When Only Silence Remains
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Summary

Love, it seems, is just not enough for Harry and Severus. When their marriage shipwrecks and Harry asks for a divorce they learn that there is still a long road to travel ahead of them.

Notes

Originally written for Secret Snarry Swap 2014, Prompt #23 from amanitamuscaria: He makes me blood-boiling, cursing, spitting angry!
I would like to thank everybody who helped, you simply rock! Special thanks to Torino for being awesome and to keyairreem for all the help and the summary.
Madam Stapleton quotes Jean de La Fontaine to Harry, and Severus’ mysterious source is the fabulous Miss Jane Austen.

Harry stepped inside the house and carefully closed the door behind him. The lock’s moderate clicking noise still sounded like a bang in the eerie silence of the house. Not for the first time, Harry felt as if he entered a crypt.

A sideways glance to the coat rack proved that Severus was at home; his customary winter cloak was hung up by the entrance. Harry sighed. These days the silence was even more impenetrable when Severus was at home.
Harry peeled away all the layers of his winter attire, which protected him from the chill of the December weather outside, meanwhile fervently wishing it could protect him from the chilliness of their home.

Leaving boots and cloak by the door, he walked into the living room. Severus wasn’t there; Harry knew he wouldn’t be. At this time of day he usually was at his basement laboratory; actually, he spent most of his time there. Once upon a time Harry had wished he wouldn’t. He had been almost jealous of all the time Severus spent with his potions and dubious experiments down there. Nowadays he was almost… glad.

Harry knew he could knock on the laboratory’s heavily warded door, he knew Severus would answer eventually, however grudgingly. He knew he could request his husband to resurface for a bit as they needed to talk. Severus would possibly emerge within a reasonable amount of time, except when he had some absolutely-impossible-to-leave-unattended experiment going on, then he would be barricaded down there for only god knows how long. Once upon a time Harry had resented those experiments much more fiercely than these days.

Harry did not knock on that door. He knew it was kind of cowardly and his inaction only delayed the inevitable, but just this once he didn’t want to be the epitome of bravery. How many this once’s had there already been, he did not want to think about.

Instead of knocking he opted to wait Severus out, so he sat down on the sofa in front of the fireplace. His gaze automatically flickered to the photograph on the mantel: their wedding photo, but he quickly tore his eyes away; the Harry and Severus on the picture were almost unbearably happy. Harry couldn’t stand the sight anymore. It was too painful, brought all the memories of that day up: the cheers, the kisses exchanged, the laughter, the promises made and his own unwavering belief that this – that they – would last forever.

He sat there for a while, he didn’t know for exactly how long, and contemplated what to say. He carefully selected then rejected all the possible sentences that came to his mind. Then he settled for the simplest way to phrase his intention. Severus would criticise his lack of eloquence no matter what Harry said, it was better not to give him any more munition with overcomplicating his message and inevitably stumbling upon his own words. He didn’t need any fancy words; they weren’t required to solve the problems between him and Severus. Harry doubted that there remained any words fancy enough to bridge the gap, even only temporarily, between the two of them. Harry only needed those words to penetrate the silence long enough to let Severus know what he decided.

It was a long time later, but simultaneously very soon, when Severus finally emerged from his lab. Harry stood up to greet his husband.

“Severus,” he said calmly.

Severus hesitated for the briefest moment in the door before bowing his own head in greeting.

“Harry. You are home earlier than I expected.”

Harry noted that there was scarcely any accusation in Severus’ voice.

“I am. I needed to talk to you about something,” declared Harry without his voice wavering.

“Indeed.” It wasn’t exactly a question, as it didn’t possess the minimum amount of curiosity required to be one.
Severus strode towards Harry and sat down on one of the armchairs. Harry settled down on the other, opposite to Severus.

“Go ahead,” Severus encouraged with a hint of impatience. “I am all ears.”

Harry was almost sure that it wasn’t Severus’ intention to be sarcastic; it was merely a habit.

“I want a divorce,” Harry announced and he was surprised that it hadn’t been much more difficult to say it out aloud. After all his agonizing over the exact wording it just slipped out, as easily as he breathed out the used air from his lungs.

Severus didn’t bat an eyelid; not that Harry expected him to do so.

“I see. And how do you plan to accomplish that?” he asked as if they were chatting about their daily shopping list.

“The usual way I guess,” Harry shrugged. “Filling forms, attending the hearing, coming to an agreement about property and stuff, although I don’t suppose it will be a problem. As I have never done this before I can’t be sure about all the details, but surely it’s not rocket science.” Harry couldn’t believe his own nonchalance.

“And when do you wish to start the process?” Severus enquired calmly.

“Er… as soon as possible, I guess. I don’t see any sense in delaying. Probably tomorrow.”

Severus nodded.

“I presume you will relocate to Mr and Mrs Ronald Weasley’s place until… conclusion is reached.”

“I plan to. I kind of have my own room there, after all the time I had spent under their roof,” Harry admitted.

“I do not doubt that,” Severus agreed a tiny bit sourly. It was the first time during their surreal discussion when some emotion flashed through Severus’ non-expression. Of course, it was gone in less than an instant. “In that case, I shall leave you to your packing. Let me know when my contribution is required in the… proceedings.” With that he gracefully arose from his chair. “If you don’t wish to discuss anything else then I bid you a good day,” he offered.

“Yeah, no, I mean there is nothing else,” said Harry. “And, er… same to you,” he reciprocated with an awkward politeness.

With a bow of his head and billowing robes in his wake Severus left the room.

“Thanks,” Harry added as an afterthought, to no one in particular.

Harry found the whole discussion disturbingly anticlimactic. It really didn’t take more than five minutes to end their marriage? Or at least to decide to do so.

A door closed somewhere in the house, without the vehemence Severus had so fondly displayed in the past.

Harry was once again surrounded by silence. He permitted himself another brief glance at their wedding picture. He would never have imagined that it would all end in silence like this. Not the silence of peace or contentment; those have their own little noises: the rustle of pages, an almost inaudible sigh or a moan, the shuffling of the sheets. Neither the silence of beginnings; those are
charged with electricity, filled with the barely perceptible humming of anticipation. No. This was absolute silence. The silence of nothingness.

With a shiver, Harry left the living room to start packing.

“So he agreed that we should divorce,” Harry finished his account of what transpired with Severus that afternoon. He sat with his two best friends, in their homey little kitchen, around the dining table. Hermione brewed him a strong tea after dinner and Ron doctored it with some Ogden’s Old Firewhisky; both of them tried their best to support Harry.

He had managed to preserve his calm detachment ever since his discussion with Severus. In all honesty, he didn’t want to let his numbness go. He knew well that it protected him against the impact of the events, against the weight of the turn his life would take from now on.

Hermione nodded with a sad expression on her face and patted his hand, which lay on the kitchen table.

Ron frowned. “A divorce? Are you sure, mate? It is serious business, a divorce.”

Harry tried for a nonchalance he didn’t necessarily feel. “Is it? Such a big deal, I mean.” He must have failed in his carefree act, because both his friends eyed him worriedly. “Okay, I know marriage is a sacred institution and all, but don’t almost half of the marriages end in a divorce?”

“Forty-two percent of them, actually,” Hermione chimed in.

Harry hardly suppressed an eye roll. Good old Hermione, never changed.

“In Muggle Britain maybe, but not in the Wizarding world,” Ron objected. “Here, it’s notoriously hard to dissolve a bond once established. It’s kind of a taboo.”

Ron was so uncharacteristically serious that he made Harry anxious. “But it is possible, isn’t it?”

Ron shrugged with an uneasy expression. “I suppose. I don’t know anybody who divorced, and it is a rare occurrence scarcely discussed with others.”

Harry was definitely alarmed. “But what about those cases that simply don’t work out? Those with some irresolvable conflict or whatnot?”

Ron shrugged. He was seemingly uncomfortable in his current role. In their trio it was usually Hermione who gave the answers and enjoyed doing so immensely.

“I suppose the marriage bond won’t even form if the couple is not compatible. Mum always told us that magic knew its stuff; it wouldn’t interweave something that didn’t belong together.”

Ron’s fingers sought out Hermione’s automatically, intertwining them on the top of the table.

Harry looked away; it was too painful to see. The sight of their joined hands threatened the numbness inside, it reminded Harry of the feelings of hurt, despair and hollowness thinly veiled by his benevolent apathy.

Harry had swallowed before he was able to ask. “Do you think I… we will be able to…”

“Sure thing,” Ron tried to encourage him. “And if there is a problem you can always use your status as The Man Who Conquered,” added Ron, only half-jokingly.
Harry was repulsed by the idea of using his unsought title for this.

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Hermione said. “I will do some research for you, then you will know your options,” she promised.

“Okay, that… that will be good.” Harry suddenly felt very tired and overwhelmed. “Thank you, Hermione,” he said gratefully.

Hermione’s sharp eyes studied Harry for a few moments before she asked, “Are you sure that this is what you want? Is there no other option left?”

