary Macdonald in an evil prank. Mulciber, who will undoubtedly become a Death Eater the moment he graduates Hogwarts.

This can't be happening. Kuhn now completely forgotten, Lily's eyes seek out Salvage and attempt to convey her outrage.

For his part, James is staring at their Defence professor as though she has just made an incredibly embarrassing mistake. There are two bright red spots on his cheeks, and his mouth twists as he says, "Excuse me, Professor, but –"

Salvage, damn her, pretends not to notice their obvious distress. She waves a dismissive hand. "You heard what I said, Mr Potter. No but's. Now, you are all to get up and take a seat next to your partners," she continues, ignoring the numerous evil looks and scowls being sent in her direction. "This is to be your assigned seating for the rest of the year."

James splutters loudly, bringing his hands down onto his desk with an angry smack. Next to him, Sirius – partnered off with Bridget Edgecombe, a pretty Ravenclaw, and thus with little to complain about – looks a cross between sickened and amused for his best friend. He pats James gingerly on the back. On James' left, however, Peter looks as though he is truly about to retch. Lily tries to remember who his partner is, but she must have not been listening when Salvage had made that announcement.

"I'll never survive," he whispers to James, so quietly that Lily has to strain her ears to hear. Peter's beady blue eyes have begun to water, and there is a desperate expression on his round face. "How could I survive?"

"Don't worry, Wormtail, we'll look out for you," James says, patting Peter clumsily on the back while sending daggers with his eyes at someone on the Slytherin side of the room. Lily turns to identify the Slytherin and dismayed to realise it's Lestrange. Lestrange, who as far as Lily knows has never taken part in Mulciber and Avery's evil pranks, but is somehow even more disturbing than both of them put together. He has very red lips – so red they make Lily's blood curdle. Currently,
they are curled into a malevolent smile. Worse, however, is the cold, spectral gleam to his eyes, which regard Peter with the anticipation of a hunter calculating the approach of his prey.

"I think you've got the best deal of us all," Remus whispers to Lily as he begins packing his satchel.

"Macmillan isn't so bad," she whispers back. All right, so Alistair Macmillan is an arse, and he won't like Remus because he's neither pureblooded nor rich. Lily bites her lip in sympathy. "At least you don't have to work with a Slytherin."

Remus smiles at her with his eyes. Lily likes his eyes – hazel, flecked with gold, and always calm. "A Slytherin has advantages. At least you know where you stand."

"Tell that to James and Peter."

Remus glances at Peter and grimaces, then pushes back from his desk to stand. Lily gets up as well, not entirely sure if she should go to Kuhn or wait for him to come to her. Her eye lands on James, now getting up from his desk and glaring at Mulciber with a mutinous expression. Sirius notices her gaze; he taps James' shoulder, causing him to glance in her direction.

James smiles, although less brilliantly than usual; he jerks his head exaggeratedly at Kuhn, warning in his eyes. Lily makes a vague cutting gesture across her throat to reassure him that she would rather die than freely associate with a Slytherin, and his smile turns wry.

A movement distracts her from the corner of her eye, and Lily turns to see Remus preparing to make his way over to Macmillan. "I think I'll try to stick close to Peter," he says quietly. She nods and he takes his leave, tattered robes dragging on the floor behind him.

Lily watches him for a while – quiet, gentle Remus, always thinking of others before himself – before glancing back over at James. Her boyfriend, she notices, is now sitting as close to Mulciber as one has to in order to share a desk. His face clearly expresses animosity and disgust. Mulciber himself merely looks disgruntled; Lily sees him glancing at the clock every few seconds.

By now, most everyone is at least standing next to the assigned partner – everyone but Kuhn and Snape, that is. Kuhn continues to stare into space, body held tense and rigid. Lily doubts whether he has even heard what Salvage said. Her suspicions are confirmed when Snape, his dark, familiar eyes carefully avoiding hers, kicks Kuhn from beneath his chair.

"What?" she hears Kuhn hiss.

"Get up," Snape hisses back, and makes to stand.

Kuhn glances up and seems to suddenly realise that there are students milling around him. Lily half-heartedly raises a hand to capture his attention.

God, his eyes are as green as hers.

"I don't bite," she tells him as he approaches. He lifts his chin, expression defiant and wary, yet there is something else there as well. It looks suspicious, whatever it is. Lily seats herself and pats a hand on the now-empty desk to her right. "Sit here."

"You sure gave a good impression of it earlier," Kuhn says resentfully, and Lily does not have to think hard to realise that he is referring to her taking some sixty points from Slytherin.

"You were fighting. That didn't count." At Kuhn's mulish expression, she sighs and adds in a low voice, "Look, I'm sorry we got off to a bad start. It's my job to stop fights and take points, and I did
"Kuhn scoffs.

"Kuhn, I took away points from my boyfriend just the same as from the rest of you," Lily says, exasperated. "Do you think I particularly enjoyed that?"

There is no response, but at least Kuhn takes a seat.

Lily frowns and looks away, towards the other students. Snape, she sees, is now sitting hunched into himself next to that odd Ravenclaw girl, Chandra Goodhart; his arms are crossed and his face – well, except for that unfortunate beak of a nose – hidden by impenetrable oily sheets of shoulder-length black hair. Lily has often been witness to Snape's retreats behind his hair, and she knows they never bode particularly well for him or anyone else involved. She cannot help but feel the slightest twinge of pity for Goodhart, whose misty grey eyes take in Snape with a kind, almost indulgent expression. He will abuse that kindness, Lily thinks bitterly.

With a jerk of her head, Lily turns her gaze to the opposite end of the room, where Remus sits with Macmillan to his right and Peter to his left. On Peter's other side sits Lestrange, towering and broad-shouldered. Peter cowers pitifully beside him. For some reason, he also keeps nibbling on his lower lip, which makes him look a great deal like a little brown mouse and Lestrange like the evil, pale-eyed cat plotting to swallow him.

God, Lily thinks, what was Salvage thinking?

"I have no idea why she put us together," says a cross voice to her right.

Lily starts. It takes her a moment to recover enough for speech. "How odd," she says in a strained voice. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

Kuhn, eyes lowered, shakes his head at some thought. "I didn't even understand what you were saying about – myths, or whatever it was."

"Metaphors?" Lily smiles a little, an image rising unbidden in her mind: In some ways, Kuhn reminds her of a petulant little boy. "If it makes you feel better, I wasn't entirely sure what I was saying myself."

"Yeah?" Kuhn looks up, letting Lily see his eyes. They are astonishingly like her own, green with fine jagged streaks of brown and gold radiating out from the pupil. Se – Snape once claimed her eyes were the colour of summer leaves when the sun shines through them from above. Not that she would credit anything Snape would say, least of all a statement regarding herself, whom he obviously never understood – but Lily thinks she can safely apply the comparison to Kuhn's eyes.

"Yeah," she says. Kuhn smiles, reminding her suddenly of someone else. She tries to quell the irritation that not being able to pinpoint the resemblance brings and ends up feeling wary instead. Who is this Kuhn? It's not that he's a boy, she doesn't mind working with boys, even if James might, only that . . . well, Kuhn's a Slytherin who was fighting James only a few minutes ago. A Slytherin who talks about the Killing Curse as though he's actually seen it. With carbon copies of her eyes.

Then there's the fact that she vaguely feels she knows him. No, something is definitely off . . .

A loud clapping sound fills the room, and Lily turns with a hot flash of resentment to see (fat, sadistic) Salvage hold up her flabby hands for silence. "Now that you have all found your partners, I would ask that you begin brainstorming ideas for your independent projects. I will accept almost any topic so long as it falls within the realm of Defence Against the Dark Arts."
The Slytherins – Mulciber and Avery, that is – give sneering indications of what they think of this restriction.

"In other words," Salvage continues in an unpleasant, strident tone, "you may choose to research ways of defending against Dark potions, spells or creatures, but I will not accept any projects dealing merely with Dark magic itself." As she makes this point, Salvage fixes her blue eyes on Lestrange. For a moment, her mouth twitches unpleasantly. Lestrange stares back uncowed, red lips twisted into a knowing, eerie smile.

Lily takes in a breath and turns back to Kuhn. Next to Lestrange, Kuhn is harmless, she thinks, a wave of pity for Peter breaking in her chest.

"You will turn in your ideas at the end of class today," Salvage announces. "Get to work."

There is a pause, then a sudden rustle of noise as students begin firing ideas at each other. Lily waits for a moment before turning to Kuhn. He's drumming his fingertips on the table, green eyes darting across the classroom.

Lily purses her lips. "We should start brainstorming. Do you have any ideas?"

Kuhn stops watching the classroom and turns to her with an appraising look. "I hear you're good at Potions."

Lily flushes angrily. She can just guess who might have told him such a thing. "Is that your idea?"

"Of course not," Kuhn says haughtily, lifting his quill. The plume brushes past his button nose, and he squeezes together his eyes as if to prevent himself from sneezing. The gesture – the shape of his nose – is annoyingly familiar. Lily feels her anger fade away. Suddenly she only feels an irrational desire to touch that impossibly well-known face, as if her fingers could better unravel its mysteries than her mind.

Then Kuhn opens his mouth again, and the desire vanishes. "I only thought we might do our research on a potion."

"A potion?" Lily furrows her brow, and an unpleasant thought rears its head. "Se- Snape didn't put you up to this, did he?"

"What? No!" Kuhn scowls. "This has nothing to do with him."

"Good." Lily glances suspiciously at Snape anyway, but he is engaged in a curt, one-sided conversation with Chandra Goodhart (poor girl, she's just nodding at whatever he says) and doesn't seem to notice her.

"I just happen to be interested in a certain potion," Kuhn says quietly, eyes glinting in a way that Lily can't interpret. His fingers continue to play with his quill; Lily is almost reminded of James, who is always moving his hands. "I'm not sure how it's made or anything, and there's no mention of it in any book, as far as I know. I've also never heard of a more complicated potion in my life. But I know the effects it's supposed to have, and I thought we might try creating a theoretical antidote."

"How do I know you aren't just interested in making a Dark potion?" Lily asks, letting her voice go cold.

Kuhn's eyes flash; for a moment, he looks like he might rebuke her. Then his lips press into a thin, mocking smile. "You really buy into all of those Slytherin stereotypes, don't you."
"For good reason," Lily says icily. "I also happen to know that every other Slytherin in this room – your friend Snape, for example – is practically a Death Eater already."

Kuhn frowns. "My friend Snape? It's you who keeps going on about him." Kuhn pauses, apparently to get a better look at Lily's suddenly heated cheeks. "Personally, I don't think he's all that bad."

"I know him better than you," Lily hisses, making her voice low enough that no-one but Kuhn can hear. "He's in love with Dark Magic, even more so than the rest of them – it's all he cares about."

"I don't know, Evans," Kuhn says, looking sceptical. He lifts up a hand to his hair – which is combed back with some kind of shiny gel and couldn't look more Slytherin – and runs small, pale fingers down to the back of his head. "Maybe you don't know him as well as you think."

Lily lets the sting of that barb roll her by – Kuhn is ignorant of her past friendship, after all, not that she intends on explaining it to him. She knows she is right about Snape. "You still haven't answered my question. How do I know you're not planning something nefarious?"

Kuhn blinks. For a brief moment Lily thinks he is angry, but then his face morphs into an expression both wary and calculating. "You'll just have to believe that I'm not," he says evasively.

"That's not good enough for me."

"It's good enough for Salvage," Kuhn points out.

"Fine," Lily declares, mostly because she has no real choice, not when he puts it that way. And she would like to see what Kuhn's up to. "We'll research your potion and see about an antidote. But I'll have you know that Snape was right – I am very good at Potions, probably much better than you, in fact. If I think for one minute that you're planning to do something dark, I will petition to work on my own." She lifts her chin in an unconscious gesture of defiance. "I will not play any part in your misdeeds."

"Of course not," Kuhn says calmly – too calmly for Lily's tastes.

"I'm warning you, Kuhn . . ."

Irritation flares on his face. "And I've made clear that I've understood your conditions."

"Good that we're on the same page," Lily says remorselessly. She leans down to her satchel and pulls out her schedule, an unmarked sheet of parchment and her quill. Kuhn wordlessly follows her lead, pulling out his crumpled schedule from a pocket in his robes.

Lily grimaces, but pulls the schedule closer to read. "Salvage was saying that we'd get twenty minutes to work on the project each class, but I strongly suspect we'll need much more time, given what you've told me about the complexity of this potion. We should probably meet at least once or twice on our own."

"That seems logical," Kuhn agrees.

"Once or twice a week," Lily stresses.

Kuhn grins – a cheeky, frank grin that forcefully reminds Lily of someone else. God, the resemblance is unsettling, and yet Lily can't for the life of her remember who Kuhn reminds her of. James, a little, but that's not really it – that doesn't explain the nose, the eyes . . .

Discomforted, Lily lowers her eyes under the pretence of consulting both of their schedules.
"How about Wednesday at two?" she asks, after a minute of both pretended and actual study. "We both have a long free period then."

"Wednesday at two is fine. Where should I meet you?"

Lily sighs. "All research begins in the library. We'll start there."

They are silent for a long while, Kuhn playing with his quill, Lily wasting time by writing out a research timetable for them both. When Kuhn finally speaks again, mere seconds before class will be called to an end, his voice nearly startles her out of her chair.

"I never said it was Snape."

Lily rears her head, cheeks flaming, heart thudding in her chest. She feels as though she has just been caught at something dirty. "Excuse me?"

"I never said he told me you were good at Potions." Kuhn's eyes glint, yet Lily cannot read them. "Slughorn told me that, actually."

"Even better," Lily says, trying to keep her voice cool. She straightens, realising as she does so that she is actually a bit taller than Kuhn, and fights against the heat in her cheeks. "Now you know that I meant every word of what I said."

Kuhn merely smiles. Lily responds with a cold glare. A part of her, however, can't help but be disappointed that Snape had not been the one to praise her abilities to Kuhn. At least it would have meant that he thought of her as more than a **Mudblood** sullying his school.

She knows better now.

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After dinner, Snape manages to return to his room unaccompanied but for several library books, having left Kuhn behind with Mulciber and Avery. He is grateful to be alone, if utterly exhausted from what seemed a very taxing first day of classes. Part of him is tempted to crawl into bed fully clothed. Briefly, he considers drinking another Pepper-Up Potion and settling down to his homework. Should he develop a resistance to the potion's effects, however . . . No, Snape decides, sleep is currently the better solution to his problems.

Back in his grey nightshirt, Snape carefully sets *Advanced Potion-Making* and a non-spilling quill next to his pillow before stretching out beneath the covers and shutting the bed curtains tightly around him. Fortunately, Kuhn is not here to turn on his horrifically bright lamp. Thinking of Kuhn, Snape sits up once more to set up a Silencing Charm around the bed for good measure. Then he settles back and closes his eyes.

When he wakes again, the light in his room has shifted. Although not nearly as bright as it had been that morning, it is certainly brighter than it had been when Snape had initially fallen asleep around dusk.

He doesn't want to get up.

He does anyway, reluctantly slipping out of bed on the side where Kuhn can't see him. His school robes lie discarded on the floor; he picks them up carelessly and begins to change back into them. Over the sound of rough fabric sliding past his ears, Snape can hear the irregular scratching of a quill and the frustrated sighs of someone thinking.

Suddenly, the quill stops scratching. A desk chair grinds against the floor. "Severus?"
Snape straightens the collar of his robes, then reaches back over his mattress to grab hold of *Advanced Potion-Making* and the non-spilling quill. Armed for work, he strides into the open, hair swinging in his face.

Kuhn sits at his desk, twisted in his chair to face Snape. He looks like he might have taken a nap of his own, for his hair is not nearly so slick as Snape remembered, but sticking up in wild tufts at the back. His hands – small and bony, surprisingly fragile for someone so adept with a wand – are playing with his quill, which he clearly has been nibbling at from time to time, for there are ink stains around his mouth. If Snape were anyone else, he might have found the sight endearing.

"Don't call me Severus."

Kuhn has been gazing up at him with a slightly worried expression, as though he's concerned about Snape's health; now he smiles wickedly. "Would you prefer 'Sev'?"

Snape feels that something has gone sour in his mouth. He fingers his wand so that Kuhn can see that he's doing it. "Say that name again and I'll hex you dumb forever."

Kuhn continues to smirk, his green eyes wandering from Snape's wand to his face to some corner of the ceiling. "Lily Evans is a piece of work," he says, sounding slightly amused. He does not seem to have noticed the way Snape has stiffened. "She kept on going on about how every Slytherin is a Death Eater, including and especially you." Kuhn pauses, eyes suddenly focusing on Snape's face.

Snape forces himself not to react.

(Her assessment is correct, of course: Snape does plan on becoming a Death Eater the moment an invitation is extended to him. But she doesn't understand his reasons. She doesn't yet suspect that he will do it for her. Someday she will understand. Snape often imagines the day when he will stand before her, empowered and dignified, holding a key to true knowledge and undreamed of beauty. On that day, he believes, and only then will Snivellus finally be able to win her respect.)

Kuhn looks away, entertained by some other thought. "Oh right, and she thinks I'm a Dark wizard too, only that I haven't revealed my true colours yet. Mental, isn't it?"

"Evans is a Gryffindor, Kuhn," Snape says, but he has to grind the words out. "What did you expect?"

"Well, you did tell me she was the cleverest person at this school, so I suppose I had reason to be a little appalled."

Snape stalks over to his desk and sets down *Advanced Potion-Making* next to library books he'd deposited there earlier. With his profile to Kuhn, he says in his most indifferent voice, "I said she was the smartest person in the room we were occupying at the time, not cleverest in the school."

"Still. You'd think things like House associations wouldn't matter so much to someone that brilliant."

Snape senses, with some trepidation, that he has been presented with a trap. If he is to answer Kuhn, his chatty roommate will undoubtedly tell him every detail about his conversation with Lily. This has an undeniable appeal – Snape is grateful for any news of her, even from Kuhn's distorted perspective – that nonetheless wears a silver lining. Should Snape encourage Kuhn to speak, he will perhaps begin to see Snape as a confidant, possibly even a friend. This would be awkward and inconvenient for Snape, especially were Kuhn to get wind of Snape's true interest in Lily Evans . . .

And yet words are slipping out of his mouth before he can stop them. "So you do think she's brilliant."
“Sure. She told me herself that she was some kind of Potions genius.” Kuhn scratches behind his ear and smiles over at Snape. He is instantly wary. "She kept on harping about you, though. I suggested that we do our research on a potion and she immediately thought you'd put me up to it.” Kuhn pauses, apparently to gauge Snape's reaction.

Snape averts his face, which has already begun to heat. He is not quick enough to avoid seeing Kuhn's smile widen. "Why she would jump to that conclusion, I wonder?"

"How would I know?” Snape snaps, scooting his chair closer to his desk.

"Point taken," says Kuhn, yet his voice is suspiciously light. "Anyway, she was nice otherwise. We're going to try and create a defence mechanism against this extremely powerful potion I'd heard about."

Snape is so relieved that the conversation has veered away from Lily that he turns to Kuhn and sneers in his face. "Merlin help us if you're the one doing the brewing."

Kuhn looks affronted. "Hey, you've never seen me at Potions before. I might actually be good."

"Not if your abysmal performance in Transfiguration is any indication."

"Abysmal? I was one of four students who actually created gold!"

"One does not create gold, Kuhn, one merely transfigures aluminium to temporarily take on the properties of gold. Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, if you recall." Snape smirks at the blank look on Kuhn's face. "And as for your success, let's not forget the considerable help bestowed upon you by me."

"So anyway," Kuhn continues, glaring at Snape, "this potion is really Dark. It makes you enter a kind of delirium and relive the worst memory of your life. You can't get rid of it, either; if you try to Vanish or Transfigure it, nothing happens. So your only choice is to drink down the whole thing and let it ravish your mind."

Snape's interest is piqued, not that he would ever admit it. He runs thin fingers along the leather spines of his library books and pretends indifference. "I've never heard of such a potion."

"It's not in any books I know either. Maybe it's just a metaphor.” Kuhn sounds surprisingly self-deprecating. Snape glances over to see him staring down at his small, fragile hands and biting his lower lip.

It takes Snape a moment to realise that Kuhn probably does not intend to say anything else. Something weighs upon him, perhaps his own worst memory; whatever it is, it has momentarily done the next-to-impossible and defeated Kuhn's voluble spirit.

This is more than fine with Snape. He turns back to his desk and pulls out The Aesthetics of Dark Magic from his pile of books.

Kuhn makes a vaguely disappointed noise as Snape takes the book in hand; Snape fights the urge to hex him with Langlock. "You never said what your project was going to be."

"No, I did not,” Snape says coldly, opening the book to its table of contents and reverently smoothing the page.

Kuhn remains silent, but kicks the floor. Snape begins to read through the list of chapters, trying to follow the author's logic. It's difficult though, as he can feel Kuhn watching him.
After enduring a minute of close, distracting scrutiny, Snape turns to Kuhn with a snarl. "Goodhart and I are to research ways of ameliorating the side effects of the Cruciatus Curse. She will approach the question from a Charms angle, and I will attempt to develop an appropriate potion. There. Satisfied? Will you leave me in peace now?"

"That's amazing," Kuhn says. Snape sees frank admiration on his face.

"It won't be unless you leave me to my work," Snape sneers.

Kuhn grins unrepentantly, his cheer seemingly restored. Snape is relieved to see him turn back to his desk, covered in parchment and a newly added pile of library Potions manuals. His relief turns to wariness as Kuhn picks up his own copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, lips twitching with mischief. "I wouldn't dream of distracting you."

"That is an outrageous lie."

"Probably," Kuhn says before bursting into clear, ringing laughter. It's a lovely sound, not directed against Snape in any way.

Snape shakes his head as he turns back to his reading. Clearly, Germans have a strange sense of humour.

Their first Potions class of the year takes place early the next morning. Snape manages to wake up in time to down his breakfast ration of Pepper-Up Potion and take a shower beforehand. He even washes his hair, if only because he doesn't want any loose ends falling into his cauldron during class. Making it look better has nothing to do with it. Snape is perfectly aware that he could combat the large amounts of grease naturally generated by his hair follicles with a much stronger (and more expensive) shampoo, but he refuses to buy or brew one. His hair has always been this way. He's not going to try and change it like some vain, silly girl.

Kuhn meets him by chance on the way down to class, apparently just come from breakfast. "Hey," he smiles, showing straight, white teeth.

Snape does not answer, but acknowledges Kuhn with an impassive glance. His roommate's wild black hair has once more been tamed by gel; the mouth so much like Potter's is free of ink. In the green eyes Snape reads morning fatigue and something else, something so warm and Gryffindor Snape decides it's better not to try and understand.

"Did you do something to your hair?"

Snape scowls and increases his pace. "Shut it, Kuhn."

Kuhn adjusts his own pace accordingly. Snape turns to glare, and sees that Kuhn has become serious. "Why don't you come to breakfast?"

Snape does not dignify that with a response. He is extremely relieved when they round a corner and the Potions classroom comes into sight. The classroom, like most dungeon rooms, is dank and dimly lit; unlike most dungeon rooms, it smells intoxicating. At the threshold, Snape nearly stops to take in the complex symphony of smells, but is startled a flash of red to his right, the side of the room usually taken by Gryffindors. He immediately withdraws behind his curtains of hair and stalks into the classroom, subtle, glorious scents forgotten. Kuhn, however, hesitates, probably to nod at Lily.
Snape can't help it; he glances over to see her reaction. Lily has crossed slender arms across her chest. Her expression is cool but not unapproachable. She is willing to give Kuhn a chance, Snape realises, ignoring the pang of jealousy in his chest. Next to her, of course, Potter is frowning, while Black looks ready to tear Kuhn apart, limb for limb. Lupin, however, offers a gentle smile.

Snape's lips thin and he looks away. He's not up to dissecting the various conflicting motives of his least favourite Gryffindors this early in the morning. The very thought makes him scowl. He prowls past the Slytherins – Rosier and Mulciber, Lestrange and Narcissa, finally Avery, sitting by himself – to his usual table at the very back left of the classroom. No-one but Snape usually sits there, and he tries to cheer himself up with the thought that he will have the table all to himself.

Kuhn will go sit with Avery, Snape trusts as he begins setting up his equipment. Avery has been fawning over Kuhn since his Anti-Hangover Charm, and they spent most of yesterday's dinner regaling each other with tales about drunkenness. Snape had also hinted to Kuhn last night that he did not like working with others – except there is flash of black robes and Snape is already inhaling the clean, chemical scent of Muggle soap and gel.

Snape finds that his hands are twitching as he turns to glare at Kuhn, about to set his pewter cauldron onto the table. "Don't even think about it," he hisses.

Perhaps he speaks too softly, for Kuhn does not react except by doing exactly the opposite of what Snape had asked. Snape decides to switch tactics. He clears his throat. "Kuhn, I would . . . appreciate it if you sat elsewhere."

Kuhn adjusts his cauldron tripod without glancing at Snape. "Why?"

"This is my table. Hers and mine. "Nothing personal. I just prefer to work alone."

"Oh, if that's all, don't worry," says Kuhn, serenely taking knives out of his cutting set. "I was also planning on working alone. One usually does in an upper-level class."

Snape sneers at the jibe, but he's becoming desperate. Having a table to himself is a comfort Snape will not readily cede; but more, it would be sacrilegious to let Kuhn sit where she once . . . "I need the extra space. For experimenting. Avery, on the other hand, looks positively ecstatic at the thought of sharing with you."

"I like sitting in the back," Kuhn murmurs, still too busy with his set-up to look at Snape, "and far away from Gryffindors."

"Avery is no closer to Gryffindors than I am," Snape points out. His foot begins tapping itself impatiently.

At this, Kuhn stops messing with his equipment and turns to Snape. His eyes are amused, yet placid as waveless green seas. "I'm not sitting here for you, believe it or not."

"And I'm finding that increasingly difficult to believe –" Snape is cut off by the sudden arrival of Professor Slughorn. He instantly hunches into himself and, glowering, takes a seat. Kuhn also sits, but the expression on his face is inscrutable.

Damn you, Snape thinks before turning to watch Slughorn's ascent to the front of the classroom.

Slughorn appears as plump, jovial and moustached as Snape remembered; as he waddles up to his podium, he beams at Lily, at Potter, at Narcissa, at Lestrange . . . in short, at the students who are rich, famous or talented. Slughorn collects students where others would collect young wines with future potential. Behind his back, Lily used to compare him to a cunning walrus from her favourite
"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"
The Walrus did beseech.
"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach. . .

Snape can't remember the rest. The walrus tricks several baby oysters out of their bed and eats them, he thinks. But he'll never forget the sound of Lily's voice, ridiculously deep as she spoke the part of the walrus, playfully high-pitched for the little oysters . . .

Lily, as a Muggleborn, is the obvious exception to Slughorn's rule. In what she lacks in blood, however, she has more than made up with brilliance, with humour, with beauty, and sometimes Snape thinks that Slughorn appreciates her even more than his standard pureblood favourites.

Snape, on the other hand, has begun mattering less and less to Slughorn with each passing day. When he had still shared a desk with Lily, this had been different. They had been an unstoppable force, Snape with his experimental streak and Lily with her unfailing instincts, always winning Slughorn's little competitions; and Slughorn had genuinely taken delight in their work. Ever since Snape sits alone at their old table – Lily stubbornly ignoring him, shoulder brushing Potter's – ever since last year, however, Slughorn almost seems to have forgotten that he exists. No matter how well Snape's potions turn out, no matter how innovative his techniques, Slughorn only ever offers the same backhanded praise.

Competent as ever, Mr Snape.

For Lily's artistic genius, of course, Slughorn's hyperbolic accolades are endless. Snape is fine with this. He is confident enough in his own abilities to know that his potions match hers in quality, and gracious enough (if only towards her) to be happy for her success. In a way, Snape is even glad that Slughorn drops his facade of bonhomie around him, because he was never comfortable with it, not even when he had been one of the favoured himself.

" – please turn to page 320 of your books."

Snape's head snaps up, and belatedly he realises he didn't even know Slughorn was speaking. Apparently he is done speaking now, which means that Snape has missed his entire introductory speech.

Heat instantly rises to his cheeks.

Not that Slughorn ever says anything useful or unexpected, but still . . . he might have . . . oh, Snape is furious with himself. He finds his hands shaking as he opens Advanced Potion-Making to page 320.

Attractions Electives, he reads. This is to be a theoretical lesson, then. Snape relaxes minutely. He believes he already has a solid understanding of how elective affinities work, but it couldn't hurt to hear the theory explained in the terms Slughorn and the Ministry will expect of him on his exams.

And indeed, Slughorn gathers in his breath – resembling in that moment nothing less than a brown walrus – and begins speaking again. Snape neither finds his rhetoric particularly good, nor his explanations particularly insightful, so he does not copy any of it down. Beside him, however, Kuhn is writing down – Snape leans over to see exactly – every single bleeding word.

Snape smirks and shifts his weight back to its original position.
As he lectures, Slughorn seems to look at every student in the classroom but Snape. Sometimes he pauses to ask for input, but Snape doesn't bother raising his hand, knowing he won't be picked. Potter and Black, of course, are constantly called upon. This does not irritate Snape; on the contrary, he draws a kind of malicious pleasure from their predictable, banal responses. If this is what Lily wants . . .

Merlin Lily, this can't be what you want.

Snape clenches his hands into fists. The slight pain of his nails sinking into his palms makes him hyperaware of Slughorn's droning voice. ". . . the affinities are driven by the four primary elements: fire, water, earth and air. It is often said that fire and water are incompatible unless bound together by a third element, usually earth – Why yes, Adrian, do you have a question?"

Adrian? Taken aback, Snape glances over at Kuhn, who is now lowering his hand and looks about to speak.

Adrian? Normally Slughorn reserves first names for the students he favours. Snape knows that Kuhn interacted with Slughorn over the summer, but he finds it hard to believe that his roommate – who neither seems wealthy nor famous nor brilliant – could be part of the Slug Club.

"Ah, yes sir, just for clarification: I don't quite understand the difference between the primary elements and the chemical ones – you know, gold, silver, oxygen . . ."

Slughorn peers down at Kuhn from over his bushy moustache. For a moment Snape thinks he will ridicule Kuhn, but then Slughorn surprises him by smiling. "Very good question, Adrian, very good. What is the difference between the two sets of elements? Any idea? – Yes, Lily."

Lily gracefully lowers her long, slender arm. Snape feels his nails digging further into his palms. "The primary elements constitute the sub-atomic structure of the chemical elements," she says coolly, keeping her gaze fixed on Slughorn. "They represent the forces that hold the atoms together and set them apart."

A snort sounds at Snape's right. "Sorry, but are you saying that earth and air, which we all know to be mixed compounds, are supposed to form the atomic basis of the elements?"

Snape glances at Kuhn in astonishment – not because the question is stupid, but because it is the kind of question he himself might have asked when he was younger and more ignorant of the wizarding world. He hadn't thought Kuhn would take enough of an interest in his studies to even notice the paradoxical status of the magical elements.

"Adrian, my boy, you're taking this much too literally," Slughorn says impatiently. "Earth and air, fire and water – these are merely names we use to designate the four fundamental elements. They're not to be confused with the coarse natural phenomena we encounter from day to day."

Kuhn furrows his brow, clearly dissatisfied. "If they're not the same thing, then why do we use the same names?"

Snape feels his upper lip curl. Why does one use centuries-outdated terminology indeed. Has Kuhn not noticed that the wizarding world is still mostly stuck in the eighteenth-century? That there hasn't been a scientific revolution here since Newton? That one can own slaves and house-elves and have one's soul forever sucked out by a Dementor for escaping prison . . .?

Slughorn blinks, clearly taken aback by the question. "Well . . . that's what we've called them for centuries, is all. Nothing more to it." He chuckles slightly, then pulls out a gold pocket watch from
his brown waistcoat. A sigh escapes his lips. "How the time does fly – I'm afraid we'll have to continue this discussion next period. Until then, I'd like you all to write an essay – three feet should do – on the theoretical outcome of at least four reactions involving elective affinities. You may choose the reactions yourself. One more thing," Slughorn raises his eyebrows at Potter and Black, who have already begun noisily packing away their cauldrons, "before you leave, your summer essays please."

Essay turned in, cauldron repacked, Snape turns to his right with every intention of leaving the classroom. Kuhn, however, stands in his way. His satchel is also packed, but he hesitates, mind apparently still processing Slughorn's response.

Theoretically, of course, Snape could just exit the room from his left, but then he wouldn't be able to embarrass Kuhn, would he. He makes an impatient sound in his throat. "Kuhn. You're in the way."

"What? Oh, sorry," says Kuhn, blushing faintly – Snape feels a pleasurable rush of spite – and begins making his way out of the classroom. Snape does not follow closely, yet Kuhn somehow measures his pace so that they are walking alongside each other into the corridor. Snape tolerates this, but only because he is acutely aware of a group of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs straggling behind him.

"You must think I'm pretty stupid," Kuhn says quietly.

Snape lets his hair swing in his face so that Kuhn won't be able to see his expression. "Not stupid, no."

"Still, I guess that was a pretty elementary thing not to know."

Snape wonders if Kuhn is aware of his own pun, and decides that he isn't. "I wouldn't say that element theory is elementary," he says slyly. "More like third-year material."

Kuhn snorts, hitting Snape in the arm. Snape blinks at the contact, hand immediately jumping to his arm.

"Bastard," Kuhn is saying, and Snape, deciding Kuhn's intentions are merely playful, however strange that concept is, lets his hand drop. "By the way, is there any chance –"

But whatever Kuhn intended to say is cut off by a call from behind. "Hey, Kuhn!"

Kuhn spins on his heel. Snape swallows, but he doesn't need to turn around; he would know her voice anywhere.

"Yeah?"

"I was wondering if we might meet a bit later tomorrow . . ." she says. For some unfathomable reason, Kuhn looks over at Snape, almost as if to ask for his permission – his permission! – to speak with Lily.

Snape curls his lips with disgust. Perhaps Kuhn really is stupid, if he doesn't know how to take an opportunity, even one so banal, to speak with the most angelic and brilliant girl in the whole bloody school. Well, Snape is not about to tolerate such ignorance. He stalks off without a backward glance, robes billowing furiously behind him.

One good thing comes of Kuhn's failure to understand element theory: While absently musing over the opposing natures of fire and water on the way back to his room, Snape has an epiphany that just
might help him make progress with his Defence project.

Fire – aside from being another symbol for Gryffindor, what is fire but another word for electricity? Electricity would seem more powerful than water, Slytherin's element, although both can be fatal and essential to life. Electricity certainly has the ability to decompose water into its constituent elements, hydrogen and oxygen. Snape has performed electrolysis before by holding the two ends of a battery to water . . . such a primitive yet powerful tool . . . a battery . . .

With a battery, Snape would be able to simulate the effects of the Crucius Curse on his nerves without being expelled for casting an Unforgiveable. He would be able to test the potency of the potions he brews in a way that none of the literature has ever done – by testing them on himself. It's so simple, it has to be brilliant. To think how much more effective his potions will be than the palliatives currently on the market!

Snape is so excited that his hands are twitching by the time he arrives in his room and is able to scrawl his ideas down in Advanced Potion-Making. A battery will be easy enough to construct – a simple Voltaic pile of oh, about one-hundred layers of silver and zinc should do the trick nicely. He can use zinc plates and Sickles for the metals and cardboard soaked in a salt-solution to instigate the electrochemical reaction. There are also some iron wires in his Potions kit that he can attach to the positive and negative ends of the battery in order to connect them with his body.

"I am a genius," Snape whispers to himself, leaving his quill in Advanced Potion-Making and hastening over to his experimenting table. He conjures a metal frame to hold the battery's layers, then assembles all of the Sickles he has onto his desk. Admittedly, he has much less than one hundred – more like forty-one Sickles – but perhaps he'll be able to win another bet, or borrow some money from Kuhn . . .

When Kuhn returns to their room a few minutes later, Snape is almost friendly.

"Back already?"

"Yeah." Kuhn rubs his forehead in an absent gesture. "Thought I'd get started on Slughorn's essay. Not that I understood a word of what he said."

"Oh?" In truth, Snape finds this hard to believe, as Germany is one of the countries best known for its research on chemical bonding. There are even novels about elective affinities in German – Wahlverwandtschaften, Snape thinks is the term.

"I just don't get this whole elective affinities business." Kuhn gives Snape a wry look. "I know, I know, it's supposed to be elementary, but for some reason I just can't picture how it's supposed to work."

"Is it the language barrier?"

"The language – no, no, my English is fine. I went to an English school, remember?"

"Perhaps you should try observing an actual reaction, then. Words rarely do justice to the real thing."

Kuhn looks thoughtful. "That's an idea."

"If you'd like, you can watch me," Snape says, injecting enough condescension into his voice that Kuhn doesn't become suspicious. "I was about to stage a reaction myself."

Kuhn brightens. "Yeah, that would be great!"
Snape's lips thin, but he gestures Kuhn to come nearer and begins slowly taking out jars from his ingredients cabinet.

Beside him, Kuhn snorts. "What are you doing, counting out your money?"

"Of course not," Snape snaps, but inwardly he is pleased that Kuhn has noticed. Getting him to lend out a few Sickles shouldn't be too difficult from here. "I plan to construct a battery and need approximately one-hundred layers of silver."

"But – you can't use money in a battery. It'll be ruined!"

"Says who? We are wizards, after all."

This seems to stump Kuhn for a moment. Snape busies himself with firing up his cauldron and sorting his ingredients in the order he plans to use them. The reaction he intends to show Kuhn is laughably simple, but if it inclines Kuhn towards his experiments, then Snape doesn't consider it a waste of time.

"Do you have enough?"

"Enough of what?"

"Silver for your battery. It looks like you have a lot less than a hundred pieces."

Snape stiffens. This is much too easy – and therefore suspicious. "Why do you care?"

"Well . . . not that I'm rich, mind you, but I spent less on my book allowance than planned. So if you needed some Sickles, I could lend them to you."

Interesting. Kuhn is at Hogwarts on scholarship just like Snape, only he is obviously less of a bibliophile.

"What's in it for you?"

"Nothing. Well," Kuhn grins, "if I were to lend you the money, I might just want your help understanding this elective affinities stuff in return."

Snape doesn't even need to think. "Deal."

"Brilliant," says Kuhn, and the green eyes sparkle.

Snape pours some Essence of Transience – a grey, choking mist heavier than air – into his cauldron, drops in a handful of pulverised earthstone and then stirs clockwise until they have dissolved and the mixture has liquefied. He reduces the heat, changes the direction of his stirs to counterclockwise, and is rewarded when the solution crystallises into a glinting new solid.

"This compound is the first stage of a typical reaction," he explains, leaning away so that Kuhn can look into the cauldron. "Let's call the first ingredient A and the second B. A plus B react together to create a new compound AB. This reaction can be considered a simple example of chemical affinity."

"Where affinity means something like attraction, or bonding."

"Correct," says Snape, uncorking a brown vial containing oil of vitriol. "Now, watch what happens when we add a third ingredient, which we shall call C."

Kuhn leans in so close that their heads are nearly touching as Snape shakes thirteen drops of oil of
vitriol into the cauldron. For a moment, it would seem that nothing had happened; then the glinting solid begins to smoke, and suddenly the Essence of Transience has separated itself from the earthstone and is curling above a shimmering yellow crystal – the product of oil of vitriol and earthstone.

In that moment, Snape is aware of just how much pleasure it gives him to stage his knowledge in this demonstrative way.

"That," he says with satisfaction, "is what we call an elective affinity. The attraction between ingredients A and C is greater than the attraction between A and B. Rather than merging all together into a combined product, only ingredients A and C combine, separating B from their midst. A elects C over B."

"That's weird," says Kuhn, sounding unnerved.

"Reactions of this kind have often been used as metaphors for human behaviour. The Greeks spoke of *sympatheia*, the Romans of *affinitas*, and many Renaissance thinkers even claimed that chemical affinity and the other attractive forces of nature – gravity, electricity and magnetism – were all various expressions of the ultimate power of love. Which is rubbish if you ask me," Snape says. "Nonetheless, you will find several potions manuals that take the reaction so seriously as to express how sorry they feel for the discarded ingredient B."

Kuhn shuffles his feet, an unreadable expression on his face. "I feel sorry for B, too."

Sentimental, are we?

"I thought you might," Snape smirks. "However, you shall be relieved to know that B is not condemned to remain alone." Snape picks up a bottle of Halcyon Water and pours it over the still-curling Essence of Transience. Instantly, the grey mist swirls into a liquid form, not forming a new chemical substance, but a mildly acidic solution known for its healing properties.

"It's not exactly fair, though," says Kuhn, now sounding genuinely put-out. "B only gets a substitute for A, and a weak one at that. I mean, B and D didn't even really react."

Snape shoots him a look of disbelief. "Kuhn, you can't possibly be taking this seriously."

"Not at all," Kuhn denies, but his flushing cheeks belie him. "It's just . . . it all seems so alive."

"Men are such narcissists," Snape declares, turning off the heat beneath his cauldron. He steps away from Kuhn, arms crossed over his chest. "Everything we do not understand we simply anthropomorphize."

"If it's the only way to get us to understand . . ." Kuhn drifts off, eyes troubled.

"We can always try to cut ourselves out of the picture," Snape snaps. "Objectivity may never be completely possible, but we can strive to keep control of our emotions, our weaknesses and subjective perceptions. We must at least attempt to overcome ourselves if we want to understand the Other – whether that Other be the nature beyond or the unknown within ourselves."

"Science as masochism," Kuhn says softly. "I never thought of it that way."

"I never said that you should."

The corner of Kuhn's mouth twitches, but never quite becomes a smile. Whatever he's thinking, it somehow makes Snape nervous. "Right then. You've done your part, so I guess I owe you some
Sickles."

Scientific debate too over your head? Snape wonders, suddenly incredibly anxious to receive his silver and get this lopsided conversation over with.

After rummaging through his trunk for what seems an age, Kuhn finally holds out a fistful of Sickles. Snape greedily puts out his hands, so thrilled by the prospect of his battery that he doesn't register Kuhn's fingers when they unnecessarily brush against his skin.

Chapter End Notes

My sources for the bits on elective affinities are varied, but include Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, Newton's *Opticks* and several secondary sources. If you're interested in any of these, just let me know.
Chapter Five: A Letter to Spinner's End

September 7, 1976

Mother,

If you are reading this, then rest assured that I am well. Hogwarts began uneventfully; there is little in my classes to challenge me, but I keep myself preoccupied with side projects. Nothing out of the ordinary has occurred, unless one counts the fact that I have been saddled against my will with a roommate. His name is Adrian Kuhn. Apparently he comes from Germany, although he sports no accent of any kind. We have little in common. This does not deter him from following me around the school or pestering me constantly about schoolwork.

As he is German, you will perhaps be surprised to hear that his education is full of holes. Of Potions, he knows about as much as a Second Year. The only subject I can confidently say he is good at is Defence, and that is only because I have seen him construct some highly advanced wards. Despite his incredible lack of knowledge, however, he does learn with alacrity. I have explained several (admittedly basic) concepts to him over the course of the past few days, and he was not only quick to understand, but also to perform the spellwork himself. While I hardly intend to become his tutor, I don't completely dislike the task of providing enlightenment to a peer. You might say that it amuses me, even. My only fear is that he will come to depend overmuch on my help. Do you have any advice?

Does this find you well? I am concerned by your condition. When we parted ways at King's Cross, it seemed to have worsened.

Please consider seeing a doctor.

Your devoted son,
Severus

Snape frowns as he considers the last two paragraphs of his letter; his quill hovers over the words, ready to cross them out. His mother is nothing if not proud and will probably consider his advice Howler-worthy. Yet ignoring the seriousness of her condition would be downright irresponsible, especially since Snape's father is jobless and therefore incapable of offering her anything but further decline to her mental health. His mother needs to get away from Spinner's End, away from the heat and depression, from the dour Muggle reality of inflation and unemployment. Otherwise . . .

A droplet of ink drips down from his quill and onto the parchment, nearly marring the word worsened. Snape jerks his hand away, cursing beneath his breath. Somehow the inkdrop seems portentous; before he can think too much about why that would be, Snape folds the parchment into an envelope and scrawls his home address over the front.

He'd planned on sending it off tomorrow, but sudden impulse tells him it to post it right away, even though curfew is in less than forty minutes. Decision made, Snape snatches up the letter from his desk and stands, nearly knocking over his chair in the process.

"Where are you going?" Kuhn asks, wide-eyed.
Snape barely notices him. "Owlery," he breathes, rushing out of the room without thinking about how irrational his actions might seem.

The owlery smells of hay, droppings and regurgitated mouse fur. Snape hastens to one of the school owls – he still can't afford one of his own – and begins attaching his letter to its scaled black foot.

"Severus!"

He fumbles; the letter falls out of his fingers and lands on the dirty floor. The owl clucks, its enormous yellow eyes regarding him with disdain.

"Fancy meeting you here," says a smooth, haughty voice. Not yet daring to look up, Snape reaches down with a trembling hand and picks up his letter.

Footsteps approach. Snape taps the residue of dried droppings from his letter and straightens, reluctantly letting his gaze meet Regulus Black's.

Black is smiling. His appearance has undergone a radical change since Snape saw him last: Not only has his hair been trimmed and combed (the dark curls glisten in the reddish light of the setting sun), his robes no longer look as though he'd slept in them (they are pressed and of the best quality). To Snape, this perfectly groomed, almost dashing Regulus would be interchangeable with his older brother were it not for the silver-green crest on his chest.

"I was about to post a letter," Snape says formally.

Black steps closer, then wrinkles his nose at the smell. The school owls are not in terrible shape, exactly, but their cubbies have probably not been cleaned in several weeks. "You can't possibly intend to use one of those."

"As I have no owl of my own –" Snape begins, but Black cuts him off with a dismissive wave.

"Don't be ridiculous. You'll use my familiar."

"I am perfectly content –"

"I insist," says Black in a tone of finality. His dark eyes glitter as they regard Snape, and his lips form a calculating, aristocratic smile. "This way," he says in a lighter voice, gesturing Snape to follow him over to the Slytherin side of the owlery.

Snape swallows, trying to fight back a growing feeling of panic. The last thing he wants is to be indebted to Black...

"Well, come on, I don't have all day."

Snape holds back a retort with effort, biting his tongue instead. After another's moment hesitation, having concluded there is no other choice, he allows his feet to propel him forward.

Black stands before a cubby with his family's crest – a chevron shield with two greyhounds rampant, two stars and a sword at the base – emblazoned on the wood. He reaches into the cubby with unexpected gentleness. When he retrieves his hand, a large, heavy raven emerges with it.

"This is Virgil," says Black, stroking the raven's plumage with his free hand. Virgil fans out his long tail and bobs his head, fixing one beady, dark brown eye on Snape.

Snape gazes back, and the bird opens its dark, slightly curved bill. Pointed, elongated feathers spread
out from its throat. "Kraa," it calls – a dry, rattling sound.

"He likes you," Black says, sounding absurdly satisfied. He pets Virgil a moment longer before glancing up at Snape. There is a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "You may touch him if you wish."

Snape hesitates – most birds despise him, but this one is undoubtedly compelling – before lifting a long-fingered, knobbly hand. Virgil regards him solemnly, making no move to bite. Slowly, cautiously, Snape lets his fingers skate over the black feathers at his neck. They are iridescent, reflecting a myriad of colours in the setting sun, and rustle smooth as silk beneath his touch.

"Virgil," Snape says, removing his hand before the bird can change his mind and take out a chunk of his fingers. He gives Black an appraising look. "I presume you named him after the character in Dante's Inferno and not after the Roman poet."

"I thought you'd understand the reference," Black says with a laugh. "Yes, Virgil is my 'guide to the underworld', so to speak."


"Yes, he's quite clever," Black says to the bird. Snape raises his eyebrows, but quickly schools his face back into an impassive expression when Black lifts his head to look up at him. His eyes gleam and his smile is suspiciously sly. "Now, about your letter."

Snape feels his heart sink. "There's really no need –"

"Stop being ridiculous and give me the letter." When Snape continues to hesitate, Black lets out an impatient huff. "It's no imposition, Severus. Virgil would just be sitting here otherwise, bored out of his not inconsiderable mind."

"Very well," Snape says coolly, handing over the letter if only for the bird's sake. Black, of course, lets his gaze linger over the address much longer than Snape considers necessary. If he realises that Spinner's End is in what many would consider a Muggle slum, however, his haughty, slightly curious expression does not reveal it. With deft movements of his hands – delicate, aristocratic hands, Seeker's hands – Black begins attaching the letter to Virgil's foot. The raven remains admirably still during this process, merely regarding Snape with an intelligent, considering air.

Snape decides that, should he ever have a familiar of his own, it will be a raven.

"In future, you are always welcome to use Virgil," Black says, making finishing ties. "I don't write many letters myself, and he could use the diversion." With a final caress to the raven's head, Black lifts his hand to an open window. Virgil spreads his wings and tail, which make an oddly creaking sound, lets out a guttural, resonating Kraa, and, after a somewhat shaky start, flaps out into the open sky.

Two thoughts compete in Snape's mind: I would very much like a raven and If Black doesn't write many letters, what is he doing in the owlery in the first place? The latter gives Snape some cause to worry.

He needs to leave now, he decides. "Thank you for the offer. Now if you would excuse me –"

"It's really nothing," Black says hastily. It's clear that he has no intention of letting Snape go easily. "Really, it's the least I could do after all that my brother puts you through."

Snape curls a lip, and Black immediately rushes on, "I'm also just glad to have run into you. You're a
hard one to find." Black laughs a little, but it sounds forced to Snape.

Snape does not volunteer the information that if he is not in classes or the library, he is almost always in his rooms. Black has probably been looking for him at breakfast. This only solidifies Snape's resolution never to attend breakfast. He makes the additional resolution never to attend a meal without other Seventh Years, preferably Narcissa and Lestrange, in tow.

Black, however, interprets Snape's silence as a license to continue spewing out his unwelcome thoughts. "I've been meaning to speak with you for ages. You're the only person I know who really thinks in this House . . . the only person with whom I feel I share something in common. My cousins would tell me I'm wrong, that your blood is dirty, but I –"

"Don't say anything you might come to regret," Snape snaps, glancing pointedly around the owlery. He is certain that they are alone, but Snape is prepared to pretend there is an eavesdropper if it will prevent Black from damning them both.

Black shakes his head, something wild in his eyes, and Snape feels his mouth go dry with fear. "I won't regret this," he breathes, and grabs Snape's wrist.

Panic crescendos dizzyingly in Snape, almost making him choke. Before he knows what he's doing, he's shaking Black away, backing into the shadows with his freed, palpitating hand clutched close to his chest. "You're not thinking clearly," he whispers, dropping his hand to seek any door, any way out of here. He knows there must be a door nearby . . .

this can't be happening please don't let this be happening

Black advances, eyes wide and pleading. Snape claws the air with his hand, gasping as it suddenly makes contact with a cold doorknob.

"Severus, please listen to me –"

"Don't," Snape chokes, and to his own surprise, manages to yank open the door.

Before Black can react, he's bolted and run.

Avery watches Snape leave the Slytherin dungeons, looking even more white-faced than usual, a letter clutched in a bloodless, bony hand. The letter tells Avery all he needs to know. Smirking, he gets up from his seat on one of the Common Room's leather couches and saunters through the boy's Seventh Year entryway. If his calculations are correct, Snape will be gone for at least half an hour, leaving Kuhn alone in their room.

To Avery's pleased surprise, the door to said rooms is wide open. Avery can feel the wards inside, pulsing and warm. For a moment, he simply stands before the door and watches Kuhn scribble notes to himself from some textbook. He's pretty for a boy – slender, almost fragile, with huge green eyes and delicate high cheekbones. Avery knows that Kuhn has seen death, perhaps even caused it himself – there is no other way to interpret his description of Avada Kedavra in class – but that notwithstanding Kuhn still radiates a kind of innocence Avery has rarely ever seen in anyone but the First and Second Year victims of his pranks.

He knocks on the doorframe. Kuhn looks up from his work, offers a small, not entirely sincere smile, and puts down his quill. "Come in."

Avery strides through the wards, a teasing smile in place. "What did you do to Snape? I saw him run out of here, looking for all the world as though a Dementor had tried to give him a kiss."
Kuhn stands from his desk. His hands – and mouth – are covered with ink stains, and there is a glint of worry to his eyes that Avery finds extremely interesting. "I don't know what came over him. He said something about the owtery and was gone, just like that."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much," Avery says lazily, letting his gaze inventory the rest of the room. "If he was heading to the owtery, that is. Snape writes to his mother every week. Like clockwork, that one, even though she never writes back." Kuhn looks faintly pained by this news. How easily you are read, Avery thinks with a smirk. Then his eyes fall onto a table covered with strange equipment, and his smirk widens. "I see you let him have his laboratory – rather forbearing of you. If he were still living with me, I'd never have allowed it."

Kuhn shrugs, looking slightly annoyed. "It's not so bad. There's no smell or noise, if that's what you're thinking, and he is a Potions genius. I don't think his cauldrons would ever explode."

"Does he ever show you anything?"

"Only grudgingly. I don't think he considers me all that smart."

Avery laughs. "You and everyone else at this school. Got an ego to fill all of Magical Britain, our Snape."

"You could say that again," Kuhn smirks, but his eyes betray wariness.

For a moment, neither of them says anything. Avery is too busy trying to think of another way to get Kuhn to talk, and Kuhn – who knows what Kuhn is thinking, but he looks uncomfortable at it.

Finally, Avery has an idea. "Say, you didn't happen to understand all that elective affinities nonsense, did you? Because I really have no idea what Slughorn was rambling on about."

An invisible weight seems to lift itself from Kuhn's shoulders, and his face assumes a considerably more friendly expression. In the privacy of his mind, Avery congratulates himself on his strategy.

"Slughorn didn't make any sense to me either," Kuhn says affably. "But I think I might understand him better now. I drew up a diagram, and it's helped to clarify things."

Kuhn doesn't strike Avery as the particularly studious type, but perhaps he is simply compensating for being a foreigner. There is a focused gleam to his enormous green eyes as he turns back to his desk – gracefully, almost like a Seeker pivoting on his broom – and picks up a sheet of parchment with what looks like formulae scrawled across it.

"Show me?" Avery asks, stretching his lips to hide a predatory smile.

"Sure." Kuhn sits, drawing the parchment close, and Avery sets himself up right behind him. This close, Kuhn smells exotic – of strange, abrasive scents that must either be Muggle or German in origin. It's intoxicating. "So here we have compound AB. On its own, A is attracted to B, but even more attracted to something else, let's call it C. Now, let's say that someone added C to a cauldron full of AB. The following reaction would take place: $AB + C \rightarrow AC + B$. That's the elective affinity, that A chooses C."

Avery's mouth inches in closer to Kuhn's tender white ear.

"I've been reading through the literature, and they make it clear that these kinds of reactions don't always work, even if A is more attracted to C than B. Lots of factors play in – temperature, elasticity, saturation . . . Furthermore, A doesn't always completely separate itself from B." Kuhn pauses, apparently embarrassed. "You'll probably laugh, but I've been comparing it all to, er, relationships."
AB is kind of like a married couple. When one partner, A, falls in love with someone else – C – the couple separates. A still has legal ties to B, though, so some connection still remains."

"I like your comparison," says Avery, so close to Kuhn that he could taste him, if he wanted.

"Really? Thanks. I –"

A sound of hasty footsteps and jagged breath cuts Kuhn off, and he whips his head to stare at the doorway. Avery, Quidditch instincts serving him well, backs off before Kuhn can notice how close they were. It's a near thing – only a split second later, Snape rushes through the door, face pink with exertion and a kind of half-panicked look to his eyes.

"All right there, Snape?" Avery asks, but privately he could curse Snape for returning earlier than he was supposed to. And what could have gotten his knickers in such a twist? Probably Potter and Black, Avery thinks scornfully, and cannot hold back a sneer.

"What happened?" Kuhn exclaims, jumping up from his desk.

"No—nothing," Snape pants, eyes darting suspiciously between Avery and Kuhn. An unpleasant thought seems to occur to him, however, for he makes a pained face and looks away. Still gasping for breath, Snape beelines directly towards his bed. Avery suspects that he will collapse onto it fully clothed.

Disgusting half-blood. If he weren't so useful . . .

"Something obviously happened," Kuhn says, thin face gone white with – what is that? Concern? How touching.

"McGonagall nearly catch you out after curfew?" Avery says, barely holding back a taunt. "Or could it have been – the Head Girl?"

Every Slytherin Seventh Year knows of Snape's infatuation with the Mudblood. Sure, he broke off the friendship at the end of Fifth Year, but Avery has lived with Snape long enough to know she is still a sore subject for him.

Snape perches himself on the edge of his bed, arms crossed against his heaving chest. He glares up at Avery, whole chunks of oily hair swinging into his face. "Shut up, Avery."

"Touchy, are we?"

Snape merely narrows his eyes and continues to pant. As his breathing slows, however, his black eyes begin wandering once more between Avery and Kuhn. If Avery weren't so confident that Snape could not have possibly seen him at Kuhn's ear, he might have entertained a moment of worry. Snape does tend to put two and two together very quickly. But, Avery reassures himself, even if Snape does suspect something, he would never dare pry into a pureblood's business. Snape knows well enough that any interference would instantly cost him his neck.

Puffing up with the knowledge of his power over these two half-bloods, Avery can almost smile at the baleful glare Snape sends him, at his mistrustful tone of voice. "What are you doing here, Avery?"

"Kuhn was helping me with my Potions essay," Avery says smoothly. "Seeing as you weren't here to do so yourself. If I'm no longer welcome, however . . ."
You're not," Snape snarls.

Snape is clearly on the verge of losing control. Either that, or he is not as submissive as Avery thought. Still, considering that Potter and Black, or worse – the Mudblood – probably worked him up into this state, Avery is willing to let things slide. When he does let himself be driven by his emotions, Snape tends to become half-wild; it's one reason why Potter and Black find him such excellent sport. To his credit, Snape usually recovers his aplomb quickly. The next time Avery sees him, he is certain that Snape will be back in line. And when Snape is back in line, he is so controlled that no-one can read his emotions, not even a Legilmens like Lestrange.

Kuhn, however, does not know Snape's mood-shifts as well as Avery. He looks at his roommate with a cross of fury and concern. "This is my room as well, Snape. Or had you forgotten that I also have a say in who's welcome here or not?"

"It's alright, Kuhn," Avery says in his most conciliatory tone. "Why don't we just continue tomorrow at breakfast? I find your insights most enlightening – possibly even more so than Snape's here, and he is, as you say, a Potions genius."

He shoots Snape a nasty look, and is amused when Snape stares back with genuine hatred.

Kuhn's brow is furrowed, but he offers Avery a smile. How he can be in Slytherin and so naïve, Avery cannot begin to guess.

The question is useless anyway, as Avery plans to have ravished that innocence before long. There is a hungry smile on his face as he turns to leave the room.

Snape points his wand at Avery's bulky retreating figure and spells the door to slam behind him. Childishly satisfied by the sound, he kicks off his shoes, lifts his aching, trembling body onto the bed, and yanks the bedcurtains shut with his last bit of strength.

Kuhn is not deterred. He talks through the curtains as if they didn't exist. "Look, Snape, I can see you're not in the best of moods –"

The sound of Kuhn's voice sends a wave of disgust rushing through Snape. Avery had been regarding Kuhn like a piece of property, like some kind of lust slave, and Kuhn – face flushed, lips wet and wide – seemed to have actually enjoyed the attention. Not that Snape cares, only that it's all a painful reminder of what might end up happening between Snape and Regulus, and –

(don't.)

Snape barks out a Silencing Charm and instinctively curls up into himself on the bed, screwing his eyes shut. The sudden silence helps him occlude; within seconds, he finds himself relaxing into the covers, thinking of pleasanter things: his nearly-complete battery, missing only the final layers of silver and zinc; Lily Evans' glistening red hair; the modified Wit-Sharpening potion he invented last night in a dream and will brew the moment he deciphers the wobbly notes he'd scratched down, half-conscious, in a margin of Advanced Potion-Making . . .

Suddenly the curtains surrounding his bed spring aside, revealing an angry-looking Kuhn. Before Snape can react, Kuhn aggressively slashes his wand, cancelling the Silencing Charm.

"Fuck you," Snape says without lifting his head, unaware how hoarse his own voice sounds. He is aware of the fact that he's slipped into using a Muggle swearword, but on further thought this doesn't bother him overly much. Perhaps he should use Muggle words more often. If it could remind Regulus Black that he's an untouchable, dirty half-blood, Snape would even be willing to dredge up
the remains of his Manchester accent. Something tells Snape, however, that it will take much more than his unfortunate heritage to put a stop to Black now.

"What's wrong with you?" Kuhn demands. Two bright spots of colour inflame his thin cheeks. "Why did you leave all of a sudden, and why did you come back half-deranged?"

"Shut up and go away," Snape hisses, suddenly feeling stupid lying down with Kuhn hovering over him. He sits up, hiding the effort it takes him, and brushes past his affronted roommate. There is a vial of Pepper-Up waiting on his desk that he snatches up and quaffs down.

"Answer my questions."

"No," Snape sneers, leaning against his desk with what he hopes appears to be a casual manner. In truth, he is embarrassed that a little run from the owlery to the dungeons should so exhaust him. His heart is still practically jumping in his chest, and the muscles in his hands and legs haven't stopped twitching. "Perhaps you have not yet noticed, Kuhn, but we are in Slytherin. One does not accost other people for private information, especially when that information has no direct bearing on oneself."

"I beg to differ," Kuhn snaps. "As my roommate, your behaviour affects me directly. For example, you just ordered Avery out of our room without asking me for my opinion first."

For the second time in the past few minutes, Snape is assaulted by a wave of disgust. "I don't care about what you and your boyfriend do elsewhere, Kuhn, but fucking leave me out of it."

"My what?" Kuhn splutters.

"Snape sneers, his respect for Kuhn quickly evaporating. "Come, Kuhn, you can't honestly be as innocent as you try to seem. Avery was leering over you when I came in, and you were enjoying it!"

"You're lying," Kuhn whispers, face turning an unpleasant shade of red.

"I don't see why you're acting so surprised," Snape says coldly. "It's not as though I would ever tell. That being said, don't ever do something like that in front of me again. It's disgusting."

"How I can I not do it again when I wasn't even doing anything of the kind!" Kuhn shrieks.

Snape smirks, enjoying the rush of adrenaline that comes from a combination of Pepper-Up Potion and having the upper-hand, and points a knobbly, pale finger at Kuhn. "You're a terrible liar."

"You're the liar, and a bastard too," Kuhn hisses, fists clenched at his sides. "We weren't doing anything – I was helping him with his essay, for God's sake –"

"Of course you were," Snape says silkily. "That is undoubtedly why he considered it necessary to position his disproportionately large tongue right next to your ear."

There is a nasty silence.

"Are you serious?" Kuhn asks. His voice cracks on the word serious.

Snape is about to make a sarcastic retort when he notices that Kuhn's already large eyes have gone wide. There is shocked understanding in the green depths, possibly even fear. And that is when Snape feels his potion-enhanced adrenaline streak take an unpleasant dive. All at once, he is less sure of what he thinks he had seen.
"Did you really not notice?" he asks quietly.

"You're serious," Kuhn breathes, face gone white, and sags into his desk chair. "Shit. Shit," he repeats, covering his bloodless face with his hands. Snape swallows, suddenly regretting that he had ever spoken. "I should have realised – he didn't care about the essay at all – Merlin's balls, what am I supposed to do?"

Snape shifts uncomfortably. He had been so sure that Kuhn had known . . . not that this is the first time he was certain of something only to find himself barking up the wrong tree, but it still smarts to be wrong. He had certainly not intended to do Kuhn any favours. Now Kuhn will start avoiding Avery, and Avery will immediately suspect Snape's influence – oh, he will be livid . . . that is, unless . . .

Heat flares in Snape's face at the question he is about to ask. "I suppose this means you do not return Avery's, ah, affections?"

"NO! I mean – God. I'm not interested in Avery. At all." Kuhn peels fingers away from his face and looks nervously at Snape. "Though . . . I suppose you should know that I'm actually gay."

Snape blanches. How is he supposed to react to such an unexpected and radical confession? His stomach hurts from the potion, his body aches from excess adrenaline and he has never had a conversation about sexual orientation with anyone before. In fact, Snape has never really given much thought to sexual orientation at all. This largely has to do with the fact that he is only interested in one particular girl (who currently hates him). The idea of sleeping with anyone else has occurred to him, of course, but he has always rejected it as a mere theoretical possibility. As for entering a relationship with another man – Snape has simply no concept of what that could mean. From the way such relationships are spoken of in wizarding society, however, he suspects that it would be a degrading experience, at least socially.

Should he change his opinion of Kuhn now, simply because of this fact? Does it override the other facts about Kuhn – that he is surprisingly intelligent when he wants to be, for example? Snape can't see how. In fact, the only situation he can think of where Kuhn's new personality would pose a real problem is one where Kuhn is secretly in love with him – which Snape highly doubts that he is. He looks at Kuhn more closely, wondering if homosexuality leaves some kind of physical mark, but only finds himself being drawn into those green eyes. Eyes that remind him of young leaves fluttering in summer sun, outlined with heavenly blue, pervaded by rays of gold. . . eyes both impossible and familiar. Are those eyes – watching him anxiously now, awaiting verdict – any less because Kuhn is gay?

The answer is unexpectedly easy: No.

Snape lowers his eyes, feeling strangely ashamed for his thoughts. "I couldn't care less, Kuhn."

Kuhn laughs, amazingly enough, and Snape's head jerks up at the clear, ringing sound. It occurs to him that Kuhn is not mocking him, merely expressing the release of bottled-up emotion.

"Right," Kuhn says, sounding incredibly relieved. Did he really think Snape would shun him because of his sexual preference? Of course, Snape himself had not been sure what his own reaction would be, but did Kuhn privately consider him a bigot? The thought is somewhat disturbing.

". . . and I certainly don't want anything like that with Avery," Kuhn is saying, gesturing wildly with small, fragile hands. "So what do you think I should do?"

Snape grows thoughtful. He picks himself up from his desk and begins pacing the room. He – they
need a strategy.

"What should you do? If I knew the answer to that question, of course, I would no longer find myself in a similar predicament."

Kuhn straightens in his chair. "Regulus," he says, as if coming to a realisation, and the green eyes fix themselves unblinkingly on Snape. "Have you heard from him since the party?"

Snape sneers, feeling self-conscious and apprehensive about discussing his own personal life. "I hope I can trust your discretion on this, Kuhn."

"Cross my heart, hope to die," Kuhn sing-songs, making some kind of slashing gesture across his chest that means nothing to Snape. No, Snape has never met a single trustworthy person in his life. Those he did end up trusting always betrayed him in the end – his parents, Lily, Dumbledore . . .

Kuhn, however, is neither Snape's elder nor better; he is neither rich nor surrounded by loving family nor a Gryffindor. No, Kuhn is in the same laughable situation as Snape. He is at Hogwarts on scholarship, he is in Slytherin and he stands at risk of being molested. There is certainly reason to believe he will not betray Snape's trust on this one matter, particularly since the problematic issue of his own homosexuality is at stake.

". . . stick a needle in my eye . . ."

"You can stop reciting that ridiculous litany, I believe you," Snape snaps. He pinches the bridge of his nose, deciding to extend his trust, just this once. "Regulus – he followed me to the owlery."

Kuhn's eyes flash as he sits up ramrod-straight. "So that's why you were so upset. You were running away from Regulus!"

Snape winces. "Keep your voice down."

"No-one can hear us over the wards," Kuhn scowls, but lowers his voice nonetheless. There is, however, an unreadable gleam to his eyes. "I suppose he tried to . . . kiss you?"

"He did nothing of the kind," Snape hisses, reflexively touching his wrist. The thought of Regulus kissing him . . . He shakes his head imperiously, banishing the unwelcome image. "The particulars of our meeting are inconsequential. What we need now is a plan."

"We?"

Snape stops pacing and whirls to face Kuhn. "Would you prefer to deal with Avery on your own?"

Kuhn flushes. "Well, no. I just thought – you never want to work with anyone –"

"Our current situation as roommates offers us a strategical advantage. Surely you are aware of this?" As the question is rhetorical, Snape resumes pacing and speaking. "We are should be able to accompany each other at all times: At meals, in classes, in the library –"

"That's never going to work," Kuhn interrupts. "I have to meet Evans every week, remember? I'm also not taking Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and unlike you, I need breakfast."

Snape waves a dismissive hand. "I never said we had to sit together, just remain in close sight in case Black or Avery should appear. If you wish, I shall accompany you to breakfast. Just don't expect me to speak to you or eat anything."
"You would come to breakfast?"

It's a big sacrifice, especially as Regulus will be looking for him there, but Snape is willing to do it if it means Kuhn will accompany him to the owlery in future. "That is what I just said, is it not?"

"Well . . . OK," Kuhn says, sounding as though he thinks Snape is the most unpredictable, strange person he has ever meet.

"That should do it for the start," says Snape, rubbing his long, thin hands together. "At some point, of course, they will catch onto the act –"

"At which point we should just tell them we aren't interested," Kuhn interrupts.

"What a terrible idea," Snape sneers. "Really, Kuhn, it's a wonder that you convinced the Hat to put you in Slytherin. You can't possibly think that someone as rich and spoilt as Black, that someone as vengeful and calculating as Avery would simply let us go with a civil conversation." Snape pauses, letting the implications of his words sink in, and steeple his hands before his lips. "Furthermore, you would do well not to forget that neither you nor I are purebloods. Not even Lestrange would step in on our behalf should either Black or Avery attempt revenge."

Kuhn crosses his arms over his chest and purses his lips, causing his thin cheeks to hollow. "I still don't see how your plan is any better."

"First and foremost, the impact of this plan upon our day-to-day lives would be minimal. We already have already been spending an inordinate amount of time together as it is; what are a few minutes more? For the sake of the common good, I am willing to live with the minor inconvenience of your constant presence." Snape increases the speed of his pacing, a finger tapping at his lips. "Naturally, we will have to come up with something else should Black or Avery decide to grow more creative. I can think of a few effective curses for a start –"

"You can't just go around cursing them!"

"Given that they will probably do the same to us once our positions are made clear, I hardly see where the problem lies." Snape pauses, lips curling into a lazy smirk. "Of course, we mustn't allow ourselves to get caught."

"This is mental," Kuhn mutters. "I can't believe you're helping me plan on breaking the school rules."

"We haven't broken any yet," Snape reminds him, "and any we do end up breaking would be in self-defence."

"Let's keep on thinking of alternative plans," says Kuhn hastily.

"And until there is a suitable alternative, let's go with mine."

Kuhn sighs, but can't seem to think of a counterargument. "Agreed."

"How good are you in a duel?"

Kuhn snorts. "Almost all of the magic I know is only good in a duel. I don't know that many curses, though. Disarming and Stunning is kind of the extent of my repertoire," Green eyes fix on Snape with sudden worry. "You're not planning on slicing them up, are you?"

Kuhn can't possibly know of *Sectumsempra*, so Snape assumes he is speaking figuratively. "Of
course not. If anyone is to be expelled, it won't be us. No, there are plenty of curses we can use that do not inflict permanent damage. If necessary, I will show some of them to you." Snape frowns, pacing away from Kuhn and then turning on his heel with force, causing his robes to flare dramatically behind him. "Write down a list of all the useful curses you know. That will give me a baseline to start with."

"I can just tell you. Expelliarmus, Stupefy, Expecto Patronum—"

"I don't have time for this," Snape snaps, even as he wonders what in Merlin's name Kuhn would need the Patronus Charm for. "Just . . . write it all down, and we'll go from there."

Kuhn gives him a sly look. "I suppose I should expect you to list all of your curses as well. You know, since we're in this together and all."

A snarl is all the answer he gets.

"Right," Kuhn says, wide-eyed. "I'll just . . . get to it then, shall I?"

"You do that," Snape sneers.

Snape paces the length of the room one last time before mentally labelling the conversation as over. Kuhn is now bent over his desk and scribbling, green eyes clouded with thought, the thick white plume of his quill absently brushing past his ear.

It's a start. Not the long-awaited answer to all of Snape's problems, but a start.

There is a faint, prickling sense of relief in his chest as he finally advances towards the only thing that really matters to him these days – his glistening, beautiful battery.

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**Journal of Experiments**

*Property of the Half-Blood Prince*

[...]

**September 7, 1976**

10:04 pm – The battery is finally ready. It gives off great sparks when I close the circuit, as if itself eager for the experimenting to begin.

10:06 pm – I dip my hand in water, then attach the right index finger to the silver pole and the left index finger to the zinc pole of the battery. Both fingers receive a smarting jolt – of differing quality! The right finger feels as though a fine knife had severed the muscle in sharp straight lines from within. (Compare to *Sectumsempra.* ) The longer the finger is attached to the battery, the more I have the sense that parts of the flesh have been removed, until I can no longer even feel the finger anymore; it is as though it had disappeared. Conversely, the left finger swells and seems almost to want to burst out of its form. The flesh strives outward, much like a plant unfurling itself to the sun.

**Contraction and expansion** – the fundamental rhythm of the universe. This is what *Crucio* invokes in the body: The primal call of matter to expand beyond itself, to contract within itself in great ebbs and tides. *Crucio* overrides the laws that would suppress and control that rhythm in the living organism, transforming it from a carefully co-ordinated system into an anarchy of conflicting desires.

10:45 pm – The longer I am attached to the battery, the less I feel either sensation. To compensate for this, I set up a recursive spell to detach the cables from my fingers at five-second intervals and
then immediately re-attach them. This method allows me to adequately simulate *Crucio*'s continuous effects.

10:52 pm – I see no further reason to test the common parts of the body – i.e. hands, elbows, feet, shoulders – but move on to the sensitive organs – eyes, nose, tongue – and erogenous zones, as these are the areas *Crucio* particularly affects.

– Attach the tongue to the zinc pole of the battery and receive a blow directed from inside the tongue to the roof of the mouth. The tongue rises on the spot, almost as if forming a boil or welt. When attached to the silver pole, however, the point of contact sinks, as if the tongue were collapsing into itself. Feels like a hole burned in tongue, but when I examine the spot with my fingers, nothing is there.

11:23 pm – Similar contracting and expanding effects on the nose. Sensation difficult to describe. Silver pole: stinging, stabbing, severing sensation. Zinc pole: extreme pressure in nostrils, as though nose would burst outward.

11:39 pm – Am forced to cease experimenting due to tremors, pain in hands and face. Test Blalock's Pain-Killing potion in this regard, but although it reduces the sensation of discomfort, it does nothing for the tremors. This is clearly where my research will come in.

11:55 pm – One last test for the evening.

Zinc pole: Almost unbearable compulsion of eye to spring out of my head. I see an indigo blue. Silver pole: Painful retreat of eye into skull; the pain stings and cuts; everything wants to dissolve into a most beautiful intense red.

That night, Snape dreams of his childhood. He's huddled up on the splintery floor of his room, half-paralyzed by open welts in his back and biting his tongue out in order not to scream. His mother, he knows, is merely waiting for the right opportunity to sneak into his room and heal him. He can almost smell the antiseptic healing salves over the metallic rank of the blood dribbling down his back. He can almost feel the healing magic gently knitting back the skin until there are barely any scars. He can almost hear his mother's breathing, the sing-song of her spell, almost hear her say his name.

This time, though, she doesn't come.

Chapter End Notes

Severus' self-experiments are informed by the experiments of a young physicist and chemist named Johann Wilhelm Ritter, who ultimately died of the deleterious effects of electrifying himself, but also made some spectacular discoveries along the way: electrochemistry, ultraviolet light, the accumulator, etc. If you're interested in my specific source texts, let me know.
The Green Lion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six: The Green Lion

*Tempus*, whispers Lily for the seventh time.

3:59 pm. She'd told Kuhn to meet her at four. He isn't late, she reminds herself, even if she's been waiting here nearly fifteen minutes, leaning against a wall adjoining the library busily reminding herself of all the better things she has to do. She drums her fingers nervously against the stones, trying not to return to that avenue of thought . . . except that she can't help but think about it. The Seventh Year curriculum is loads more challenging than she'd anticipated. Challenging is the wrong word. It's not that her classes are more difficult than usual or that she is having trouble understanding the material. Heaven forbid. No, Lily's problem is that she simply doesn't have enough time. With her Head Girl's responsibilities and eight classes, Lily is struggling to find the time to complete her essays, let alone to play her violin or write to her family. If she had to share a room with the other (extremely chatty) Gryffindor girls, she would probably be even further behind . . . thank Merlin for Head Girl's privileges . . .

Her essay for McGonagall is done at least, she reminds herself, holding back a nervous tremor. She's been putting off Slughorn's essay, though, despite the fact that she could probably write a treatise on elective affinities in her sleep. The thought makes her stomach lurch with unease. Could she really write the essay in her sleep? Well probably, only that she wants to do more than just write an essay. Her essay has to stand out – she has to at least invent a few examples of her own – not that she wants the top grade so much as she knows that Slughorn will give it to her no matter what she writes. And that isn't fair. Even if Slughorn doesn't think so, Lily knows she isn't the best in her class at Potions. No, loath as she is to think it, that honour undoubtedly falls to Snape . . . most of her tricks she learned from him . . . Not that Snape has ever complained or even given the slightest indication that Slughorn's preferential treatment of Lily bothers him. But it bothers Lily. It really bothers her. If she's going to receive better grades than Snape, then her pride dictates that she actually has to deserve them . . . and usually she thinks she does, but this year – this year, she has yet to invent examples for her first essay, and there's sweet, adorable James taking up so much of her time with clever jokes and . . .