Harry sighed. “I can’t think about anything else to try, Hermione. We… we live next to each other but not together. We have nothing to talk about, nothing to do together. We don’t even fight anymore! We are nothing more than roommates nowadays.”

“But maybe you can still change that.” Hermione’s eyes shone with hope that Harry had not felt for a very long time.

“No, I don’t think we can. I tried, but nothing worked. Severus… he does not talk about these things, about problems or relationships or about feelings. Gods, I am not entirely sure if he has any!” he exclaimed. Harry felt his numbness slowly drift away, and he tried to cling to it desperately.

“Oh Harry, he must have feelings for you, I know he does!”

If Severus had been there, Hermione’s romantic declaration would have been sneered upon thoroughly; Harry was sure about that. He shook his head to chase the unwelcome thought away.

“Does he really?” Harry asked resignedly. “I don’t know, Hermione. I wanted to believe that for a long time, but I am not sure anymore. He is older, smarter and much more sophisticated than I am. Maybe he wants something more.”

Ron’s expression became thunderous while Hermione protested vehemently. “But you are smart Harry, and a worthy companion.”

“Yeah, mate, Snape is the one who should count himself lucky, the git,” Ron muttered.

“Ronald!” Hermione cried out, scandalised.

“What? He is a git,” Ron insisted.

“And also your best friend’s husband,” Hermione lectured.

“Not for long as it seems,” Ron murmured under his breath, but Harry still heard the comment. It made his chest clench painfully.

Harry shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I can’t live like this and I can’t solve these problems alone. Severus refused to be my partner in that. And he quite readily agreed to the divorce, didn’t he? For me it means that he wants a separation as well.” Harry felt he was on the edge of falling apart.

“And Snape readily complied?” Ron was clearly disbelieving. “Just like that? No snark, fury or poisonous tongue lashing?”

“Ronald!” Hermione shriilled.
“No. Not one sound of protest, despite of the fact that he must have known about how these things work in the Wizarding world. I think his lack of protest is proof enough that he, too, wants a divorce; he had never been shy to give voice to his disagreement,” said Harry dejectedly.

“But you still love him,” Hermione told him quietly.

And wasn’t the truth always the hardest to swallow?

Harry felt his last resolve waver. He steeled himself; just a few more moments and he could fall apart. “As I said, it doesn’t matter. We are unable to function together,” he claimed with utmost finality.

Ron and Hermione must have been aware of his weakened state, because they let him off the hook. After a few more pleasantries had been exchanged, Harry retreated to the solace of his bedroom and permitted himself to feel once again. It was an unbearably long night.

Harry tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible while he passed through the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Hermione had kept her promise and she had done her research; its result was Harry’s current meeting with the Minister for Magic. It was slightly embarrassing that he would bother the man with something as trivial as the doom of his personal life, but he desperately tried to preserve his privacy for as long as possible. He really didn’t need the tabloids to sniff the potential scandal and sprout headlines like ‘Snape-Potter Marriage in Shambles, Former Boy Hero Potter Contemplates Divorce with Complete Disregard for Wizarding Tradition’. His name still bought his way into the intricate web of bureaucracy without major detours, so – although reluctantly – he used it.

Within ten minutes he was inside of the Minister’s office: impressive for somebody who didn’t even work for the Ministry anymore. Mere mortals had to wait months for an appointment.

“Harry,” Shacklebolt greeted him with a wide smile and a firm handshake.

“Good morning, Minister,” Harry reciprocated.

Kingsley huffed. “No formalities needed. It’s good to see you! It’s been ages. How have you been? Please, take a seat!” Kingsley offered.

Harry managed to sit down, although his movements were a bit more angular than he would have preferred.

“I’ve been fine, thank you. And you?” He wasn’t fine, of course, but he found it unnecessary to tell this to Shacklebolt.

The man eyed Harry’s less than graceful descent onto his chair with concern.

“Is your leg acting up again?” he asked without answering Harry’s question.

“Just a bit stiff.” Harry tried to shoo the Minister’s worries away. “I fell asleep in an awkward position last night.”

It was more likely the lack of sleep that caused his discomfort. In the week or so since he had last spoken to Severus he hadn’t been sleeping enough in spite of the fact that most of the evenings he excused himself early from the company of his friends. He used the breathing techniques he learnt during his Auror training to fall asleep quickly and possibly without thinking; the latter was to be avoided these days. Still, he usually awoke in the wee hours of the morning and wasn’t able to find
peace again.

During his sleepless nights his memories had been assaulting him mercilessly, and through the day he constantly caught himself with an urge to tell Severus about this or that, but he had to realize again and again that Severus was not there and he wouldn’t be there anymore. They hadn’t been in contact since the day Harry had left. It was only a week, and it hadn’t been unusual in the past to spend such an amount of time separated, and it was not as if they had communicated a lot in the last few months, but still: Harry missed Severus with an ache.

Fortunately, Shacklebolt accepted his explanation and didn’t seem to be bothered by his distractedness.

“Old Mr Vivliori treats you well in that shop of his, I hope,” Shacklebolt further inquired.

“He does. Best boss ever. Second only to you, of course,” he added playfully.

“Well, that is good to hear, although I am not surprised,” the Minister answered with a wink, but his face quickly morphed into something more serious. “Now, let’s get down to business.”

Harry only nodded.

“I hear from Mrs Granger-Weasley that you seek a divorce.”

One more nod, in confirmation.

“I trust you contemplated the weight of the matter.”

“I did.”

“And also you discussed it with Severus.”

“I did.” Kind of.

“In this case I should say a few things about the actual process.”

Shacklebolt didn’t question his decision and Harry was grateful for it. He questioned himself often enough.

“The process itself consists of three separate stages: the hearing, the negotiations and the agreement.”

It sounded an awful lot like the Muggle way. Harry wondered what all the fuss was about, then.

“The hearing takes place in front of a senior member of the Wizengamot and both parties are required to attend. The consensual use of Veritaserum is also necessary.”

Harry wanted to protest but, with a lift of his hand, Shacklebolt prevented the interruption.

“Everything said under the effects of the potion is strictly confidential. It’s simply a way to ease communication between the parties.”

Harry bit down on his lower lip. Severus sure as hell won’t like this, Harry thought. He is such a private man.

Shacklebolt must have guessed his dilemma. “Don’t worry, only the officiator of the hearing will be present and nothing out of line will be asked: only the basics.”
Harry uneasily accepted the reassurance with a tilt of his head.

“The second part of the process is for negotiation between the parties. The Ministry ensures an appropriate, neutral ground for the proceedings. Only the interested parties attend this time, there is no third participant involved,” Shacklebolt explained.

“What if the couple fails to negotiate… amenably? Or if they are unable to reach a consensus?” Harry wasn’t sure, if left to their own devices, Severus and he would be able to come to any consensus at all.

“As the negotiation stage is hosted by the Ministry, certain security measures are taken. There is no time limit for this stage of the proceedings, thus participants are able to take their time to find common ground,” the Minister assured Harry. “Think about it as a path to be travelled by the couple.”

That sounded suspiciously like something a Muggle self-help book would say. Harry wondered if Shacklebolt was familiar with those kinds of books.

“And finally, the third stage is the agreement, a declaration of intent signed by the parties after emerging from the second stage, officiated by an employee of the Ministry of Magic,” Shacklebolt finished.

The whole thing sounded very simple. Almost conspicuously so. If divorce only consisted of these three simple steps, then why had Ron made it seem like the stuff of myth? Was the mystification of divorce one more eccentricity of the Wizarding world or a clever tool to preserve society’s integrity? Or was this taboo on divorce a left-behind remainder of some Victorian moral code?

Whichever it was, Harry had no other option. With a heavy heart, he sighed.

“I see. Thank you for the thorough explanation, I really appreciate it. How do I start the process?”

“If you are still set on this course of action, you declare your intention on parchment. I may put a Ministry seal on it. After that, an owl will be sent to your husband about your intention to start the process. As soon as the hearing is scheduled, you both will be informed about the date.”

“How much time do you think we have before the hearing?”

“A few days, maybe, not more than a fortnight.”

It would happen so soon? Harry wasn’t sure that he would be ready for a divorce in less than two weeks. The mere thought made him feel sick, forced his insides to clench with sadness and hopeless desperation. He felt panic blossoming in his chest; he didn’t want to, really, he didn’t, he wasn’t able to.

He forced himself to breathe in deeply.

He didn’t want to, but he needed to. Nothing else remained.

He steeled himself for the inevitable. The raw pain in his chest resembled a feral animal: howling, whimpering, tearing him apart with its claws, its teeth, maiming, killing, consuming him.

He repressed it mercilessly.

“May I borrow a piece of parchment, Minister?”
The day of the hearing came too soon for Harry’s liking, ten days after his meeting with the Minister for Magic.