What else is due? Right, there's that three-and-a-half foot essay for Ancient Runes she's been working on all week but can't seem to finish, and her endless Arithmancy readings, and – damn – that Herbology report for Sprout . . . Lily fidgets, her face twisting with impatience and irritation. Why did she insist on meeting with Kuhn again? Twice a week, no less? She must have been mad, there simply is no other explanation.

She huffs with frustration, wondering where Kuhn could possibly be, when a flash of green and black catches her eye. It's Kuhn all right, only that – her chest constricts – he's brought Snape along. They have been inseparable all day, sitting together for every meal and in every single one of their classes, so she should really not be surprised that Snape is with Kuhn now. Nonetheless, seeing him makes her feel even more nervous and upset.

Snape reacts badly to her presence as well, immediately becoming twitchy and defensive – his head jerks and his dark, beady eyes fall to the ground. Curtains of black hair sway before his face, hiding his expression. Kuhn, on the other hand, doesn't seem to notice Lily at all. He clutches several books in small, thin hands, green eyes slowly wandering the corridors as if watching a butterfly make its
Lily feels a stab of anger. Does Kuhn have no idea how long she's been waiting? Well of course not, but still – does he have to dally like a child?

"Kuhn," she says, pushing back from the wall and assuming a cold stance. Kuhn's eyes flash with something like alarm; he goes rigid and stares in her direction. Lily realises the exact moment he recognises her, and watches with slight fascination as his pupils contract and the unsettlingly familiar green irises grow calm.

"Kuhn," she repeats icily. "What's he doing here?"

Kuhn stares at her as if has no idea what she could mean, although his mouth dips into a small frown. Snape, for his part, scowls at the floor. He's holding a battered and familiar copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* at the crook of his arm, and his long, ink-stained hands – reaching like pale branches out of robes much too short for him – convulse disturbingly. Snape's hands have always had a tremor, but the way they are *spasming* now is just extreme.

Serves him right, she thinks viciously. With all likelihood, he's been experimenting with Dark Magic and these are the side effects. Lily wrinkles her nose with disgust as his hands spasm again and pointedly looks at Kuhn. "I asked you a question."

"I heard you, Evans," Kuhn says, working around something in his jaw. "Are we still planning on working in the library or do you prefer standing around in the hall?"

"I refuse to work with Snape around."

"*Severus* is here to meet someone else ..."

"Who would want to meet up with *him*?" Lily spits before she can stop herself. She notices how Snape's face goes completely white but does not feel regret. Serves you right, she thinks again.

"I would," says Kuhn calmly, but there is an angry glitter in his eyes. "Have a problem with that?"

Lily is too high-strung to feel remorse. Snape deserves what he gets. Once, Lily might have entertained thoughts of saving him, but no longer.

Still, nags a small voice in her mind, Kuhn may not be as far gone as Snape. There may be hope for him. And even if there isn't, even if he *is* planning on something dark for their project, it's probably best not to antagonize him yet. No, if she wants to discover his plans and nip them in the bud, she should treat him cordially, encouraging him to reveal his secrets . . .

Lily closes her eyes, wishing she were anywhere but here. "Forget it," she tells Kuhn. "Let's just get this over with."

At that moment, footsteps sound – Lily opens her eyes in time to see Chandra Goodhart step around the corner, ash-blonde hair fluttering lightly behind her back. Her attire is unsurprisingly atrocious: Aside from her Ravenclaw robes, Goodhart wears pink Wellington boots, bright purple and green parrot earrings and a chintzy necklace depicting a triangle halved by a line and filled by a circle. The necklace is on an extremely long chain and makes jangling noises as she moves. The parrots, for their part, have been charmed to flap their wings and snap their beaks.

"Hello, *Severus,"* Goodhart says dreamily, oblivious to the tension emitting from Snape, Lily and Kuhn.
"Chandra," Snape says with a nod, his shoulders relaxing slightly. Lily has always found Snape's round shoulders at odds with his otherwise angular, bony frame; today, however, she is too busy thinking about Snape's words to notice his strange anatomy. Since when is he on first-name basis with Goodhart? True, they're partners in Defence, but Lily's not about to start calling Kuhn Adrian...

"Hello, Chandra," says Kuhn loudly. Lily thinks he still looks angry, even though he is attempting to smile at Goodhart. Lily will simply have to appease him in the library.

Goodhart cocks her head and inspects Kuhn as though he were a highly unusual specimen, which Lily finds ironic. With her bulging eyes and clashing clothes, Goodhart is a species all to herself.

"Hello. Have we been introduced?"

Lily watches with growing irritation as Kuhn sticks out his hand and says his name. He pronounces it differently than McGonagall had at the Sorting – 'Ah-dri-ahn' rather than 'A-dri-an,' and 'Kuhn' with a very short 'u'. Goodhart smiles mistily and takes Kuhn's small hand into her long, limp fingers.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Adrian."

It seems that Goodhart simply calls everyone by his or her first names. Lily usually does so as well, but with Slytherins? What's the point?

"The pleasure is all mine." Kuhn sounds surprisingly sincere. Perhaps Germans are used to eccentric tastes in fashion? "Severus told me a little about your research; it sounds fascinating."

Lily lets out an impatient sigh.

"Hello, Lily," says Goodhart in her airy, distant voice, making Lily feel slightly guilty. She nods reluctantly, not really knowing why she doesn't like Goodhart...no, that isn't true. Lily would like Goodhart well enough were she not partnered with Snape. Not that Goodhart had any choice in the matter, but then again, she doesn't seem to mind. At all. In fact, Goodhart seems to almost like Snape, and that's just...

Lily would prefer not to think about it.

Fortunately, Goodhart does not seem to notice Lily's passive-aggressive response. She smiles brilliantly before turning to Snape. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

His lips tighten, but he shakes his head. A lank, oily strand of hair falls across his catastrophically large nose; he doesn't react.

"Meet up here afterward?" Kuhn asks him, and Snape neither scowls nor smirks nor frowns at the suggestion. He merely murmurs something back, dark eyes steadily fixed on the floor. It occurs to Lily that this is exceedingly strange behaviour for Snape – he never associates willingly with his peers and is almost always thinking up ways to either insult them or escape their company. With Kuhn, however, he almost seems to have struck up some sort of truce, perhaps even a kind of camaraderie. Not that tolerating the presence of another person for more than a few seconds would normally qualify as camaraderie, but in Snape's case...

They're up to something, Lily decides.

"See you later, Chandra," Kuhn is saying, and the next thing Lily knows he's roughly brushing past her into the library. With a toss of her hair that signals just how little she thinks of this whole situation, she follows him in.
They find an empty table in the Potions section. Lily has just begun packing out her things when she
notices that Snape and Goodhart have also taken a table in the vicinity – not near enough that she
would be able to hear them, but close enough to remain a constant eyesore.

"Let's switch sides," she tells Kuhn, who glares at her but complies.

They have barely sat down again – Lily now faces a stained-glass window portraying Faust making
a pact with Mephistopheles – when Kuhn leans forward and hisses, "Listen, Evans. You got to name
terms when we began this project, and now I'm going to name mine. You are not to insult Snape in
my presence. Got it?"

Lily takes out her inkwell and scoffs, all attempts to conciliate Kuhn forgotten in her displeasure at
hearing Snape mentioned again. Clearly, they're plotting something together. "Why do you care?
You've been at this school for what – a few days? How do you know I'm not right to dislike him?"

"Oh, I'm sure you have your reasons," says Kuhn, eyes glinting, "but seeing as he's the only friend
I've got right now, I'd prefer it if you kept your mouth shut."

Lily's anger spikes. "So that's why you've practically been glued to each other's side," she hisses.
"Because you're friends."

Perhaps Lily only fancies it, but for a moment, Kuhn looks stricken. A second later, however, his
face is carefully blank. "That's different," he insists. Then he seems to realise he's said too much, for
his expression grows dark. "And none of your business."

Lily has no idea what Kuhn is going on about, only that he is going about it all wrong. "Let me offer
you a piece of advice, Kuhn. Snape doesn't do 'friends'. He tolerates people while they're useful to
him and tosses them aside once their purpose has been served. You'd do best to remember that before
he stabs you in the back."

"You're wrong about him, Evans."

"No, Kuhn, I'm afraid you're the one who's wrong."

Kuhn stares up at her, expression unreadable. Lily stares back, but ends up averting her gaze first.
His face unsettles her. It's almost like discovering a letter from a friend written in a language she
doesn't know. The form of the penstrokes, the choice of paper – everything is intimately familiar,
only she can't read the contents.

"Well, well," Kuhn says softly. "A Gryffindor trying to give a Slytherin advice. Why would that
be?"

"Look," Lily hisses, too angry to hold back her suspicions, "I know you and Snape are conspiring
something. The moment I find out what it is, it will be my personal pleasure to see you both
expelled."

"There is no conspiracy," Kuhn hisses back. "Unless you count the simple fact of our attempting to
stay alive."

Lily rears in her expression to convey dispassion, not ready to admit just how much Kuhn's words
unsettle her. She had heard something similar from Snape in their Fourth Year – It's a hard business,
staying alive in Slytherin. Lily hadn't taken Snape seriously then, but hearing nearly the same words
from Kuhn makes her wonder. Randomly, she is suddenly reminded of something James told her
recently – that Kuhn's mother was a Muggleborn. Perhaps . . . perhaps she was wrong to accuse him
of plotting something . . .
"I'll grant you that Slytherin is difficult," she says slowly, only to harden her expression at an unpleasant thought. "But if you're looking for protection against pure-blood prejudice, you've got the wrong man. In Snape's eyes, people like you and me are nothing but Mudbloods."

"I think he deeply regrets ever saying that to you," says Kuhn quietly.

Lily freezes. He wouldn't have.

"Snape told you about that?"

Kuhn's eyes are hooded, his expression evasive. "In a manner of speaking."

"What else did he say?"

"Nothing," Kuhn insists, but the high spots of colour on his cheeks tell a different story. Lily bores her eyes into him until he relents. "Look, I can't pretend to understand what happened. But I think, if given the choice again, he would have chosen you."

Lily slams a hand onto the table, not caring if Madam Pince hears and decides to throw them out of the library, not caring about the painful sting. "That's a complete load of bollocks. He never had me to choose." She can feel her face twisting like her heart; she's so angry that tears prickle at her eyes. "And if he thinks that's all it was ever about, then he's even worse than I thought. It was never just about me and never will be and –"

"Bloody hell, Evans, keep your voice down," Kuhn hisses, glancing furtively around the library.

"It's your fault," she says, blinking back the tears in her eyes. "You just had to bring that up."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, well, you'd better be."

Kuhn looks down at the table and bites his lip. "I am sorry and I won't mention any of it again. Now will you accept my terms or not?"

Lily has to think back to recall what those terms were. Why does everything involving Kuhn always seem to involve Snape? But if she promises not to speak of Snape, perhaps Kuhn will also have less reason to mention him as well. That would be good.

She nods, fighting back a nervous tremor. "As long as you don't try anything Dark, I won't speak of. . . him."

"I suppose that'll have to do," says Kuhn, sitting back with a faintly resigned expression.

Lily has to admire his nerve. Kuhn clearly wants her to promise not to speak badly of Snape ever again, but the only way Lily will ever manage that is not to speak of him at all. Surely Kuhn must understand her position by now. And God, why are they still talking about Snape? "Are we intending on actually doing some research any time soon?"

Kuhn's eyes flash at her tone, but he reaches over to the books he'd brought with him. "We can start right now, Evans. You may remember me telling you that the specific potion I'd mentioned isn't covered in any books that I know. Well, although I can't find the exact potion, I did manage to look up some similar ones: the Draught of Despair and the Elixir of Minnemosyne."

"Mnemosyne," she corrects absently. Lily doesn't know anything about the Draught of Despair, but
she is aware that the active ingredient in Elixir of Mnemosyne – usually used to restore suppressed, traumatic memories – is dragon blood. Dragon blood is highly reactive, exploding on contact with most ingredients. Whatever potion Kuhn has in mind is bound to be dangerous to brew.

She furrows her brow. "Describe the potion's exact effects."

"It's . . ." Kuhn sighs and runs a hand over his slick black hair. It seems to be an automatic gesture he makes when thinking. "It's awful, that's what it is. When you drink it, you don't just feel despair – you start relieving the worst moments of your life. The illusion doesn't break until you've finished drinking the entire potion. And you have to drink it all, because you can't get rid of it otherwise. Oh, you can try to vanish or transfigure it, you can try to scoop it up or pour it away, but nothing works. You have to drink it. But the more you drink, the more you want to stop. You have to be forced to drink it all. And by the time you've finished, you're so dehydrated and weak that you can barely move and are screaming for water." Kuhn pauses for a moment, apparently lost in recollection, then frowns. "I can't remember what else . . . oh, right, it's got a kind of creepy phosphorescent green colour. Any idea what ingredients might cause that?"

Lily says nothing for a moment, too disturbed by Kuhn's description of the potion to think about its material requirements. "Why do you want to make this again?"

"I want to create an antidote, not the potion itself."

"Nice try. You know very well that we won't be able to create an antidote unless we can recreate the potion first."

Kuhn shrugs and pulls a book out of the pile stacked beside him. Lily doesn't catch the title, but she feels her breath catch as Kuhn opens it to a bookmarked page showing a man in considerable mental agony, his hands clutched to his head and his mouth opening and closing in a silent scream. *The Draught of Despair*, reads a caption below the man.

"It doesn't look too hard," says Lily, keeping her eyes strictly focused on the brewing instructions and away from the despairing man. "Then again, you're wrong if you think we could just combine this with Spirit of Mnemosyne to make whatever it is that you just described. The spirit of hartshorn required by the Draught is incompatible with the dragon blood in the Elixir."

Kuhn nods, unable to keep the disappointment from showing on his face. "I didn't think it would be that easy," he says.

"Of course," Lily says, thinking aloud now, "there are always intermediaries – for fire and water, a mediator of earth – perhaps a bit of pearl ash, or maybe tartar –" Lily squints as she thinks, wishing she had more time of her own for studying, wishing that she knew her Potions as well as she once had, back when Snape had still been her partner . . .

Rather than admit that she's run into a dead end, Lily makes an expectant noise at Kuhn. "Well, what do you think?"

"Er . . . what were you talking about, exactly?"

Lily is genuinely annoyed. Not only does she have to work with a Slytherin, her partner picks a project that is obviously beyond his skill level . . . "Element theory, you dolt. Weren't you paying the least bit of attention in class? Dragon blood and spirit of hartshorn correspond to fire and water, the opposing elements; you need an intermediary, in this case, some element of earth, in order for them to bind. And while I'd need to test it out to be sure, pearl ash just might do the trick. Only . . ." she
purses her lips, trying to visualise the reaction and not quite succeeding, "I don't think the combined effect would make the drinker thirsty. You'd need something else for that – probably element of air to overwhelm the effects of the water . . ."

Kuhn is staring at her with something like awe. "You are good."

Lily ignores him. What good is it to be praised by someone who doesn't even understand what he's praising? "Still, I'd need to consult the affinity charts to see how pearl ash responds to asphodel; it could be that it just binds with the asphodel in the Draught instead of neutralising the spirit of hartshorn and dragon blood." Lily leans over and takes Advanced Potion-Making out of her satchel, then flips it open to the back, where she has pasted an affinity chart for easy reference. "Let's see now . . . pearl ash. Shows affinity to ashwinder eggs . . . and asphodel." She wrinkles her nose in disappointment. "Bugger."

They have spent the good part of an hour searching fruitlessly for an element of earth that will bind spirit of hartshorn and dragon blood without reacting to either when Lily finally gives up. "This is going nowhere. Clearly, I need to refresh my knowledge on the properties of dragon blood." She taps her fingers nervously against her lips. "Dumbledore wrote an entire treatise on dragon blood. I wonder if he says anything about intermediaries . . ."

"What can I do?"

Lily privately thinks that Kuhn has been useless so far, but she also doesn't intend on doing this entire project herself. "Well, maybe you can find something in the German literature. There was a lot of work done on affinities in Germany, after all.

Kuhn grows thoughtful, his lips soft and eyes distant. "Do you think Hogwarts has any books in German?"

"Sure," says Lily, although she has no clue. "Ask Madam Pince, I'm sure she would be happy to help you."

Perhaps her uncertainty is too obvious, for Kuhn doesn't look convinced. "Maybe Severus knows something," he muses.

Lily assumes a ferocious expression. "You're not to involve him in this, do you hear? Otherwise you can completely forget about us working together."

"Blimey, Evans – I wasn't going to ask him to study with us or anything." At her look of rage, Kuhn relents. "I won't say a word."

"Good." Lily nervously snatches up her books and begins stuffing them in her satchel. She can't take another second of Kuhn – Kuhn, who looks so much like someone she ought to know; Kuhn, who somehow involves Snape in everything he does; Kuhn, the half-blood Slytherin she really ought to try to save yet can't bring herself to stand. "We'll meet again as soon as I've made some progress. If you actually find out anything of use, you should let me know, of course."

"I'm not stupid, you know," Kuhn challenges.

"Prove it," she replies, buttoning her satchel closed and readying to stand. Her legs ache – like a gazelle, she wants to bolt and run. "Show me that you're more than an unmotivated, mediocre student and a Slytherin bigot, and I'd be happy to acknowledge your intelligence."

"Is that really what you think of me?"
She stands, staring down into eyes so like hers and for a heartbeat, wondering when it was that she became so cold. Then her head jerks, unable to stand that gaze; her feet begin propelling her away. "Later, Kuhn."

"Evans."

Lily sweeps out of the library, not noticing how Kuhn's expression crumbles as he buries his face into his hands.

Snape surreptitiously watches Lily push back from her table in a ripple of black robes and red hair. In the sunlight – the green and yellow rays seeping through the stained glass window – her hair glows the same red as when the beam of *Lumos* pierces through dark crystals of cuprite, illuminating them from within. And as she turns, face white as flowers of antimony, eyes the dangerous green of fulminating gold, her hair whips around her in an arc that cuts the air as would a blade.

Merlin is she beautiful . . .

Snape averts his gaze as she passes, the slight breeze created by her robes picking up a strand of his hair and flinging it into his face. It is a painless sensation, yet Snape cannot help but think it symbolic for Lily's contempt. She detests him thoroughly now; she would, he supposes, detest him even more were she to know the true depth of his feelings for her.

He accepts this fact as easily as the whip-like strand of hair marring his face. Unconcernedly, he brushes the strand away, catching a glimpse of Kuhn sitting alone as he does so. Pale hands grip a thin, pale face; bars of yellow and green from the window scene above – Faust making a pact, Snape believes – traverse his slick black hair and cast him in a strange, sickly light. Where the light made Lily seem strong, it makes Kuhn ethereal.

Hands slowly fall away from green eyes, subtly changing the composition of the scene. Kuhn is all lightness as he gathers his books and quills, fingers darting across the table to capture an inkwell that threatens to ski off the surface; in the hazy, yellow-green light one might almost mistake him for a sprite. When he stands, there is no grace in his movements, yet he moves with the buoyancy of a creature born to fly.

*Where the bee sucks, there lurk I;*
*In a cowslip's bell I lie;*
*There I couch when owls do cry.*
*On the bat's back I do fly*
*After summer merrily.*

Snape turns away, thinking that no two beings could be less similar than the light-hearted, delicate spirit Ariel from *The Tempest* – where did that thought come from anyway? – and his depressive, scraggly German roommate. Kuhn is the opposite of poesy, of flights of fantasy; he is as poor and possibly even more powerless than Snape. Of course, Ariel was actually a slave –

"Poor Adrian," says a dreamy, airy voice. Caught off-guard, Snape glares over at Goodhart. She wasn't supposed to have noticed his wandering attention.

"Hardly," he drawls. "If we might return to the topic at hand . . ."

"But he is, Severus," Goodhart insists. "Lily doesn't like it that he spends time with you, so she tries to make him dislike you as well, but then he keeps on defending you and making her even madder. And Adrian just isn't that good at Potions, I'm afraid . . ."
Snape ignores the pang he feels at mention of Lily's continued, completely understandable resolve to hate him for all eternity. "It isn't polite to eavesdrop," he says.

"Oh, I wasn't eavesdropping," Goodhart says innocuously. "It was all rather clearly written over their faces."

Snape stares at Goodhart in disbelief before shaking off her words as yet another manifestation of her trademark eccentricity. He decides to pretend that this part of the conversation never took place. "Your suggestion that one combine the wand movements of a Confounding Charm with an incantation to calm the nerves intrigued me. Did you have a specific incantation in mind? Personally, I would suggest –"

"Why hello, Adrian," Goodhart is saying to a person somewhere behind Snape.

– Curatio nervum. Snape grits his teeth as Kuhn slides into the empty chair beside him.

"Hi," says Kuhn glumly.

"I'm glad you came to sit with us," Goodhart says, protuberant eyes going wide. "There was an entire swarm of Dalmatian dust pixies over in the corner where you were sitting; they tend to make one very restless."

Kuhn frowns, but does not call out Goodhart on her obvious delusions. For such an intelligent girl –a Ravenclaw, no less – Snape cannot fathom where she gets her blatant disregard for empiricism – unless it's from Xenophilius Lovegood, that quack journalist and self-proclaimed naturalist who took her to the Yule Ball last year. Yes, that would explain her belief in Dalmatian dust pixies . . .

"They seemed particularly attracted to Lily," Goodhart reflects. "Did you see the reddish mark beneath her chin? That –"

"Stop blathering nonsense," Snape snaps. "Evans wasn't bitten by fantastical pixies; she simply plays a great deal of violin."

"Violin?"

"Yes, Kuhn, violin. A wooden instrument with four strings tuned in perfect fifths, sometimes called a fiddle."

Goodhart turns her misty eyes on Kuhn. The parrots at her ears flap their wings erratically. "There must be a great deal of violins in Germany. They say it's the home of classical music – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms . . ."

Kuhn looks deeply unhappy with this turn of conversation. "Sorry to disappoint, but I don't know anything about classical music."

"Oh?"

"How could I?" Kuhn sounds bitter. "I was raised by a bunch of philistines whose idea of cultural finesse was to sit around the telly all day."

Snape feels his eyebrows rise. It seems that Kuhn can always be counted on to randomly reveal important facts about his life in the most banal of conversations. If Snape didn't know Kuhn, he would think that it amused him to watch people slowly gather and arrange the puzzle pieces of his life into a comprehensive whole. Snape does know Kuhn well enough, however, to strongly doubt that his roommate is even aware of most of what he says.
(Then again, even his ingenuousness could be an act. Kuhn may just be a very excellent actor. How else could he have convinced the Hat to place him in Slytherin . . .?)

So, Kuhn was raised by Muggles, although his parents were both wizards. His parents must indeed be dead then. But while this new information accounts for Kuhn's manners and speech, it does not explain his lack of intellectual curiosity. The deprivation of Spinner's End made Snape seek for stimulation and knowledge at all costs; Kuhn, on the contrary, seems content to remain ignorant.

"Pity," says Goodhart distantly, wrapping a lock of dirty-blonde hair around her finger, "I was going to ask you what you thought about the rumours that a new species of Bavarian Bricklespots had infested the violinist's section of the Berlin Philharmonic."

"Bavarian Bricklespots?" Kuhn repeats, clearly trying to suppress a laugh. "Sorry, never heard of them. I suppose they, er, like violins then?"

"They do not like anything of the sort," Snape says coldly, "as Bavarian Bricklespots most certainly do not exist."

Goodhart frowns, letting the lock of hair slide from her finger. "Once the infestation of the Berlin Philharmonic is confirmed, then it will be quite clear that they exist. Even you must acknowledge that, Severus."

"Yes, yes, once the infestation has been confirmed," Snape says silkily. "Apparently even you know better than to fallaciously assume the truth of a statement before it has been proven."

"So, what are you two working on?" Kuhn asks before Goodhart can respond. He looks slightly desperate. "I don't suppose there's any chance I could join your group, is there?"

"Trouble in paradise already?" Snape sneers. How Kuhn could botch up his first meeting with Lily is unfathomable. Snape had heard his unintelligible, agitated whispers to Lily and her equally unintelligible yet furious replies, of course, but he can't imagine what they could possibly have found to argue about so early in their research.

Kuhn shoots Snape a disgruntled look. "Evans hates me. There's nothing I say that doesn't set her off. It's not paradise – working with her is utter hell."

"Lily doesn't hate you, Adrian," Goodhart soothes. "She's just jumpy because of the Dalmatian dust pixies and all that Pepper-Up potion she drinks."

"Severus drinks Pepper-Up potion all the time and even he isn't so nasty."

"I doubt that," Snape says dryly.

"Believe me, I'm not exaggerating," Kuhn says. He shudders then, expression turning sober. "No, Evans' problem is definitely not just limited to nerves."

Goodhart frowns. She snakes a hand around her pendant – symbolizing the Deathly Hallows, yet another of her quack beliefs – and tugs thoughtfully. "Perhaps it's because you two look so alike. I think that unsettles her."

Snape's eyes dart between Goodhart and Kuhn, ready to take in every detail of their respective reactions. Unlikely as it is that a girl who believes in fictional creatures should also possess keen powers of observation, Snape is not one to underestimate a Ravenclaw, especially as he thinks she is actually right about Lily. He has also not entirely ruled out the possibility that the Dalmatian pixies and Bavarian Bricklespots were all just a ruse to make Kuhn feel better . . .
"We don't look alike," Kuhn immediately denies.

"Your eyes are exactly the same," Goodhart points out.

"No-one has exactly the same eyes," Kuhn protests, a bit weakly Snape thinks. "Just because our eyes are both green doesn't mean they're the same. Besides, my eyes are, er, Slytherin green, while hers are more . . . Gryffindorish . . ."

"You both have eyes the colour of leaves in summer, golden-green and blue," murmurs Snape before he can stop himself.

Kuhn swivels to face him, his expression disarmed, surprised; Snape works to keep his own expression blank. He hadn't meant to let that slip, dammit –

"That's a very good description, Severus," says Goodhart approvingly. "You see, Adrian? That's what upsets her. Perhaps you should address the topic directly the next time you see her."

"I'm not going to start up a conversation with Evans about her eyes!" Kuhn exclaims, appalled. "She'd think I was trying to hit on her – which I most emphatically do not want to do, by the way – and never talk to me again!"

"Oh, I don't know," Goodhart muses, "perhaps it might allay her fears that you are connected to her in an insidious manner."

"I'm not connected with her in any manner, Chandra."

"Yes, I know, but Lily doesn't."

"What she doesn't know won't kill her," Kuhn mutters, but there is a more relaxed air to him now. He looks up at Snape with a wry smile. "I suppose this means you won't let me join your group."

Snape regards Kuhn with impatience. While it would obviously be convenient for their plan to have Kuhn in the same group, Snape is not about to willingly spend even more of his day tutoring his roommate. Besides, letting Kuhn work with them would only antagonize Lily further. Damn it, if Kuhn knew what was good for him, he would already be thinking of ways to get back into Lily's good graces. Doesn't he want to make any contacts at Hogwarts besides Snape?

"No, you may not join our group, as you put it. And unless you stop blabbering about Evans and distracting us from our work, you had also better find another table."

Kuhn's face falls. "Right. Sorry about that." He averts his eyes and makes to stand, but Goodhart stops him with a hand to his sleeve.

Snape makes a soft, impatient noise.

"Stay, Adrian," she says soothingly. "Severus knows we're almost done; then the two of you can leave together."

Kuhn looks flabbergasted. "You know about that?" he blurts.

As Goodhart retracts her hand from Kuhn's sleeve, her expression quizzical, Snape quickly assesses the situation. Given how accurately she pinpointed the source of Lily's distress, Snape would not put it past Goodhart to have also noticed how closely Kuhn and Snape have been shadowing one another. That does not mean, however, that Kuhn should start blithely volunteering information on their reasons for doing so. And knowing his roommate –
'Chandra merely heard you tell me that we would meet up after completing our work here," Snape says smoothly. He aims a sharp kick at Kuhn from beneath the table.

Naturally, Kuhn yelps. Snape manages to keep his expression blank, but he seethes inwardly. Could Kuhn be any less obvious?

Goodhart leans forward with an expression of genuine concern. "My, Adrian, are you all right?"

Kuhn offers her a fake smile. "Sure I am. Probably just . . . a rogue pixie in my sock. Yeah, that must have been it." He turns to glare frostily at Snape, who merely raises his eyebrows; the glare progresses into a scowl. "They have a really painful bite, you know . . . ."

"Oh dear. I didn't know."

"I'll leave you two alone now," Kuhn adds, scooting his chair further down the table, as far away from Snape as possible. There is a pile of Potions manuals to his left, library books he brought with him for his meeting with Lily, and he takes hold of the top volume now. Before opening it, however, he aims yet another glare at Snape. "You won't hear another word out of me."

Snape smirks. "That would be a first," he drawls.

Goodhart smiles cryptically, silver eyes dancing with a strange light as they dart between Snape and Kuhn. "In that case, I suppose we should wrap things up, Severus. What were we discussing again? Ah yes, an incantation to heal the nerves. Well, I had Curatio nervum in mind . . . ."

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Snape dips his quill into a black inkwell and sets the sharp tip to parchment, scratching out the final sentence of a paragraph. He is nearly finished composing his essay for Slughorn; all it requires is one last example of an elective affinity and a conclusion. As he sets his quill down and re-reads what he has written, however, he finds himself disappointed. All the sample reactions Snape uses in his essay are ones he invented himself, and yet in retrospect they seem underwhelming, trivial. This irks Snape. He can just imagine Slughorn's condescending reaction – Competent as ever, Mr Snape – Merlin, just thinking of it makes him seethe. It is imperative that he come up with something better. Slughorn will never acknowledge his achievement, that is true, but at least Snape will be able to sit in class with his head high, knowing he has created something truly spectacular.

He needs to be more than technically, mechanically brilliant; he must also be an artist. Poetry is what he needs.

Snape reaches into his pile of scratch parchments and fishes until he finds a relatively blank one. Quill back in hand, he begins scrawling down every ingredient that reminds him of the most poetic being he knows:

flowers of antimony

cuprite crystals

fulminating gold

What could react with one of those ingredients? Black flux, perhaps – a potent liquid mixture of metal filings, nitre, ground scarab beetles and powdered thestral hooves. Snape has always felt a particular affinity to this strange, impure ingredient, symbolic of water and therefore Slytherin. What would happen in a reaction between black flux and cuprite crystals?

blackflux + cuprite → ? Snape writes hastily, then picks up his notes and moves over to his experimenting table. He has the ingredients arranged before him and his gloves and protective goggles on in a matter of seconds. Educated guessing tells him that heat will help speed the reaction.
along, so he waits until the black flux has begun bubbling in his cauldron before slowly adding the cuprite.

At first, nothing happens; the fire-red crystals merely sink to the bottom of the cauldron, their glistening tips poking out of the thick black liquid. Snape stirs the mixture with his wand in a pattern he invents on the spot (8 clockwise, 2 figure-eights, 1 counterclockwise). Soon the flux begins sending up tendrils of grey smoke that quickly become great, smelly clouds – Snape coughs but does not turn away, unwilling to overlook a second of the reaction before him. His perseverance is rewarded when he feels the crystals begin to soften beneath his wand; like liquid mercury a shimmering red spreads itself across the dull surface of the flux – the red bleeds into the black – and the mixture becomes brown, then purple . . .

Thick smoke clogs Snape's nostrils and he is forced to back away, coughing. A second later he is back at the cauldron – and oh, wonder of wonders! – the mixture is no longer a mixture, but the calm, glistening blue of a product entirely new. Smoke continues to issue from the cauldron, but it smells of cream, of smooth, freshly washed skin . . . Hands trembling with excitement, Snape flips open his Journal of Experiments and jots down a detailed report of what he has just seen.

It is not an elective affinity yet. No, for that he needs to add another ingredient, something that cuprite will find more attractive than flux. Another element of water? Snape can't think of anything suitable in his stores. Perhaps an element of earth? It's a promising line of thought . . . Snape throws open the doors of his ingredients cabinet and lets his eyes sweep over the various labelled vials and jars. His gaze soon lands on a pot of kaolin, the white clay used in fine Muggle pottery and many simple potions . . . kaolin, element of earth, with a strong affinity to elements of fire . . . Without a magical catalyst, however, it won't react with the cuprite.

A catalyst, a catalyst . . . such as regulus of sheerbright, the pure metal form of the sheerbright ore. Snape quickly runs through affinity tables in his head. Regulus could weaken the hold of the flux, leaving the cuprite free to react with the kaolin . . .

It will have to do. With a smooth gesture, Snape snatches up the pot and lifts out a handful of the clay, dropping it into the cauldron. A moment later, he carefully adds the regulus of sheerbright.

Immediately, the blue liquid begins to hiss; steam rises now, thick and acidic, fogging up his protective goggles, but he continues to stubbornly gaze into the cauldron. Before his eyes, the red separates from the black, sliding over the dull flux in sensual curves until it has found the white clay. The reaction between the two is immediate and explosive –

"What the fuck – Snape!"

Snape does not even realise he has been knocked to the (hard, cold) floor, his mind is too busy calculating his next move. Hemlock. He needs hemlock – two or three drops of the poison will stabilise the reaction. He is standing without realising it, eyes only for his cauldron frothing at the rim – most of the potion did not spew into the air, thank Merlin – Kuhn is shouting obscenities in English and German, even though the wards will have prevented any damage to his property –

Hemlock – there – in.

"Everything is under control," Snape snaps after Kuhn shouts something along the lines of Are you out of your fucking mind?

"You could have broken something!"

Snape makes a point of letting his gaze sweep over Kuhn's untouched side of the room. "Your things
certainly seem unharmed. Rest assured, no explosion could best my wards."

"You could have broken a bone, you fucking idiot! I thought you knew what you were doing!"

"I do," Snape says calmly, examining the now placid potion. The kaolin and cuprite have formed a brown, flaky solid that closely resembles a dead lionfish. "There is hardly any cause for worry. These types of potions do tend to be instable."

"Tend to be instable? That potion wasn't just instable, it fucking blasted you across the room!"
Kuhn's hands are balled at the sides of his head; his face is red with yelling and twisted with an emotion Snape cannot immediately identify.

"Desist with the theatrics, Kuhn. They are both unappreciated and inappropriate."

"Promise you're finished brewing for today."

"When and how I brew is no concern of yours."

"It is if you're determined to kill yourself!"

Snape fingers his wand, both angered and bewildered by Kuhn's words. The sheer presumption –

"I would never attempt to kill myself in such an undignified fashion," he says in a soft, deadly voice. "And unless you intend to distract me with further hyperbole and directly cause another explosion, I would ask that you kindly shut your overzealous mouth."

He pauses. Kuhn is glowering darkly, and Snape feels his lips twist of their own accord. "Now, if possible."

Kuhn crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm monitoring your next move."

"You are not my keeper."

"But I am your friend."

"Don't be ridiculous," sneers Snape, making a jerking, impatient motion with his arm that sends his robes flaring. Kuhn's preposterous notions are giving him a headache. "Just because I do not want to harm or bugger you does not – I repeat, does not make us friends."

"Why not?"

Snape pushes his protective goggles up his forehead to better stare at Kuhn. "I should think it obvious."

"Obviously not, so enlighten me."

Lips thinning with annoyance, Snape lifts up long, knobbly fingers and begins to count. "First of all, friends tend to actually derive pleasure from each other's company. That is – indubitably – not the case here." Kuhn opens and closes his mouth like a fish; Snape smirks. "Second, friendship is meaningless without trust –"

"I trust you!" Kuhn exclaims. Then a thought seems to occur to him, for he lowers his eyes. "But you don't trust me. I see."

Snape snarls, his irritation rising like a twisting wind. His voice, however, remains dangerously soft. "Did you truly expect differently? Has it not occurred to you how suspicious you seem? Convincing the Hat to put you into Slytherin, although it would seem to be the worst possible House for you – after a summer here at Hogwarts, you must have known exactly what kind of political views this
Snape has begun shouting without realising it; he flushes and tosses loose strands of hair out of his face. "Do you wish to know why Evans dislikes you?" he asks quietly. "No? I will tell you anyway. Goodhart was right – you do look uncannily alike. But there is more. Evans recognises that you do not belong here. You have quoted her yourself. She knows you have an agenda and does not trust you." Snape lifts his chin. "As for me, I may not know exactly how I fit into your plans yet, but I think we should put an end to the nice fable that there is no other reason you keep trying to cosy up to me. I trust you to help me with Regulus Black – and beyond that no further than I could throw."

Snape expects Kuhn to either give in and spill some of his secrets or vehemently deny everything. Kuhn, however, merely inclines his head. "Would you have chosen Slytherin if you'd known what it would be like?"

For a moment, Snape is taken aback by the implication that he chose Slytherin instead of having it chosen for him; once he has recovered to recognise Kuhn's words as a diversionary tactic, however, he sneers. "That has absolutely nothing to do with anything I just said."

Kuhn is persistent. "If you'd been given the choice – Slytherin or another House – knowing full well what Slytherin meant, what would you have chosen?"

"If you refuse to take my word seriously, I can simply return to brewing my potion," Snape snaps. "I certainly have better things to do than listen to you insult my intelligence."

"I wasn't –" Kuhn's eyes flash, but his shoulders slump. "Look, I completely understand why you wouldn't trust me. If I were you, I wouldn't trust me either. And I wish I could tell you everything, because I do consider you a friend. You help me when I need it and are honest, and I haven't met anyone else here as clever or . . ." Kuhn flushes, then hurries on, "But there are certain things that I can't talk about, not because I don't trust you, but because . . . It's just that things weren't easy for me before I came here, and it hurts to remember how they were."

Snape isn't sure what to make of this rambling confession, so he prods instead. "Why did you choose Slytherin?"

Kuhn grins, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Well, Hufflepuff was just too lame . . ." At Snape's sour look, he sobers. "You're right of course, I was warned about Slytherin. Potter gave me a big long speech. But the way he made it sound – like everyone in Slytherin is automatically bad – it just seemed a pretty stupid thing to say. It's a bit like people who claim that Germans are all Nazis and Grindelwald supporters. There were some – not enough, but still some – Germans who fought tooth and nail against the Nazis, against Grindelwald, people who gave up their friends, their country – their lives in order to fight . . ."

Kuhn trails off, almost as if he has forgotten that Snape is there. He closes his eyes; when he opens them again, after a long pause, they seem unnaturally bright.

Whom have you lost? Snape wonders, even as he prays to Merlin that Kuhn won't begin to cry and crawl to him for sympathy.

Fortunately, Kuhn gets a grip on himself and resumes speaking. "In short, I refuse to believe that all Slytherins are evil. And when I saw that Potter did," the green eyes glitter strangely, "I wanted to prove him wrong."

Snape is not entirely convinced by this explanation. It is not nearly Slytherin enough. That being said, Kuhn's words do remind Snape of an important fact: that Kuhn is a foreigner. Snape had almost
forgotten, Kuhn's English is so good . . . but of course he is German, of course he thinks like a
German . . . of course he would associate the British wizarding discourse on blood purity with the
Holocaust. Snape is slightly appalled with himself for having overlooked this.