In the days prior to the hearing, he occupied himself with his job, friends and godson, filling his daytime hours with as much activity as possible. While at work, Harry organized, cleaned, reorganized and dusted, then restarted the whole process from the beginning. *Vivliori’s Antique Books, Maps, Charts, Plans, Atlases & Globes* shop never had been more orderly than these days. All tomes stood in firm lines, without a speck of dust polluting their covers, all the globes shined and the maps on the walls seemed as if they had received an ironing. It was kind of unnatural, and although Mr Vivliori allowed Harry his cleaning frenzy, he seemed definitely alarmed by the state of both property and employee.

If not at work, Harry tirelessly practiced Quidditch with an overeager nine-year-old Teddy, played chess with Ron, helped Hermione around the house and socialized with friends, Weasleys or with those who fell in both categories. The one whom he didn’t have any contact with was Severus.

Still, he found the nights too long, the memories too close to the surface, the thoughts too traitorous and the dreams too vivid.

The hearing was to be held on Level Two of the Ministry of Magic, in Mabel Stapleton’s office. It was a familiar territory to Harry, given that the same corridor housed the Auror Office as well.

When he arrived – five minutes before the scheduled time – Severus was already there. Harry spotted him from the end of the corridor and his heartbeat immediately quickened. The man stood facing Madam Stapleton’s office door, back ramrod straight, black robes impeccable, face unreadable. Only the slight twitch of his hand betrayed his discomfort and Harry only noticed because he was so familiar with Severus’ body language. Harry knew that Severus didn’t have any fond memories of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, although he had never shared with Harry the details of his interrogation by Aurors after the First Voldemort War. He felt an urge to envelop Severus’ hand in his own, in a display of comfort. He didn’t, of course; Severus would surely have found the gesture revolting.

Harry walked towards Severus with a minor limp, a consequence of sleep deprivation and overexertion.

“Hello, Severus.” His voice came out fainter than he intended.

Severus turned his dark gaze on Harry, scrutinizing him from head to toe. His eyes lingered on Harry’s leg for a moment longer than on his other parts. Harry was certain the man spotted his limp; he blushed at the thought of showing a weakness in front of Severus.

“Harry,” he said finally, stare once again directed at the door.

Harry stood next to him. “How have you been?” he asked hesitantly.

“Acceptable,” Severus answered flatly, still facing the door. “What about you?”

“I have been fine, thanks,” Harry supplied and they fell silent. Oh God, but it was awkward.

Harry used the opportunity to study his husband from the corner of his eye. If he wasn’t mistaken, Severus was paler than usual, maybe a little thinner as well. He had used his newfound freedom to brew round the clock, no doubt.
Right on time, the office door opened, revealing an old lady with sharp, dark eyes and white hair tied in a strict bun – not unlike Professor McGonagall’s.

“Mr Potter and Mr Snape?” she asked in a no-nonsense tone.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry answered for the both of them and instinctively straightened his posture.

“I am Mabel Stapleton. Do come in, gentlemen, and take a seat.” She invited them in, stepping back from the entrance of her office.

Severus marched ahead and Harry followed. They sat down in the two chairs facing the enormous desk occupying half of the room while Madam Stapleton settled behind said desk.

A tray was placed on the tabletop with two glasses, filled with what seemed to be water, and a pipette, also filled with a few drops of clear, colourless liquid. Harry saw that Severus’ gaze was settled on the displayed items.

“We are here today on the matter of the divorce process initiated by Mr Potter,” Madam Stapleton began. “Everything said during this hearing falls within the strictest confines of confidence. As a member of the Wizengamot, I am oath-bound to keep the contents of this meeting secret and ask questions only concerning the present subject. My role is to mediate this meeting, not to make judgements in any way. Being acquainted with these stipulations, are you still willing to proceed?” Madam Stapleton asked, sounding calm and professional.

“Yes, ma’am,” they both affirmed.

“Are you both here on your own volition for this hearing?” she questioned them.

Again, they both agreed.

“Are you willing, in the interest of this meeting’s efficiency, to take Veritaserum?” she went on.

Harry’s eyes automatically sought out Severus for guidance. After all, he was the Potions master.

“You don’t mind if I check the substance first?” Severus asked.

“But of course. Go ahead.” She gestured in the direction of the pipette.

Severus waved his wand over the little glass tube a few times, murmuring incantations. After the magical examination, he measured one drop on his fingertip, smelled it, then smeared it between two fingers, probably to check consistency. He must have found it acceptable because he nodded.

Madam Stapleton measured three drops in each glass and they drank it.

Harry started to feel a bit fuzzy, as if the connections between his brain and all the other parts of him were suddenly blurred by some jelly-like substance settling in his mind. He needed to lick his lips to know they were still there and available.

“While waiting for the potion to take full effect, I would like to set some ground rules for this meeting,” she stated sternly, as if they were naughty children. Judging by her paper-thin skin and many wrinkles, she must have been over a hundred, but still, she was quite intimidating. “I will ask one question at a time and you may answer in turns. This hearing’s purpose is to gain knowledge of the state of affairs between the two of you, from both of your perspectives. Having a clear picture of the current standing of your marriage is essential for the further proceedings in the stage of negotiations.”
Harry’s muddled brain registered that she was wearing a wedding ring. Harry somehow deduced that this would be a disadvantage to him, as it possibly would make her biased. His gaze wandered to his own hand. He didn’t wear his ring anymore and now he felt a need to conceal this fact. He put his left behind his back. Then his gaze moved to Severus who, Harry realized in wonder, still wore his own band. Curious.

“As Mr Potter is the initiator,” at this point she gave Harry a disapproving look – or maybe it was just his imagination? – and continued, “he will have the chance to start. I ask you not to interrupt each other and give the opportunity to your spouse to speak. Are these rules acceptable?”

Harry felt thoroughly reprimanded by the old lady.

Both men consented.

“Mr Potter, what were your reasons for initiating a divorce process?” she asked.

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Harry’s mouth answered. “We don’t have common ground anymore. We don’t speak, we don’t fight and we don’t have sex.” Harry blushed with the admission. “We aren’t a we anymore,” he concluded, his sadness filtering through the fog of the potion. He looked at Severus, but his mask was firmly on: cold and unmoving. Just like their marriage.

“Mr Snape, what were your reasons for consenting to the divorce process?”

“I didn’t seem to have a choice,” said Severus indifferently.

“Wha…” Harry started to ask but Madam Stapleton prevented him from doing so.

“Mr Potter!” she raised her voice. “Please try to respect the rules we set for this meeting and don’t interrupt.”

Harry nodded reluctantly but his thoughts remained in turmoil. Didn’t have a choice?!

“Mr Potter, was there any coercion, hidden agenda or seeking of undeserved advantage involved in your marriage to Mr Snape?”

“No, of course not,” said Harry.

Then she turned to Severus. “Mr Snape, was there any coercion, hidden agenda or gaining of undeserved advantage involved in your marriage to Mr Potter?”

Severus’ mask seemed to waver for the merest moment, his lips tightening and a frown marring his forehead. “There was.”

“What?! What do you mean?” erupted from Harry.

“Mr Potter!” This time Madam Stapleton wasn’t quick enough to interfere.

Because of the potion, Severus was compelled to answer Harry’s question.

“I mean you were Boy Hero Extraordinaire and I a former Death Eater. Being your spouse provided me with the advantage of higher social standing and financial stability. I don’t see the need to deny this.”

Harry was absolutely stunned. Severus married him for status and money? No need to deny?! Holy Merlin! Betrayal was bitter on his tongue.
“Mr Potter, I must insist, again, that you refrain from interrupting,” said Madam Stapleton.

Harry numbly tilted his head in surrender.

“Mr Potter, did you provide support for your spouse during your marriage?”

“Well… Yes… I guess I did. I mean with money…” He got a nasty look from Severus. “I mean, we have a shared account and all. And I cooked, not always but often enough, and I took care of the house, at least I did what Kreacher didn’t manage, except in the lab, I wasn’t allowed in there. And I used to ask him about his day and when he had influenza I tried to help, although he is a tough case when sick, and also after nightmares I… I tried to, well, comfort him. I couldn’t really help with his work, because he says I am pants at potions, and to be honest I really am… And nowadays work includes Malfoy junior somehow, I am not quite sure… I didn’t ask, not exactly keen on gaining information on the ferret. I was really not getting on well with Severus’… with the Malfoys so I sometimes… often skipped dinners with them, but otherwise I think I kind of supported him… More or less.”

“An impressive show of eloquence, Mr Potter,” Severus murmured under his breath. Even Veritaserum couldn’t obliterate his sarcasm.

“Mr Snape, did you provide support for your spouse during your marriage?” Madam Stapleton repeated the question.

“I contributed to aforementioned shared accounts with my own income and took my fair share of household chores. I provided Mr Potter with potions when the need arose, accompanied him when required, suffered his friends – even if he didn’t give me the courtesy of the same – and sycophants, stood by his side during his many career changes in the past few years, nursed him through a serious field injury after he had been released from St. Mungo’s into my care, and I participated in the upbringing of his godson – a responsibility shared with the boy’s grandmother – as much as he let me. I also waited for him to return home during his countless sulks when he removed himself to the Weasleys’ residence, usually for several days. So, to answer your question, Madam Stapleton, indeed, I did provide support.”

Harry wanted to protest against the use of the word ’sulk’, but managed to choke it back. He had to admit, albeit grudgingly, that Severus was right; he really gave Harry support.

The old lady accepted their answers without comment and continued her line of inquiry.

“Mr Potter, were you abusive towards your spouse during your marriage?”

“I… yes,” he admitted shamefacedly. Madam Stapleton didn’t give a sign of judgement and Severus… Harry didn’t dare to look at Severus. “When we were fighting,” he added, trying to explain, although he knew there was no acceptable explanation. “I said things. And once my magic lashed out,” he had to pause, “and another time I… slapped him.” He closed his eyes in shame.

It had been the lowest point of their marriage: a row had got out of hand and at the end they had been accusing each other of murder. ’At least I killed Dumbledore because he asked me to, not because of my idiocy!’ Severus had said. Harry would never forget his words. After that he didn’t go home for more than a week.

“Mr Snape, were you abusive towards your spouse during your marriage?”

“I was. I more than once said things which were uncalled for and my actions can be considered
verbal abuse.”

Harry was surprised that Severus admitted that much—although Veritaserum didn’t leave him a choice. But still, it was true: Severus never hurt him physically, but had a penchant for painful words.

“Mr Potter, were you unfaithful during your marriage?” Although the question was aimed at Harry, Severus obviously stiffened.

“I was not,” Harry answered truthfully.

He felt Severus’ eyes on himself and looked back at his husband. Was he surprised by Harry’s answer? Their eyes met and for a heartbeat Severus’ armour fell and something raw and painful flashed in his eyes. Then it was gone when his expression once again closed off.

“Mr Snape, were you unfaithful during your marriage?”

Severus looked at Harry in obvious discomfort, his lips forced into the thinnest line. Then his gaze turned back to Stapleton, but he still didn’t answer. It must have taken a tremendous effort to withstand the lure of the potion. Harry wondered why Severus was resisting.

Madam Stapleton’s eyes were on Severus’ face but she didn’t hurry him.

Finally Severus spoke: “I was,” and Harry’s world shattered.

For a moment Harry had only heard a static, humming noise before Severus’ words registered. Then he was flooded by pure, uncompromising fury. He jumped to his feet.

“You fucking, sodding, cheating slimy bastard!” he yelled into Snape’s face. “You two-faced wanker, I will…” He would have gone on but suddenly he found himself back in his chair, stuck and silenced.

“Ministry safety measures,” Madam Stapleton explained. “They keep the hearing from getting out of hand.”

Harry seethed with anger, but he wasn’t able to get out of the confines of the safety spells. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm down. In, out, in, out. That’s it. After a few rounds he felt notably calmer. He felt the restraints easing off on him. He opened his eyes and immediately met his husband’s dark gaze, boring into him.

“Harry, I…”

“Don’t! Please, just… don’t.” He turned away from Severus. Now that his anger was tamed, only his despair remained. He didn’t want to hear any excuses or explanations or, Merlin save him, details! He just wanted it to be over.

“Have you got any other questions?” he asked Madam Stapleton apathetically.

The old lady pondered his question for a moment before answering. “No, I don’t think so. All necessary questions were asked. All the cards are on the table, as the saying goes. You may elaborate on what was revealed today during the next stage of negotiations.”

Harry personally thought that there was nothing to elaborate on. He wanted an out, now more than ever, and he wanted it post haste. There was nothing to say. Nothing.

“You will be informed of the exact details concerning the second stage by owl. The arrangements
will be made in a week’s time at longest.”

Splendid. Just one more week and this farce might come to an end. Harry couldn’t wait. He was so very tired.

“Thank you for your attendance, gentlemen. I wish you the best in the future.”

Harry mumbled some reply and stood up to leave. Severus did the same and turned towards Harry.

Why wouldn’t Severus leave him in peace? He didn’t want to speak, much less to think about this whole mess. His anger flared again.

“Harry, I…” Severus started to say but Harry didn’t want to hear, he couldn’t bear it.

“Get out of my sight!” he spat with as much contempt as he could muster. “You disgust me,” he added icily.

Severus looked astonished for an instant then his face froze into a mask of cold indifference. He whirled on his heel and marched out of the room.

Harry’s shoulders sagged. That was it? Half a dozen questions asked and now his marriage was ruined beyond recognition? Razed to the ground and covered with salt?

Their wedding picture came – completely unbidden – to his mind. The love he used to think was shining there. He wasn’t sure anymore.

“You never asked if we loved each other,” he blurted out; the potion more than likely lowered his inhibitions.

“You and your husband are eloquent proof that love is not always enough. In my not-so-insignificant experience, honesty, trust and communication are also required,” she told him softly.

Harry almost snorted.

“Now, off you go, Mr Potter. And don’t you forget: a person often meets his destiny on the road he took to avoid it.”

Harry left her office with a faint goodbye.

On his way out of the building he wondered – mostly to avoid other, more painful topics – what it was with Ministry officers and self-help book slogans.

* 

When Harry received the Ministry’s owl the next week, he noticed with great displeasure that the so-called negotiations would be held in the Department of Mysteries. He wasn’t keen at all on returning to that damned place.

He was in a horrible mood in the days leading up to the date of his Ministry visit, constantly fluctuating between hot fury and deep despair. Mostly he just wanted it all to end.

He shared the essence of the hearing with his best friends, but more than once he came to regret it, depending on his mood. When in a fury, it was satisfying to have Ron – who was always agreeable when it came to calling Snape every name in the book, or to channelling angry energies through Quidditch, or to drowning sorrows – by his side. The problem was with those occasions when he wanted to be left alone and never, ever to hear his husband’s name again.
On those occasions, Hermione was a much better choice for company, with her gentler compassion but, when Harry was not in the mood, the pity in her eyes drove him up the wall.

He decided to look for a flat of his own right after the proceedings were finished.

So it was with great reluctance and distaste he arrived at the Ministry for the negotiations. He met the assigned Unspeakable guide and Severus in the Atrium. He didn’t look at the latter. His plan was to get in, be done with the whole thing as soon as possible, then get out.

They used the lift to descend to Level Nine – Severus and Harry occupying opposite corners, as far from each other as was humanly possible.

Severus must have been in a snit as well, judging from the way he stalked through the torch-lit corridor leading to that ominous black door once they reached Level Nine. Harry stomped down on his uneasiness and followed him.

The circular room was as eerie as ever with its blue flames, black surfaces and strange, underwater quality.

The Unspeakable stood in front of one of the identical, unmarked, handle-less black doors.

“The use of magic will be limited once you get inside,” said Unspeakable Bastard-Never-Told-His-Name in a monotone. “Standard security and Anti-Apparation wards are in place. Basic necessities, un-Transfigurable under Gamp’s Law, will be supplied by the Ministry upon Summoning. Any questions?” he asked dispassionately.

“How do we get in?” Snape barked – and he was definitely in Snape-mode now, dungeon bat extraordinaire. Harry could hear the ‘dunderhead’ at the end of his question.

“You both lay your palms on the door and the chamber’s magic does the rest,” he supplied.

With a huff, Snape stepped closer to the door and put his hand on its surface. He gave an impatient look to Harry.

“What are you waiting for, Potter? I don’t have all day!” he spat.

So it was Potter now?! Stupid prick!

Harry strode to the door and raised his hand while the Unspeakable said, “Have a pleasant trip.” When his palm connected with the cold surface, there was a jerk, then twisting as if he was trapped in a whirlpool, then falling and falling eternally. Then he arrived with a thud and all went black.

* Reality came back with the feeling of heat. Harry lay face-down on something shifty and semi-soft: sand, his brain supplied, as he tried to cough it out of his mouth. He sat up and spotted Snape, who also was in the process of getting back on his feet. Unbelievably, they were in some kind of desert, surrounded by dunes of sand in every direction. Not a soul was around them. The sun was scorching hot and so was the air, burning Harry’s lungs with every breath he took. There was no trace of an exit.

“What the heck are we doing in the desert?” Harry wondered loudly. “Furthermore – how did we get here?”

“Magic, I think, is the word you are looking for,” Snape drawled as if speaking to an extremely slow
child.

“Obviously. It still doesn’t explain why we are here. Weren’t we supposed to negotiate about the divorce?”

“And what were you expecting – sitting around a table, sipping tea and taking notes?” Snape mocked him.

“Well…” In all honesty, that was exactly what Harry expected.

“Your ineptitude never ceases to astonish me,” Snape said derisively.

“Why, thank you, Mr All-knowing. I cannot fail to notice that you aren’t supplying answers,” Harry retorted angrily.