"That probably doesn't seem like enough of a reason to you," Kuhn continues, "but it was an
important one to me."

Snape considers for a moment. Then a thought occurs to him, and he feels one of his eyebrows climb
with disbelief. "To summarise: You chose Slytherin because you think you can reform it from
within."

Kuhn blinks at him, his lips twitching into a smile. "Something like that, yes."

"You must be even more of an idiot than I thought," Snape mutters, and because he now has even
less of an idea what to make of Kuhn, pulls his goggles back over his eyes and turns to his cauldron.

Lestrange was right all along. Kuhn's agenda is diametrically opposed to the Dark Lord's. But what
does that mean? Kuhn has neither connections nor wealth nor power – soon enough, he will have
made an enemy of Avery, possibly also of Regulus Black. He can hardly offer someone like Snape a
genuine alternative to becoming a Death Eater. No, Kuhn knows nothing of glory, of might . . .

Kuhn does seem to know something about how the mighty can fall, however, and a part of Snape is
curious to hear his views on recent German history. Were his parents Grindelwald supporters? Were
they – worse – Nazis? Did they kill, torture, betray Jews? Or were they themselves persecuted?

Snape stares into the oily depths of his cauldron, into the blackness of the flux, and feels his stomach
lurch.

"May I watch?"

"Must you?" Snape grinds out, but Kuhn seems to take this for a yes and beams at him. Snape
decides to tolerate his observing presence, but only because he thinks he won't be able to brew
properly without a distraction from his current dark thoughts.

Kuhn stands very close to Snape while trying to glimpse the contents of his cauldron. It's unsettling,
as he smells very strongly of the Muggle world: of soap and gel and scrubbed skin . . .

"What are you making?"

"I am inventing," Snape corrects, elbowing Kuhn out of his personal space. "The entire reaction is a
metaphor, and it requires but one further ingredient."

"A metaphor?" Kuhn grins. "I thought you said that metaphors didn't belong in science."

Snape flushes. Of course Kuhn would have to fling that back at him. "I said that anthropomorphism
did not belong in science. Metaphors are different."

Not that Snape really thinks of his reaction as a metaphor. The reaction doesn't actually represent
anything. It merely began with an ingredient Snape has often associated with Lily – nothing more.

"Oh, I see. We're back to how metaphors are magic and everything."

Snape keeps his face blank, his voice soft and smooth. He is not about to admit to Kuhn that he does
not quite know what he is doing. "In a matter of speaking. From a structural perspective, you might
say that chemical affinities and metaphors are closely related." Snape pauses, thinking that his
spontaneous answer contains potential merit. He decides to embellish it. "In a metaphor, as in a chemical reaction, distinct entities are bound together to create something that adds up to more than their mere mutual presence, something that was not present before."

"Something new."

"Precisely." Unwilling to delve further into unknown territory, Snape gives Kuhn a curt, thin-lipped smile, then begins sorting through his ingredients cabinet.

"What are you looking for?"

"Something to combine with black flux. Preferably an element of air."

Kuhn inches closer despite the fact that he's too short to see most of the ingredients in the cabinet. Snape attempts to ignore him and the discomfort he feels at their close proximity. Eventually, however, he misjudges the distance between them and accidentally hits Kuhn with his elbow while taking hold of a vial. It slips perilously from his fingers –

"Got it," Kuhn says, catching the vial before Snape could even see it fall.

"Don't stand so close to me," Snape mutters, heart pounding.

"Oh. Sorry." Kuhn takes a single, small step back and inspects the vial. "Green lion."

Snape snatches it from Kuhn's small hands, involuntarily brushing his fingers in the process. Although he is wearing gloves, Snape jerks away from the contact, wrapping his hand possessively around the vial.

"What is it?"

"Chlorophyll." Snape scowls at the uncomprehending look on Kuhn's face. "Have you never opened a potions textbook? The allegory of the green lion devouring the sun is illuminated in practically every treatise ever written on alchemy." When Kuhn continues to look blank, Snape relents and continues, "Generally it is a name given to acids that can dissolve gold. Chlorophyll, because it 'eats' sunlight, is also referred to as a 'green lion'."

"A green lion," Kuhn murmurs. He glances over at the cauldron, eyes narrowed with thought. "I think I'm beginning to see how this could be a metaphor. So this green lion is supposed to react with that sludge in there, or something?"

"Black flux, and yes." Snape had not originally intended on using chlorophyll, but since this is all an exercise in artistry anyway and chlorophyll can react with flux, he doesn't see why not. "There is no real need to stage this reaction, of course, as the actual elective affinity has already taken place, but for the sake of poetic completeness – or poetic excess, if you prefer – I am giving the flux something to react with."

"Compensation for its troubles, so to speak."

Snape inclines his head in assent. "Quite." With a swift flick of his wand, he banishes the now crystallised product of cuprite, kaolin and the catalyst magic of regulus and hemlock to an empty flask on his desk. "Of course, chlorophyll and black flux alone will not react, at least not under current conditions. I have removed everything in the cauldron but the flux and am now reducing the temperature . . ."

"Reducing the temperature?"
"Obviously, as the properties of the flux that would best combine with an element of air are first exhibited at temperatures below zero."

As Kuhn processes this – honestly, has he never brewed a single potion below room temperature before? – Snape casts a freezing charm on his cauldron, adds the chlorophyll and takes out a final ingredient.

"Acid of Averroes," Kuhn says, reading the label over Snape's shoulder. "Isn't that really corrosive?"

"That is why you are to stay back and out of my way," Snape warns. He waits until Kuhn is standing just outside the explosion wards before measuring out a fluid dram (3.55 mL) of acid and stirring it into the cauldron.

"What happened?" Kuhn demands.

Snape is too busy observing the events in his cauldron to reply. The flux and the chlorophyll are reacting in a way he had not anticipated – first swirling green and black next to each other like snakes chasing their own tails, then entwining themselves –

Kuhn bumps into his side in his eagerness to see the cauldron. Snape is distracted into glaring at him. "Whoa," Kuhn breathes, green eyes wide.

The green and black are merging into something new – iridescent bubbles rise from the surface of the potion – it seems to shiver, as if it can feel the cold – a ripple passes through, bright as a ray of sun – Snape's hand is cramped from the speed at which he is writing this all down –

The potion is coloured gold.

"This makes no sense," Snape mutters. Unconsciously, he tightens his grip on his quill and nearly snaps it. "The green lion is supposed to devour gold, not produce it."

"That isn't really gold, though. Right? I mean, it doesn't look like that stuff we made for McGonagall."

"Of course not," Snape snaps. "Only the Philosopher's Stone can create gold. This is –" he drops his quill and casts Specialis Revelio. The result disappoints him. "This is a potion with qualities similar to Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Unction."

Despite Snape's sarcastic delivery, Kuhn seems intrigued. "That's cool. So it can heal the scars left by thoughts, then?"

"Or words," adds Snape absently before it occurs to him that for once, Kuhn knew something about a potion. "You have had occasion to brew the Oblivious Unction before?"

"No. A friend of mine was treated with it, though."

"I see," Snape says coolly. If Kuhn's friend had needed Oblivious Unction, then he must have been gravely injured indeed. Just what was Kuhn doing in Germany? "Well, I have made the Oblivious Unction myself, and this is not the same potion. I shall have to undertake further tests to determine exactly what it does."

"You can test it on me," Kuhn offers, inexplicably holding out a fisted hand. Snape scowls and intends to knock it away, but is arrested by the sight of a strange set of scars:

*I must not tell lies.*
"A Blood Quill," he breathes, taking the small, fragile hand into his gloved ones and examining it closely. The words stand out in white relief against Kuhn's smooth, nearly translucent skin. Unlike the spidery scars *Sectumsempra* leaves behind, these scars that are words are coarse – ugly.

Snape looks up at Kuhn, whose gaze is unnervingly calm. "I thought these were illegal."

"They are."

Snape looks back down at the scars and feels his stomach begin to churn. "You wish me to test the potion on these scars?"

"Do you think it would work?"

Snape hesitates. On the one hand, he would not be averse to testing the potion. On the other . . . "While I do not think the potion would harm you, I cannot yet guarantee the effects. It would perhaps be wise to wait."

"Are you sure? I really don't mind being a guinea pig."

Snape narrows his eyes and drops Kuhn's hand. Ultimately, he reasons, this is not just about some potion; ultimately, Kuhn is not so subtly attempting to demonstrate the meaning of trust.

"I will conduct a few more diagnostic spells," Snape says grudgingly. "If I am satisfied that you will come to no harm, then we may consider applying the potion to your hand."

Several moments later, Snape has gone through most of the spells in his repertoire. The potion should not be applied to the eyes and could be fatal when imbibed, but seems harmless otherwise.

"Very well," he mumbles. "If you are still amenable . . ."

"Yep," says Kuhn, holding out his fist again. Snape hesitates before cautiously taking it back into his own.

A pleasant warmth bleeds through his gloves that Snape steadfastly ignores. Pumping a small amount of the potion into a thin siphon, he carefully lets tiny beads of golden liquid settle onto the first of the scars.

"Blimey – it tickles."

"Stay still," Snape snaps, determined not to let the potion touch any skin but scar tissue.

"I wasn't moving," Kuhn protests, but his body squirms all the same. Fortunately, Snape has his hand in an iron grip.

"Done," Snape announces, laying aside the siphon and pulling Kuhn's hand closer for inspection.

"Well?"

"The words are still visible," Snape says slowly, "but the scar tissue is considerably reduced. In order to eradicate it completely, we would probably have to apply the potion several times."

Kuhn wrests his hand away and examines it critically. "Hmm."

"You should not touch the affected area for the next few minutes. If you accidentally do, be careful not to rub your eyes."
"It does look better," Kuhn says after a moment. He continues to examine his hand, but his eyes are no longer filled with scepticism. "I couldn't see the difference at first, but now I can – lies is almost gone."

Snape feels his face twist. What could those lies could have been, to have merited such a punishment?

"I didn't lie, if that's what you're thinking," Kuhn bursts out. "My teacher was one of those people who deny the Holocaust and claim that Grindelwald was acting for the greater good. She didn't like it when I told her she was wrong."

"And so naturally she punished you by providing you with a permanent inscription of her lies."

"Exactly."

Snape frowns. Kuhn seems very calm about all this. "How very medieval."

"Yeah. English schools." Kuhn smiles wryly before pulling out his wand and casting a silent Tempus. "I knew there was a reason I was hungry. Dinner's about to start."

How many more secrets are you hiding? Why did you go to an English school in Germany? Why are you so adamant about your political views? How did your parents die? Yet Snape holds back these pressing questions in favour of one considerably more banal.

"Already looking forward to Narcissa's scintillating company, are we?"

Ever since Snape and Kuhn began avoiding Regulus and Avery, they have been careful to sit close to Narcissa and Lestrange during meals. Unfortunately, Narcissa and Lestrange have their own personal House Elves at Hogwarts to cook them gourmet dishes and uncork expensive wines. From Snape's perspective, this obvious display of luxury does tend to make their company somewhat intolerable.

"I like Narcissa," says Kuhn quietly. For a moment, he looks lost in thought; then his wry smile is back in place. "In small doses, mind."

"Then we had best not keep her waiting," says Snape. He takes off his goggles and gloves, places a stasis charm on his cauldron and casts a weak cleansing charm on his robes.

Hair almost free of knots, hands almost free of potions stains, Snape turns to face the door. He halts – and scowls – when he sees that Kuhn is staring at him.

"What?"

"You can be very gallant when you want to."

Snape relaxes into a smirk. "Careful, or I shall Obliviate your memories."

"You wouldn't."

"I would."

They set off for dinner, Kuhn's ringing laughter echoing through the halls.

Chapter End Notes
regulus, green lion and several other ingredients mentioned here are actual alchemical terms. It goes without saying that none of these reactions would ever turn out as described.
Chapter Seven: Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs

After the relative silence of the dungeons, the heat and bustle of the Great Hall comes as something of a shock. Caught in the surge of students rushing to their respective tables, Snape feels twitchy and ill at ease. He keeps his wand close to hand and a defensive curtain of hair before his face, avoids Gryffindors and potential Slytherin enemies, and is not above pushing younger students out of the way if it means he will reach the Slytherin table in a shorter amount of time. Kuhn, either equally unsettled by crowds or merely demonstrating uncharacteristic self-restraint, does not question Snape's methods.

Shadows are gathering at the Slytherin table when they finally reach it. Only Narcissa – sitting tall, proudly unmoving, her nearly white hair shimmering like a distant star – offers a guiding point of light. Her blue eyes regard Snape and Kuhn apathetically. Almost lazily, she gestures at the empty seat beside her with an inclination of her delicate head.

"Severus. Adrian."

Kuhn smiles winningly and plops himself down next to Narcissa as if sitting next to the fiancée of Lucius Malfoy were the most natural place for him to be in the world. Snape is more calculating – he seats himself at a diagonal to Narcissa and across from Kuhn, at the very edge of the table, where he can escape easily and has a complete view of the Great Hall.

Snape can see the Ravenclaws best – Goodhart has twisted ribbons of clashing colours into her hair and stares dreamily into space, parrots still flapping ridiculously at her ears. Sitting up particularly straight, Snape can just glimpse past Potter's bloody ridiculous hair to where she sits with her face turned away, deep in conversation with a wan-looking Lupin . . .

"I see that you have been diverting yourself, Adrian," Narcissa remarks in soft, yet accusatory tones. "Indeed, you look remarkably well . . ."

Snape feels his eyebrows rise. Kuhn does not look any different from before, that is to say, he is as thin and pale as ever. Narcissa must have some self-serving reason for complimenting him. But Snape is too preoccupied with other thoughts to give her motives a full analysis. The sight of Lupin next to Lily has reminded him that the moon will be full tonight . . . not that Snape intends to leave the castle at night, but it is nonetheless harrowing to know that the werewolf will be loose on Hogwarts grounds. Snape clenches his hands despite the unpleasant tremors that run through his veins –

Kuhn – Snape focuses on Kuhn, all big green eyes and hollow cheeks, and his hands gradually begin to unclench. Kuhn, he notices, seems utterly bewildered by Narcissa's comments. He mouths for a moment before finding words. "I, why – thank you."
"I cannot think of the last time when I was properly amused," Narcissa continues in a reproachful whisper, her blue eyes growing colder with every word. "Ever since my cousin's defection to Gryffindor and Andromeda's calamitous marriage, nothing has been quite the same with us . . . Even Hogwarts has lost its charm, without Lucius and Bella. Would you not agree, Severus?"

"Few things have been the same since they left," Snape says.

(Snape does occasionally miss Lucius, the first person to champion him in Slytherin, but would instantly forego his charming companionship forever if it meant he would never have to encounter Bellatrix again. The few times she had noticed Snape at Hogwarts, Bellatrix had gone out of her way to demean him: cursing his hair with even more grease, pushing him into a pile of Hippogriff dung, intercepting his letters home and reading them aloud in the Common Room . . .)

Narcissa nods. "Exactly . . . things have been absolutely tedious of late . . ." She bores her eyes into Kuhn. The irises – dark blue, yet striated with lines so pale as almost to be white – resemble impenetrable walls of ice. "Well? Do tell what so managed to lift your spirits. Perhaps it shall also succeed in entertaining me."

"Erm . . ." Kuhn glances over at Snape's forbidding expression and swallows. His eyes lift to the ceiling, as if searching for divine inspiration. They are as expressive as hers, and Snape recognises the exact moment when Kuhn fixes upon an idea. It is as though the idea were a set of twin black holes, represented by the pupils; these black holes overtake the green irises in a breathtakingly swift dilation.

"Severus made a scar-removing potion that I decided to test out." Kuhn proffers his hand; Narcissa's eyes barely flick down to the scars. Her body is taut with controlled impatience.

"Well?"

"Well, it was actually kind of fun to use – when you apply it to your skin, it really tickles . . ."

Snape scowls. Kuhn's storytelling abilities are, like his capacity to lie convincingly, non-existent.

"I see," Narcissa says in a bored tone that Snape suspects she uses to mask disappointment. "And where were you conducting this experiment, exactly?"

Snape tries to kick Kuhn into silence, but reaches his foot a second too late: "In our room."

Damn it!

Narcissa pales, looking almost ill. When she turns to Snape, however, she has recovered herself enough to sneer. "So, the rumours are true then. You have your own private lab." Before Snape can reply, Narcissa leans forward and hisses, "How lucky for you, Severus, that dear Adrian is so willing to submit himself to your tests. It must be so much more cost-efficient for you than experimenting on House Elves. Oh, but I'd forgotten – you can't afford any House Elves. I only hope that you haven't been bringing vermin into the dorms."

Snape smiles coldly, letting none of his anger, his panic show in his expression. "Rest assured, Narcissa, animals feature no part in my experiments." This, of course, is not true. Snape killed many a frog and mouse while testing Sectumsempra and feels no compunction about using animals in experiments. However, should Narcissa get wind of the truth, Slughorn might choose to inspect the dorms . . . "Kuhn here, of course, being the single exception. Indeed, I am of the persuasion that it is considerably more instructive to – ah – simply become part of the experiments myself."

Narcissa's horrified expression cheers Snape up slightly. Kuhn's spluttering is a mere bonus.
"Snape! I'm not an animal!"

"Really? But the resemblance between you and a chimpanzee is so uncanny. . ."

As he fights to keep himself from looking Kuhn in the eye and laughing, Snape unconsciously straightens in his seat. With the corner of his eye, he can see Lestrange – lanky and dark as Narcissa is well proportioned and fair – making his way to them through the crowd. Behind the prefect a group of Fifth Years also heads for the Slytherin table, one of them with dark curls and an aristocratic sneer on his face.

"Surely you exaggerate, Severus," Narcissa is saying. "Experimenting on yourself – you simply cannot mean what you say."

"On the contrary," he says, smirking into her disbelieving face. Ah, Narcissa – was there ever a person more aptly named? Poor Narcissa: with her notions of beauty and family pride, how could she ever hope to understand the thrills of self-experimentation? the searing, cleansing, edifying pain born of a battery attached to the limbs, the tongue, the eyes – of *Sectumsempra* cutting open one's own veins . . . could she even begin to fathom it? Narcissa, taught from the crib to revere her own body as a work of art, as a status symbol, as the image of her future sons, is socially, culturally incapable of appreciating the gravity of what it means to be both the subject and object of an experiment. No, Narcissa, imprisoned by the expectations of her world, has no understanding of what emancipation is. The sheer potential of the self-experiment to transcend the boundaries between subject and object and yield the most powerful of all knowledge, self-knowledge – is simply lost on her. To Narcissa, the very idea of self-experimentation must seem absolutely degrading and barbaric, a threat to the foundations of civilisation . . .

A dark shadow passes the table, pausing before Snape, and he tenses. He does not need to look up to know that it is Lestrange who looms over him. Automatically he occludes . . . Thoughts of his battery, of his Defence project rise to the surface of his mind; the rest he locks behind labyrinth, moat and black walls . . .

When he looks up, mere seconds later, it is to confront unnaturally pale eyes – Lestrange enters his mind like a bull in a china shop, seeking information on Kuhn –

"Severus," he says, but his voice is disembodied, somehow not real –

What is real are the obvious cracks in Lestrange's mental defences – and because he is annoyed that Lestrange would try Legilmency on *him*, Snape sneaks past the planted memories (Lestrange writing *Bellatrix*) at the forefront – catches sight of a tall, deformed, white-faced creature with glistening red eyes –

"Rodolphus," he says, almost gagging on the name – the sickening, yet undeniably fascinating creature is the Dark Lord, Snape knows that much –

Afraid that his visceral reaction might give him away, Snape clamps down on his emotions and carefully retracts himself from Lestrange's mind. . . Lestrange, who does not seem to have noticed the intrusion and still picks through pointless memories . . . Snape writing in *Advanced Potion-Making*, Snape sitting bored through Charms . . . Tiring of the game, Snape pretends to succumb to Lestrange's probe by offering up several uninteresting memories of Kuhn –

"Hello," says a quiet, nervous voice, and all at once Lestrange's obtrusive mental presence is gone.

Snape blinks, then realises what has happened. Lestrange is now staring at Kuhn, who is smiling back with unease. He can't occlude, Snape thinks with sudden panic, watching Lestrange's nostrils
dilate with something like satisfaction . . .

And yet despite his guileless smile, Kuhn is somehow avoiding Lestrange's direct gaze. It is like watching a brilliant green hummingbird dip and dive away from a bird-catcher's pale net. Lestrange pursues Kuhn, whose winged eyes lift up and effortlessly soar away. The theatre is subtle, almost beautiful to watch . . . Snape observes with an emotion bordering on disbelief, incapable of reconciling such skilled performance with his clumsy and chronically honest roommate . . .

When Lestrange finally turns away from Kuhn, Snape realises that his heart is beating rapidly in his chest.

(Against all of Snape's expectations, Kuhn has successfully evaded Lestrange. It is strange, absolutely unexpected, and in the privacy of his mind Snape will admit that he is relieved. After all, what good would it do either of them were Lestrange to get wind of their plan? The leverage he would gain by learning about Regulus Black . . .)

As Lestrange seats himself next to Snape and across from Narcissa, Snape flashes Kuhn a brief look of warning. In response, Kuhn merely raises his eyebrows as if to say that he can take care of himself, thank you very much.

Cheeky idiot.

"Rodolphus," Narcissa says quietly, earnestly, "thank Merlin that you are here. Severus was just telling me about his revolting experiments —"

And with that, Snape's estimation of Kuhn takes a sudden steep dive. He glares at his errant roommate, feeling that this is definitely his fault – had Kuhn not mentioned Snape's laboratory, this conversation would never be taking place . . .

"Really?" drawls Lestrange.

"Yes, and I would appreciate it if you found a way to prevent such dangerous activities from taking place, in your very own dorm no less —"

"Now, now, Narcissa, you know how Lucius and I feel about Severus' . . . speculative proclivities."

Snape begins to feel hopeful. Lestrange knows about the lab, of course: Snape naturally asked his permission beforehand. The question is, will he stand up for the half-blood or give in to his future sister-in-law's demands?

Before the question can be answered, a muscular figure in green and silver throws himself into the seat beside Narcissa with such force that the entire table seems to shake: Mulciber, dressed in his Quidditch gear. Snape looks up and tenses, seeing Avery not far behind.

"Cassius, must you wear your Quidditch gear to dinner? It's indecorous."

Mulciber shrugs. "Quidditch practice after dinner – we need all the practice we can get if we want to defeat Gryffindor this year." Oblivious to Narcissa's expression of disdain, Mulciber leans his elbows onto the table and frowns over at Kuhn. "Hey, Kuhn, are you sure you don't like to play? You might surprise yourself, and we could definitely use new talent."

Kuhn's smile, Snape can tell, is forced. "Thanks, but I'm not exactly fond of heights."

"Too bad," says a cold, drawling voice from somewhere behind Snape. Fabric rustles, heavy footsteps draw near, and then Avery is seating himself beside Lestrange, his lips curled into a leering
smile. "I think you would make an excellent Seeker."

Mulciber's frown deepens as he looks Kuhn up and down. "He does have the right build."

Kuhn barks an unconvincing laugh. "You're joking, right? I would be terrible."

"Would you?" Avery asks, grey eyes glinting maliciously. "You have such fine little hands – for my part I can't help but think they were just made for catching the Snitch."

Kuhn flushes. At his side, Narcissa shoots Avery an icy glare. Snape knows better than to think she is concerned for Kuhn; Narcissa merely cannot tolerate even the barest hints of lewdness in her dinner conversation.

"Daniel," she warns.

"Try-outs are tomorrow afternoon. Think about it, Kuhn," Avery says with a laugh before turning to Mulciber and launching a discussion on prospective new members of the Quidditch team. No sooner than they have begun, Rosier – panting, clearly having run to the Great Hall from the dungeons and closely followed by a pimply pink-faced Wilkes and a sullen Claudia Bramblethorn – slumps into the seat beside Mulciber.

"None of the Second Years look particularly promising . . ." mutters Mulciber.

Despite his breathlessness, Rosier immediately chimes in: "I'm thinking we should set Flint up against Nott, see how they both fare as Keepers . . ."

Snape, disappointed that the question of his lab remains unresolved, turns away from the conversation to discover that food has appeared on his plate. Next to him, Lestrange uncovers a small silver platter to reveal a fantastical first course that does not visually correspond to Snape's concept of food, but smells heavenly nonetheless – of milkroot and nutmeg and delicate white fish . . . Between Narcissa and Lestrange, nestled in a bucket of ice, stands a bottle of white wine.

"What did my mother relinquish from her cellar for us today?" asks Narcissa, lifting the lid of her own silver platter as she speaks. Steam twines around her face, and if it weren't for her supercilious expression, she might almost seem beautiful.

Lestrange takes hold of the bottle and examines its label. "A positively ancient elf-made Riesling," he drawls.

Narcissa wrinkles her nose. "She did threaten to pass along a few of her older whites. Let us hope this one hasn't completely turned to acid . . ."

Snape turns his attention to his own comparatively uninteresting food, but not without noticing how listlessly Kuhn picks at his plate. Snape has never commented on Kuhn's chronic lack of appetite before, but this time . . .

"I thought you were hungry," he says after several bites, when Kuhn still shows no sign of taking interest in his meal.

"I am."

Snape sneers. "Yes, that is why you are poking at your roast pork as though it were full of maggots."

"Am not. I'm just slow, is all."
"This wine is undrinkable," Narcissa hisses at Lestrange, setting down her elegant crystal goblet – etched with the Black family crest – to pull the bottle of wine out of its cooling bucket. Suddenly she is doing the inconceivable and presenting Kuhn with the bottle –

"Perhaps, dear Adrian, I could tempt you with some of this wine? A Riesling, as you see, made by German elves. Rodolphus and I simply couldn't finish it by ourselves."

Kuhn pales, clearly uncertain whether this is an insult, a compliment or an attempt to poison him. 
"No, I wouldn't dream of taking your wine . . ."

Narcissa narrows her eyes. "You're not a teetotaller like Severus, are you?"

Kuhn's eyes flicker with surprise. "No."

"Well then," Narcissa smiles, twirling the wine before Kuhn's pinched face, as if hoping to interest him with the label. Condensation and melted ice flow off the bottle and drip onto Kuhn's roast pork and pease pudding, but neither Narcissa nor Kuhn seem to notice. "Who better to appreciate a Riesling than a German, nicht wahr?"

Kuhn swallows and assumes his most disarming smile. "Your German is quite good."

Narcissa's expression softens and she gives Kuhn a small, preening smile. "But of course. Rodolphus and I have been studying languages since we were small children."

"Narcissa is much better at them than I," Lestrange says in bored tone.

"How many languages do you speak?" Kuhn asks her, somehow managing to look genuinely interested.

Narcissa, nearly losing her precarious hold on the dripping wine bottle, sets it down next to Kuhn's plate. Her expression is smug. "Quite a few, if I might say so myself . . . French, German, Russian, Italian . . ."

"Wow," Kuhn says, face lighting up with admiration.

"Admittedly, I am out of practice, but let's see . . ." Narcissa gives Kuhn a simpering smile. "Ich wäre entzückt, lieber Adrian, durch Ihr Entgegenkommen zu erfahren, wie es gegenwärtig in Ihrer Heimat ist, und wenn Sie zu meinem deutschen Wortverstand etwas anzumerken haben, werde ich Ihnen dafür dankbar sein. Denn es macht in der Gesellschaft nichts lächerlicher, als wenn man ein Wort falsch anwendet." Narcissa pauses, silver lashes fluttering. "Finden Sie nicht?"

At first, Kuhn seems too gobsmacked by Narcissa's undoubtedly baroque vocabulary to pay attention to the actual meaning of her words (Snape hasn't understood anything, but he does know the tendencies of purebloods). Somewhere towards the end of her lengthy performance, however, he seems to recover. Kuhn smiles without his green eyes as he says, "Aber selbstverständlich. Sie haben vollkommen Recht, und es wäre mir eine Ehre, Ihnen in dieser Hinsicht zu helfen—zu dienen . . ."

His voice is different in German, Snape notes – higher in pitch, softer, more clearly enunciated.

With the satisfied smile of someone who always gets what she wants, Narcissa transfigures a serviette into a wine glass and pours Kuhn some of the golden wine. That her own actions might be considered unspeakably rude, given that Kuhn never wanted the wine in the first place, does not appear to have occurred to her. No, from what Snape can tell, Narcissa genuinely believes she comes across as charming. "So there it is. I am delighted that we have reached an understanding, Adrian."
Kuhn's mouth twitches nervously, but he lifts the glass in a kind of toast. "To mutual understandings and foreign languages."

"Why not," says Narcissa, and raises her own crystal glass to his. The contact produces a clear, musical sound.

Kuhn does not drink immediately, choosing to first sniff carefully at the wine. Narcissa watches with some distaste before turning back to her own food. Her posture is stiff, haughty, as though she feels embarrassed at having lavished such attention on a social inferior. Snape can almost imagine her thoughts: Were it not for that horrible wine . . .

Lestrange, on the other hand, straightens with renewed interest. His pale eyes gleam as they regard Kuhn, and he is actually smiling. "Now that we are on the subject of Germany, Adrian, do tell us a little about your political activities there."

Kuhn takes a cautious sip of wine. If it is bad, his expression at least does not proclaim it. "My political activities?"

"Why yes, did you not tell us that you were – how shall I put it – rather fascinated by German politics?"

Kuhn sets down the wine glass, his lips set in a thin line. "So I did. I have an interest in recent political history."

"Grindelwald interests you, I take it?"

"Grindelwald?" Kuhn's eyes flick in the direction of the staff table. "He was, of course, a very powerful wizard."

"Indeed," says Lestrange softly, "most powerful." Kuhn does not reply, and Lestrange purses his lips – dark and red as toadstool caps. "I wonder – did any of your family support his new order?"

"No," Kuhn says immediately. A moment later, annoyance crosses his face, and Snape senses that Kuhn had not intended to give that answer.

"I see," Lestrange says, even more quietly. "They did not believe that wizards deserve a higher place in the world than Muggles?"

Kuhn lifts his wine glass, but does not drink. Snape can see that he is trying to remain composed and having a hard time of it.

A sip of wine, a pause, then: "I'm afraid I wouldn't really know what they believed." There is a distinct note of irritation in Kuhn's voice. "My parents died shortly after I was born, and the only family members I ever met were my Muggle uncle and aunt, whose account of my parents was anything but objective."

"How unfortunate," says Narcissa distantly, waving a hand over her finished plate. It disappears in a puff and is instantly replaced by a lidded golden platter.

Lestrange leans in closer, his eyes glittering. "And what, pray, did your Muggle relatives tell you about your parents?"

Kuhn's face is white, and there are tense crinkles in the skin around his eyes. When he speaks, he is nearly inaudible.
"They told me that my parents were freaks."

"Didn't appreciate magic, did they? Well, that's neither here nor there. I presume you had little to do with them . . . unless they were, by chance, your guardians?"

Green eyes harden, clearly angry to relieve these memories. "I lived with them for a while, yes."

Lestrange tuts sympathy. "Dear me. Well, your account merely confirms what I have heard about Muggles – barbaric creatures, really. Absolutely no understanding of their place in the world."

Kuhn swallows, looking as though he is carefully weighing his next words. "My relatives were terrible. Some of the things they did to me should have landed them in prison. But not all Muggles are as unsavoury, or as stupid. There are some things –"

Sneering, Lestrange makes an abortive gesture. "Don't tell me. You think there are some things we could learn from Muggles, no?"

Kuhn looks to him helplessly, as though he knows it is futile to argue the point, but would never be able to live with himself otherwise. "I just think we shouldn't be so quick to underestimate them, that's all. In Germany, I saw some of their weapons in use, and they were . . ." His voice cracks. "They were terrible."

"No Muggle weapons could match our powers," says Lestrange, cold pale eyes radiating contempt. "You would do well to remember that, Adrian."

And as he watches Lestrange's expression twist into something calculating, Snape remembers glowing red eyes and feels something remarkably like fear. Never give him reason to harm you, Snape thinks to himself. And yet there sits Kuhn. It is painfully clear to Snape that Lestrange, if given enough reasons, would not hesitate to destroy Kuhn, or Snape for that matter. He would get away with murder, Lestrange, thanks to his family connections, his wealth, the invisible yet powerful support he receives from the Dark Lord.

Rationally, Snape has always known this. Never before, however, had he actually seen the (horrible, fascinating) monsters lurking in the depths of Lestrange's mind.

And there sits Kuhn. Kuhn – Snape's best protection against Regulus Black. Kuhn, a potential blood-traitor and enemy of the Dark Lord. Kuhn, who still hides secrets, even when he calls Snape his friend. Snape cannot afford to take sides with him, simply cannot. And yet . . . Lestrange has affronted Snape, invading his mind as though he has a right to be there. Lestrange is no friend of his.

Who says that Snape cannot manoeuvre both Kuhn and Lestrange at once? Take from both their strengths while abandoning them to their weaknesses? Is it really impossible that Snape maintain his status with Lestrange at the same time as he protects Kuhn from him for the sake of the plan?

Perhaps the fact that he is a better Occlumens than Lestrange has made him overconfident, but Snape suddenly believes he can succeed, at least for a little while. Diverting Lestrange's attentions away from Kuhn will admittedly not be easy, but Snape prides himself on his ability to improvise solutions under the most difficult of circumstances . . .

And as Lestrange continues to regard Kuhn like a deer he intends to slaughter, Snape assumes a lazy smirk, lets one of his long hands dangle expressively over his goblet of pumpkin juice, and drawls:

"Grindelwald's failed political agenda never did much for me."

Immediately, Lestrange's gaze snaps over to Snape. Not nearly as clever as he thinks, says a little
voice in Snape's head, and he smirks. "Grindelwald's experiments, on the other hand, gruesome as many were, may be termed on the whole as positively inspired –"

"I forbid you from returning to that odious topic, Severus," Narcissa exclaims, raising the lid of her platter to reveal a steaming, buttered lobster. "Do respect the fact that I am still eating."

"You must learn to become less sensitive, my dear," chides Lestrange. "The experiments Severus speaks of represent the future of our world, surely you understand this."

"So Lucius says," murmurs Narcissa.

"There you have it. It simply won't do for you to forbid us speaking of something so important, simply because a few details make you squeamish."

Snape manages not to outwardly gloat. Lestrange has just sanctioned Snape's lab, more or less. In any case, Narcissa will not be complaining to Slughorn about vermin . .

"You really think Grindelwald's experiments were inspired?" asks a quiet, unsettled voice. Kuhn – painfully obvious as always. Snape slowly turns to face his roommate, whose green eyes are clouded with a combination of curiosity and dismay.

Beside him, Lestrange also turns his eyes on Kuhn.

"I do," Snape says coolly. "Grindelwald not only invented several highly powerful spells, he revolutionised the field of mind magic. There would never have been a paradigm shift –" Snape pauses, realising that Kuhn probably knows nothing about the terminology used by historians of magical science, then rephrases, "We would not be nearly as far along in our researches today without the experiments he conducted in Nurmengard."

"You mean the torture he inflicted on his prisoners."

"Call it what you like," says Snape, annoyed, "the fact of the matter is that vast amounts of knowledge were gained that have considerably influenced the direction of magical research today."

"I doubt that Adrian will take comfort in that fact, Severus," says Lestrange, sounding as though he would like to laugh.

Narcissa's nostrils constrict as she takes in a deep breath and delicately stabs lobster flesh with her fork.

Lestrange does laugh.

And Avery, who has probably been listening to the whole conversation, turns watery grey eyes on Kuhn and laughs as well.

Snape shoots Kuhn a furious glare; Kuhn's mouth twists unhappily at Snape. Avery's cold laughter soon seems to grate on his nerves, however, for the green eyes flash with something remarkably resembling the sense of self-preservation Snape had begun to think Kuhn seriously lacked.

As the laughter subsides, Kuhn takes his chance. "I'm afraid I must disappoint you, Rodolphus. I take comfort in the facts as they are, and this fact is no exception." A small, twisted smile appears on Kuhn's face. "Reality is rarely pretty. I see no reason to gloss it over. Grindelwald used torture, plain and simple – it's not a moral judgment, just a statement of fact."

Narcissa sets down her cutlery, her expression strangely weary. "Adrian, if there is but one lesson
you learn while you are with us here at Hogwarts, it is that everything has a proper time and place . . .

"In other words, Adrian, Narcissa would prefer it if you glossed things over a bit," Avery says gleefully.

"I said no such thing," she snaps. "There are simply times for conversations such as these, and now is not one of them."

"Cissy," Lestrange warns.

"Don't use that ridiculous moniker, Rodolphus. I'm perfectly right, and you know it."

With that, Narcissa and Lestrange begin a whispered exchange that seems to cover every single one of the differences between their two noble families. Avery quickly grows bored and returns to arguing Quidditch strategy with Rosier and Mulciber. Snape, not trusting Narcissa and Lestrange to keep at each other's throats for long, snatches the opportunity to speak privately with Kuhn.

"If you don't eat at least half of what's on your plate, I refuse to proofread your essays for the next week."

"What?" Kuhn asks, looking both surprised and slightly angry. "Why?"

Snape does not dare speak the truth with Lestrange sitting next to him – namely, that Kuhn will soon become useless to him as protection if his eating habits don't swiftly improve – so he settles for something close. "The less you eat, the more exasperating you become. I refuse to encourage your obvious penchant for causing trouble."

"Trouble, Severus?"

"You know what I mean." Snape stabs his fork in the air accusingly. He is not amused when Kuhn decides this is funny and starts to laugh. It is, admittedly, not a very happy laugh, more an expression of bottled-up anger and desperation.

"Shut up," Snape hisses, bringing the hand holding the fork down to the table with a clang.

Kuhn closes his mouth, breathing heavily. He takes one look at his barely touched, now cold and soggy roast and scowls. "Half, you say?"

"At least."

Kuhn grumbles but complies.

A great flapping sound fills the Great Hall, and Snape realises that it is time for the evening post delivery. He does not expect a reply from his mother, so is mildly concerned when Virgil suddenly settles down next to his plate with a Muggle envelope in his beak.

Spotting the raven, Narcissa and Lestrange immediately cease their bickering and turn to face Snape.

Hands trembling, Snape pushes his plate away and carefully extracts the letter from Virgil's glistening bill.

"You may eat what you like," he tells the bird quietly, not quite daring to examine the letter in his hands. There are irregular liquid stains on the paper, and strangest of all, the address is written in his father's sloppy script . . . his father, who has never once written to Snape in his life . . .
"Is that not Regulus' raven?" sneers Narcissa.

Snape shoves the letter into an inner pocket of his robes. Virgil, head and tail bobbing, steps closer and begins feasting from the remainders of Snape's roast.

"Regulus asked me to use him," he says, and can feel his heart pounding.

This seems to amuse Lestrange, who snorts. "Since he never uses that raven himself, I can see why."

"Can you?" Narcissa's voice is cold, and Snape can see the motors turning in her head. He hopes that she will come to the right conclusion and what is more, do something about it.