“Not saying does not equal not knowing. Verbal diarrhoea is your speciality, not mine,” Snape answered arrogantly.

Harry rolled his eyes and, instead of exchanging insults with Snape, he studied the landscape. There was dune upon dune as far as Harry could see. All the waves carved into the sand by the wind made it look like an odd parody of the stormy sea. The sand had a reddish-orange colour, but in the distance gold, white and yellow stripes adorned the hills. Harry suspected that this was not exactly natural colouring for such a geographical area – the constant changing in pattern and colouring was a big giveaway. The sky was also splayed out in an unnaturally bright turquoise. It most definitely was a magical place.

His musing was interrupted by Snape, who was rapidly flicking his wand at various pieces of his attire. His elegant, heavy black robes became much lighter but they still covered almost his whole body. His dragon-hide boots were transformed into light trainers – still black, of course – and from a handkerchief Snape transfigured a long black shawl, which he was currently wrapping around his head and neck, Tuareg-style.

Harry – entirely against his will – was fascinated by this transformation. Severus had never looked so… bandit-like before. Dark, exotic and devious. Suddenly Harry got angry – the cheating bastard not only looked like a deceitful scum, he also was one!

Snape let out a frustrated growl after he had waved his wand around himself three times in the exact same pattern to no avail. His dissatisfaction made Harry smile.

“What are you grinning at, you imbecilic brat?” Snape barked. “No cooling charm works efficiently in this infernal place,” he complained.

“If I was as much of a peeler as you are, I would be concerned not about the cooling but the sun-protection charm,” Harry answered cheekily. He was of course worried about the heat, but didn’t want to let Snape have the upper hand.

With a flourish of his wand, Harry applied a charm against the sun and – although it felt a little odd and ticklish – it stuck. Probably he should renew it regularly. After that, he started to change his own attire to something more suitable.

“Augamenti!” he heard from Snape’s direction and looked up to see the man filling a newly Transfigured flask with water.

“At least we won’t have hardships with the water supply. We will need it,” Snape said ominously. “We may try to summon some food – the Unspeakable said it was possible,” he continued.
“He said?” Harry asked surprised.

“Un-Transfigurable exceptions under Gamp’s Law. Gods, Potter – you are shamefully undereducated,” he said with a reproving shake of his head.

“Well, give credit to my professors for that!” Harry snapped.

“Your lack of the barest effort shouldn’t be blamed on anybody else but you –” Snape lectured.

Harry had had enough of the man’s rants at Hogwarts and he didn’t need one right then. “Accio Apple!” he said, and moments later the fruit fell into his hand. Literally fell, as it came from above. “Food problem solved. At least I won’t die of malnutrition.” He pocketed the apple for later use.

“We need to find shelter and probably test the limits of our magic within these walls,” Snape declared.

“What walls?” Harry asked, confused.

Snape sighed dramatically. “I know your mental capacity is limited but you must remember that we are still within the Ministry of Magic, even if our senses are trying to betray us.”

“Is this place some variation of the Room of Requirement?” Harry tried to understand.

“I don’t think so. If it was similar to the one in Hogwarts, the room – and more important, the magic sustaining it – would be more limited; it wouldn’t be able to turn into something that essentially is not some variation of a – well, a room,” Snape said. “This place is most likely a projection conjured up by our minds.”

“Is it like Dumbledore’s bullshit about what’s happening in my head is still real regardless of the fact that it’s existing only in my mind?” Harry asked, frustrated.

“Your gift for butchering magical theory is simply appalling, but you are basically correct,” Snape said.

Harry’s jaw dropped – had Snape just admitted that he was right? Effects of the sun, no doubt.

Snape sneered at Harry’s astonishment. “This space is the manifestation of material provided by both our minds, considering that we were both touching the door when this magical area formed. Be that as it may, we are not in the desert even if we seem to be. Fascinatingly, this mental manifestation of ours obviously resembles – judging from the presence of erg – Sahara desert. And to further your education – ‘erg’ refers to areas covered with sand dunes,” he said patronizingly.

“I know what a bloody erg is, thank you very much.” Harry fumed. “I work at Vivliori’s – a shop filled with maps, globes and whatnots to the brim,” he reminded Snape.

“Oh yes – how could I forget?” Severus mocked. In recent years Harry’s employment had been a sore spot between them. “Anyway – we should find shelter –”

Harry was fed up with Snape’s commanding tone and constantly flowing criticism. “There is no we, just I going on my own way without you. Or – if you wish me to rephrase – you may just fuck off!” he exploded.

“And how do you hope to negotiate any crucial point of our marriage if we go our separate ways?” Snape hissed, annoyed.
“There is nothing to be negotiated about our marriage but the divorce. And I have only one request regarding that: as soon as possible.” Harry huffed.

“You act so immature,” Snape said disparagingly.

“What do you recommend then? How should I become more mature? Should I belittle you at every chance? Refuse to talk? Or better: cheat on you? Now that is an idea with merits! I should just fuck around, getting some at last. You shouldn’t be the only one satisfied in this marriage – I deserve my fair share of fucking as well!” Harry yelled.

“You are vulgar,” Snape sighed.

Suddenly Harry felt fatigued. “And you? What are you, Severus? A hypocrite, that’s what.”

Without waiting for an answer Harry turned around and walked away towards the endless hills of sand displaying a million colours.

Harry had been walking for hours; if the sun was any indication in this bizarre reality, it was already late afternoon. The heat was oppressing, it made Harry’s eyes, nose and mouth dry out and itch, and – despite his best efforts to renew the sun-protection charm frequently – his skin was burnt by the brutal force of the sun. Fortunately, he had water and food, if not shelter. He tried to Transfigure some kind of tent or at least an umbrella, but his spells failed. The place’s magic vetoed Harry’s desire for a little patch of shadow.

He fervently hoped that the sun would set soon, giving him some long-awaited relief. He was sweating like a pig – presumably smelling like one, too – and was absolutely knackered. At least his leg didn’t hurt. He was glad that he had had the forethought to apply his healing ointment in the morning. He hadn’t needed it regularly for some time now but, in all honesty, he hadn’t wanted to show any weakness in front of Severus at today’s meeting. He would have to thank Hermione for the salve; only she could have left it on the sink, in the bathroom adjoining Harry’s guestroom residence. She must have found some time in her busy schedule to brew some for Harry, as he hadn’t brought any when he had moved in. He hadn’t even known that Hermione knew the recipe; it must have come up at one of their scientific discussions with Severus, when the four of them had still got together sometimes.

Severus… somehow his thought always ended up at Severus. The man was right about Harry’s behaviour earlier, he really acted immaturely – not to mention erratically – but he was so unsettled and Severus made him so fucking angry! Albeit, if he didn’t stay furious then he would sure as hell break down in agony that he couldn’t afford, especially not now, trapped in the desert.

With a sigh he kept on walking: to where, he didn’t know.

Relief came, eventually. As the sky turned into orange and red to match the ground, then into dark blue, and as the air started to cool down, Harry’s breathing became easier. He remembered that deserts could turn nastily cold at night, but he didn’t care for now.

He almost collapsed on the sand to just wait for the stars to come up when he spied a light in the distance before him. What was it? His curiosity won over his exhaustion and he walked towards the source of light. It was nearer than he had thought. He saw light and some movement – it must have been some living creature! He hastened his pace, only to be halted abruptly.

It was Snape – the one moving around the light was Snape. How was that possible? He had spent his
day travelling in the opposite direction from Snape and here he was! He must have gone a full circle and at the end he arrived back to… Snape. Fuck.

There was nothing else to do; defeated, he dragged himself towards the light. As he got closer he saw the source of light was a magical fire – cheery little blue flames positioned in a circle, levitating above the ground.

With a few strides he got to the fireside and sat down. Only then did Snape look up.

“Have you had a pleasant walk?” he asked Harry.

Harry ignored him. He filled his Transfigured cup using Aguamenti and just looked out of his head.

As darkness settled, the eerie silence of the desert got more pronounced. Severus was a quiet creature by nature and the magical fire didn’t produce sounds, so if Harry refrained from moving he could experience quietude in its purest form. Harry could hear the sound of his own heart; he suspected that, if he wanted it enough, he could hear Severus’ as well. But he didn’t want to.

At some point he must have fallen asleep beside the fire, because he was awoken by the rustle of fabric and the feel of a light weight descending on him.

Harry’s eyes snapped open to see Snape standing over him.

“What are you doing?” he asked gruffly.

“It will be cold at night,” Snape said awkwardly.

And Harry understood – Snape was covering him with a cloak and tucking him in! Harry was flabbergasted.

“Have you got any problems with your leg?” Snape asked. “Besides some other basic potions, I brought a salve that can be used,” he said nonchalantly.

Harry sat up as Snape drew out a pouch from his pocket. It contained a pain reliever, a Pepperup Potion, some other potion which Harry didn’t recognize, and a jar filled with a white cream Harry was all too familiar with.

“Why would you have it on you? It is not commonly used,” Harry gave voice to his confusion.

“One never knows when it may come handy,” Snape said calmly.

“Besides, I knew I would be spending time with you and did not want to hear your whinging,” Snape said, annoyed. “If you need assistance, I can apply it for you,” he offered in an irritated voice.

Harry felt vulnerable and somehow humiliated by Snape’s offer and this angered him. His robe-wrapped sitting position allowed only limited movement but he managed to crawl back from Snape, pulled his knees to his chest and folded his arms around himself.

“I am not a fucking invalid,” Harry whispered. “I don’t need your help,” he added more fiercely.

“Fine. Then I give you the salve and you may use it as you wish,” Snape said indifferently.

His oddly tame behaviour infuriated Harry.
"Don’t treat me like an incompetent, like you always did!” he hissed at the man.

“I do no such thing; I have never done,” Snape stated with absolute calmness. “I simply offered you a medicine which is in my possession and I have no need for it for myself,” he rationalized.

“Bullshit! Ever since the… incident with my leg you have been constantly reminding me how useless I am!” Harry cried.

“I most assuredly have not,” Snape said, his cool demeanor not wavering.

“How many times have you told me since I left the Aurors that my job is meaningless, that what I do is not good enough?” Harry asked.

Snape’s lips had formed an impossibly thin line before he answered. “You have been drifting, pursuing unquestionably unchallenging jobs, wasting your capacity.” He was strict, but didn’t raise his voice. “Should I have cheered you on while you were wasting away in Weasley’s storage room? Or should I have been happy with your progress when you got that administrative job in the Ministry, pushing piles of papers around endlessly? If I remember correctly, even you hated that position.”

Snape was right. He did hate that job, offered to him by the Ministry after his injury.

“Or should I have been overjoyed with this most recent endeavour of yours: burying yourself in Vivliori’s rarely frequented little dusty rat-hole that he dares to call a shop?” Snape asked, his disdain clearly written on his face.

“Even if it’s beneath you, I like working there,” Harry answered truthfully. “All those maps and globes and stuff are fascinating. I always wanted to travel,” he said quietly. He honestly couldn’t find a reason why he was telling all of this to Snape.

“If you really want to, why don’t you travel, instead of hiding at Vivliori’s?” Snape asked softly.

It was a good question. He had the money and now he would have time as well, considering that soon he wouldn’t have a husband to go home to, so he would be able to travel to his heart’s content. That prospect didn’t make Harry happy at all.

“What do you care?” he snapped.

With a huff he turned his back to Snape and curled up into a ball.

The night was cold and soundless. Due to the lack of light-pollution, many more stars were visible than Harry was used to. The sky above him was so richly adorned with stars that it was a miracle that it didn’t cave in from their weight. He closed his eyes against their shine.

In his dreams, Snape was the one walking away from him amongst the dunes, and didn’t matter how hard Harry tried to run after him, he was getting farther and farther away.

* *

Harry was, once again, roused by heat. The sun scarcely rose above the horizon, but it already was unmercifully hot against Harry’s skin. He sat up with a groan and applied a sun-protection charm over himself.

Severus sat a few feet away from him, nursing a cup in his hands. He used to sit exactly like this in their home, beside their kitchen table. In the early mornings he had held his cup in both hands,
inhaling the smell of coffee. He never had been ready to face the day without a brew.

The sight of his husband was so very painful that Harry needed to look away. And this man
undeniably was his husband. Severus. Harry tried to draw a line between Snape and Severus to
protect himself from the pain of losing the former, but he couldn’t fool himself anymore. There was
only one man. Once Harry called that man his Severus.

Severus turned towards him.

“Would you like some coffee?” he asked. “The force driving this place was gracious enough to grant
us coffee. It must have known that it’s a basic necessity in the mornings,” he said lightly. Familiarly.

“Yes, thank you,” Harry accepted. Severus filled a cup for him and handed it back to Harry.

For a long while there was silence.

“Do you plan to wander around the place again today?” Severus asked.

Harry was surprised by his question.

“There doesn’t seem to be anything else to do,” he said hesitantly.

“I believe it doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things if we leave this spot or not. Albeit walking
has the advantage of not being bored to death,” Severus lamented. “If you don’t mind, I will
accompany you today,” he said.

Harry only nodded.

After they had organized their meagre possessions, they set off.

For the longest time they didn’t talk. In the last few months silence had become their natural
environment, thus it wasn’t too awkward now. Harry knew that it couldn’t stay like this; there were
things they needed to talk about. But he had yet to find the courage to address all the matters that
needed to be addressed.

The sun was already at its highest, the heat almost unbearable. Harry’s skin was chafed sore by his
sweat-soaked clothes and he keenly felt the discomfort in his leg, due to his dismissing of Severus’
ointment.

“This was the best our minds were able to come up with?” Harry asked, annoyed. “It must have been
your wish to be scorched to death, I would have never wished for something this… hot!” he said.

Severus had the audacity to find this amusing. “Well, I see a few similarities between our
surroundings and yourself,” he said. “Given what a hot-headed, passionate brat you are,” he teased.

“This desert comparison could be applied to you, as well, you know – let me see – demanding and
abruptly changes from freezing cold to burning hot,” Harry reciprocated.

“With all these volatile qualities, it’s a miracle we got married in the first place,” Severus joked.

Harry’s light mood, brought on by their bantering, suddenly flew away. He stopped suddenly and
turned towards Severus, who halted as well.

“Severus, did you really marry me for my money and social status?” he asked, the first hard question
in the line of many.
Severus sighed. “As I said at the hearing, those aspects had been advantageous, but not deciding, factors. Recognizing the benefits of a situation doesn’t necessarily mean the lack of… attachment,” he said.

Attachment. Not love. Harry couldn’t recall the last time when Severus told him that he loved him.

“Maybe you should have married someone else,” Harry said, discouraged. Before his mind’s eye a picture emerged: Severus with someone else, someone suspiciously Malfoyish—not quite a Malfoy, but close enough. Then he remembered that Severus had already been with someone else, even if he had been married to Harry. His fury returned full force. “Then we wouldn’t be in this mess! Maybe someone smarter or more sophisticated would have been enough and you wouldn’t have screwed somebody else through the mattress!” he yelled.

“Harry, I didn’t –” started Severus, but Harry interrupted.

“It is the problem, isn’t it? I am too much beneath you intellectually, not like your precious Malfoys! Have they known what you did? Did they congratulate you? Were you all laughing at poor, simpleton Potter who is not good enough for the likes of you?” Harry was totally riled up by then. From the distance the rumble of a gathering storm sounded.

“Harry, I never –” Severus tried again.

“Or maybe it was one of them you fucked? Or better, all three?” he said menacingly, right into Severus’ face. Harry didn’t know when he had stepped this close to the other. Severus frowned, his arms folded. “You don’t know what you are talking about,” he hissed.

“They always hated me; they must be happy now!” Harry cried.

“They don’t hate you, nor do they know you. You have never given them a chance to actually get to know you,” Severus said icily.

“Don’t they know me? Didn’t you tell them all my dirty little secrets, all my flaws, the way you suffer beside me so much that you had to cheat on me!?” he asked furiously.

“I, unlike you, don’t share the details of our private life with my friends or anybody else. You are the one who runs to Granger for counselling with every little problem, even before speaking with me!” Severus started to get angry as well. Above them the most peculiar, angry green storm clouds were gathering, unnoticed by them. “What gives her standing to be the judge of our life? She is a young, heterosexual woman whose experience in relationships consists of the obedience training she subjects her husband to,” he said.

“Don’t say things like this about them, they have never hurt you!” Harry defended his best friends.

“But of course not, Weasley’s long-lasting habit of calling me ‘sodding bastard’ or ‘greasy git’ notwithstanding,” Severus retorted.

“You terrorized him enough to give him the privilege of calling me a few choice names when you deserve it, I think. He does that extremely rarely, anyway. Usually you wouldn’t care about such… what do you call them? Oh yes, meaningless trivialities,” he mocked.

“I don’t find them meaningless when the boy placed in my care calls me these names, and when asked where he learnt them, he happily supplies that they are from his Uncle Ron!” Severus raged.

“Teddy called you a greasy git?” Harry was surprised out of his anger for a moment.
“He did,” Severus said more calmly than before.

“And what did you do to him?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“What did I do to him?” Severus seethed. “I whipped him and chained him to the laboratory wall for a week! What do you think I did to him?” he yelled, outraged.

“I wouldn’t know, would I? You never told me about the incident,” Harry said accusingly.

“Pray tell, when do you suppose I should have told you? You practically lived with the Weasleys instead of me! If I had wanted to see you or Teddy at home, I would have needed to find a photograph of you, because you surely wouldn’t have been there for me to see. You were constantly on an outing with this Weasley, dinner with that, once Molly invited, the other time Hermione insisted. There was always something not to be missed,” Severus spat.

“I assumed you were happier when Teddy wasn’t under your feet,” Harry replied.