"Regulus was . . . most insistent that I use Virgil."

Narcissa is staring down the length of the table to where Black sits, all dark curls and aristocratic sneer. "I see," she says emotionlessly.

"Kraa," Virgil calls. Snape turns to look and for a moment, a single beady eye holds his gaze. There is something . . . almost knowing in the bird's expression . . .

And then Virgil spreads his creaky black feathers and takes off with powerful beatings of his wings, leaving Snape alone to deal with the sinking feeling in his gut, Narcissa's growing suspicions, and a very pale and disgruntled looking Kuhn.

The Quidditch team leaves dinner first, followed by Narcissa, who claims a headache, and Lestrange, who has to attend a prefect's meeting.

Kuhn has still not eaten enough of his meal, so Snape grinds his teeth and contemplates an array of hexes that might help motivate him to do so.

"Hey, Kuhn!"

The call comes from further down the table, where Wilkes sits with Claudia Bramblethorn next to other Seventh Year girls. Wilkes is grinning at Kuhn, gesturing him to scoot down and join them.

Kuhn raises an eyebrow at Snape. "You coming?"

Snape hides his surprise at being invited – after all, Black and Avery are far away on the Quidditch pitch – behind a faint sneer. "Only if you take your plate with you."

"Yes, mother."

"If you wish to retain full use of your limbs . . ."

Kuhn rolls his eyes. "I get it, Severus." He grins disarmingly, picking up his plate and motioning at Wilkes with his head. "Come on."

Is it strange, Snape wonders as he stands up and makes his way to sit next to Claudia Bramblethorn, that he no longer minds when Kuhn addresses him by his first name? Snape has never once referred to his roommate as Adrian, nor does he plan on ever doing so. Insincere familiarity is anathema to him. Kuhn does not say Snape's name with malice or as an insult, however – in fact, he almost says his name as an endearment, just as she might once have. It is confusing, if not entirely unpleasant . . .

Claudia Bramblethorn is a heavy-set witch with a strong jawbone, short black hair and thick dark makeup applied to her lips and eyelashes. She barely glances at Snape, her eyes only for Kuhn as he
settles in next to Wilkes.

"We heard you speaking in German," she tells Kuhn with a smile. Up this close, Snape can see that she has painted her lips a deep purple, which makes the smile rather ghastly.

"It was mostly Narcissa doing the talking," Kuhn says, lips twitching with suppressed amusement. Snape is relieved to see some wariness in his eyes.

"Yes, we heard her showing off as well." Bramblethorn wrinkles her nose. "Awful, the way she does that. She doesn't care at all about other people, only about looking good in front of society."

Kuhn blinks. "That's basically what she said to me in German."

Wilkes elbows Kuhn with a grin, obviously proud of his girlfriend. "Claudia's mother is Swiss German, so she understands everything."

Bramblethorn laughs. It's not the ugliest sound Snape has heard. "Don't get his hopes up, Terance." She rolls her eyes at Kuhn. "I understand most things. Can't speak for the life of me, though."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. My mother may have spoken to me in German, but I always answered back in English." Bramblethorn shrugs. "Didn't want to have her accent, I suppose."

Snape can sympathise.

"Oh. Well, that's still cool. Have you ever visited, er, Switzerland or Germany?"

"Loads of times. We usually go to Alps for our winter holidays, you see. And I've been all over Germany – Munich, Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Cologne . . ."

"Have you been to Berlin?" Kuhn sounds absurdly hopeful.

"No, my parents say it isn't worth the trouble. The Russians had their Ministry of Magic put Anti-Apparition barriers over the wall, you know, even though we wizards aren't at all involved in the Cold War."

"I know."

Does Snape merely imagine it, or are those shadows lurking in Kuhn's eyes?

"Is that where you're from, then?" Bramblethorn asks. "I was wondering – I couldn't quite place your accent."

"Yeah, I lived in Berlin."

"Strange, I'd never have guessed. You don't seem to speak Berlinerisch."

Kuhn pretends to shudder, leading Snape to believe that Berlinerisch must be at least as ugly as a Manchester dialect. "Never. Only standard German for me."

"You don't speak any dialects?" Bramblethorn presses, looking slightly disappointed. "What about your parents – where were they from?"

"My father came from Wittenberg – most of the Kuhn's are from Wittenberg – and my mother from Jena." But there is a something in Kuhn's tone, a false note that suggests to Snape he is not telling the
"East Germany, I see. Never been there myself. And you really don't know any Mundarten? Shame, they're so charming. I guess they're dying out in Germany. In Switzerland, though . . ."

Snape tunes out the rest of Bramblethorn's chatter in order to analyse what he has just learned. Kuhn seems to have been lying about his parents' origins, which he claims are somewhere in East Germany, a place where, at least according to Bramblethorn, few wizards frequent. He is obviously attached to Berlin, an apparently a dangerous place to live, and yet does not speak like a local. What was it that Kuhn had said? *I lived in Berlin,* as if to imply he'd also lived elsewhere. And yet he does not carry the accent of any other German city or region, almost as though he had never been born and raised in the country . . .

If Snape hadn't heard Kuhn speak the language with his very own ears, he would conclude that Kuhn is not German at all.

". . . say something in German," Wilkes demands.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Slytherin is awesome."

"Slytherin ist der Hammer."

Bramblethorn giggles.

Confronting Kuhn with his suspicions now would not be a good idea, Snape decides. Kuhn would simply lie to his face anyway. *I must not tell lies* indeed. Kuhn is a terrible liar, frank to a fault – except, apparently, when it comes to his own past. Does his entire life story consist of fabrications? Well, Snape can wait to find out. Inevitably, Kuhn will slip again.

Snape will get to the bottom of this, one way or another.

Nearly all students and most of the staff have left the Great Hall by now. Bramblethorn and Wilkes are headed towards the doors, and Snape follows closely, Kuhn in tow.

Kuhn seems strangely reluctant to leave. He pulls at the arm of Snape's robes as if trying to slow him down.

"I was thinking – since today is a Wednesday – well, when I was here this summer, I used to go down to visit the gamekeeper –"

"What on earth are you blabbering on about now, Kuhn?"

There is something desperate to that pale face, those brilliant green eyes. "Can we go visit Hagrid? Curfew isn't for another two hours, and it would just be for a quick tea."

"Absolutely not," Snape snaps, thinking about the full moon outside.

"Why?"

"Because it is unsafe."

"Unsafe?" Kuhn frowns. "If you mean Hagrid's dog, he may *look* big, but on the inside he's an absolute baby. Wouldn't harm a mouse."
"That is not what I meant –"

"Hagrid does have a tendency to keep dangerous pets, I'll grant you that, but last I checked it was just him and Scar. You know, the dog."

Snape stops walking. He glances surreptitiously in both directions – no one is watching – then grabs Kuhn by the collar, hauling him close so that their noses are practically touching. Swiftly, Snape leans forward and hisses into Kuhn's ear, "There will be a full moon tonight."

He can nearly taste the other boy, the scent of his Muggle cologne is so strong. It occurs to Snape that he is in roughly the same position Avery had been – appalled, he lets go of Kuhn's collar and jerks back . . .

But Kuhn does not seem to notice Snape's dismay. "So? Sunset is not for another hour, and even if it does get dark while we're out, the full moon will help us to see better. Unless – oh," Kuhn says in a tone of dawning realisation. "There's a werewolf on the grounds, isn't there."

"Precisely," Snape hisses, avoiding Kuhn's gaze.

Sneering in lieu of another way to rid himself of the disgust curling in his stomach, Snape resumes walking, this time at a doubled pace. Kuhn scrambles to keep up with him. "Yeah, but I don't really see the problem. Dumbledore wouldn't let a werewolf roam the grounds, not while Quidditch practice is still on and especially not when Hagrid lives out there."

"Don't be so sure."

"But Hagrid –"

"Dumbledore knows that the gamekeeper can take care of himself."

Kuhn comes to a halt. Snape stalks onward, unmoved.

"Severus, please."

Snape closes his eyes and counts to ten in his head. When he spins to face Kuhn, the billowing of his robes is dramatic. "What?"

Kuhn's green eyes are pleading, begging him to relent. Snape avoids looking at them. "Hagrid is my friend. If you don't come with me, I'll go visit him alone."

"If you're waiting for me to stop you, I'm afraid I must disappoint."

"Oh come on, Severus. It'll be fun, and I'll be careful, promise."

Snape sneers. "You and careful don't belong in the same sentence. You are the most foolhardy, reckless –"

"I know, I know. I always speak before I think – dammit, I know."

"Well then."

Kuhn steps forward, green eyes shining with hope. "Please come with me?"

Snape snarls, hating himself for his reaction to those eyes. "Why can't this be on some other day?"

"Because I always visit Hagrid on Wednesdays."
"And you did not see fit to tell me this until now?"

Kuhn shrugs, only looking slightly guilty. "I didn't remember until now."

Snape thinks for a long time. He does not want to do this. The chance of running into the werewolf is slim, of course, but he still does not want to do this. He has his battery to experiment with and essays to complete and assigned readings to analyse.

And yet there is something about the way Kuhn is looking at him that makes him hesitate. Kuhn wants him to come to Hagrid's, and not just because he needs Snape to protect him from Avery. It is almost as though Kuhn really does consider Snape his friend.

"Blast," Snape mutters.

"I'll take that as a yes," beams Kuhn, practically bouncing with excitement. "It's a yes, right?"

Snape merely sneers.

"Thank you thank you thank you – you won't regret this, I promise."

Snape glowers at him. "I'm regretting this already."

But Kuhn is all smiles, and Snape – because no one has smiled at him like that in ages, because possibly he's missed having someone smile at him like that – follows him sneeringly out of the Great Hall, something intangible and almost pleasant fluttering in his chest . . .

They have not gone very far – or at least it doesn't seem that they have – when Kuhn comes to an abrupt halt and says, "Shit."

Snape looks up from the ground and freezes mid-step. They are in a badly lit, rarely frequented side corridor. Potter, Black and Pettigrew are standing directly in their way, horrible smiles on their faces.

A quick glance to either side reveals a ratty tapestry of Mechthild the Wise and that there is no easy escape.

"Thought we saw the two of you plotting," says Black in a self-satisfied sort of voice. He holds his wand in a slender hand, and though it is not quite pointed at Snape, it could instantly move in that direction if Black so desired.

"Sn-Snivellus and Adrianne," Pettigrew exclaims, round cheeks quivering, "all they need to do is start holding hands, then they'll be the most – the absolutely most disgusting people in the school!"

"You need to work on your grammar, Pettigrew," Snape sneers, flicking his sleeve so that the black fabric flares out – and his ebony wand slides surreptitiously out of its sleeve holster into his hand.

"Oi, Wormtail, I could have lived without that image," Black complains.

"Don't want to be giving them any ideas, now," Potter says coldly.

Next to Snape, Kuhn is staring at Potter with a combination of disbelief and rage. "So this is how you fulfil your Head Boy's duties, Potter – by picking stupid fights. Severus and I haven't done anything to you."

Black pretends that he has a sudden coughing fit. "Oh, it's Severus now, is it?"

Potter stares at Kuhn, hesitant and imperious at the same time. "Tell Snivellus to put away his wand,
then."

"So you could hex him all the better? I don't think so." Kuhn grimaces. "If Evans got word of this –"

Potter snarls, his wand instantly materialising in his right hand. "Lily would never defend the likes of you, especially since you're the one who riled her up in the first place."

"What?" Kuhn looks devastated. "Are you saying she wanted –"

Of course Lily didn't intend for her boyfriend to attack them. She would be furious if she knew what Potter was doing. Snape takes pleasure in this knowledge as he intensifies his sneer for Potter. "Evans isn't in the best of moods, I take it? Perhaps she's finally recognised that an overblown ego is no proper substitute for brains . . ."

Pettigrew blinks ratlike eyes at Snape. "Don't you dare speak to James that way, Sn-Snivellus!"

Kuhn steps forward, and suddenly the world tilts.

Snape feels his hackles rise, his eyes widen. Around Kuhn, the once stale air now seems to pulse with energy. The shift is not visual and would be subtle enough to go unnoticed, a mere uncomfortable prickling beneath the skin, were Snape not already sensitised to the electric kiss of his battery . . .

Kuhn advances and Black makes a growling sound, his dark eyes narrowed in warning. Pettigrew whimpers and bites his lower lip with overgrown front teeth . . .

"Say that name again," Kuhn says softly, "and I'll gut you, you filthy rat." And as Pettigrew throws himself, trembling, behind Black, Snape shakes his head, wishing he had his instruments with him to measure the voltage, the current and resistance of the invisible electric flow now surging through the room.

Kuhn spins to face Potter, who quickly schools a look of mild unease into one of scorn. When Kuhn opens his mouth to speak, Snape can almost hear the air crackling. "As for you, Potter, you say I upset Evans, but somehow I have trouble imagining that's why you're here."

Potter's thin lips curl into a cool, arrogant smile. It's the smile of a boy who believes himself indestructible. "Wrong, Kuhn. You upset Lily, so you have to pay."

"Of what exactly am I supposed to be guilty?" Kuhn's voice trembles, and the air vibrates angrily with him. But Potter does not appear to have noticed; his supercilious smile merely widens. "I never insulted Evans. She was already upset before we even met."

Prickles of energy charge the hairs on Snape's arms and he finds that he is trembling –whether from excitement or mere physiological overload, he does not know. Probably both. The power coursing through the room rouses both the scientist and the aesthete in Snape. Every inch of his body strains to come nearer to Kuhn, to examine and observe him, to quantify and qualify his power in rational terms, and yet the desire to merely admire him is strong too. Snape wants to touch the sublime unseen with his own hands, but he also wants . . . to worship it from a distance . . .

"Let's just get on with it, Prongs," growls the impatient voice of a barbarian unable to appreciate the earth-shattering shift in paradigm taking place before him –

Snape belatedly recognises the voice and turns, slowly, to face Black. He had nearly forgotten that he and Kuhn were being ambushed by his three most-hated Gryffindors. Cheeks heating with the embarrassing realisation that he has allowed his mind to wander, Snape stares at his enemy and tries
to analyse their next move.

Their weaknesses are obvious, their strategy plain. All three Gryffindors have drawn their wands . . .

Snape's own ebony wand rests comfortably in his fingers, ready to hex any of them at any second. But even as he plans his attack, Kuhn's magic reverberates like a siren call in his skin, and he cannot help but glance over at his roommate: pale, determined, radiant with magic . . .

Gentle footsteps sound from an unexpected quarter, bringing with them more change. Snape twists to see Lupin emerge from a secret passageway behind Mechthild the Wise. "Why there you are, James, I'd been looking everywhere – oh."

Lupin's voice sends such hatred spiking through Snape that he whips his wand out into an attack stance. Lupin, however, does not seem to notice. He stands hesitant at the threshold between the tapestry and the corridor, his almost yellow eyes wandering between Potter and Kuhn.

"Lily is looking for you, James," Lupin says quietly.

"As you can see, Moony, Lily can wait," snaps Black, jabbing his wand in Snape's direction. "Back us up here."

Lupin worries his bottom lip with his teeth. "I'd rather that you went up to the common room."
Snape barks a disbelieving laugh. " Worried you'll accidentally maul your friends, Lupin?"

How much longer until his transformation? Two hours, at most . . .

Lupin, his skin shiny as wax in the flickering torchlight, sends Snape an infuriatingly melancholy smile. "I wouldn't expect you to understand, Severus."

"Moony –"

"Lupin," interrupts a bright, ringing voice – and although the tremors in the air that accompany that voice hardly surprise him any longer, Snape cannot help but wonder how he ever thought Kuhn powerless. "Will you please tell Evans I'm sorry?"

"See, he admits that he's guilty!" Black exclaims.

"He does no such thing," snarls Snape.

Kuhn's voice continues, clear and extraordinary, "I never meant to upset her, and if I did am very sorry –"

Potter snorts. "It doesn't bloody well matter what you meant –"

"James, this isn't productive –"

"Yes, just think of Potter's reputation," Snape mocks.

Lupin ignores Snape and makes eye contact with Kuhn. "I'll . . . convey your apology."

"You won't say a word to Lily, Remus, or we can forget about tonight." Potter's voice is icy, and Lupin pales to hear it. "Have we got that clear?"

Snape doesn't quite understand what Potter is referring to, but he does recognise a threat when he hears one. Potter is blackmailing Lupin, no doubt with regard to his lycanthropy, and while Snape
feels no sympathy for Lupin whatsoever, he is nonetheless unpleasantly reminded of that night not so long ago when Black sent him after the werewolf –

"Planning on a moonlit stroll, Potter?" he sneers. "I wonder what poor, unsuspecting victim you intend to lure down with you this time –"

"SILENCIO!" snarls Black, robbing Snape of his voice.

Kuhn reacts even before Snape, cancelling the spell with a savage slash of his wand. Black leers and sends a red Stunner at Kuhn, who instantly blocks it with a shimmering blue shield –

Sneering, Snape stuns Black with a Stupefy of his own.

"Fighting won't help, dammit –"

Ignoring Lupin's pitiful attempts at peacemaking, Potter shoots a non-verbal Leg-Locker curse at Kuhn who, again, merely defends himself with powerful shield charm. Scowling now, Potter, assisted by Pettigrew, sends a rapid succession of increasingly dangerous curses at Kuhn – with the corner of his eye, Snape can see Kuhn dart nimbly, effortlessly away from Potter's curses, as though ducking horrible spells were something he did for a living –

Despite his amazement at Kuhn's skill, Snape cannot quite approve of his entirely defensive approach to the fight. Never one to shy away from the offensive himself, he shoots volleys of savagely painful curses at Potter and Pettigrew. Several of them hit their targets, much to his delight –

Unfortunately, Potter is not one to give up, even when he is hopelessly outclassed. Panting, sweat dripping from his brow, he flicks his wand – a hot flash of orange light streaks towards Kuhn –

Pettigrew attempts to stun Snape, who retaliates with a curse that causes Pettigrew's ears to blow up like balloons, knocking away his sense of balance –

In a swift, yet almost lazy gesture, Kuhn steps forward to meet Potter's spell, his wand held up before him like a sword. For a moment, time seems to still, and Snape catches glimpse of a face remarkably like Lily's, strained with concentration and steeped in fiery light –

"Repercussio," says Kuhn, and suddenly the streak of orange light is hurtling back towards Potter –

"Excelsiosempra!" shouts Potter, desperate now, and this time Kuhn's shield isn't quite quick enough, but is sent shooting up into the air.

Snape casts a non-verbal Accio! on Kuhn to bring him back to the ground – a split-second later Potter has been incapacitated by his own rebounded spell. Since Black has been stunned, only that idiot Pettigrew still presents a threat . . .

But before Snape can cast Stupefy, Pettigrew, face twisted and inhuman, ears the size of saucers, shoots a spell at Snape that sends him hurtling to the stone floor with boils breaking out all over his skin.

The counterhex is easy enough – Snape slashes wordlessly at the air with his wand, and his skin is clear again – but he had not counted on the effects of his Accio. Snape is barely back to his feet when, seemingly out of nowhere, Kuhn slams into him with his full weight, knocking them both forcefully to the ground.

"Enough, Peter! Stop!"
"But Moony –"

"Just help me take care of Sirius and James, OK?"

There are stars spinning before Snape's eyes and blood on his lips from where he must have bitten them as he fell. A thinly muscled, bony body, trembling with breathlessness and shock, presses painfully into his own, seeping warmth and leaving bruises. Kuhn is heavier than Snape would have expected; he cannot find the strength to push him away.

"Here." Snape has closed his eyes, but he can almost hear Lupin offering Kuhn a hand. Slowly, the body removes itself, leaving Snape cold and aching behind.

The magic – the power infusing the air – it's gone. For a moment, Snape allows himself to believe it had never been there.

"Severus?"

Snape's eyes flutter open and are met by orbs of reactive green. The hypnotic, electric power is still there, he realises, contained in that pair of green eyes.

He grimaces and looks away. Kuhn proffers a hand that he refuses. Gracelessly, Snape picks himself up from the floor, wiping at his bloodied mouth with his sleeve and wondering darkly just how many more surprises Kuhn has in store for him.

As he sheathes his wand, Snape's hand trembles.

Lupin hovers next to Pettigrew, presumably to help awaken his friends. Pettigrew, apparently, has not yet mastered *Enervate*, and Lupin, interestingly enough, does not appear particularly eager to assist him. There is a look of mildly simmering anger on the werewolf's sickly face as he glances over at Kuhn.

"I think you'd better go," he says quietly. His nostrils are dilated, and Snape suspects that Lupin can smell his blood.

"Good idea," Kuhn replies fervently. He steps over and reaches out to shake Lupin's bony, clawlike hand. "Thanks," he says, almost shyly.

The smile Lupin wears is small but genuine, and crinkles appear around his yellow-brown eyes. "There's nothing to thank me for."

"Still." Kuhn pulls back, appraising Snape with his clear, calm gaze. "You OK?"

"Never better," Snape snarls, hating the way Lupin and Kuhn look at each other, as though they share complete understanding.

"Then let's go," says Kuhn.

His world has been turned upside down, his body aches, there's a werewolf out and he would like nothing better than to return to his room. But Snape follows Kuhn out into the waning sunlight, because Kuhn has awakened his scientific curiosity and there is no way Snape will give up a chance to observe him now.

Curiosity – the motor of modern science. Snape prefers not to think about how it was also supposed to have killed the cat.
"Just what was that all about?"

"What do you mean?"

Snape scowls. "You know exactly what I mean. Your magic –"

"Oh." Kuhn runs two thin fingers over the bridge of his nose, almost as if seeking glasses to push into place. "Potter and Black made me really angry. This is the second time they've gone out of their way to make my life miserable, and this time we were definitely outnumbered. I guess I sort of . . . lost control."

Mentally, Snape notes that this is not a very accurate depiction of events. Potter and Black were not the ones who had pushed Kuhn over the edge – no, if Snape remembers correctly, that had been Pettigrew with his 'Snivellus' comment. Furthermore, Kuhn had been nowhere close to losing control. On the contrary, his display had been carefully restrained, channelled almost exclusively into creating defensive shields. Had Kuhn only decided to take the offensive, Snape doubts that Potter and his cronies would have gotten off with nothing but a few bruises . . .

They are silent for several moments, preoccupied with manoeuvring themselves down the steep and rocky pathway to Hagrid's hut. Once they reach leveller ground, Snape speaks again, his tone mild. "You never did give me that list of spells."

"List of spells? Oh – right." Kuhn smiles ruefully. "You seemed kind of busy last night, you know, with your experiments, and I guess I forgot to give it to you this morning."

"No matter. It is probably redundant now."

"Really?"

Snape scowls, annoyed that he has to spell things out. "Obviously, you are more than capable of defending yourself in a duel without my assistance."

Kuhn grins up at him. Absurd, that someone so short could produce such magic. "Was that a compliment?"

"No, it was a statement of fact."

A laugh, pleasantly clear. "Still, I would be interested in hearing your opinion. I'm aware that my strategy has its weaknesses. And I bet you know loads more spells than me."

Snape is both pleased and irritated. On the one hand, he has analysed Kuhn's strategy and would not be averse to discussing its weaknesses with him. On the other, Kuhn has just demonstrated that he is a very powerful wizard, probably even more powerful than Snape. There is absolutely no reason for him to ingratiate himself with Snape, as though Snape were a stupid little kid he had to keep in the dark and bribe with sweets.

"Flattery will get you nowhere –"

"Seriously, you read a lot more than I do, and you experiment all the time. I just tend to stick with what I already know, and I know that that limits me."

Snape opens his mouth to protest, then considers. He decides that he is not offended, merely understandably disbelieving. "You truly wish for my opinion?"

Kuhn blinks at him. "Well, yeah."
A smile threatens to break Snape's composed expression, and he averts his face so that Kuhn won't see it.

"Perhaps not right now, though. I don't particularly want Hagrid to know that we just came from a fight."

Reflexively, Snape licks the dried blood on his lips. He'll never get it all off this way, he decides, and casts *Tergeo* on his face and clothes.

"Good idea," says Kuhn approvingly, using the same cleaning spell on his own sweaty robes.

Marginally more presentable now, Snape follows Kuhn up a set of rickety wooden stairs that lead up to the door of the gamekeeper's cabin. The door opens almost before Kuhn can finish knocking, and a black mastiff with a long, jagged white scar on its nose bounds out, wagging its enormous tail at a furious speed.

"Hey there, Scar," croons Kuhn, holding out the back of his hand for the dog to smell and lick. Snape edges away from the dribbling beast, knowing from experience that most animals are predisposed to attack him. Fortunately, this dog only seems to have eyes for Kuhn . . .

"Is tha' yeh, Adrian?"

"Hi, Hagrid," Kuhn calls past the open door. "Are we still on for tea?"

A massive figure lumbers out from the shadowy interior of the cabin, dark beard and hair scraggily and wild, glinting black eyes crinkled in a smile. "'Course we are," says Hagrid, but Snape hears false cheer in his tone.

Hagrid had not been expecting visitors, so much is clear.

"This is my friend Severus Snape," says Kuhn, still scratching Scar. He seems to have hit a sweet spot, for the dog whines with pleasure, one leg beating ecstatically at the air. "I wanted him to meet you."

Hagrid squints down at Snape, and his mouth twitches noticeably downward as he takes in the Slytherin robes. Snape, not eager to offend someone twice his size, warily proffers his hand. With every sign that he would rather touch a Fire Crab, Hagrid grudgingly takes Snape's hand into his own gigantic, callused one and squeezes as though intending to crush the bones.

"A pleasure – to properly make – your acquaintance," Snape manages through the pain.

"Snape, is it?" says Hagrid gruffly. "I've heard abou' yeh."

"Have you?" Snape gasps as his hand is finally let go. He flexes it, almost surprised that it still remains functional and connected to his body.

If he notices Hagrid's animosity, Kuhn does a good job of hiding it. He glides past the gigantic man into the cabin's only room, closely followed by the dog, and settles himself into a capacious red armchair with the air of someone certain of his welcome. Snape thinks that Hagrid would have a fit were he to sit in one of his chairs, so he stands behind Kuhn instead, quietly observing.

The cabin smells strongly of firewood and game, of pheasant and ham and dried herbs. There is a large bed in one corner, covered in a colourful patchwork quilt, and on the other, a sizeable copper teakettle dangles within a sooty fireplace. On a tall wooden table to Snape's immediate right, a glass contraption reeking faintly of alcohol stands half-covered by a dusty blanket. Strange items are
suspended from the ceiling rafters and hooks on the walls, including an enormous crossbow and a shiny moleskin coat. Scattered over the dirty, crumb-littered floor, Snape also notices some glistening white strands of hair that look suspiciously as though they might have come from a unicorn.

"I have ter admit, I wasn' sure yeh'd want ter come by anymore, Adrian . . ."

"Why not?" Kuhn is bent over the dog, ruffling its floppy ears. "You didn't think I would forget you, Hagrid?"

"Well . . . with yer classes startin' an' all . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kuhn says with feeling, letting go of the dog and smiling at the gamekeeper.

Hagrid shuffles his considerable weight, expression still caught somewhere between pleased surprise and mistrust. "I suppose yeh'll be wantin' some tea, then?"

"Only if it's no imposition, Hagrid. I mostly just wanted to see how you and Scar were getting along, and if you needed help with anything."

Hagrid beams at this, his craggy, wind-scoured face softening into an almost childlike expression of gratification. "Yer a good one, Adrian, tha' yeh are. Well, me an' Scar don' need any help specific like. 'Course, if yeh want, yeh an' yer friend here can come help me feed the Thestrals."

Snape feels his eyes widening. It so happens that he can see Thestrals – he sat at the deathbed of his father's mother as a child – but while he has always considered their gaunt, reptilian appearance aesthetically interesting, he has never felt even the faintest stirrings of desire to actually approach one. Even the prospect of being able to observe Kuhn around such dangerous animals fails to warm Snape's enthusiasm.

There is also the fact that Hagrid looks as though he would like nothing better than to speak with Kuhn alone. One part of Snape is compelled to ignore this and simply go along with them into the forest, as Kuhn's interactions with Hagrid are bound to be interesting. Another part of him feels that it is not in his place to interrupt a meeting between friends.

Perhaps it is the repellent thought of Thestrals, perhaps merely the thought that Kuhn will appreciate the gesture. The latter part wins out. "What is the purpose of this device?" Snape asks, gesturing at the glass contraption smelling of alcohol.

Hagrid reddens. "Er, well now, that's not exactly fer me ter say . . ."

Snape takes swift steps until he is standing directly before the contraption; he levitates the blanket covering with a swish and flick of his wand. Clearly, Hagrid has been attempting to distil his own liquor. To judge from the haphazard manner in which the boiling chamber of the distiller is connected to water-cooling tubes, his efforts have probably not met with much success.

He tells Hagrid as much. "I would be happy to make the necessary adjustments, with your approval of course," Snape adds, running a thin finger across the rim of the receiving glass, then lifting it to his nose to sniff.

How anyone could want to drink something with this stench Snape cannot begin to imagine, but if repairing the device will get him out of feeding Thestrals, he is more than willing to oblige.

"Oh, Severus is brilliant at this kind of thing," Kuhn says enthusiastically.

Hagrid looks dubious, but eventually Kuhn convinces him to leave Snape alone in the cabin with the
distiller while they go feed the Thestrals.

"We won't be long," says Kuhn softly.

"Yeh be careful, now," warns Hagrid as he forcefully closes the door behind them.

"Naturally," Snape mutters.

The distiller has apparently never been cleaned, and Snape spends more time rinsing it out than he does making adjustments. As time passes and Hagrid and Kuhn still have not returned, he begins to divert himself in a more challenging manner, conjuring alternative parts out of thimbles and pottery shards and screwing them onto the device. All together, the changes he has imposed should greatly elevate the quality of Hagrid's liquor.

When Snape finally runs out of ways to work on the distiller, the sun has nearly set. He stretches, considers reading his father's letter, decides that the letter can wait and makes his way over to a large window facing the Forbidden Forest. There is no sign of either Hagrid or Kuhn.

Snape raises a hand to the cold windowpane and presses his face closer to the glass, as though he might see better that way. And indeed, for a moment he seems to catch sight of movement –

A stag stands nearly camouflaged by the shadows of the forest, its head lifted, ears cocked as if listening for a sound. Something – a small rodent, perhaps a rat – clings to its back. Beside the stag a black mutt runs back and forth with its nose trained on the ground, clearly analysing a trail. Snape has never seen a more unlikely group of animals in his life.

All of a sudden, the stag's ears shoot up in alarm. Haunches twitching, it bounds out of sight, the dog close behind.

A moment later, Hagrid and Kuhn emerge from the Forest, looking grim and exasperated.

Snape springs away from the window, his heart skittering in his chest.

Hagrid's gruff voice carries through the wooden door as he pounds his way up the front stairs. "... Never try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur, Adrian. Ruddy stargazers." There is a loud scraping sound, as though Hagrid were wiping his feet on sandpaper.

"I just wonder what he meant..."

"Ah, no good worryin' abou' it," says Hagrid wisely, opening the door.

Snape stands beside the glistening distiller, his hands trembling.

For a moment Hagrid merely glances around the cabin suspiciously, as if suspecting Snape of having stolen or broken or hexed his things. (Snape may just have pocketed a few of the stray unicorn hairs, but since they were lying like rubbish on the floor, he feels no guilt about this whatsoever.) Then he shuffles into the cabin, a frown on his face.

"Well," he says, suddenly noticing the distiller. His face widens in genuine surprise. "Why, yeh cleaned it!"

Snape, a sarcastic comment threatening to roll off his tongue, merely nods.

"Why –" Hagrid seems at a loss for words. "Tha' was real good of yeh, Sn—Snev –"

"Severus," supplies Kuhn, stepping around Hagrid's bulk with a tired smile on his face. Scar follows
devotedly at his heels. "I told you he was brilliant. So, when do I get to try some of your moonshine, Hagrid?"

"Ah, yeh know it ain' good fer yeh –"

"I'm old enough to decide that for myself."

Hagrid gives Kuhn an appraising look, and Snape thinks he sees consternation briefly pass over that craggy face. "Aye," says Hagrid quietly, "I reckon tha' yeh are."

"It's getting late," Snape says carefully.

Hagrid jumps as though he had forgotten Snape was even there. "Crikey, it's almos' dark. Best be on yer way to the castle, yeh two."

Kuhn nods at Snape, smiles at Hagrid. "Thanks for letting us come by, Hagrid."

"Any time," enthuses Hagrid, holding his whining dog to his leg, probably so that it won't follow Kuhn to the Slytherin dorms. "Nice ter meet yeh, Sev'rus."

Snape cannot think of anything to say, so he merely bows his head in acknowledgment before following Kuhn out of the cabin into the gathering nightfall.

They make their way up the rocky pathway in silence. Snape would like to ask Kuhn about his apparent meeting with centaurs, but cannot quite think of a way to do so that does not bring up the fact that he was technically eavesdropping.

"That was really nice, what you did for Hagrid."

Snape glances at Kuhn, whose expression is veiled by the dusk. "You know perfectly well that I only did it so that I wouldn't have to feed the Thestrals."

"If you'd just wanted to escape the Thestrals, you wouldn't have repaired Hagrid's distiller." Kuhn laughs. "Sorry, mate, this time you can't make me think anything but the best of you."

Snape ignores the sentiment. "Did you see the stag?"

"What?"

"There were three animals in the forest – a stag, a mutt and some kind of rodent. I wondered if you had seen them."

Kuhn mutters something incomprehensible under his breath. "No, but we did run into a pack of centaurs. The least friendly beasts on the planet, centaurs. They were going on and on about how bright Uranus looks –"

"Uranus." Snape was never particularly interested in astronomy, but he seems to vaguely remember Uranus as the planet of radical and unforeseen changes, the portent of revolution.

"Yeah. Anyway, they said it like it was something bad. Hagrid says they're always like that, though – pessimistic."

"I can only imagine."

Kuhn snorts. "You'd get along splendidly."
Snape steps around a boulder, and Kuhn appears on its other side. In the diminishing light, his large eyes are almost blue.

"Why didn't you want to come with us?"

Snape sneers, but in truth the question surprises him. "I hate animals. Animals hate me. Besides, your wild and hairy friend seemed eager for an opportunity to speak with you alone."

"True enough." Kuhn sounds considering. "I should probably be thanking you, then."

There is a strangely tight feeling in Snape's chest. He ignores it.

"You don't have to do that in the future, though. Hagrid knows you now, and I think you'd like the Thestrals. Once you get used to how they look, and the fact that they eat a lot of raw meat, they're really rather charming . . ."

You're rambling, thinks Snape, looking up at the lit castle, the growing moon.

". . . are you planning on conducting any experiments tonight?"

Snape comes to an abrupt halt. "Yes," he says, making the decision as he speaks. Before Kuhn can comment, he resumes walking at twice the pace.

"Great. Can I watch?"

"Certainly – assuming you let me work in peace."

Kuhn smiles brilliantly, and Snape quickly looks away. Kuhn cannot know that he himself has acquired the character of one of Snape's experiments. Everything Kuhn says and does from now into the future, Snape will monitor and analyse as carefully as his own physiological reactions to the Voltaic battery. For the integrity of the study, of course, Kuhn cannot know.

And if a little voice at the back of his mind objects that Kuhn is a person, not merely the object of an experiment, Snape pretends not to hear.

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Chapter End Notes

Translations of single German phrases:
nicht wahr?: is that not true?
Berlinerisch: German as spoken by locals in Berlin
Mundarten: vernaculars

*Rough translation of Narcissa's conversation with Kuhn:

NARCISSA: "I would be delighted, dear Adrian, if you would be so accommodating as to inform me about current events in your homeland, and would be grateful should you have any advice with regard to my understanding of German words. For nothing can make one more ridiculous in the eyes of society than the improper use of a word."

Narcissa pauses, silver lashes fluttering. "Do you not agree?"

KUHN: "But of course. You're completely right, and it would be an honour for me to hel—serve you in this regard."
Narcissa basically recites lines from German literature. Her first sentence paraphrases a line from Leibnitz's *China-Briefe*; her second is a slightly modified version of one of Charlotte's lines in Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*. 
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eight: Polarities

*Journal of Experiments*

*Property of the Half-Blood Prince*

September 8, 1976

9:55 pm – Kuhn will watch me experiment tonight. I am of two minds about this. On the one hand, I fear that he will get in the way or distract me with idle badinage. On the other, he might observe details that I, being connected to the battery, would otherwise miss.

Kuhn himself certainly goes out of his way to advance the second argument, even offering to photograph the experiments. Apparently he owns a camera that can instantly produce magical photographs. Personally, I do not see any value to photographing a self-experiment –

"I'm ready," announces a clear, earnest voice. Snape does not look up from his journal, merely hunching closer to his desk, hair swinging before his face, as he scrawls:

> given that the whole point is to see how my body reacts to electricity, and that almost all of those reactions are purely subjective. Then again, to see his perspective, the outsider's perspective, captured on film – the prospect is without doubt enticing. Perhaps the photographs will help me describe the process in more objective terms?

Snape sets down his quill and glances over at Kuhn, who looks bright-eyed and eager. He holds a leather pouch, undoubtedly the case for the camera, in one hand. The other hand is playing with the thick plumage of a Self-Inking Quill tucked behind his ear. The quill appears to be leaking, for a black rivulet is slowly trickling down Kuhn's cheek.

"Why do you want to photograph me again?" Snape asks.

"I used to hate cameras, but now . . ." Kuhn shifts impatiently. "Anyway, I don't want to take pictures of you, but scientifically relevant pictures of you experimenting."

They've gone over this countless times, but Snape still cannot quite grasp Kuhn's motivations. "I see. You wish to take pictures because you believe they would offer additional insight into my experiments."

"Yeah."

Snape squints at him. "Why?" And when Kuhn opens his mouth to answer, Snape continues, "Surely you have better things to do, such as your own research. Or," he sneers, "could it be that you harbour a secret desire to see me rendered helpless by pain?"

They have had a similar argument twice already, so Snape is not surprised to see Kuhn's eyes darken with frustration. "As if," he snaps. "Honestly, you prick, is it really that hard for your brilliant mind to grasp that I might actually be invested in the success of your experiments? That it would be great for me and oh yeah, a tonne of other people as well if you found a way to counteract the effects of one of the most debilitating curses in existence?"
When Kuhn is frustrated, his cheeks and lips become pronounced with colour. Snape also expects to feel a powerful shift in his magic, and is mildly disappointed when nothing extraordinary occurs.

"No?" Kuhn seethes. Snape merely watches him, the glitter in those green eyes, waiting for the dam on his magic to break. "Well, I hate to break it to you, Snape, but not everything is about you. Not even your bloody self-experiments – and I know you keep saying they're subjective and stuff, but not even they are completely about you, and – "

Snape glances at the enchanted window; from the position of the moon, he can tell it is growing late. Kuhn is probably not going to do anything interesting in the next few minutes.

He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Very well, then, you make take photographs."

Kuhn lets out a strangled sort of noise.

Snape lifts his nose and stares Kuhn down, even though Kuhn is standing and he is sitting. "You will not to interrupt me during my experiments. That means no folderol and no attempting to prevent me from undergoing a seemingly painful process." Snape sneers at Kuhn's surprised expression. "I am quite serious," he says softly. "Distract me, and I shall never allow you to come near my experimenting table again."

Kuhn opens, closes his mouth. "You – you're letting me take photographs."

"Are you deaf?" snaps Snape. "Of course you are going to take photographs. You are scarcely qualified to assist me in any other capacity."

Kuhn frowns, his eyes swirling, angry green pools. Snape steeples his hands and does not lower his gaze. The swirling pools narrow into gullies overflowing with suspicion.

And then, just like that, the fight goes out of Kuhn's shoulders. He puts on a poker face and opens the leather pouch, pulling out a chrome and leather-panelled camera that Snape immediately recognises as Polaroid SX-70.

Snape feels his mouth go dry with lust. He has wanted a camera like that . . . a single lens reflex system like that . . . well, ever since he first saw Mr Evans taking pictures of Lily with a SX-70 . . . Before he even realises it, Snape has risen from his desk. He lets out a sharp breath as those thin, clever fingers unfold the camera's viewfinder and lens.

"Don't worry, I have magical film. And yes, I do know how to use a camera, in case you were thinking of asking."

Snape straightens. He hadn't intended to get up, but now that he is standing, he might as well pretend that it was planned. "I hadn't realised that Polaroid produced magical versions of their cameras."

Kuhn shoves a film cartridge into the camera and doesn't reply. When he finally catches Snape's annoyed expression, it seems to puzzle him. "Did you say something?"

Snape feels his lips beginning to thin. "That is a SX-70, am I not correct?"

Kuhn goggles at Snape before shaking his head as if to clear it. "Yeah. God." Kuhn sounds resigned. "You know everything, don't you."

Snape says nothing.

The camera gleams up at him from the cradle of Kuhn's hands. A thrum of jealousy courses through


Snape. First there had been Lucius with his immense library, then Avery with his record player and Mulciber with his top-of-the-line set of potions equipment. Now Kuhn has the exact same camera that Snape has always wanted.

The situation is as familiar and unpleasant as ever. Except that – unlike Lucius and Avery and Mulciber, Kuhn is not aggressively flaunting his possessions in front of Snape. It is hard to imagine friendly, delicate Kuhn swearing at Snape to keep his greasy paws away from his camera. And Kuhn has always seemed willing to share his things . . .

Without quite thinking things through, Snape begins to speak. "May I –?" Too late, Snape clamps down his treacherous mouth.

Kuhn looks surprised, as though he thinks it out of character for Snape to be interested in a Muggle device. "You want to see?"

Snape averts his gaze. He is therefore quite surprised when a cool, rectangular weight is pressed into his hands. When his gaze snaps up in astonishment, Kuhn's eyes glisten with a tentative smile.

Gingerly, not quite believing his luck, Snape raises the camera to eye-level. He loses several moments in admiring its sleek modern lines and wishing fervently, obsessively, that it were his own.

"Want to take a picture?" Kuhn asks, assuming a jaunty pose before his desk.

Snape sneers. "It is plain that you want me to." He hopes that Kuhn does not see how his fingers are trembling.

"Well, go on then."

Snape lifts the viewfinder to his eyes and spends a long time playing with the focusing wheel. It is surprisingly difficult to get the camera to focus. After several teeth-grinding moments, Snape is finally satisfied enough with his composition (Kuhn is an out of focus blur, while his messy desk appears in excruciating detail) to push the red shutter button. The camera instantly ejects a wet, undistinguished photograph –

Before Snape can even react, Kuhn has already leapt forward and snatched it away by the edges.

As he fans the wet photograph, Kuhn hops up and down in his impatience for it to develop. Snape pretends disinterest, examining the camera instead. There is probably a mirror along this surface and another one there – and there – to reflect the light onto film. It is a magic of its own, this simple mechanism to preserve the world as Snape sees it, if only for a moment . . .

Snape is suddenly aware of the silence around him. He looks up from the camera and realises that Kuhn is no longer hopping up and down, but staring at him with unabashed curiosity.

"It is a well-engineered machine," Snape snaps, feeling the need to defend himself.

Kuhn raises his eyebrows, but says nothing. Snape looks down at the camera in his hands, his heart sinking at the thought of what he must do next.

"Thank you for letting me take a look," he says, averting his gaze. Then he proffers the camera.

"Sure," says Kuhn. He accepts the camera easily, although his attention remains fixed on the photograph he holds in his other hand. Snape glances at it: Within the square, milky-green space of film, the faint, moving outlines of a slender torso and wide smile have begun to assert themselves.
"You have a good eye," Kuhn murmurs.

Snape sneers. Kuhn probably only likes the photo because he features in it. "How would you know? It hasn't even finished developing."

Kuhn sets down the photograph on his own desk. "I can just tell," he says cryptically.

Snape has a sarcastic rejoinder on the tip of his tongue when Kuhn looks up at him, bright-eyed.

The comment dies in his throat.

"So," says Kuhn, buoyant, "ready to experiment?"

Snape stammers some kind of answer, his eyes unable to leave Kuhn's face. It is as if having framed Kuhn through a camera viewfinder has dramatically altered his perspective. Kuhn is . . . Snape can't even begin to describe what he is . . . There is a Self-Inking Quill tucked behind Kuhn's ear that Snape grasps onto as for a lifeline to help tear himself away from those eyes. The Quill continues to paint Kuhn's cheek with steadily falling drops of ink. The way Kuhn looks with black tears washing down his face is indescribably beautiful . . . What Snape would give for the camera now, to preserve this image . . .

Yet in a most peculiar burst of – something, Snape can suddenly no longer watch from a distance. He is compelled to interact with the composition before him, even if it means destroying its strange, ethereal beauty. And so he does, tipping forward and – snatching up the quill.

He retracts his hand on instinct, fingers brushing the cold surface of skin. Realisation hits a second later, the impact widening his eyes.

Kuhn is somewhat slower on the uptake. His hand snakes up to his ear; disbelief is written over his face. "Did you just . . ."

Snape cannot explain what it means to feel what he feels, as he does not quite understand it himself. It wouldn't do to let Kuhn know, in any case. Smirking, ignoring how rapidly his heart is beating, he runs a hand through the quill's thick plumage and quickly thinks up a cover-up story.

"It's been dripping ink all over your face," he drawls, taking in the way Kuhn's expression leaps from shock into embarrassment.

"Shit."

"Indeed." Letting his smirk widen, just enough so that Kuhn thinks he's being laughed at, Snape turns on his heel and makes the dramatic sweep back to his experimenting table.

Kuhn races to keep up as he casts a frantic Tergeo over his face. The SX-70 is cupped in his other arm. "You really could have said something before."

"And spared you the embarrassment of finding yourself covered in ink? I don't think so." Snape gives Kuhn a quick up and down. "You missed a spot," he smirks. And because there is something very strange and thrilling about touching Kuhn, because Kuhn is one of his experiments, Snape laps up the last black tear with a knobbly pointer finger.

There is definitely something electric about Kuhn's skin. Touching it makes Snape's entire arm tingle. Intrigued, Snape pulls back his finger to examine it. It seems unchanged.

For his part, Kuhn does not seem to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. He scrubs violently at
his cheek with his sleeve, turning the remnants of the blob into a long grey smear.

"You're only making it worse," Snape points out, unable to hold back a smirk.

"Bastard." Green eyes narrow at Snape; something makes them darken with satisfaction. "At least it's dripping all over you, now."

Snape glances down at the quill in his left hand and is unsurprised to see that his palm is being covered in ink. He casts swift blotting and cleaning spells. "One would think you'd never owned a quill before," he sneers.

"This one is more trouble than it's worth. You can keep it."

Self-Inking Quills, even possibly defect ones like this, are expensive. Snape wonders where Kuhn, who seems about as poor as he is (except for that camera, except for that), gets his generosity. He also begins thinking of plans to get the quill back to Kuhn without him noticing. "Are you still planning on taking pictures?"

"Yes." Although Kuhn has succeeded in rubbing his cheek raw, the smear is still there.

Snape finds himself staring. Irritation rises in him with the suddenness of a meteor blazing down on earth and he stalks up to his table with clenched hands. Once there, he sneers down at Kuhn, although it is himself he is sneering at really. "What are you waiting for, then? Let's get this over with."

10:03 pm – With Kuhn observing, I repeat yesterday's experiments with my hands. The battery is less lively than before. Must find a way to recharge it that doesn't involve replacing the individual components.

Possible roots for a recharging spell: recro, novo.

10:08 pm – Move on to experiments with my eyes because I think they will be easier to photograph than tongue, nose, ears. Kuhn does not appear to have realised what these experiments entail for he protests rather [blotted out] even as he continues watching through the camera lens. I barely see him when testing the silver pole. At first I think I have lost sight in my eye but then the opaque red haze asserts itself. Despite the battery's loss of energy between yesterday and today, the pain it produces remains [blotted out] extreme.

What would happen were I to increase the voltage of the battery while holding the silver pole to my eye? Would the red haze change colour? Would it shift to the opposite end of the spectrum, to blue?

What if I were to stare into the sun (at least twenty minutes would be necessary, I think), then down at a sheet of red paper? Would I see blue?

Probably. For what would seem to be polar opposites – positive and negative, red and blue – are merely relative intensifications of each other. That in fact many of the dualities we experience in nature are but the extreme expressions of the same, single force is one of the battery's greatest proofs.

"What is the point of this again?" Kuhn says, his voice distorted by the electricity coursing through Snape's skull.

Snape drops his quill – Kuhn's spluttering, barely functioning quill – but does not immediately reply. Slowly, he disconnects his left eyeball (it feels as though it has retreated completely into the skull, as though a knife has slit it into little bits) from the battery. Kuhn snaps a picture as he does so.
"You made a promise not to interrupt me," Snape says between gritted teeth. If he weren't in such pain, and so busy trying to gather his thoughts on the experiment, he might be angrier.

"I wasn't *interrupting*, I was asking a valid question."

"I told you I wouldn't have any of your foolish talk while experimenting."

"You never . . . Well, all right, you said *something*, but I didn't really understand what you meant."

Snape cannot remember what it was that he'd said, so he simply leans into the table with one palm held down on its surface, the other clutching at his butchered (at least it feels that way) eye.

"Jesus, Severus." Suddenly, Kuhn's voice is high-pitched with worry. "You can't just stand there like this. If it would help, I have some eye drops –"

"Be quiet," Snape hisses.

Kuhn shifts, makes a disgruntled sound. "I don't understand you. If I didn't know you were working on a potion to make these symptoms go away, I'd say you were deliberately trying to torture yourself."

Snape straightens, but his hand is still clutched protectively around his eye. "And if I were?"

"Don't be fucking obtuse."

This amuses Snape. Dropping his hand from his eye, he turns to Kuhn with the best smirk he can muster under the circumstances. "The pain is no longer of consequence. I am moving on to the other experiments." Snape pauses to squint at Kuhn, letting his voice go cold. "And this time, you will *not* interrupt me."

They have gotten through the experiments with Snape's ear and tongue and nose (with results almost exactly the same as yesterday) when Kuhn starts huffing with impatience.

"Are you going to experiment with *every* part of your body?"

Snape sneers at him. "No. Only the sensitive bits."

Kuhn opens and closes his mouth in an odd pantomime of a drawbridge. Snape raises an eyebrow and Kuhn, bright red, lowers his gaze. Randomly, Snape notices that Kuhn has very long eyelashes.

"You mean . . . even . . ."

"Indeed." Snape smirks. "You are not to observe that particular experiment, however."

"Right," Kuhn nods, looking everywhere but at Snape, who merely continues to smirk. Without glancing at the camera in his hands, Kuhn sets it down gingerly on the table. Either he is tired of carrying the camera, or he no longer wants to photograph the experiments. Probably both, Snape thinks. "And, er, what about the potion?"

"I haven't developed it yet," says Snape with a sniff. "At present, I am merely testing the more common remedies on the market – all palliatives of course – and observing their effects."

Kuhn's eyes are distant green quasars, bright and diffuse at the same time. "You can't possibly mean that you're planning on going through this every single night in order to test a few *palliatives*? Are you insane?"
Snape crosses his arms over his chest, annoyed and bewildered by Kuhn's concern. "It is standard procedure."

"Fuck standard procedure. You're not a pharmaceutical company. Either you stop electrifying yourself or you develop a cure and wait to do it then!"

"Or else?" says Snape softly.

Kuhn gapes at him. "Are you serious? You could end up destroying yourself." Before Snape can reply, Kuhn has grabbed one of Snape's pale, spasming hands. His grip is unexpectedly strong, holding on even as Snape struggles against it. "Just look at your hands. Do you want this to happen to the rest of you?"

Snape manages to free his hand (more likely: Kuhn lets him go), snatching it away as if it had been shocked by the electricity of four batteries. Distantly, it occurs to him that Kuhn probably would never have worked up the balls to touch him had Snape not plucked away his quill in the first place. This is a game that Snape himself started, but he is not going to think about those implications now. It is one thing for him, a pariah, to touch Kuhn, a whole different thing entirely for Kuhn to . . .

What would she say?

"What happens to my body is my concern, and mine only," Snape hisses, clutching his hand to his chest. A part of him may just be slightly flattered by the interest in his welfare. But the part of Snape that is proud of his independence, the part of Snape that prides itself on his logic and consistency – that part of him is insulted and enraged. Just who does Kuhn think he is, telling Snape what he can and cannot do? In his own room, no less?

And because Kuhn simply presumes – too – much, Snape uses his elbow to shove him out of his workspace.

Kuhn merely purses his lips and steps right back up to him. "I can't just stand by and allow you to slowly torture yourself, Severus."

Snape bares his crooked teeth. He probably looks as demented as he feels. "You have no obligation to stand here at all. In fact, I would appreciate it if you would return to your side of the room."

"Since when do we have 'sides'?" Green eyes flash as though a dagger had fatally pierced their depths, but any guilt Snape feels is rapidly being replaced with anger. "This is a pretty paltry thanks for trying to help you."

"In light of the fact that I never wanted your help in the first place," Snape sneers, "I think it is you who should be thanking me for my considerable forbearance up to now."

Kuhn stares up at him, stubborn to a fault.

Snape stares back, infuriated by Kuhn's unwillingness to yield.

"Get out of my lab." His wand slides down to his hand and he holds it in a tight grip.

"Or what?"

No sooner than he has spoken do Kuhn's eyes widen, guessing at what is to come –too late. Snape is already sending him flying across the room with a non-verbal Stupefy.

For several moments, Snape is too angry to properly analyse what he has done. Then the haze of
emotion clears and he sees. Kuhn has landed in sprawled heap at the foot of his bed, his head lolling forward, arms dangling limply at his sides. Briefly, Snape is paralysed by the sight. Unconscious like this, Kuhn seems impossibly fragile . . . Swallowing, Snape palms the SX-70 still sitting on his desk and cautiously steps forward.

The camera he sets carefully on Kuhn's bed. He hesitates; squats down next to Kuhn. Lightly Snape skates a hand over coarse, stiffly combed-back hair, searching for blood. He discovers a recalcitrant patch of hair at the back of the skull, its texture rougher than the rest. Gel and comb have had no effect on its natural pattern of growth; beneath Snape's long, pale fingers, it plays defiant games with gravity. Snape leans in closer, inhaling the strong, artificial scent of Muggle shampoo. A small thrill races through his gut. This is somehow forbidden, this closeness . . . but, Snape tells himself, he needs to make certain there was no injury. Besides, there will probably never be a better opportunity to observe Kuhn than this . . .

How could he ever have overlooked Kuhn's abundance of magic? Kuhn emanates energy like a pulsing star. There is almost . . . something familiar . . . Curious, Snape lets a finger trace down Kuhn's pale, curved cheek. The contact is warm, electric, and it makes Snape certain that some kind of magical energy is embedded in the skin itself. But that is not the extent of it. Snape has been training himself to identify magical signatures, and he immediately recognises that Kuhn's signature is different from the magic in his skin. Bright and buoyant . . . Snape tries to reach out for it with his own magic.

Instead, he brushes against something cold – dark, almost impossible to grasp, yet unnervingly familiar . . . a scent of sorts . . .

Snape's face is almost buried in that glistening field of black hair, so intent is he on unmasking it. It occurs to him rather as a side-thought that Kuhn might wake up and find his position incriminating. Snape pulls away from Kuhn so quickly that he nearly loses his balance in the process. He snarls at his own foolishness. Kuhn, fortunately, does not appear to have regained consciousness. Now hyperaware of the time, Snape casts a rapid succession of diagnostic spells to assure himself that Kuhn has sustained no critical injury. Then he tucks back a lock of stray, greasy hair and, swaying, gets to his feet.

Kuhn's eyelids are fluttering. He is unlikely to remain stunned for more than another thirty seconds. Damn, damn – damn.

This is no time for indecision. Snape makes a sharp about-turn and stalks back to his side of the room, adjusting the settings on his laboratory wards so that Kuhn cannot come anywhere near the experimenting table. With an almost vicious gesture of his wand, he banishes the Self-Inking Quill to Kuhn's desk. There is an unpleasant expression on his face as he transfigures an inkwell into a set of privacy panels.

The rustling of cloth and snapping of joints briefly bring Snape to halt. He recovers quickly. Without the slightest glance at his awakening roommate, Snape levitates the panels so that they are hiding everything but his bed from Kuhn's view.

He can hear Kuhn getting up from the floor. Sneering, Snape stares at the black panels and tightens his hold around his wand. His shoulders are so tightly drawn together the muscle cords seem ready to snap. Any second now, Kuhn will come bursting past wards and panels in a blaze of righteous anger.

Any second now.
Snape has nearly forgotten to breathe when, against his expectations, wood grinds against stone and a quill begins scratching at parchment. He frowns, unable to quite believe what he is hearing. But the scratch of the quill shows no signs of hesitation or stopping. To all appearances, Kuhn has taken up residence at his desk and simply resolved to ignore Snape.

It's almost disappointing.

11:22 pm – At last, I have enough privacy for this experiment. I have great expectations for the results, given how sensitive this organ is during masturbation.

Procedure: Once mildly aroused, I retract the foreskin and cover the organ's upper surface with a water-soaked linen rag of about room temperature. This is then connected with the zinc side of the battery. I dip my left hand in water and attach it to the battery's silver side, thereby closing the galvanic circuit.

The moment the circuit closes I receive a blow of such magnitude – the nearest parallel is hooking the battery to my finger, but that doesn't even come close in intensity. What's fascinating: Despite the pain, the organ swells and grows until it has reached such a length that I have to stop the experiment. For the feeling that accompanies that growth is so utterly indescribable, so utterly sublime [words crossed out]

Repeat experiment with silver connected to organ and zinc to hand, and the exact opposite occurs! The organ retreats into itself until it seems even smaller than when the experiment began. Searing, cutting pains accompany the process.

In these experiments, all sensation comes to a head. Next to the concentration, the intensity and completeness of feeling that is produced here, the other senses are but its lower forms.

Snape wakes up the next morning to horrible muscle pains. It's still early – six twenty-eight, according to Tempus, much earlier than he usually wakes – so he naturally tries to fall back asleep.

Eventually, Snape is forced to concede that he won't be able to sleep without taking a potion against the pain. Hands trembling, he parts the curtains of his bed and swings his aching legs to the floor. To his surprise, there is a faint light emitting from Kuhn's side of the room.

Snape squints, rubs the sleep from his eyes. Kuhn's silhouette stands out sharply against tightly drawn silver-green bedcurtains. He seems to have propped up a book against his knees and is reading by the light of his wand. Snape can see his head bent over in concentration, his sleep-tousled hair projecting wild, spiky shapes against the shimmering curtains. If Kuhn notices Snape – Snape assumes that he does – he gives no indication of having done so.

It occurs to Snape that he is supposed to be angry with Kuhn. What had Kuhn done again? Interrupted, presumed . . . Snape winces, suddenly remembering how he'd actually gone out and stunned Kuhn. Probably not the best move he could have made, in hindsight . . .

Is he really angry with Kuhn? With his muscles straining in pain, Snape even finds it hard to summon his remembered anger. Perhaps it's best to just . . . forget last night. Hopefully Kuhn will see things the same way. Surely Kuhn will understand that it's in their mutual interest to maintain a united front against Avery and Black.

But what if Kuhn doesn't agree?

Snape closes his eyes in an effort to ignore the trepidation pressing down on his chest. Kuhn will be reasonable. He has always been reasonable before. Surely . . . An image of Kuhn's brilliant grin rises
up in Snape's mind, followed by an unsettling thought. Will Kuhn ever trust Snape enough to smile at him like that again?

Maudlin rubbish. Disgusting, that he should even harbour such silly thoughts. For Merlin's sake, it's probably better for their working relationship that Kuhn stop trusting him. Snape doesn't exactly trust Kuhn himself.

Sneering, Snape stands and makes the shaky walk over to his desk, not caring whether Kuhn sees or gets up or smiles or anything. The wards Snape had set up against Kuhn last night should keep him out of Snape's path anyway.

A muscle relaxant and headache potion later, Snape has the presence of mind to realise that the self-same wards he has been relying on have been breached. The most concrete evidence of this takes the form of a Self-Inking Quill leaking over his desk. Next to it rests a scroll of parchment that definitely hadn't been there when Snape had gone to bed. As for the black panels that Snape had conjured for privacy, they have been transfigured back into an inkwell – a cracked inkwell now, also leaking all over Snape's desk.

Snape rubs his eyes listlessly. This is annoying, but not especially surprising. It merely confirms that Kuhn is a very powerful wizard. Whether he is a very powerful wizard with a grudge against Snape is the more interesting and immediate question. All of a sudden, Snape is uncomfortably aware of the fact that Kuhn is awake, behind his back and probably watching his every move. Pursing his lips, he subjects the parchment to a ruthlessly thorough examination before daring to touch, let alone unroll it.

It appears harmless, but appearances can be deceptive. Kuhn doesn't strike Snape as one for subtlety, but then, appearances can be deceptive there too. Rather than touch the parchment, Snape steps back several feet and unrolls it with a spell.

Nothing happens. Snape takes cautious steps back to his desk; nothing happens. He leans over the scroll and sees that it contains a list of spells written in Kuhn's bold, big handwriting. They have been organised alphabetically and by battle strategy – offensive, defensive, useless in a fight . . .

The breath nearly goes out of Snape's lungs and he throws caution to the winds, picking up the parchment with trembling fingers. Here, spilled out on paper, is a cipher to Kuhn's secrets. If he has even a modicum of sense, of course, Kuhn will not have listed every spell in his repertoire; and Snape knows better than to leave this list around for someone like Avery to find. He will have to simply commit Kuhn's obvious weaknesses to memory and then burn the thing.

*Confringo, Confundo, Crucio . . .*

Snape falls into his desk chair without realising it. So engrossed is he in analysing the surprisingly long list of offensive spells that he also does not realise that Kuhn has gotten out of bed.

"I'm pretty sure I forgot to list some things."

The list nearly falls out of Snape's nerveless fingers. Kuhn stands directly before Snape, a thin smile on his face. Snape scowls at him ferociously. "Yes, for example, *how* exactly you managed to break through my wards."

Kuhn yawns, not bothering to cover his mouth. "Trial and error," he says, completely unapologetic. Snape narrows his eyes, taking in Kuhn's condition. Purple shadows haunt the hollows of his skull, though the green eyes are softer, hazier than usual. His hair is sticking up in every direction, messier even than Potter's. In fact, the resemblance to Potter is particularly strong right now. Surprisingly, this does not unsettle Snape quite as much as the fact that Kuhn is wearing nothing but boxers and a
dressing gown.

(Mulciber had often wandered around naked, so that's not the problem. But there are spidery white scars on Kuhn's open chest, on what Snape can see of his legs, too many scars for a schoolboy. Not even Snape has so many scars left over from his encounters with Potter and experiments with Sectumsempra. The mystery surrounding Kuhn, Snape thinks resignedly, only continues to grow.)

"I see."

"No offence, but they weren't exactly your best work. I got the feeling you weren't really trying to keep me out."

Snape sneers, but does not immediately deny the accusation. It is true that he set up the wards with the expectation that Kuhn would undo them – as part of his experiment on Kuhn, of course. However, the less Kuhn knows about that the better.

"I was distracted," he says smoothly.

"You? Distracted? Well," Kuhn becomes thoughtful, clearly remembering the battery, "I guess you were." He shrugs. "So, are we back on the same page? No hard feelings?"

Snape feels his brow furrowing with confusion. "I think you should be the one to answer that question."

Kuhn yawns again, stretching the long scars on his thinly muscled chest. "Look, I can see where you were coming from. Just . . . don't do that again."

The warning, though friendly, is palpable.

"Are you saying I can't throw you out of my lab?" Snape can hear the bitterness in his voice.

"No. Next time you say to get out, I promise that I will. What I'm saying is that I tend not to react well to attack."

Snape is bursting with questions. Where did Kuhn get his scars? Why does he know so many offensive spells? Why is he tolerating Snape in the first place?

"So are we good?"

It would be a strategic error to ask Kuhn those questions now, Snape is certain of it. Despite his tendency to tell all, Kuhn always seems pained when someone asks him about his life. If Snape wants to hear his story – the true story, he will have to bring Kuhn into his confidence. To make Kuhn trust him with his secrets, he will have to make significant concessions. The only question is whether he has the energy and interest for such an investment.

It's not a decision Snape can make just now. Despite the headache potion, his temple is throbbing with pain. He touches it with a shaking hand before remembering that Kuhn is awaiting an answer.

"Yes. I accept your terms."

A smile, not quite as brilliant as Snape remembers. "Great."

Kuhn steps forward and picks up a stack of instant photographs from Snape's desk. They depict Snape – facial muscles tense and concentrated here, convulsing there – with sparking battery wires protruding from his eyes, nose, ears. Snape barely spares them a glance, fixated instead by the scarred chest moving at his own eye level.
"The pictures didn't come out too bad," says Kuhn, shuffling through the stack. "Have you taken a look yet?"

Snape looks down at the list in his hands. He rattles it for Kuhn's benefit. "I have been otherwise preoccupied."

"Oh. Right. So what do you think? Any spells I definitely need to master?"

Snape scowls. "How should I know? I haven't finished reading yet." But as he turns back to the list, a thought occurs to him. He is tired enough that he thinks aloud. "Of course, there are a few spells of my own invention – nothing ground-breaking, mind, just some spells I devised for my OWLs –"

"Show me." Kuhn's eyes are bright, as bright as those of a child whose wish has just come true.

Snape shrinks back from that gaze, unsure what to make of it. What does Kuhn want from him? Friendship? Is that really it? Does he really think that Snape can give that to him?

Suddenly, Snape wants nothing more than to flee to his bed. "I shouldn't have mentioned it," he says, "they're nothing more than schoolboy larks. Flights of fantasy."

Kuhn protests.

Snape makes a show of letting his weary eyes shut. "If you really want, I'll show you later."

"Later?"

"Yes." Snape pushes back his chair and stands. "Right now, I'm going back to bed."

Kuhn does not hide his disappointment.

"If I sleep through my alarm, you have permission to wake me," Snape mutters, uncomfortable, as he walks past Kuhn.

Snape is about to crawl into his bed when Kuhn stops him with his voice. "When are you going to stop doing this to yourself?"

Pretending not to hear, Snape arranges his long body beneath the covers.

"I won't stand for it much longer, Severus."

"Wake me up in an hour," says Snape coldly, and pulls the curtain shut.

Lily is outside on the green. She lies on a soft blanket, summer-sweet berries crushed in her mouth, and writes in her diary.

She knows that she should be studying, but there was simply no denying the warm September sun. And she needs the break – it's been that kind of week. Besides, the House Elves had given her strawberries, and don't strawberries taste even better slightly warmed by a summer's afternoon?

Definitely, thinks Lily, writing something completely different on the pages spread out before her.

For whatever reasons, Lily never uses her diary to record actual events. If someone upsets her, for example, she does not write that she is angry. Nor does she record the conversation leading to said anger. No, Lily prefers to compose her reactions to the world in general, even philosophical terms.
Names, places, and especially sensual details – the heightened colour of her detractor's face, the prickling sensation of tears – simply have no place in her diary.

Some people are obsessed with capturing every single detail of every moment of life on earth. Usually, these people drive themselves insane, because the venture is impossible. Reality is not a butterfly to be caught and preserved behind a glass display. Lily knows this. She's a pragmatist and proud of it. Certain details matter. The rest don't. She goes to great lengths to make sure that her worldview is reflected in her diary.

Lily also has a heightened sense of privacy and a dislike of people who pry into her life. She writes for herself and herself only, not for future readers. In her mind, the future reader is no better than an intruder. Keeping her text recondite, shielded against his voyeuristic gaze is even more important to her than being practical about the world.

Of course, there are readers and there are readers. Lily wouldn't mind showing her diary to someone, someday. As long as this reader didn't care about the sordid, quotidian details, she would be happy to share the sweeping patterns of her thoughts. That her mental image of this reader (yes, she has one) bears no small resemblance to one hook-nosed, greasy-haired, unhealthily pale boy from her neighbourhood back home does not overly concern her. Snape had known her best, is all; Lily is certain that her mind will latch upon a more appropriate candidate in time.

And she isn't ashamed to admit it: Thinking about Snape helps her sort out some of the moral and political questions that have been bugging her ever since learning about the wizarding world. She likes to tackle these issues in her diary. If Snape often serves to inspire her entries, then he does so only as the personification of certain issues, nothing more.

Nothing more. Lily lets her tongue trace along the protuberant seeds of a strawberry and re-reads her current entry.

Sept. 9 – Binns raised the point in History of Magic today that euthanasia isn't considered a criminal homicide in the wizarding world. The difference between intentions and actions, he said. This got me to thinking about how often our good intentions translate into actions with bad repercussions. But is the way to hell really paved with good intentions? Personally, I find the opposite even more difficult to believe. If there really were a power that would ever desire to do evil, but ever do good, then we wouldn't be so far from living in the best of all worlds, and I just can't believe that.

If there is a difference between intentions and actions, then there is also a difference between the pursuit of knowledge – science – and the technology we hold in our hand in form of a wand. The one seeks to decipher the world, the other to shape and change it. Usually we don't differentiate the two, because they feed upon each other so naturally. But

A loud crack startles Lily from her reading and she looks up to pinpoint the source of the noise. Just a bird, it would seem, only . . . now that Lily is taking the time to look around, she can see that the green is no longer as empty as it had been when she'd first arrived. Mary and Alice are sunning themselves beside the lake. Their skin has already turned an alarming state of red, she notes with distaste. Nearer to Lily, a gaggle of younger Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs holds a picnic study session. And behind them, two figures wearing Slytherin robes are emerging from the shadows of the castle.

Lily ducks behind her diary. She would recognise those two anywhere. Even at this distance, Kuhn's resemblance to James is strong, except that he is much paler and more delicate. As for Snape – well, Lily can't think of anyone in the castle who even remotely resembles him. His hair hangs in scraggly black curtains around the white sliver of his face, and his robes don't fit properly, leaving his socks and shoes, the pale lengths of his wrists exposed.
They don't appear to have seen her.

Lily snaps her diary shut, strawberries and reflections forgotten. Kuhn and Snape are unquestionably up to something, and it's her duty to find out what. Her hands are shaking a little as she charms her picnic blanket, basket and diary to fit into her pockets.

When she glances up again, Snape and Kuhn are heading towards the Quidditch pitch. Their backs are turned to her. Even if they had noticed her on the green, they will surely not be looking for her now.

Straightening with determination, Lily raps her wand over her head. She shudders at a sensation not unlike a cold raw egg seeping over her hair and down her back. A moment later, she glances down at her hands.

And sees nothing but trampled grass. Seeing the sunlight passing through her own body like this is creepy and unsettling and yet incredibly thrilling, and a part of Lily is extremely proud that she managed the Disillusionment Charm on her first try. If only those Slytherin bigots, the one who claim that Muggleborns can't perform advanced magic, could see . . . But now is not the time for such thoughts.

Lily rushes past the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff study group, so quickly that she raises a small wind –

"Did you feel that?"

"Hey, wasn't someone sitting there just a second ago?"

"Yeah, the Head Girl. At least, I thought she was."

"Weird."

Her lesson learned, Lily waits to start sprinting until she has passed Alice and Mary. She only begins to slow down when the distance between Snape, Kuhn and herself has shrunk to a few feet.

Certain exchanges had given Lily the impression that Snape and Kuhn were on good terms. This close to them, she finds herself drastically revising that assessment. Tension pulls between them as it would between prisoners unwillingly chained together at the hip. So much is clear, even from behind. Lily knows Snape, and he doesn't keep his eyes fixed to the ground like that unless he's ashamed or angry beyond words. Or looking for something, but that possibility doesn't actually occur to Lily until later. As for Kuhn, he keeps glancing everywhere – everywhere, that is, but at Snape. Lily can almost feel his resentment pulsing through the warm summer air.

Up ahead, the hooped Quidditch goals glisten in the afternoon sun. Lily sees the green and silver blurs of the Slytherin team whizzing past on brooms, probably holding try-outs. Have Snape and Kuhn come to watch the team?

Lily's question is answered when Snape and Kuhn come to an unexpected halt in the middle of the green. There is nothing far and wide to have merited their attention. Snape, however, seems to think the opposite. Shoulders hunched, he kneels and begins examining a group of weeds.

Confused, Lily moves to where she can see Snape's face (hidden by curtains of lank hair) and hands (white as paraffin wax, picking methodically at the ground). She inches closer and it becomes clear that Snape is harvesting a patch of feverfew.

She'd had no idea that feverfew grows wild on the Hogwarts grounds.
Kuhn makes no move to help Snape. His arms are crossed over his chest and his fingers tap impatiently at his elbows. Lily cannot fathom why he would accompany Snape across the green in order to stand there and be bored. Apparently, neither can Kuhn, for he glares down at Snape as though this were his entire fault.

"Why do I smell lemons?"

Snape does not glance up in surprise or tense at the sound of Kuhn's voice. Collected, calm, he keeps his eyes focused on the feverfew he picks. "Why are you so intent on making the world think you are stupid?"

Lily blinks.

"What?" Kuhn sounds just as taken aback as she is, but his eyes are narrowing. "I was just asking a question."

Snape makes an almost imperceptible sound as he pulls a particularly stubborn stalk out by the roots. "Even First Years can identify this scent." When Kuhn fails to make the connection, Snape sneers. "It's feverfew, you dolt."

"Feverfew?" Kuhn looks vaguely interested. Then a mistrustful expression crosses his face. "What do you need that for?"

Snape's voice drips sarcasm. "Guess."

Kuhn grinds his heel into the earth, his gaze hardening on Snape. "I can guess pretty well, thanks."

"If your guesses are any better than your knowledge of Herbology, I suppose I should be relieved."

It's something of a shock for Lily to hear Snape speak. His voice has undergone an almost unrecognisable change. A year and a half ago, when it had begun to crack unpredictably, it had still been reedy and whiny and not quite free of Manchester. Many people had laughed when he spoke because it had simply been that, laughable. Now . . .

Now, his voice is dark. Cold, painstakingly enunciated and controlled. It shouldn't belong to the gangly, greasy boy kneeling down on the green in second-hand robes, clutching feverfew in his hands as though it were precious money.

Lily suspects that Snape has been preparing himself for service to Voldemort. No self-respecting Death Eater would want to speak with a Manc accent –

Angry words suddenly cut off her thoughts. "Oh, it's pretty obvious why you need the feverfew," Kuhn tells Snape. "Another fucking palliative, right?"

Snape scowls. His shoulders tense closer together as he pulls another stalk from the ground. After only a few minutes outside, the heat already seems to have melted his waxy skin and heavy hair; wobbling beads of perspiration stand out on his brow. Still, his hands are clever and quick.

Belatedly, Lily realises that she is staring, and that Kuhn has confirmed what she had suspected all along. Snape has been experimenting with Dark Magic. Clearly, he is brewing painkillers to deal with the side effects. The only surprise in the whole business is that Kuhn apparently doesn't approve.

"I hate this," he continues, much to her surprise. "Just by standing here and watching you, I'm helping you destroy yourself."
Lily feels her eyes going wide.

Snape is sneering. "Your penchant for melodrama has been duly noted."

"Melodramatic? Me?" Kuhn kicks at the ground, sending a spray of earth flying in Lily's direction. She flinches and edges closer to Snape, counting on Kuhn to not fling dirt directly at his roommate. "Sounds like you're confusing me with yourself."

"If anyone is confused, it is you, Kuhn. There is nothing remotely melodramatic about pursuing objective, scientific goals." Snape raises his sleeve and wipes his brow. Lily watches the barely controlled trembling of the pale, knobbly hand poking out from the much-too-short sleeve.

Kuhn stops kicking to peer down at Snape, who has resumed his harvest. Lily can't read Kuhn's expression. "Are you OK?"

"Never better." Snape sneers, but there is dullness to his tone, almost as if he hasn't the energy for the exchange.

"You look – nevermind." Kuhn's brows are furrowed, and he looks like he regrets his previous anger.

Lily glances at Snape as though the reason for Kuhn's change of heart were written on his thin, twisted face. But he has locked his expression behind impenetrable walls of hair. Only his trembling hands remain exposed, and Lily knows better than to think those tremors have an emotional rather than physiological cause.

Grass swishes and rustles as Kuhn steps closer. After a moment of hesitation, he squats down beside Snape. "How much more of this stuff do you need?"

"I require specimens that have not been trampled or otherwise maimed." Snape pauses to glare pointedly at Kuhn's shoes, which have crushed some of the outer perimeter of the feverfew patch. "Two or three more stalks of such quality should suffice."

Kuhn's voice carries a tone of annoyance now. "I don't suppose you want my help."

"Very true. I don't need your help except in keeping your obnoxious inquiries to yourself."

Despite looking like a blackened, wilted plant that has been hit by a lightning bolt a few too many times, Snape manages to sound smug.

Kuhn makes a huffing noise. "Fine. I'll get out of your hair." He stands, but when he looks down at Snape it is with an expression more of consideration than annoyance.

There is something else there too. Something almost approaching fondness.

For all that Lily has eavesdropped on their conversation, she feels no closer to understanding the dynamic between Snape and Kuhn than she had been before. Kuhn, especially, keeps surprising her. At first, he had seemed to be on her side of things, berating Snape for his Dark inclinations. Then it had turned out that he was only concerned for Snape's physical well being, which Lily supposes she can understand. Kuhn had once said something about Snape acting as his bodyguard, so it makes sense – in a rather Slytherin sort of way – for him to be invested in Snape's physical welfare. Now, however, Kuhn reveals that he rather likes Snape, just so. In his eyes, at least, Snape is a friend. Lily knows that Kuhn had told her this, but she hadn't actually believed him.

Snape, too, seems more comfortable in Kuhn's company than Lily would have expected. Now that
they are no longer arguing over his Dark experiments, at least.