“You assumed! Isn’t that what you always do? You never ask me, just assume. Why not take Teddy away; the old bat hates him, anyway, and wouldn’t want to spend time with him!” Severus shouted.

The clouds above them concentrated into the thick, black mass of a furious storm. The first fat drops of rain started to descend and the sand drank them up greedily, with a hissing sound and tiny puffs of vapour.

“It was your comfort I kept in mind,” Harry defended himself. The fact that he felt compelled to do so made him all the more livid. He wasn’t the one fucking around, he shouldn’t be defending himself! “And I am glad I occasionally took Teddy away; at least he didn’t have to see the whores you paraded through the house, he didn’t have to hear them scream when you came in their arse – or was it their mouth?” he asked nastily.

“ENOUGH!” Severus bellowed. “Don’t try to make me into more of a villain than I am! I am not the only one at fault!”

“DON’T YOU DARE! Don’t you dare make it look like it is my fault that you cheated on me, you unfaithful bastard! I didn’t force you to fuck somebody else raw!” Harry howled back.

“I didn’t fuck anybody raw! There was only that one time, with one man, and only happened with him because…” Severus trailed off.

“Because what? He was the cheapest?” Harry asked maliciously.

“Because he smelled of apples, fuck you!” Severus shrieked. “You had been gone to the Weasleys’ for days in one of your snits, so I went to the pub to get disgustingly drunk and he was there, reeking of apples, and I rutted against him like a fool, a mongrel in heat, and I came in my pants and I said your name, you fucking self-righteous prat!”

Harry didn’t know what to say. It was raining in earnest, soaking the both of them.

“He smelled of apples,” Severus said once again, much less loudly.

They stood toe to toe; in the heat of their fight they had been pulled together. A raindrop rolled over Severus’ forehead, then over his nose, before it landed on Harry’s chest.

“He smelled like you,” Severus said softly.
Then the storm hit full force. If they had had anything else to say, it wouldn’t have been heard over the roaring of the heavens.

This was no ordinary downpour but a rage of heaven driven by magical force. It was awesome, supernatural, wild and devastating. Severus and Harry automatically sought out each other as they tried to withstand the force fighting against them. They reached for each other and tried to steady each other; still, they didn’t stand a chance. Water was coming from everywhere, not just pouring from above but rolling around them, licking their ankles, then their shins, rapidly reaching their knees, washing out the sand from under their feet. They were still holding each other when the flood swept them off their feet and carried them away.

They were clinging to each other while they were sliding down the dune’s side, right into the whirlpool that formed under them, sucking them in.

Then they were simply flushed.

“Harry!” Someone called his name. “Harry! Harry, are you there?” an agitated voice asked. It was a bit muffled, as though it was coming from a distance or from behind a wall. “Harry!” The mysterious voice definitely sounded frantic.

With a moan, Harry opened his eyes.

“Harry, is that you?” the voice asked again. Harry recognized it now; it belonged to his husband, Severus.

“Yes,” he tried to reply but his voice came out too weak to be heard. He tried again, with greater force. “I am here!”

“Thank God,” Severus murmured. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Harry sat up, with some effort, and looked around. He was in a high-ceilinged room, built from some light coloured stone – probably sandstone. It had only one miniscule window, high up on its wall, and no door. It wasn’t overly spacious and contained nothing else but a table with jars and potion equipment, and a fire pit with a cauldron over it.

“Harry?” Severus called his name impatiently. “Are you all right?”

“I think so, yes,” Harry replied. “Are you?” he asked back.

“I am,” came the answer from the distance.

Obviously, Severus wasn’t there in the room with him. His voice came behind the wall in front of Harry. “Where are we?” Harry asked him.

Severus snorted. “At the next stage of our merry little trip, no doubt.” Harry could hear the frown in Severus’ voice. “Our minds probably craved a change of scenery. After all, that heat can’t be good for the higher brain functions,” he said sarcastically.

“Our minds put us in a… prison?” Harry asked. “Splendid!” he exclaimed sourly.

Harry stood up, checked if he still had his wand – he did – and tried to Apparate just to know that it still wasn’t an option. Neither was making a hole on the wall with magic. Then he walked to the table full of potion paraphernalia.
“Have you got all this stuff there, too?” Harry asked.

“Stuff?” Severus repeated confused. “What stuff?”

“Potion ingredients mostly. A cauldron too. And a fire pit,” Harry listed.

There was a pause.

“I have nothing here, just the bare room,” Severus said.

“Then somebody must have switched up our landing destinations,” Harry murmured.

“What kind of ingredients do you see?” Severus further inquired.

“A lot of them,” Harry supplied, not too helpfully. He leaned forward to have a closer look.

“I will need more details,” Severus grunted.

“Okay, keep your pants on! Let’s see. These are definitely ashwinder eggs,” Harry started his inventory, recognizing the fiery red eggs immediately. “There are a few pixy wings and some sky-blue powder in a jar, more grainy than dust-like.”

“Powdered Poisoned Dart Frog, most likely,” Severus identified the substance immediately.

“Eww.” Harry wrinkled his nose. “There are also some moonstones and some animal fur, probably…”

Achooo.

“Kneazle,” they both said together.

“Put that away, I didn’t bring any allergy medicine,” Severus barked at him. Harry hastily obeyed.

“There are also shards of a mirror, dried mushrooms – you know, the poisonous red ones with the dots – something like green jelly and a big dried – hmm – cucumber?” Harry guessed.

“Possibly Luffa Aegyptiaca.” How Severus was able to tell that through a wall remained a mystery to Harry. He shrugged it off and went on with his inventory.

“Something disturbingly vomit-like, at least three bottles of colourless liquid – I’m not sure if they are the same fluid – and finally tortoise shell – uninhabited,” he finished.

“The shell – does it have a dark-blue, circular pattern?” Severus asked; he sounded excited. Harry shook his head long-sufferingly.

After a closer inspection of the shell he replied, “Yes.”

“In that case, I know what may be brewed from these ingredients,” Severus said triumphantly.

Harry was waiting for him to elaborate but he remained silent. Harry suspected Severus was doing this for dramatic effect.

“I am waiting for the big reveal,” Harry said.

“It’s a potion to install doors at places where there previously weren’t any exits,” Severus replied smugly.
“Do you think it will be able to get us out of here?” Harry inquired hopefully.

“Probably. But to test it, you must brew it,” Severus declared.

“I? How?” Harry was taken aback and a little panicky.

“With my help, of course. After all, I am a professional,” Severus reassured him.

Harry rolled his eyes; fortunately, Severus couldn’t see it from the other chamber.

Even if Harry was no potions enthusiast, he had to admit that this concoction was fascinating. It was difficult to brew it, even with precise instructions from a Potions master, and Harry had to concentrate extremely hard not to miss anything. The final product was a thick, cerulean blue potion with a gently glowing surface.

“You need to stir it until a light mist settles on its surface, not higher than three-sevenths of an inch; then it’s finished,” Severus instructed him from the other side of the wall.

“Okay,” Harry said and kept on stirring.

Severus was surprisingly patient and calm all through the process. Harry had expected him to be angry and consequently nasty about this trespass on his territory, but Severus exceeded his expectations.

Again an assumption of Harry’s proved wrong. He reflected that it shouldn’t have been that surprising; for the majority of this recent adventure of theirs, Severus reined in his infamous temper as much as humanly – and more important, severusly – possible. Because he still had his limitations and he still remained himself. During the brewing procedure he used the word dunderhead at least twice, not to mention all the murmuring that filtered through from his side of the wall, on which he declined to elaborate. Still, he tried.

When the mist over the potion’s surface reached the required height – or came as close to it as Harry could estimate – he turned down the fire and put the stirring rod down with a contented sigh.

“It’s done,” he stated for Severus’ sake.

“Good. Now you apply it on the surface where you want to open a passage. I suggest the wall separating us, thus I will be able to say the incantation, which I will teach you later on, if you wish,” Severus said.

“Right,” Harry agreed.

He decanted the potion and stepped to the wall, then hesitated. It was much easier to get on with Severus while a wall separated them; it gave a sense of security. It was almost effortless not to remember all the bad or shameful things, all the hurtful truths they hurled at each other in the desert, all the silences before that. If he demolished that wall between them, he would have to face not only Severus, but all their problems, as well. He had to face his own part just as much as Severus’.

“Are you ready?” Severus’ voice came from the other side.

Harry nodded, then realized that Severus couldn’t see him. “I am,” he said and sprinkled the potion on the wall. It covered the stone surface in a blue glow.
“It’s done,” he informed Severus and immediately heard the other man’s chanting.

He took a few steps back from the wall and watched as the bricks became translucent, then vanished, revealing Severus behind them.

Harry’s gaze shied away from meeting Severus’; instead, it was stuck to the ground. Severus stepped through the hole and inspected first Harry – he felt Severus’ eyes upon him – then the remainder of the potion in the cauldron.