Lily just doesn't understand, so she is relieved when Kuhn finally turns his confusing gaze away from Snape to gaze out at the Quidditch pitch.

"Looks like they've just started Seeker try-outs."

"Planning on joining them? Avery would be ever so pleased."

Kuhn makes a face at Snape. "Of course not. I meant what I said yesterday: I'm not interested."

"As I recall, you claimed a fear of heights."

"Yeah. Made that up on the spot. Don't tell anyone." Kuhn kicks at the ground, sending a clump of grass into the air. "I just don't want a sport interfering with my studies."

Snape plucks out another sprig of feverfew. Lily has been keeping count; this should have been his last. Instead of gathering up his harvest and rising to his feet, however, Snape raises one of his hands to his eyes and begins examining its tremor. His gaze is bleak, bloodshot, and for the first time, Lily notices puffed sacs beneath his eyes.

"Snape?"

Snape drops his hand, a sneer already in place. "Naturally, I will not share your little secret." His lips twitch. "But I will confess myself surprised. Whence," his voice goes dry, "comes this sudden burst of academic devotion?"

To her mortification, Lily nearly snickers.

"I've always been devoted to my studies, you twit. I may not obsess about them like you and Evans, but that doesn't mean –"

Lily sober at the mention of her surname. All doubts that Snape and Kuhn talk about her behind her back have been soundly eviscerated from her mind.

This should be a bad thing, but maybe it's a good thing too. In a way. Perhaps Snape and Kuhn are as obsessed with her as she is with them. She should keep on her guard.

" – very seriously," finishes Kuhn.

Snape sniffs. "I have never let schooling interfere with my education," he says, and turns back to the ground.

Kuhn glares at him.

Behind his greasy hair, Snape smirks. He has begun to tuck the collected feverfew into special harvesting bags. Kuhn soon bores of observing him and turns to watch the Slytherin team. Lily, sensing that they will be done here any minute now, cautiously increases the distance between the two Slytherins and herself.

When Snape finally gets to his feet, hair swinging in his face, Kuhn moves to meet him. He wears a wistful expression. "The team isn't so bad. Black, especially, is a good Seeker."

Snape's eyes flick over to the Slytherins weaving across the pitch, then back to Kuhn. "And you would know that how?"
"I just watched him dive for the Snitch. He's very balanced, very focused – his broom responds to him instantly . . ."

Snape sneers, showing his crooked yellow teeth. Lily's father always said that Snape had probably been a sickly child and given too many antibiotics. "That is hardly an accomplishment. Black happens to be in possession of one of the most expensive racing brooms ever made."

"Brooms aren't everything," Kuhn insists, ignoring Snape's scoff. "If you work at it enough, you can manage to get the juices running in any broom. Even an old Silver Arrow will –"

"An old Silver Arrow?" Snape sounds sly. Lily has to think for a moment, but then she remembers that James has been lusting over a new broom, a silver something that just came out this summer.

"Er, I meant a Silberpfeil. You know, the German for silver arrow. They're really, really old."

"I had gathered that." Snape's eyes are gleaming, never a good sign. "Well, well, it seems that you have hidden talents after all. I would never –"

Whoosh!

Instinctively, Lily ducks as the air above her suddenly begins to seethe with the turbulent presence of several broomstick riders.

Green and silver – Slytherins. Members of the Quidditch team. They must have zoomed over here at an unbelievable speed, for their arrival not only caught Lily, but clearly also Kuhn and Snape by surprise.

"Adrian! But how delightful!" calls a mocking voice from above, as another grouses, "They've been spying!"

"They haven't been spying, you dolt; they're Slytherins like us."

Lily doesn't think that Slytherins are above spying on their own Quidditch team, but fortunately no one is asking for her opinion. She squints up at the last speaker and recognises the Seeker, Regulus Black. Dark curls, aristocratic features, slender build – the family resemblance to Sirius is strong. Regulus wears a permanent sneer, though, and Lily finds him considerably less handsome than his disowned elder brother.

"Come to try out for the Seeker position, Adrian?" It's difficult at this angle, but Lily is fairly certain that the bulky shape leering down at Kuhn is Avery.

"Don't push him, Dan," says a rough voice. Mulciber – Lily would know Mary's tormenter anywhere. He has manoeuvred his broom so that he is hovering in front of Avery, but Lily can't make out his expression against the summer sun. "I mean, we'd love for you to try out, Adrian, but only if you're really up to it. We don't do things halfway on this team."

"You're not afraid of a broomstick, are you, Adri-anne?" Lily has to rack her brains for this one. Probably Rosier, given the nature of the comment.

"We saw you watching us," says Avery – yes, definitely Avery. Only Mulciber and Lestrange can exceed him in creepiness. "Did you like what you saw?"

A flicker of movement catches the corner of her eye. Regulus, she realises. His broom is slowly drifting forward and he is staring down at Snape, an unreadable expression in his eyes.
Snape is studiously ignoring him.

"Of course I did, and of course I'm not afraid of a broom," says a clear, ringing voice. Lily is so intent on watching Snape's lack of reaction that she only belatedly recognises Kuhn as the speaker. "I am afraid of heights. That makes me a very bad candidate for a Quidditch team, I'm sorry to say."

With the corner of her eye, Lily sees Regulus land his broom. He picks it up with the kind of elegance that only aristocratic Slytherins ever seem to master and saunters over to Snape and Kuhn. Lily thinks that his face has grown darker, more cunning, and she is instantly suspicious of his motives.

"If you would permit it, I believe I know of a way to overcome this fear," he tells Kuhn, loud enough that the rest of the team can hear. "Many people I know have developed an aversion to flying simply because they were made to use bad brooms. One positive experience with a quality broom, however," Regulus pauses to stroke the handle of his own custom-made broom, "and the problem was no more."

Lily glances over at Snape. His face is hidden behind his hair and betrays no reaction, but his hands are trembling. Nothing new there.

Kuhn, on the other hand, looks like he is fighting not to pull out his wand and hex the entire Quidditch team, beginning with Regulus Black.

Regulus seems to be fully aware that he is eliciting an ambivalent reaction. He smiles the cold smile of people who know they are about to get what they want. "Since my teammates seem to think so much of your promise, you are more than welcome to try out for the team using my own broom." The smile widens. "I wouldn't mind watching a Seeker candidate from the sidelines, myself."

And there he goes again – directing nearly unreadable, intense glances at Snape, who ignores him utterly.

"Excellent idea," declares Avery, now just hovering above ground. There is an odd smile lurking around his mouth.

Snape makes a loud, derisive sound. "Oh yes, let's just put the acrophobic on a broom and see how well he can fly." After standing in silence for so long, Snape seems to have suddenly come alive; his pale hands rise from their sleeves to gesture sharply, and the hair parts from his face to reveal black, glittering eyes. "Are you imbeciles even aware of the fact that most acrophobiacs have balance troubles?" he demands. "The moment he gets on that broom, he will fall off and break his neck."

"Sounds fun," leers Rosier.

Avery looks like he could throttle Snape. "And what would you know about Quidditch?"

Snape sneers. "Fortunately, in this case, I needn't know anything."

Lily is beginning to feel like she's in over her head. None of this is making any sense to her. Avery and Snape are supposed to be good friends, except that they clearly aren't. She has never seen anyone look so – murderous – as Avery does right now. It doesn't make any sense, because Snape hasn't even done anything but point out a few facts. All right, so Kuhn is faking his acrophobia, but Avery can't know that, right?

As for Snape – Snape is the exact opposite of Avery, the very personification of aplomb. How he can remain unfazed in the face of such menace... it's simply unbelievable.
And it doesn't make any sense.

A part of Lily, a sad, ruthlessly repressed part of Lily wishes that Snape had been able to show such composure a year and a half ago. Perhaps he could have done, only he'd felt she wasn't worth the effort. Was that it?

(mudblood.)

Someone – Kuhn – clears his throat. Lily realises that she has closed her eyes, that there are actually tears in her eyes. She wipes the tears away furiously and shoves every thought of her former friendship with Snape into the darkest corner of her mind.

Kuhn seems to have taken some lessons from Snape, for he looks more collected than before. "Even if Severus were incorrect, I wouldn't want preferential treatment," he tells the team. "Using a broom significantly better than any one I could afford wouldn't give you a very objective idea of my skills."

"Oh, money isn't a problem," says Avery, too eagerly. "The team would be happy to buy your broom."

"Would it?" asks a sceptical voice. "That would be preferential treatment in and of itself." Lily glances up to see a tall, blond boy leaning across his broom – Barty Crouch Jr. Supposedly, Crouch is brilliant, best of his year in every subject. That a boy obviously using a Time Turner to take all of his classes still has the energy to play Quidditch is something Lily has to (grudgingly) admire . . .

"And what's wrong with a bit of partiality here and there?" Avery wants to know. "Don't you care about winning, no matter what the means?"

"Winning, sure, but that's not the point here –"

"Enough of this, we're wasting time," grouses Mulciber, looking royally annoyed. "Avery, if you hadn't said we were being watched by Gryffindor spies, we'd already be finished with practice. Kuhn, now that we're here, do you want to try out or not? This is your last chance."

"No."

Regulus makes an incoherent noise and stalks away with his broom. A moment later, he is aloft and glaring down at Kuhn.

"No?" Avery's smile is so forced, it's a wonder that his teeth don't crack from the pressure.

Kuhn smiles prettily. "Sorry, Daniel, Quidditch just isn't my thing. Good luck to all of you, though."

"Thanks," says Mulciber. "Team –" he gestures at the pitch, "back to work."

And with that, the Quidditch team is gone. Lily is so busy watching the streaks of silver and green float over the hooped goals that she nearly misses the next words to come out of Kuhn's mouth.

"All right, mysterious spy, you can reveal yourself now. We know you're here."

Snape is staring directly at the empty spot in the air where Lily is standing. Kuhn, for his part, has actually drawn his wand.

Lily won't be proud to admit it to herself later, but in that moment when she should have run, she freezes. She has been so careful – never letting the grass rustle beneath her feet, using nonverbal Featherweight charms. It seems impossible and incredibly unfair that she should have been caught.
"If you don't undo the spell yourself, I would be happy to oblige," says Kuhn, a note of a threat to his voice now, and somehow Lily believes him.

Fuming, she initiates the counterspell, hating the slimy feeling of the magic trickling up her back, even though it feels more like a warm egg this time. She is even more distressed when neither Kuhn nor Snape appear surprised to see her.

"How did you know?" she asks, directing her words at Kuhn. Snape, she decides to ignore for the meantime.

"Your perfume," says Kuhn, as though it were completely obvious.

Dammit. Should have thought of that. "I was within my prerogative," she declares, straightening to glare down at the two of them. "If you two were plotting something, I would have had to report it."

Kuhn turns unsettling green eyes on Snape. They seem to exchange some sort of nonverbal message. "And do you no longer believe that we're plotting something?"

"Not at all," she says confidently. "In fact, from the sound of it, Snape's experiments present a general danger to the school."

Snape hisses as though in pain. Kuhn, however, smiles as though he thinks he's found himself an ally. "What if I told you that the only danger they present is to himself?"

Lily is not going to give Kuhn the satisfaction of agreeing with him, not after he's just blown her cover. "Perhaps that's all they do at the moment, but I know that he won't be satisfied with self-experiments for long."

"Despite what you might believe, I am not experimenting with Dark Magic," snarls Snape. They are the first words he has directed at her in one and a half years, and all Lily can think is that they are probably a lie.

"Prove it," she challenges, feeling every inch of the angry heat that rises in her cheeks.

"Why should he have to?" asks Kuhn, beginning to look angry himself. "Slughorn approves; that should be good enough for you."

That has to be a lie, but it's a surprisingly good one. If Slughorn really does know about Snape's experiments, he might not take kindly to Lily's interference, favourite student or no. House matters are House matters, after all.

"Then don't tell me. If anything happens, though, I'll know it was you."

Kuhn snorts. "That's a pretty vague threat. If anything happens? What about when your boyfriend and his gang ambush and attack us, like they did just last night? Is that going to be our fault too?"

"If you allow them to provoke you into a fight, yes," Lily snaps, although she makes a note to herself to ask James just what he was up to last night. The full moon is a touchy subject between them, almost as touchy as it had been between Snape and herself . . .

She absolutely refuses to go down that route in memory lane.

"Well, that's very noble of you," Kuhn sneers. The expression is as foreign to his face as it is natural to Snape's. "I suppose that's what it means to be a Gryffindor – turn a blind eye to your own and exact impossible standards from everyone else."
"Funny," she says coldly, "I thought that's what it meant to be a Slytherin."

"Keep making comments like those and we'll be stuck here for the foreseeable future," Snape mutters to Kuhn.

And somehow the way that Snape turns to Kuhn as though she weren't there – somehow that makes her even madder than everything else Snape has done recently. She almost sees sparks, she's so confused and angry. "Mind saying that to my face?" she demands. "If you want to be rid of my odious presence, why don't you just say so? Am I so beneath your notice that you can't even bear to address me like a real person?"

All the blood drains from Snape's face. "You know that isn't true," he whispers.

"Isn't it?" Lily has forgotten who ended their friendship, forgotten everything but an ugly word and a miserable summer of total and unexpected silence. Snape, the coward, had never tried to apologise again. So what if she never intended to accept his repeated offers of friendship? The fact that he never even tried to extend one – she simply can't forgive him that.

"No!"

"I don't want to hear your excuses," Lily seethes. "It's bad enough that you talk about me behind my back. Don't make that face – I heard the both of you just now. Does it make you feel big and powerful, talking about me as though I were a piece of dirt?"

"You're wrong," insists Snape. Lily has to credit his acting skills. His entire body trembles with the semblance of desperation. Even his old accent has begun to resurface. "It's nothing like that, Lily, really. I . . ."

He shakes his head adamantly, but although he moves his mouth, no further words emerge.

Pathetic.

"All we ever do is compliment you," says Kuhn after a pause. He sounds disgusted. "Not that you really deserve it."

"I don't want you ever talking about me," Lily decides. Then she remembers her last meeting with Kuhn. "I thought I'd made that clear last time we spoke."

"And I don't want you following me or Snape around," he snarls.

"Fine."

"Fine?"

"I had no intention of following you again anyway," she declares, which is not entirely true.

"Then you'll understand if I ask you to stop following us now," says Kuhn, stressing the now. "Come on, Snape. We're going."

But Snape does not immediately follow Kuhn up the green. He stares at Lily with the kind of resignation usually only seen in the sick and dying.

"You never gave me a chance," he says softly. His eyes are no longer desperate – they are wounded and calculated to wound. "You never even planned on giving me one."

"Because you didn't try hard enough!"
Snape shakes his head. "No, Lily. I admit my guilt, but in the end, I'm only partly to blame."

And with that, he turns in a billow of robes and follows Kuhn up towards the castle. Lily stays rooted to the spot. Only once they are out of sight does she allow the tears of frustration to flow.

Chapter End Notes

"I never let schooling interfere with my education" is a Mark Twain quote. As ever, the inspiration for Snape's experiments remains Johann Wilhelm Ritter, crazy German physicist and one possible model for the scientist in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.
Chapter Nine: The Shifter

Neither of them speaks after that.

Snape keeps his aspect bowed. Ahead of him, Kuhn broods. Snape cannot see his face, but he imagines it looks pinched and grey. Snape's own body moves forward merely out of habit. His eyes search the ground neither for footsteps nor feverfew, rather a certain image stowed away in the recesses of his mind. As it is, his eyes do not see. Their view is unfocused and spotty, as though someone had laid strips of dirty film over them.

And so Snape trails behind Kuhn; and his eyes do not see. Turned inward, they seek out her image, the wisps of red hair, the leaves of her eyes . . . But, swift Daphne that she is, she hides. Runs from him, alarmed as a doe. The hasty trail left in her wake is too violently fragmented to read. Snape knows she resides here, deep in his mind, despite her stubborn refusal to show herself. He does not give up searching. But he is beginning to lose his will to do so.

Never has she eluded him like this. He hadn't known that memories, that fantasies could do that. Even after he had wronged the real Lily, after she had scorned him, he had always been able to summon her image. It had comforted him to know that he still had some connection to her, even if only in his mind.

Why has that changed? For having exchanged a few heated words with her real self, is her luminous vision now to be snuffed? Is he to be left alone with shadows, blackened wicks – an outline burnt into the retina of his eye?

Is this – absence – all he is to have of her now?

Unexpectedly, the film before his eyes breaks, becoming waves that crash at the corners of his eyes and spill over the harsh landscape of his cheeks.

Occlumens . . .

(excerpted from The Pathology of Mind: Lectures on Wizarding Mental Disease, property of Hogwarts Library, currently checked out to Adrian Kuhn)

Chapter Five: Regarding the Uses and Abuses of Occlumency

[...]

In summation, Occlumency is powerful magic. The only true means of defence against Legilmency, it also presents a useful technique for ordering the mind, insofar as it enables a wizard to take control over his emotions by subjecting them to rational categories.

However, it behoves the wizard to remember that the world itself does not adhere to rational laws and categories. Despite what fairy-tales, dictators and religious sects may claim, history is merely an amalgamation of contingent events, not a grand narrative gravitating towards a final telos (see the first lecture in this book for a complete refutation of such nebulous claims). The wizard seeking to
espy a rational motive behind all the events that take place around him is therefore himself acting irrationally. In other words, his rationality has taken on an extreme form that is no longer rational, but in fact more closely akin to paranoia.

Occlumency is a magic that often attracts the paranoid and instable – wizards who are as self-destructive as they can be destructive to the world. Directed both against oneself and the world, Occlumency is – without doubt – a dangerous magic. There is perhaps no surer method of going mad.

In the following, I would like to detail a particular case, taken from the St Mungo's files [...] Let us call this particular patient Lawrence A. Twenty-five years old, Lawrence A. lost his mother early in life and was raised by his father, an alcoholic. [...] This patient has retreated so deeply behind his Occlumency shields that he lies in an apparently self-induced coma, completely unreceptive to sensations from the outside world. Legilmency tests on the patient confirm that Lawrence A. only sees the dark walls he erected in his mind to keep outsiders, particularly his father, from invading his thoughts. That those self-same walls have doubled their purpose, preventing him from experiencing external sensation, precluding internal revelation, is an irony that Lawrence A. seems unable, or unwilling, to comprehend. On the contrary, he prefers to remain cocooned in a void, trapped in his own mind – unseeing, unfeeling, as good as dead to the world. Were there but a guiding hand to lead him out of his self-made purgatory! . . .

His elbow feels strange.

Snape blinks into the gloom and is mildly surprised to find himself standing before the door to his room in the Slytherin dorms. Briefly, he wonders how he got there, before turning his mental attention back to his elbow.

It feels as though it might be . . . vibrating. Something is wrapped around it like an electric coil. Eyes growing accustomed to the shadows, Snape peers closer and realises that it is a hand – Kuhn.

Snape licks his lips, which seem to have dried out and become encrusted together. His roommate's face is tilted away, as though he is embarrassed, and yet his fingers squeeze Snape's arm reassuringly.

What just happened? Snape wonders, growing dizzy with panic. Did Kuhn just lead him all the way from the green to the dungeons? Why on earth would he do that? Snape licks his lips again, tasting salt. Has he been crying? Did – oh Merlin – did anyone see?

Kuhn lets go of Snape's arm. He steps forward, turning his profile to Snape as he spells open the door with a flick of wrist.

Snape tries to read his features. He is paranoid enough, at the moment, to feel, if only unconsciously, that the world is made up of a network of signs, signs that he can arrange into meaningful patterns. The torchlight in the passageway flickers, bringing out the gold in Kuhn's skin, the remarkably clear orbs that are his eyes. Kuhn's expression is neutral, but he seems to radiate a quiet confidence, which would indicate that they probably weren't seen . . . that Kuhn at least thinks they weren't seen . . . God. . .

Snape is dimly aware of a muffled creak, the sound of the door opening. Before he can take any further stock of the expressionless face, Kuhn has crossed the threshold into their room.
Snape wipes angrily at his cheeks – they are dry, yet itchy – and follows Kuhn inside. He closes the door behind himself, and, suddenly ashamed, averts his face.

The wards crackle and hum. Snape is so unsettled, so desperate for any kind of mooring that he allows himself to lean into them. The protective magic explores, acknowledges his trembling frame, and for a moment, he feels safe in its embrace.

Only – there aren't any safe havens left, are there? Not now, now that Lily has rejected him again. Strange, that he should only remember that now. Shoulder slumping against the back of the door, Snape buries his face in his hands. He breathes –

Palms, the skin sheathed in a fine covering of soil. Fingers, hinting of earth, of broken, citrusy leaves. Beneath his fingernails – kept short to not interfere with experiments, yet just grown enough to gather dust and dead skin – Snape senses the pressure of accumulating dirt. His face must be covered with dirt now. It feels smudged, at least, and unbearably hot. Bony, ugly – covered in dirt and dried tears.

How appropriate.

"Severus."

Snape jerks, hands dropping like rapidly falling cobwebs to his sides. He shifts away from the door and levels a glare at the source of the voice.

Kuhn stands beside his bed, an arm twisted around a dark, snake-like bedpost. His eyes are so large they seem ready to swallow up his entire face; in the harsh rays emitting from one of his infernal lighting spells, they seem as funereal and hazy as the green skull-lamps decorating the Slytherin common room.

"What are you staring at?" Snape is snapping, pulling himself out of his slouch against the door. He avoids those eyes, afraid of what they might see – and he Occludes, because there is nothing they can be allowed to see. If Kuhn's gaze suddenly shrinks away from his own eyes, as though something unbearably cold and heartless were to be seen there, Snape does not particularly care. He does care about the fact that Kuhn has failed to answer his question.

"Well?" Snape demands.

Kuhn narrows his eyes, says nothing. Snape feels his cheeks burning, and a vague sense of self tells him that he has somehow done wrong. He scowls, not really caring, and enters a stalk towards his desk.

Halfway across the room, the electric coil unexpectedly twines itself around his arm again. Snape nearly stumbles; only Kuhn's next words prevent him from lashing out in anger.

"I'm glad you stood up to her, Severus."

Kuhn's eyes are shimmering, fierce; how can there be two pairs of eyes like that in the world? so clear and green . . . Snape meets them for but a moment before clenching his jaw and –

He glares down at his shoes (worn, scuffed so badly the black leather has faded into brown at places). There is a thick prickling sensation building in his throat.

"It was the right thing to do." Kuhn's hand constricts briefly around Snape's arm, all thin bone and energetic strength. "She was spying on us, for God's sake."
Snape frowns and shakes his arm. "Let go."

Kuhn releases him reluctantly.

Snape rubs his arm, vaguely missing the prickling warmth of Kuhn's hand. "Lily's not a sneak," he says, fighting against the thickness in his throat.

"What do you call her spying, then?"

Snape does not respond, merely rubbing his arm.

"She's not only a sneak, she's wrong," Kuhn murmurs. He edges closer to Snape so that, even though they are not actually touching, it almost feels as though they were. "Wrong about you, wrong about me. I never knew a person could be so intelligent and so wrong about everything."

"She's not," Snape insists, turning his glare onto Kuhn.

Who smiles, if sadly. "But she is, Severus. You told her so yourself."

"I – didn't know what I was saying. I shouldn't have said it." Snape realises that he is slouching; he straightens to his full height.

"No."

"You don't know Lily the way I do. You wouldn't understand."

Kuhn says nothing, but his expression is disapproving. They are so close. Snape, not wanting to think about Lily yet, tilts his head a little in order to make a surreptitious study of Kuhn's face. Like this, Snape can see every line, every pore. Not that there are many lines on that face. Yes, crow's feet have stamped light impressions around the green eyes, but where Snape is already beginning to develop severe furrows in his cheeks, Kuhn's skin remains transparent and smooth. If Snape did not know for a fact that Kuhn shaved, he would think that his roommate had not yet begun to grow a beard, the skin is so clear around his mouth and chin. In contrast, Snape's skin shows visible signs of his daily shaving charm; there are ugly little red inflammations around several pores from all the times he has botched the spell and cut too deep.

Snape avoids looking at Kuhn's eyes, his gaze jumping to the pale forehead instead. He notices a discoloured patch and thinks for a moment that the light is tricking him. Then he realises that the patch has a different texture from the rest of the skin, as though it had been treated with some kind of lotion or concealer (Muggle, from the vaguely chemical smell).

He would like nothing better than to touch it and discover its secrets. He feels a desire, strangely urgent, to examine Kuhn's body, as though it were a map that might lead him to the source of all of Kuhn's mystery.

(Scarcs, white and raised in crosshatches against nearly translucent skin. Hex and curse scars, scars from sharp knives. Kuhn's chest, covered in a crisscrossing network of scars. So many questions that Snape cannot bring himself to directly ask, even though they should be simple ones. How old are you. Why – why do you want to be my friend.)

And yet Snape does dare not touch Kuhn any more than he already has, to examine any more of Kuhn than had already been offered in a hand twined briefly around his wrist. He lets his gaze drop back to his shoes, and is at once dizzy. It seems impossible to think.

"It's never easy to tell the truth," says Kuhn, softly.
"Is that what it was?" To his own ears, Snape's voice sounds very far away.

"Yes."

Snape looks over at his desk, at his battery and the pewter cauldron. Kuhn's photographs lie scattered over the tabletop.

Absently, he steps away from Kuhn – who stands aside without comment – and moves over to the desk. His fingers seem to have a mind of their own. Slowly, they arrange the photographs into a fragmented narrative of his experiments.

"She was my best friend," he says quietly, knowing that Kuhn stands at his shoulder, watching his long, knobbly fingers establish a fragile order.

"I know."

"I betrayed her."

"So you both say."

"I did," insists Snape, moving a photo of his ear next to another showing that same ear in a later stage of electrification.

"Do you want to know what I did?" he asks, after a pause.

He can feel Kuhn's magic in the air between them. It is warm, like a stone in the sun, and yet much too excited for the metaphor – the air quivers between them like a vibrating string. If Snape is reading him correctly, Kuhn is agitated.

Snape turns to Kuhn, notes the distressed expression on his face, and sneers. "I shall tell you anyway. It shall be good for you – teach you not to trust me within an inch of your life. You could use a good lesson in trust, Kuhn."

Green eyes flash in protest. "I don't –"

But something has snapped inside of Snape, like a rubber band holding together thousands of papers that unexpectedly breaks, sending them tumbling to the floor. This is all Kuhn's fault; he is the one making Snape talk about Lily. And so Snape approaches Kuhn with an ugly sneer, aggressively invading his personal space. "Lily was my best friend, and you know what I did to her?" Snape drops his voice to a whisper. "I called her one of the foulest names there is. Yes, I can see that you are beginning to comprehend what I did – you look rather frightened just now, Kuhn. Well, why postpone the show? I called her a Mud–"

"I don't care what you said," interrupts Kuhn, but he sounds desperate, not convinced. "She probably deserved it on some level –"

Snape snarls. Anger mushrooms in him with a shattering force. "She never deserved that!"

"Maybe not that, exactly, but she certainly deserved something!" Kuhn strains to stand even higher, to meet Snape on the same ground. His face has gone from a translucent white to bright red, and the green eyes stare at Snape accusingly. "Aren't you even listening to yourself? Do you really think that a friend would give up on she cared about – her supposed best friend – over a stupid insult? No real friendship is that fragile, Snape –"

"It was real!" Snape is having trouble breathing; his hands are bunched at his sides in fists, despite
his overwhelming desire to punch Kuhn in the nose.

"I'm sure it was," says Kuhn in what is probably meant to be a placating tone. To Snape, it only sounds condescending. "But then something must have happened –"

"Of course, you dunderhead, of course something happened," and Snape is so angry that he swings a fist at Kuhn's shoulder –

Kuhn does not even blink; he catches the errant hand in one of his own as though it were a Snitch.

"Don't touch me," pants Snape, struggling to retrieve his hand and not quite daring to swing with the other, lest it also be caught.

Kuhn clamps down his grip, his expression grim. "Tell me what happened first."

"Let go, you imbecile!"

"What happened?"

"What do you think?" Still struggling for his hand, Snape feels that he could be shrieking, or sobbing, and yet he is also aware that he is doing neither, that his eyes are dry and his voice barely raised above a whisper.

"Tell me, Severus."

There is something in Kuhn's voice, something commanding or pleading or understanding; whatever it is, it makes Snape momentarily give up on trying to wrench away. "What do you think?" he repeats.

Kuhn does not reply.

Snape closes his eyes. He takes in a shuddering breath. He no longer wants to talk about this, but perhaps . . . perhaps he will. As long as Kuhn remains silent. That way he can pretend he is alone, that he is only speaking to himself.

He takes in another breath, but Kuhn doesn't say anything, so he decides to talk. "What happened. Well, we were Sorted. She got into Gryffindor. They didn't care about blood – or so they claim. She made friends amongst the pretty and rich, friends who didn't like to be seen with poor ugly Slytherins. They wanted to turn her against me – and she let them. And then Potter came along and made everything a thousand times worse . . ." Snape suddenly remembers that he is speaking aloud. He opens his eyes and snarls. "Well? Are you satisfied?"

"What did Potter do?"

"I don't want to talk about him."

"What do you want to talk about?"

Snape's captured hand registers an unaccustomed sensation; were he in a more rational frame of mind, he might realise that Kuhn is gently stroking it with his thumb. As it is, Snape only knows a sudden warm, pleasurable feeling, and he thinks that it is the pleasure that comes from finally having an audience.

Kuhn isn't a bad listener, Snape decides. Perhaps he can afford to tell Kuhn a few more things.

"She was waiting for a good reason to cut me off," he says savagely. He lets out a frustrated breath,
although he isn't really frustrated, not with his hand still registering the sensation of being heard. "I
know that now. And I also know that if I had been Sorted into a different House, and if I had money,
and if I were better-looking, that I could have made it as hard for her to leave me as it was for me to
leave her."

What Snape is saying about Lily is tantamount to blasphemy, in his mind. It's such a new – and
potentially emancipating – mode of thought for him that he not only has no idea what is going to
come out of his mouth next, he is almost afraid of what that will be.

"It was because it was so hard for me to leave her that I had to be the one to break it off," he says
slowly. "You know, I don't think I realised that until just now, Kuhn. I doubt that you understand,
and I don't know if I can explain what I mean. But I couldn't stand waiting for my sentence anymore.
She expected me to slip. And so I thought: why not go ahead – and slip? At least then, the worst
would be over."

Snape considers for a moment.

"I never meant to say that word. Not exactly. But I said it. In hindsight, it was . . . I shouldn't have
said it." Snape feels his forehead crinkling; he rubs it absently with his free hand. The words are
drying up in his mouth; he does not know how to speak of the painfully charged absence Lily has
left behind. "Only – I had to say it. It was the only way for me to regain a semblance of control. I
would have made too great a fool of myself, otherwise."

Snape tries to say more, but finds that he can't. The words have crumbled to dust.

Kuhn waits expectantly. An awkward moment passes before he squeezes Snape's hand and says, "I
understand."

Passively, Snape lets those two words wash over him. It's a comfort to know that one has been
understood . . . until ugly comprehension dawns.

Rearing up, Snape shakes his hand free from the all-too-pleasant cage of Kuhn's fingers. "You
understand?" he asks in an incredulous voice that trembles. "Don't play me for a fool, Kuhn; you
have spoken up for Muggle rights often enough. Surely you cannot condone the use of such a word,
no matter the circumstances."

Snape trembles like the string of a harp pulled in the wrong direction and with too much force. His
mind is not clear; on the contrary, he twangs with dissonance. All he knows is that he does not trust
Kuhn anymore.

Kuhn should not trust him, either. Snape does not trust himself.

"I don't have to like what you said to understand why you said it," says Kuhn, eyes narrowed with
confusion and something else – hurt, perhaps. "What else do you expect me to say?"

Snape scowls desperately, wanting to hear other words – wanting Kuhn to show his hand and say
exactly what it is he understands, wanting unequivocal assurance that he has been understood and is
not merely being pitied. He would even be satisfied with a condemnation – at least it would be clear.
"I want you to tell me what part of telling a Muggleborn that she's worthless because of her dirty
blood you understand!"

"What's wrong with you?" demands Kuhn, backpedalling away.

For a brief moment of sheer madness, Snape considers lunging forward and grabbing Kuhn by the
collar. It would, at least, close the sudden distance between them. Except –
"I don't know what you want me to say. That what you did was wrong?" Kuhn's voice is cold. "At another time in my life, I would have hated you for it. Really hated you, in fact. What you said was wrong on so many levels I can't even get my head completely around it." Kuhn's eyes seem to glint with a polar light. Snape stares at them in fascination. An Aurora Borealis of their own, they are, beautifully barren and unapproachable. "You may hate your father, Snape, but he's still your father – nothing can change that, nothing can change the fact that he's a Muggle."

Snape sneers, but the words do not particularly affect him: he is certain that they are but the prefigurations of something more terrible yet to come. Kuhn is going to reject him, saying he is mad or racist or something similarly rotten.

(Some part of Snape's mind lingers on the image of his father, as though there were some unfinished business between them he'd forgotten to resolve. And yet Snape cannot think for the life of him of what business that could be.)

Kuhn is observing him closely. In all likelihood, he is trying to watch the impact of his words sink in. Snape curls his upper lip, signalling his readiness for the real blow.

Kuhn's eyes glitter back. "I'm not that person anymore."

"Oh?" Snape's voice is bitter.

Kuhn takes a step towards Snape, who watches him warily. It should not feel so good to have him near again, his magic thrumming close.

"I know that the world is not black and white. I know you don't think that Evans is an inferior witch because of her blood." Kuhn takes another step forward, ignoring Snape's scowl. "Do you think the same about other Muggleborns? I don't know. I'll admit, it worries me to think that Evans might be the exception to your Mudblood-rule."

Snape twitches at the word.

Kuhn watches him with unconcealed interest. "I believe your side of the story, Severus. I don't have to know exact details to get that Evans wasn't as good a friend to you as she could have been. I'm beginning to think the real reason she liked you was because you looked up to her. She didn't have to work hard to make you like her; perhaps it went to her head."

Snape frowns. There was certainly more to his friendship with Lily than a power game, he thinks – that was what had made it so special.

"This is just a hunch, but I think that she thought of your friendship in terms of the influence she had over you. When that began to change, when you stopped doing exactly as she wanted you to do, she probably felt betrayed. Which, I will admit, is probably a gross oversimplification –"

Snape is shaking his head. Kuhn has guessed at a surprising amount of truths and yet interpreted them – all – wrong. Lily's influence over Snape had never waned. The only reason he had fulfilled her worst expectations of him was because that was what she had wanted him to do.

"I should probably shut up, now, shouldn't I?" says Kuhn ruefully. "Let me at least say this: You're not alone to blame. Also, she's not a saint." Kuhn chews thoughtfully on his bottom lip. "By a long run."

Snape laughs – a single bark. Then he frowns. "Why do you care about any of this?" he asks, voice unwillingly cracked.
Kuhn is taken aback. "Why shouldn't I?"

Snape sneers at him. "It's bad form to answer a question with a question."

Kuhn crosses his arms over his chest, looking annoyed. "Evans wasn't only spying on you, Snape."

"Let me rephrase the question in terms you are more likely to understand," says Snape, irritated that Kuhn won't give him a straightforward answer. "Why are you so concerned about a pathetic teenage sob story? What's in it for you?"

"Can't it be –" Intriguingly, Kuhn cuts himself off, his cheeks staining with red.

"Can't it be what?"

Kuhn glares. "You're a right git sometimes, you know that?"

Determined to make Kuhn reveal his motivations, Snape turns to excessive cynicism. "All the less reason for you to give a damn. So, what is it, Kuhn? Blackmail?" Snape smiles coldly. "Or are you planning on running to Evans with all of my dirty secrets? You could make her hate me even more. Even better, why not tell the whole school? I'm sure they'll be grateful to you for providing them with such a good laugh –"

While Snape has been speaking, Kuhn's face has been growing redder and redder. At last he can no longer contain himself, exclaiming: "Snape! Can't it be enough that you're my friend?"

To his credit, Snape thinks, he is only momentarily speechless. He shakes his head, ignoring the strands of greasy hair that swing before his eyes, and assumes his coldest smile. "You're a terrible liar, Kuhn."

Snape hadn't realised that Kuhn's face could get any redder. "No, you bastard, I'm telling the truth, only you're too fucking paranoid to know the difference!"

Could it be? Snape wonders – except that, if Kuhn really is his friend, why won't he answer any of Snape's questions? Bitterly, Snape contends, "Given that I hardly even know who you are, I certainly prefer to err on the side of paranoia."

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Kuhn demands.

"Well, who are you, then?"

"I –" Something almost like anguish flickers across Kuhn's face, settling into resignation. Snape watches the shift with a growing sense of restlessness. Perhaps Kuhn will make concessions – perhaps not.

"What do you want to know?" asks Kuhn after a moment.

Snape nearly goggles at him, he is so surprised to have gotten somewhere. For a moment, he is also simply overwhelmed by the thousands of questions rushing through his mind, each competing to be asked first, such as – why did you leave Germany and how old are you and what are the sources of your magic?

(why are you wasting your time with me?)

"I just told you something I've never told anyone else," Snape points out, feeling slightly dizzy with the realisation that he has just shared one of his greatest secrets with Kuhn, of all people. How could
"Perhaps we should sit down for this," Snape suggests, when he sees that Kuhn is having trouble thinking up something to say.

"Good idea," says Kuhn, sounding stressed. He begins dragging over his desk chair to where Snape is standing.

Snape pulls out his own desk chair, flips it around, and sits with his arms propped across the back and his legs positioned to either side of the seat. Kuhn sets down his chair inches away from Snape and slouches into it.

"OK," Kuhn says, breathing in and raking a hand through his perfectly arranged hair. Bits of it are left sticking up in crazy angles. Together with his flushed face, they make him look as though he's just escaped from an angry dragon. "Well, since we were talking about a girl, I guess I could tell you one of my girl stories."

Snape raises an eyebrow.

"My best friend was a girl." Snape has to wonder at Kuhn's sudden defensiveness, and as always, his persistent use of the past tense. "Most of my friends were girls, actually. Chandra Goodhart reminds me of one of them especially. She was, you know, also a bit barmy. But brilliant. In her own way." Kuhn pauses to stare down at his hands. "Anyway, I don't want to talk about my friends." He pauses again, this time to assess Snape's reaction. "I've decided to tell you about my mum."

Snape attempts to make his expression encouraging, although he is fairly certain that he has failed. Kuhn immediately looks back down to his hands.

"I never knew my mother. She died when I was a baby. Apparently I don't look much like her, except for my eyes. She had green ones as well." Kuhn fidgets, frowning at his hands. "Shortly after I was born, my parents were targeted by a dark wizard. They'd been resisting his attempts to gain power and he wanted them out of his way. But most important, the dark wizard had heard a prophecy – a prophecy about a boy who might defeat him someday. Now obviously, the prophecy was bullshit." Kuhn makes a face, his eyes unusually cloudy. "But this wizard believed what he'd heard, and he decided that I was that boy."

Snape frowns – that was unexpected. Nonetheless, he begins listing possible outcomes in his head. There are, of course, numerous candidates for the dark wizard, starting with the many supporters of Grindelwald who were given easy parole or overlooked by the German authorities. The fact that Kuhn is alive and speaking would indicate that the wizard was killed, probably by one of Kuhn's parents. Undoubtedly, Kuhn's mother died in the struggle.

"A childhood friend of my mother's, who had been working for the dark wizard, heard about his plans to kill her and bravely switched sides. He was responsible for warning my parents in time for us to go into hiding." Kuhn's eyes flicker briefly up to Snape before falling back to his hands. "There was a Fidelius placed on the house, of course. My father chose the Secret Keeper out of his three best friends from school. One of them was a strong, powerful wizard; he seemed too obvious a choice, and only served as a decoy. Another was also powerful, but too ill. The third was weak, something of a coward, and my father thought that nobody would ever guess he was the real Secret Keeper. My father was wrong."
Kuhn takes in an angry breath, his cheeks briefly pressing into his skull. "The third friend was, in fact, a spy for the dark wizard. I don't know the exact details of how or why, but he told him how to find the house. My parents didn't suspect anything was wrong until the dark wizard had already broken onto the premises. My father tried to fight him off to give my mother and me time to escape, but the dark wizard killed him at once. My mother pleaded with him to spare my life. She shielded me with her body rather than giving me up, begging the dark wizard to take her life instead. Naturally, he didn't listen. He killed my mother before turning onto me."

Snape is finding it hard to breathe. Kuhn can't possibly mean that –

"Something strange happened that evening, something that perhaps shouldn't have happened. The wizard cast the killing curse, and I did not die. Obviously." Kuhn smiles weakly. "Instead, the curse bounced back, not killing him exactly, but wounding him so badly that he lost much of his power. Apparently, the force of my mother's sacrifice had acted as a kind of protective magic, shielding me from the wizard's curse." Kuhn touches the discoloured spot on his forehead, saying bitterly, "All that the curse left behind was a scar."

The story about a mother's sacrifice that Kuhn had told in class – it had not been a fairy tale, but an explanation of the genesis of his power. Snape is . . . well, his interest in studying Kuhn has just increased tenfold.

"Did the wizard ever recover?"

Kuhn grimaces, a shadow passing over his eyes. "He died."

Snape runs a finger across his bottom lip. He feels oddly calm in face of the revolutionary nature of Kuhn's revelations.

"You killed him."

"I –"

Utterly unselfconscious, Snape lifts his finger from his lips to Kuhn's discoloured forehead, to the mysterious patch of skin. He ignores Kuhn's sharp inhaled breath. The scar just barely perceptible to his fingertip, jagged as a bolt of lightning, has been well concealed beneath a skin-coloured cream.

There is not even the faintest trace of magic emanating from the scar. Snape withdraws his finger with clinical detachment, his suspicions confirmed. "Usually curse scars continue to radiate some evidence of dark magic. Did it stop doing so when he died?"

Kuhn stares at him incredulously, as though he cannot understand the motivations behind Snape's questioning.

"Never mind, it's quite obvious. Why do you hide it?"

An ugly flush suffuses Kuhn's thin cheeks. "Why would I not want to be reminded of my mother's death every time I look into the mirror? Are you fucking serious, Snape?"

Snape scowls, refusing to be embarrassed. "She must have loved you very much."

"Yes, well." Kuhn looks sour. "I would much rather have my mother than a stupid scar."

Snape resumes tracing his finger over his bottom lip, imagining what it would be like to have a scar instead of his mother. He thinks about her slight, bowed frame, her brittle hair and long, tobacco-stained fingers, her cold black eyes. She not very beautiful, he thinks, and the thought is
accompanied by a sudden wave of shame.

That he could even think about exchanging her for some definitive proof of her love, given in death.

But shameful and disloyal as it is to think such a thing, Snape can't help but wish that his mother were different. Not significantly different, but braver, perhaps – stronger. Her eyes are so cold these days, Snape no longer knows when it was he last saw his mother with her Occlumency shields down. There is no better way of blocking out pain, of course, than retreating behind those shields, and Snape is grateful to his mother for teaching him how to Occlude for that very reason. He doesn't begrudge her a refuge from his father and all the other sufferings she has been forced to endure. That's not the point. The point is that he is tired of looking into her face and not being recognised. Just thinking about her blank stare makes him livid with anger. Doesn't she realise that Snape needs her? Doesn't she care enough about him to want to emerge from the shadow-land in her mind?

Snape gathers into himself, anger and shame twisting in him like hot trails of sand caught in a fierce desert wind.

"Snape?"

"What?"

Snape's tone is snappish. Kuhn ignores this, an almost ironic glint to his eye. "We sure make a fine pair, sitting here moping like this."

Snape curls a lip, although Kuhn's words do make him feel slightly less angry.

Kuhn smiles. "Come on, enough dwelling on the past." Ignoring Snape's glare, Kuhn reaches out for Snape's hand and pulls him, rather awkwardly, into a standing position.

Snape, electrified by the contact, can no longer think about his mother. Neither can he look Kuhn in the face.

Kuhn lets go of Snape's hand and begins waving before Snape's eyes. "Earth to Snape, Earth to Snape –"

Snape clears his throat. "You really survived the killing curse?" he asks, letting disbelief colour his voice.

"Yes," Kuhn sounds uncertain, wary even. "Would you rather I hadn't told you?"

"I don't know." One by one, Snape curls his left fingers into his palm. The number of people who would be clamouring for this kind of information, the Dark Lord not least amongst them . . . He lets his voice darken. "You certainly shouldn't tell anyone else."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Snape's head snaps up; he narrows his eyes with suspicion and something else he doesn't dare too closely examine. "Really?"

"I'm serious," says Kuhn, smiling at him. "This is strictly between you and me."

Snape glances down at his scuffed shoes to hide his impulse to smile back. At another point in time, he might have been disgusted by his roommate's complete lack of guile. What kind of a Slytherin would reveal such sensitive information to someone he by all means shouldn't trust? At present,
however, all Snape can think is that Kuhn wouldn't have shared his story if he didn't really consider Snape his friend, which is –

"Good," he says. He brushes back the curtains of his hair, lifts his gaze and – smiles.

Kuhn's smile widens to illuminate gold, to send rays of light cascading through circles of green.

Snape can feel his heart racing. He swallows and turns his gaze back down, hair falling back over his eyes. The shrunken bag of feverfew in his pocket rustles in his robes and he reaches in to take it out. "I need to start brewing," he says with sudden realisation, unshrinking the bag and observing the semi-wilted state of the feverfew.

"Really? I was hoping that you might teach me some of your spells."

Snape looks up in surprise; he'd forgotten his promise to teach Kuhn some of his invented spells. He glances down at the bag in his hands. "The feverfew is wilting."

Kuhn does not seem to understand the urgent implications of that statement. His disappointment spreads to his eyes.

Snape cannot stand looking at them. "Later," he says to the bag of feverfew. "I'll show them to you later."

Kuhn sighs. "I'll leave you to your potions, then. Only –"

Irritation begins to simmer in Snape. "Yes?" he interrupts.

"Don't forget."

Snape glares at him. Unabashed, Kuhn smiles before turning away.

Through bedraggled strands of hair and with the corner of his eye, Snape watches Kuhn seat himself at his desk and open the pages of a book – probably *Like Poppy to Memory: Powerful Potions to Manipulate the Mind*, the book Kuhn has been perusing lately for his Defence project. He watches Kuhn lift a finger to his mouth to wet it, then turn the corner of a page. That (is) could be my friend, he thinks – before shaking his head of its nonsense and turning his attention to unbagging the feverfew.

Kuhn learns *Langlock, Muffliato* and *Levicorpus* with enviable ease. The only thing preventing Snape from throwing a tantrum and refusing to show him any further spells is the gratifying amount of enthusiasm Kuhn shows for his "brilliant" inventions. The fact that Kuhn also promises to teach him how to Disillusion himself is also a considerable motivator.

It turns out that Snape is practically a natural when it comes to Disillusionment charms. He has trouble restraining a smirk, even an invisible one, after that.

"How good is your Occlumency?" Kuhn asks, once they are no longer transparent.

Snape, still smirking, says, "I doubt that anyone at this school is better."

"So, who else can Occlude? Lestrange?"

"Every Slytherin worth his salt can Occlude," sneers Snape. "The question is not one of Occlumency, but of Legilmency. Of the Slytherins in our year, only Lestrange and myself, I believe,
are Legilmens."

"Yeah, I sort of gathered that he's a Legilmens," says Kuhn ruefully.

"Do you not know how to Occlude?"

Kuhn colours. "Er, well, I had lessons once, but they . . . didn't go so well."

Snape considers him, his puzzling embarrassment. "Occlumency is very difficult to teach. Perhaps you did not trust your instructor enough, or vice versa."

Kuhn's face is now completely red, and he is shifting guiltily from foot to foot. "Erm, probably not."

"Or you lack the proper disposition for Occlumency. It is often said, as a rule, that you are either able to Occlude or you are not."

Kuhn coughs. "I think I probably could, if someone showed me how."

Snape begins to pace. It would indeed be in his own interests were Kuhn able to Occlude, but who would be able to teach him? "That is unlikely to happen. There are no classes taught on the subject at Hogwarts; it is considered too dangerous. Those of us who know Occlumency were taught it at home by our parents. Perhaps, however, you can take instruction out of a book. I'm sure that Professor Slughorn would be willing to give you a list of relevant literature."

Kuhn is shaking his head. "I would rather take a more . . . practical route, if you know what I mean."

Snape stops pacing to stare at him. "No, I do not."

"Well – would you –"

Kuhn has not even finished his sentence before Snape snaps, "Absolutely not. It's unconscionable of you to even ask."

They glare at each other, Kuhn's face a picture of disappointed surprise. "Why?"

"I thought we'd established this already," snaps Snape. "There is a reason that mind magic is not taught at this school. It is a highly dangerous enterprise, requiring mutual trust on part of the Legilmens and the Occlumens –"

"And I thought we'd established that I trust you!"

"You are a fool to do so!" Snape steps in closer to Kuhn, his voice soft and deadly. "One unintentional slip – one push too hard – and I could destroy the very foundations of your sanity. Do you understand the ramifications of what I am saying, Kuhn? This is not a game. If I were to have access to your mind, you would find yourself at considerable risk. I am not about to make that gamble."

Kuhn, damn him, looks at Snape with pleading green eyes and says: "Please."

"No."

"Please. Severus, I would do just about anything –"

"What must I say to get this ludicrous idea out of your head?" Immensely frustrated, Snape tears his gaze away from Kuhn and resumes pacing. "I don't remember how I was taught, how do you expect me to teach you?"
"I don't consider that disqualifying. And I'm not afraid, Severus. I don't care about the risk – I need to learn this. And, I will say this again and again – I trust you."

Snape stops pacing to stare at Kuhn, his upper lip curling with disgust. "You are even more reckless than I thought."

Kuhn shrugs. "Desperate times, desperate measures."

Snape shakes his head, unconvinced. "I won't do it," he says firmly.

"Fine," says Kuhn, blotches of red discolouring his cheeks, his head bobbing in an angry rhythm. "Fine. In that case, I want my money back."

Snape freezes.

"You know, the money you've been using in your battery."

Despite feeling as though a stalactite has just been pounded through his chest, Snape tries to keep calm. There must be a way to talk Kuhn out of this madness. "Don't worry, I promise to give it all back to you in time for Hogsmeade weekend. I only need until then to finish my preliminary experiments. Besides," he adds snidely, "you couldn't possibly spend have anything to spend it on till then."

"This about principles, not money," snaps Kuhn. Like this, jaw set, his hair upended by a long day, he strongly resembles Potter. "If you won't help me, then I won't help you."

"Principles?" Snape repeats, disbelieving and offended. "If this were about principles, then you wouldn't be trying to make me teach you Occlumency!" he hisses. "What if something were to go wrong, then? What if, by invading your mind, I made you forget things, or even worse, go mad? Have you considered how I would feel about having inflicted such a thing?"

"I don't see how it's any worse than me sitting by and letting you experiment on yourself," replies Kuhn with an irritating calm. "In fact, I think your self-experiments are actually more dangerous, in the end."

"You don't know the least about such things, dammit –" Something like anguish is building itself up in Snape, and he growls in order to placate it, glaring at Kuhn with accusation. "I just knew you would try to blackmail me someday."

"Only because you're being such a git!"

"Oh, yes, as if that weren't a valid reason to blackmail a person."

The air trembles with suffocating, angry energy. Kuhn's wand is emitting sparks; his face is twisted in rage. "Fine, then, keep the stupid money!"

"Maybe I don't want to, after all!" shouts Snape. "If this is how you're going to be about it!"

"Fuck off, Snape!"

And with that, Kuhn throws himself onto his bed, spelling the curtains to shut around him with a bang. Snape swallows, intimidated by the sudden emptiness of the room. He shuts his eyes, feeling a thickness building up rapidly in his throat, feeling as though he is going to hurl.

This can't have just happened. It was too fast, too banal . . . This is either a dream, or a simple
misunderstanding, easily rectified . . .

"Kuhn?"

Kuhn does not emerge from his bed. He probably has thrown up a silencing charm.

"Kuhn, –" but what is Snape supposed to say? Suddenly disgusted with himself – what a crybaby you are, Snivellus– Snape turns away. After a second's thought, he begins violently dismantling his battery.

_Occlumens_ . . .

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That night, Snape has strange dreams that he will only vaguely be able to remember in the morning. His mother features prominently in one. Her skin is shaded an unnatural blue and looks oddly puffy, as though she were the subject of an early Picasso painting. In another dream, Snape finds himself lost in a forest. Not even Hagrid could find him there, the brambles are so thick, the overgrowth so wild. He wanders and wanders, not even glimpsing the sun through the dark, almost black canopy made by the trees.

He wanders aimlessly – until, amazingly, he hears a voice.

"Snape!"

---

Snape awakens in pitch-darkness. There is a face looming over his, made grey and indistinct by the night.

"Snape," it says plaintively, one of its hands rocking him by the arm.

"I'm awake, you dimwit," he says, but his tongue is thick in his mouth and the words do not come out as sharply as they should.

"Sorry." Snape is dimly aware of a weight settling itself down on his bed, an incorporeal sigh. "I had to wake you. I couldn't sleep, knowing what I'd said."

It takes Snape a few seconds to make sense of these sentences. He lifts up his head and squints into the darkness. "Kuhn?"

A pause. "Who else?"

"I thought –" Snape frowns, wondering if that wasn't part of a dream. "I thought we weren't speaking."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm sorry, Snape. Truly. I'm very, very sorry for what I said. It was wrong of me to try and force you to teach me Occlumency."

Snape tries to sit up on his elbows, but his head is already too heavy. His elbows collapse and his head sinks back into the pillow. "This is what you had to wake me up in the middle of the night to say?"

"Yes."

Snape considers this. Yesterday evening he had been forced to dismantle his battery, an event that had enraged and sickened him so utterly that he had spent the rest of the evening cooped up in bed, inventing horrible hexes with which to get his revenge. He had not gone to dinner, and since he and
Kuhn had avoided each other like the plague, he has no idea whether Kuhn ended up going by himself.

"Does this mean I get to rebuild my battery?"

Kuhn shifts his weight against Snape's legs, dragging the blanket across his skin. "If you want. I haven't touched any of the things you catapulted over to my side of the room."

Snape allows himself a grim moment of satisfaction. Then he closes his eyes, lets out a breath through his nose, and concedes tiredly, "Very well."

"Very well?" Kuhn shifts again, his voice unnaturally high-pitched. "What does that mean?"

"What do you want it to mean?"

"Well... we're still friends, right?" Kuhn sounds nervous, worried.

Snape doesn't understand him at all. He opens his eyes to stare at the bed's dark canopy. "I don't know. I don't exactly trust you." He pauses, tasting the cold air with his tongue. "Were we even friends?"

Kuhn's voice is soft. "I'd like to think so."

There is a brief silence. Kuhn shifts again, this time leaning forward.

"We can start over, if you want." Kuhn's cheer sounds forced. All of a sudden, he lifts one of Snape's hands – knotted into the blanket – and begins shaking it up and down. "Hello, my name is Adrian Kuhn, and –"

Snape sneers. "This is stupid."

"Don't you believe in second chances, Snape?"

Snape pulls back his hand, unwillingly reminded of red hair, leaf-green eyes. His throat feels thick. It would be inconsequential of me if I didn't, he thinks. And yet, to Kuhn he says, "I have to think about it."

Disappointed, Kuhn becomes rigidly still. In the ponderous silence that follows, Snape begins to regret his own words.

"Just this once, Kuhn," says Snape, turning over onto his side, burrowing his nose into the pillow. "Do you understand?"

There is a moment of hesitation, and then Kuhn says, "I think so." He pats Snape's hand, still clenched within the blanket, and squeezes.

Snape shuts his eyes tight.

"Thanks," says Kuhn, voice still soft. Snape waits, and finally hears the reluctant squeak of the mattress as Kuhn's weight leaves it.

Snape curls his legs together, up and away from the new absence.

Snape trudges into the Potions classroom in yesterday's robes, his hair clumped together and draped in smelly strings across his face. He glances blearily at the Gryffindors, noticing Lupin's continued
absence from their ranks (he had not been in class yesterday either). Lily is packing out her things with slender hands, her cheeks slightly pink and her eyes trained fixedly on her task. Beside her, Potter leans against the desk, eyes hooded behind round metal glasses, mouth curved into a vaguely cruel smile. His smile becomes a sneer as he notices Snape.

"Don't stare at him. You're only making it worse," hisses Kuhn from behind.

Snape only woke up ten minutes ago. Kuhn had pulled apart the curtains of his bed, snapping something about his sleeping habits. For a moment, Snape had been so disoriented to see Kuhn that he'd thought he was in the middle of a dream. Then he'd remembered how Kuhn had sat on his bed, asking for pardon.

Snape may have pardoned Kuhn – in a very provisional sense – but that doesn't mean he isn't annoyed with him. He scowls before pulling out a desk chair and moving it a few inches away from Kuhn's.

"I am not staring," he declares once seated.

"Not anymore, perhaps." Kuhn sounds irritated as he digs into his satchel and begins unpacking parchment and quill, protective goggles and gloves.

Snape narrows his eyes and juts out his chin, his lips a disapproving line. He makes no effort to unpack anything, merely opening *Advanced Potion-Making* to the chapter on elective affinities and pulling out his folded essay from between the pages. Legs stretched out before him, he then crosses his arms and sits back, unconsciously fixing his gaze on the rear of Narcissa's shimmering white-blond head.

Kuhn begins setting up his cauldron, loud and incompetent. Scowling at the noise, Snape gathers up his stiff limbs and manages to arrange his own cauldron in half the time it has taken Kuhn to simply crank up his tripod.

At some point in time, around the time when Snape had just been about to nod off, Slughorn chooses to make his entrance. He spouts good morning welcomes that wash over Snape like background noise. Trying to keep his eyes open is more strenuous an activity than it might seem . . .

" . . . essays to the front, please," says Slughorn. Snape starts as his essay suddenly sprouts a pair of wings and begins flattering up to a basket on Slughorn's desk.

He is proud of this particular essay, he remembers. The scar-removing potion at the end is really rather beautiful . . . crystalline red and chlorophyll green . . . Snape sits up straight, blood rushing to his cheeks. Damn it – what if Slughorn realises whom those ingredients had been meant to signify? The more Snape thinks about it, the more he is convinced that he could not have been any more obvious about his admiration for Lily . . .

Damn it!

Snape is so caught up in self-tirade that he misses Slughorn's introductory lecture, and therefore the day's assignment. By the time he realises what has happened, he is thoroughly frustrated, and ends up kicking the table leg.

" . . . given its complexity, I would suggest you work in pairs. There will be a prize for the best potion."

Scowling at the self-induced pain in his foot, Snape glances over at Kuhn, who has been taking copious notes. His copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* already lies open to the day's assignment,
apparently – Snape leans forward, pushing back the hair from his eyes – a Contumacy Concoction.

Snape drops his hand, freeing the greasy sheets of hair that keep his expression hidden from Slughorn, and sneers.

At the front of the classroom, Slughorn is pulling two gleaming bottles from the pocket of his tweed waistcoat. They contain a viscous potion with a phosphorescent green tinge. There are many potions of the type; Snape mentally runs through a list of the most likely candidates –

"I rather doubt that any of you recognise this particular potion," says Slughorn, licking his plump lips. "Those of you aiming for a high score your NEWT exams ought to make a note of it, however. The Ministry may not allow me to teach you how to brew this, but they'll have no qualms about testing you on its properties."

At this pronouncement, Lily sits up straight in her chair, tucking a loose strand of red hair back into her – for safety reasons – tightly knotted bun. Kuhn also begins paying greater attention, craning his neck forward in order to get a better look at the phosphorescent bottles.

Even Potter has dropped his mask of boredom, for once. "Why aren't you allowed to teach us to brew it, sir?"

"It has hallucinogenic properties," says Slughorn briskly.

Potter exchanges a wicked grin with Black.

"Now, Mr Potter, Mr Black, I hope that you aren't getting any ideas," says Slughorn in a tone that is only barely admonishing. The old fraud is almost smiling, damn him. "This potion is much too important to be used as a mere drug –"

"What's it do, then?" calls Black, curiosity burning in his dark eyes.

Slughorn's eyes actually twinkle. "What would you say, Mr Black, when I told you that this potion has the ability to bend certain laws of matter? To overcome them, so to speak?"

Lily lets out an involuntary gasp. Snape curls a lip – she had never used to be such a know-it-all, such a Gryffindor.

"What's so special about that?" says Black, looking annoyed that he hasn't leapt to the same conclusion as Lily.

Slughorn chuckles. "Very good, Mr Black, very good. Let's see – you're thinking that magic, by its very definition, is not subject to the natural order of things."

"Exactly."

You idiot, thinks Snape before he is distracted by a faint, rustling sound. He glances around the classroom and realises that Lestrangle and Narcissa have their heads together and are muttering discontentedly.

Up until now, Snape has been more asleep than not. Seeing Lestrangle and Narcissa's obvious displeasure, however, makes him feel apprehensive, which in turn makes him hyperaware of his surroundings. Feeling fully awake, Snape sends a silent eavesdropping spell (of his own invention) in the direction of Narcissa's shimmering head.

"... Slughorn an empiricist..."
"Now, now, Cissy, he's merely espousing the standard Ministry position . . ."

"But a Slytherin . . ."

The man in question turns from Black to frown at them. Instantly, Narcissa pulls away from Lestrange, a hand going to her hair as if to pat it down. Snape can only see a sliver of her profile, but he can imagine the rest: Her expression is haughty and accusing, as though Slughorn were the one whispering in class.

Still frowning, Slughorn turns back to the Gryffindors. "Well, Mr Black, that view is not entirely correct. Magic is bound by natural laws. Little corpuscles of energy are transmitted from our wands into the space and time around us, changing them according to laws that are just as natural as those governing the non-magical world." Slughorn peers down his flat, piggish nose. "Potions wouldn't make any sense otherwise, you see. We would never have to measure temperature if we didn't have to worry that the potion we were brewing would suddenly turn into a gas or freeze into a solid according to the natural laws. Does that make sense, my boy?"

Black is as haughty as his cousin, his countenance betraying a supreme, yet elegant boredom. "As much as it ever will," he drawls.

Potter smirks.

Narcissa is looking at Black with something almost approaching approval. As if sensing her approbation, Black's eyes flicker to hers, darkening for a moment before he turns his face away.

"Good, good." There is a slight edge to Slughorn's tone, the only indication that he has also noticed the subtle exchange between the Blacks. "Now, after all that I've said, can any of you guess what it might be that makes this particular potion so special? Why yes, my dear."

Lily's expression is absent. Her green eyes blink like traffic lights, signalling which trains of thought should proceed and which should come to a halt. Before speaking, she tilts her head as if weighing two hypotheses against each other. "Does the potion suspend the phases of matter?"

Snape closes his eyes, her voice – tentative, low – reverberating in his mind.

"Excellent! Quite brilliant! Five points to Gryffindor." Snape opens his eyes to see that Slughorn's face has turned red from beaming. "I can see that the rest of you have not quite caught on the same way as Miss Evans has. However, the matter is rather easy to understand, rather elementary in fact. You all are aware that matter can exist in a variety of states – solid, liquid, gas. In certain branches of magic, however, we sometimes have need of a state that is neither solid, liquid nor gas, but rather all three at once – or in other words, none of them in particular. Many of the most powerful potions require this special property, a property that bends the rules of both space and time, in order to function.

"Due to the complexity of the brewing process, and the aforementioned hallucinogenic effects, this potion was – rightfully or not – removed from the Hogwarts curriculum some sixty years ago. The NEWT testers are nonetheless rather fond of asking about it on your written exams." At Avery's groan, Slughorn makes a tutting sound. "Now I realise that this may not seem altogether fair, but you should remember that they haven't updated their questions in over a hundred years. As for the kinds of questions you'll be asked, you should make sure to be versed in the potion's various names. It has several different names in every language, you see – in English, for example, we commonly refer to the potion as the 'Shifter', although there are other names as well."

"Such as?" asks Lestrange, never one to do more research on his own than necessary.
"Ah, that discovery I'll leave up to you, my boy," says Slughorn with a maddening twinkle to his eye. "Now, as you all know, I don't believe in coddling –"

Snape snorts to himself.

"I think that many of you are ready to experiment with potions like this." Slughorn's gaze falls on Lily, who is watching him with rapt attention. "So, as possession of this potion by a student is not expressly forbidden, I've decided to award this sample to two of you. The pair that brews the best example of Contumacy Concoction – which, I warn you, is not a task to be taken lightly – shall win the two bottles as prize. I shall look forward to seeing what uses you put the Shifter to in your potions-making."

Snape glances at Lily. Her eyes are wide and (beautiful) gleaming and her mouth a determined line. Obviously, she intends on winning the potion. Looking away, Snape is startled to see that Kuhn staring at Slughorn with an expression almost identical to Lily's.

Kuhn turns to Snape, beseeching. "I need that potion."

"Whatever for?"

Kuhn purses his lips, eyes becoming shifty. "My project," he says evasively.

"Lily is bound to win, you'll have the potions for your project that way."

"But I don't want her to win," insists Kuhn. "I want us to win."

Snape frowns, unsure what to think of that sentence. Kuhn is rather pushy, he thinks. "That is very unlikely."

"Oh, come on, you know we can do it."

"Well . . ." There is the fact that Slughorn actually likes Kuhn. And that Snape can rarely say no to a challenge. "The only way we would win, and I repeat, the chances are exceedingly slim, is if all the actual brewing were left to me –"

"Great. I'll bring you all the ingredients and help you with chopping and stuff."

Snape is nearly amused by Kuhn's immediate acquiescence. He is forced to remind himself that he and Kuhn are on different terms than they were before. "Fine, but don't get your hopes up. If, for some unfathomable reason, we do win—"

But Slughorn chooses that moment to break in with the announcement, "Well, go on then – and good luck!"

Before Snape can say anything else, Kuhn has set off racing to the ingredients cabinet. Lily arrives there at nearly the same time, panting. The two of them begin a strange dance of avoiding each other while making a competition out of snatching up the best specimens.

Their movements, Snape realises with a kind of belated horror, are nearly identical. It is as though they had been programmed to make mirror gestures of one another. When Lily moves her arm, Kuhn does so as well, with exactly the same kind of inelegant tomboy rashness, the same kind of swift, darting –

Snape tears his gaze away from the odd scene, his cheeks abnormally hot. He is imagining things. Where is the recipe for Contumacy Concoction – page 625 – there. Snape can still feel the heat in his
cheeks. Read, Snivellus, read . . . The potion is, obviously, an example of a complicated elective affinity – Snape is certain that the more intricate steps involved, the more contumacious the potion’s effect – but it is not a particularly difficult potion to brew otherwise. That is, assuming one knows that dried nettles ought to be **pulverised**, not chopped – Snape scowls as he scrawls this correction into the margin. Also, Snape knows from experience that the tough outer skin of the crabfish is best opened with a silver knife, not the standard steel ones –

"All right," says a breathless voice, startling Snape out of his thoughts. He looks up to see Kuhn, cheeks flushed, eyes bright, setting out the twelve requisite ingredients on his side of the desk. "Nettles, check; one dead, disgusting crabfish, check; wasp's tails, check; hippogriff feathers –"

"Cut the hippogriff feathers into fifths," interrupts Snape, leaning forward to move the more sensitive ingredients, including the crabfish, over to his side. "When you're finished with that, pulverise the nettles. And I mean **pulverise**– the book is wrong when it says to chop them."

Kuhn takes this unorthodox instruction with surprising equanimity. Snape had expected at least a token protest. Instead, Kuhn immediately begins cutting the hippogriff feathers, all while wearing a rather irritating smile, as though he were secretly pleased about something.

"We haven't won anything yet," Snape warns, not thinking about the semi-pending status of their friendship.

"But we will," says Kuhn, green eyes brimming with a confidence that Snape does not understand.

Snape shakes his head and turns to his cauldron, spelling on the flame. It flares up in a blue, smelly gust – a smell that Snape loves. He begins removing the skin on the crabfish . . .

In the ensuing half-an-hour, Snape is careful to limit Kuhn's participation in the brewing process to the preparation of ingredients. Everything else – everything that could possibly be considered intellectually tasking – he leaves to himself. This division of labour turns out to be remarkably efficient: Kuhn not only manages to follow Snape's instructions, but he also does so with alacrity. Snape has never before seen such a finely pulverised gram of nettles . . .

It is therefore unsurprising that they reach the potion's resting state five minutes before *Advanced Potion-Making* predicts they should.

Snape turns down the flame beneath the cauldron in order to let the potion simmer. He then casts a silent *Muffliato* around Kuhn and himself. Kuhn, sensing the web of magic around them, makes an approving noise.

Snape gives him a sidelong glance from behind his straggly hair. "If we do win," he says, his first real words of conversation since they began brewing, "then you may keep both bottles."

"Really?" says Kuhn excitedly. At Snape's disapproving look, he soberes and adds, "What do you want in return?"

"Better," Snape smirks. "In return, I want you to answer a question."

"What kind of question?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Well, decide now."

"And where would be the fun in that?" asks Snape smoothly. "No. I won't tell you what the question
is until after we've won."

Kuhn squints at him, rubbing at his forehead with stained fingers. "A few minutes ago, you were convinced that we'd lose. What's changed?"

"Inspiration," Snape drawls. "I've come up with a slight improvement on the recipe. We'll add a fistful of rue –"

"Rue?"

Snape is so used to the gaps in Kuhn's knowledge by now that he doesn't even bother to sneer. "Rue is a horrible smelling herb, Kuhn, often used to keep insects away. Added to this particular potion, it will evince a series of complex changes that you are rather unlikely to understand."

"Try me."

"And waste my breath? Not a chance."

"Oh, come on."

Snape tucks several clumped-together strands of hair behind his ear, glaring all the while at Kuhn. "The rue, you pitiful excuse for a NEWT potions student, will set off an elective affinity, as you should well know. It will neutralise the nettle-crabfish bond, cause the nettles to bind with the wasps' tails and enter an affinity bond with the crabfish that will not only increase the strength of the potion, but also release a pleasant scent."

"How do you define pleasant?" asks Kuhn. Although he remained seemingly unbothered by Snape's insults, he looks slightly nervous now, as though he is afraid that Snape's idea of pleasant is bound to run to the gory and putrefied.

Snape bares his teeth in an almost smile. "Most people would say that pineapple has a pleasant scent, I believe."

Kuhn's eyes light up, as though he actually knows about Slughorn's pineapple obsession. Who could have told him – Narcissa? "Oh. Well, in that case, you should definitely do whatever it was you were planning to do."

Unimpressed, Snape crosses his arms over his chest. "Will you answer a question for me in return?"

"Just win us those potions, Severus – I'll do whatever you ask."

"That, I believe, would be somewhat more than what I originally asked for –"

"Snape, I'll answer your questions, every single one of them, but can we finish brewing the potion first?"

"Patience is a virtue," smirks Snape, turning back to the still-simmering potion. The resting period is nearly over, to judge from colour and viscosity . . .

"Bring me some rue, would you?" he asks, picking up a stirrer.

Snape's little addition to the recipe works wonders for their standing in Slughorn's eyes – that is, for Kuhn's standing in Slughorn's eyes. When, towards the end of the class period, Slughorn comes to test their (more than perfect) potion, he nearly weeps with delight.

"Do I detect – a hint of pineapple?" he cries. "Adrian, my boy, I'm speechless! May I assume that
"You used rue?"

Kuhn glances at Snape, who remains stiff and expressionless, then nods.

"Of course, Mr Snape, you helped as well, but I must say, this is no ordinary potion. No merely competent brewer could have produced this. This, my dear Adrian, is the fruit of unqualified genius." Slughorn does not appear to notice how Kuhn seems to shrink with each word of praise. Nor does he notice Snape's sneer, only partially hidden behind greasy black hair. "I'm sure you don't mind if I keep a sample for myself? Well, I think it's clear who today's winners are. Ten points to Slytherin, and do enjoy the Shifter, boys –"

Slughorn gives both phosphorescent bottles to Kuhn, then waddles away.

On the Gryffindor side of the room, Snape can see Lily, stone-faced, eyes directing a combined confusion and fury onto her cauldron. He quickly averts his gaze, turning it onto Kuhn instead.

Kuhn, who looks ridiculously miserable. Snape can't help but like him in that moment. Nor can he help but smirk at him. "Aren't you supposed to be happy?"

"You know I'm not," hisses Kuhn. "I mean, yeah, I'm glad to have the potion, but not like this.

"You'd better get used to it." Snape casts another surreptitious Muffliato and begins decanting the cooled-down potion into flasks. "Personally, I don't see what you're moping about. You got the potion, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but –"

"Cork this." Snape hands Kuhn a flask full of the potion, smiling wickedly. "You can bring Slughorn his personal sample."

Kuhn sets down the potion with a scowl. "You're enjoying this, aren't you."

"Immensely."

"Unfeeling bastard," retorts Kuhn. "Aren't you the least bit upset about how he treated you?"

"Not one whit," Snape declares, surprised to find that this is true. He pauses significantly, allowing satisfaction to saturate his tone. "Besides, you can't have missed Slughorn's indirect acknowledgement of my genius."

Kuhn snorts. "Trust you to see an insult as a compliment."

"And you to take a compliment for an insult. Which tendency is worse, do you think?"

The corners of Kuhn's lips are twitching. "I guess we make a good team, huh?"

Snape gives him a quelling glare, even though he knows – even though both of them know – that it is a wasted gesture. "Cork this," he says, handing Kuhn another filled flask.

"Certainly."

Their fingers briefly touch – and Kuhn nearly drops the flask. Despite this near mishap, Kuhn (suspiciously enough) begins smiling.

The expression is so contagious that Snape catches his own mouth partaking in the same questionable activity.
They file out of their desks in spirits unusually high, Avery, Narcissa and Lestrange close behind them. Avery, of course, tries to get close to Kuhn by showering him with compliments. Kuhn turns to Narcissa instead, whose eyes gleam as she takes in the rare and complex potion – "so beautiful." Lestrange exchanges a knowing glance with Snape, his pale eyes cold and sarcastic. The rush of sudden attention is so distracting that Snape, opening the classroom door, runs right into –

A flash of periwinkle blue, a glimpse of an ornate hem, and Snape is instantly red-faced with horror. He backs into Lestrange, eyes still trained on the floor, and mumbles. "My apologies, Headmaster."

"There is no need for an apology, Mr Snape," says Dumbledore calmly. "It is very difficult to avoid running into people who stand directly in front of doors. You might say, in fact, that it is I who ought to be apologising to you."

Confused, Snape enters the hallway, careful to keep a proper distance between Dumbledore and himself.

Instantly, Kuhn is at his side. "Hello, Professor Dumbledore," Kuhn says. Something in his voice makes Snape take a closer look at his face. There is a guarded expression there, an expression guarding equal mixtures of hope and concern.

Dumbledore's features, however, betray nothing but the mild concern of an elderly Headmaster for a new student. "Hello, Mr Kuhn. I trust that you have been settling in well?"

"Things are going brilliantly," says Kuhn, not quite relaxed, but making a point out of smiling at Narcissa and Lestrange. Both stand to the side, watching the exchange. Potter, Black and Lily also hover close, their expressions partly scowls, partly ones of naked curiosity.

"I am glad to hear it," says Dumbledore, peering down his half-moon spectacles at the two bottles in Kuhn's hands. "And I see that you won Professor Slughorn's competition. Very good, Mr Kuhn, very good."

"We won," corrects Kuhn, placing a hand on Snape's shoulder. "Severus is the potions genius, not me."

There is something inevitable about the way Dumbledore's blue eyes seek him out, as though they were connected to Snape by a magnet. Snape immediately, instinctively Occludes. "I don't doubt that for a moment," says Dumbledore, and perhaps Snape is only imagining it, but there is something condemnatory mixed in with his light tone of praise. "I must confess, it is because of the competition that I am here. I had hoped to catch the end of it, but my timing, as you can see, was unfortunately a bit off – a shame, for Potions were always my favourite subject as a boy . . ." Dumbledore's eyes, which have been roving across the various faces in the hallway, settle back on Snape. "Perhaps, Mr Snape, Mr Kuhn, you would care to accompany me to tea? I would be most interested in hearing the story of your success. It would, I am sure, provide a pleasant recompense for having missed the actual event."

Snape stares resentfully at the silvery beard, so long that it covers most of the metal, rune-engraved belt Dumbledore keeps around his waist. He is certain that Dumbledore is not really interested in swapping potions stories. Something else is at stake, and Snape has a bad feeling about it. If only he had a proper excuse and could get away! Doubtlessly Dumbledore knows that Snape has a free period now.

"If it would truly please you, Headmaster—"
"Oh, but my boy, it would."

Snape glances at Kuhn, whose expression is, frustratingly enough, completely unreadable. "Then I would be happy to oblige."

"As would I," says Kuhn, a strange smile on his face.

Dumbledore claps together his hands in a semblance of delight. "Capital! Thank you for humouring me, boys, I am sure I shall make it worth your while. Now," he begins moving towards the upper-levels, clearly expecting them to follow, "what shall I have the House Elves set out? Scones, perhaps? Or something savoury?"

Snape glances back over his shoulder at the still-gathered potions class. With the possible exception of Lestrange, whose eyes have narrowed to slits, none of the students seems to have sensed anything extraordinary about Dumbledore's request. In fact, as far as Snape can tell, many of them are jealous – Lily especially, who stares into space with pursed lips, her hands white from gripping Advanced Potion-Making against her chest –

Dumbledore and Kuhn are already several paces ahead, chattering gaily about cucumber sandwiches and crumpets. Cursing beneath his breath, unable to suppress a sinking feeling of worry, Snape hurries to catch up.

Chapter End Notes

The empiricist/anti-empiricist debate is inspired by tartaucitron's wonderful "Look for me here" :

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