“You did a good job, Harry,” Severus praised after his inspection.

Harry blushed. “Thank you,” he said. “It wasn’t as horrible an experience as I expected,” he admitted.

“I’m glad; it also proves that maybe you aren’t a complete nincompoop after all,” Severus teased.

“Oh, but this must be the reason why you let me near one of your darlings for the first time!” Harry retorted playfully.

“My darlings,” Severus repeated with audible distaste.

“Your potions,” Harry clarified his meaning. “I… thank you for trusting me with this,” he said seriously.

Now Severus was the one slightly blushing. “You are welcome. Shall we proceed?” he asked.

“Which way do you think we should try?” Harry asked.

“Probably the one wall with the window, it should lead to the outside,” Severus suggested.

They repeated the potion-incantation sequence once again and waited. The sight that greeted them once the wall had disappeared made Harry gasp.

They weren’t in the desert anymore, but on an endless flat plain of grassland, sporadically adorned with a tree or bush. The field of grass was golden coloured with a warm copper highlight and its every blade of grass gently swayed with the light breeze in perfect unison.

“That really is a change of scenery,” Harry said.


Harry had no answer for that.

They stepped through the passage to look around on the outside. The weather was more tolerable than earlier, albeit still hot. The place of their previous incarceration proved to be no more than a simple rectangular building with no doors – except the one made by Harry and Severus – only two windows and the two rooms they formerly occupied. As it provided shelter from the sun, a salvation they had craved so much at their former location, they didn’t mind its limited capacity at all.

The previously established restrictions were still in effect.

As it was the middle of the day, they opted to settle down in the shadow of the house. They had a humble lunch outside, then leaned back into the wall of the building and relaxed.

It was quiet but peaceful.
“It is quite a remarkable potion we used here,” Harry commented. “How does it work exactly?”

“It creates a backdoor – an emergency exit, if you please – through magical wards or physical walls; the material doesn’t matter,” Severus explained.

Harry had an idea. “Can we use it to get out of… well, here?”

Severus pondered for a while. “No, I don’t think so. This place is more metaphysical than it is real,” he concluded.

Harry wasn’t upset; it was more his curiosity than his desperation that supplied his question.

“It would have come in handy when I was trapped on my last Auror mission. If I had been able to get out before the house collapsed on us, maybe I still could be an Auror,” he speculated. Most of his bitterness about the abrupt end of his Auror career was gone by now, but still, it was a sore spot.

“Yes, it was designed for situations just like that,” Severus said hesitantly. Something sounded off about his statement.

“It’s ingenious. Why have I never heard about it before?” Harry asked.

Severus hesitated for a split second before his answer. “It is one of my experiments still under testing,” he finally admitted.

Harry wasn’t surprised.

“Not only my own,” Severus went on, “as it is a coproduction with Draco.”

The last time Draco Malfoy’s name was uttered between them involuntarily came to Harry’s mind. “Is it?” he asked half awkwardly, half defiantly.

“It is a mutually beneficial arrangement. It’s advantageous for his warding business and prevents me from being bored to death by brewing contraceptives, various lust potions, Pepperup Potion and other unimaginative stuff for the masses. I am quite honestly fed up with the mail-order business; it holds no challenge at all, or very rarely. I contemplate selling it,” Severus confessed honestly.

“I didn’t know that,” Harry said and he couldn’t help but wonder how many other everyday things there were that he didn’t know about his husband. Their shameful lack of communication was more obvious than ever. It pained Harry greatly.

“No, you didn’t,” Severus agreed. He wasn’t judgemental, he just said this matter-of-factly.

“Warding is what you are interested in nowadays?” Harry questioned.

“We can say that, yes. It’s a fascinating mixture of several facets of magic. Has elements from all the basic branches of wizardry and gives space for one’s creativity. This potion-enchantment sequence we used is only one possible answer for the same problem, but there are other promising combinations still unexplored,” Severus explained animatedly.

Harry envied Severus’ enthusiasm about this new prospect in his professional life; Harry longed for one, too.

They had a companionable discussion on the matters of ward creating, magical theory, and possible fusions between several areas of magic. Harry couldn’t remember when they had spent time together like this.
When they got tired of talking, they remained silent.

“Would you like a short tour of the place?” Severus asked in late afternoon, when the weather became more agreeable.

Harry agreed.

The piece of savannah they found themselves at was beautiful in its wildness, but also eerily empty. No fauna was present; at least, they encountered none.

They spent the night in the sandstone building, in separate rooms. That night Harry dreamt of antelopes running from enormous, mighty lions that chased them.

* *

Next morning found Harry once again in front of the house, seeking shelter from the sun in the shadows. He had an idea he wanted to test. In the room which the previous day functioned as his makeshift potions laboratory, he had found quill, ink and parchment and now he was ready to test whether the limitations around them were willing to make an allowance for him.

He laid the parchment flat on the ground, grabbed the quill, dipped into the ink and carefully positioned it at the middle of the sheet.

*Here goes,* he thought, and uttered the enchantment he had learnt during his days as Mr Vivliori’s shop assistant.

The forces responsible for their environment must have been in a lenient mood, because the quill suddenly came to life and started to dance all around the parchment’s surface. It moved softly, elegantly, with swirls and flourishes, and in its wake several curly lines – constantly intertwining, then coming apart – came to life. Harry watched with satisfaction as the replica of their surroundings was drawn onto the parchment. It was a very detailed facsimile: all the curves of the terrain were represented by wavelike lines, and little pictures of the bigger trees surrounding the house appeared.

When the quill stopped its dance, the parchment transformed into a detailed map of the area surrounding the house in a hundred-metre radius.

Harry grinned and uttered one more enchantment. The quill once more sprang to life to form two dots on the paper with a few crazy pirouettes. The two dots were suspiciously close to each other and, indeed, when Harry looked to the side, he saw Severus intently watching his machinations.

“It was not my intention to interrupt you,” he said. “Please, go on as if I wasn’t here.”

“You didn’t interrupt,” Harry protested. “I was just turning theory into reality.”

The movement of the quill beckoned his attention; with a flourish, their respective names appeared on the paper in front of him. Harry beamed.

“I was always fascinated by the Marauder’s Map, but even if I inherited it, the real secret of the map was never shared with me. After I had started working at Vivliori’s I studied his maps and the way they are made. My real appreciation for the Marauder’s Map only started then. It’s an impressive bit of magic. Today I was curious whether it was possible to make a much simpler map of this area,” Harry explained.

“And how is this project progressing?” Severus asked curiously.
“Well, the terrain and the occupants are visible; those are the first and second steps,” Harry said.

“Is that so?” Severus stepped closer to take an inquisitive look at the parchment. “Interesting,” he said, and he sounded as if he really thought so.

“First step is showing the Obvious, the second to visualize the Living. These two steps are easy enough. The difficult parts come next: to unveil the Hidden – when you force the map to show anything in the area, even the magically concealed places or people. This stage is not always successful: see the Chamber of Secrets. It never was part of the Marauder’s Map. Fourth step is to show all the Changes; it basically means giving the map the ability to follow any changes in names or structure and so on. Finally, the fifth step is to give the map a limited Intelligence; thus the map will be able to give tips, or accept passwords.

“Or insult innocents,” Severus readily added.

“Yes, that is also a distant possibility,” Harry admitted.

“You were right, Harry. Magical Cartography is impressive. A captivating mixture of Transfiguration, Charms and a great amount of creativity,” Severus said.

“Yeah, and the best part is that it’s kind of fun, as well,” Harry added with a cheeky smile.

“This project makes you enthusiastic,” Severus observed. “Maybe you should have your fun with maps for a living,” he suggested.

“But how? Few parts of the globe – if any – remain uncharted these days,” Harry protested.

“The Marauder’s Map was made of a school, not of a geographical unit; a map like this would be useful at other places as well. Maybe in prison – to always keep track of the offenders – or in institutes for children. There are many possibilities. When I was a professor, regrettably with patrol duties, I would have loved to have a map like this. Imagine all the detentions I could have given out —from my armchair, no less!” The thought brought an almost dreamy expression to Severus’ face.

Harry laughed.

“I am kind of glad you couldn’t,” Harry said later.

“I bet you are!” Severus huffed. “It is your choice, of course, but it’s a rare trade and many would seek your assistance; furthermore, you would finally have the opportunity to travel,” Severus reasoned.

With that he left Harry alone with his half-formed map and his thoughts.

As Severus-dot walked away from Harry-dot on the parchment, Harry grinned widely.

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The next few days were spent as if they were on a vacation. They talked a lot about things like maps and wards and other not earthshattering but still – at least for them – important topics. Harry spent a significant amount of his time with working on his map. By then, it showed the names and habitats of a few potions ingredients and edible plants.

They still hadn’t talked about the hard things; neither their marriage nor their divorce was a topic between them. All the accusations and revelations made before the storm remained unaddressed. Harry needed time for all the conflicting thoughts and feelings to settle down. He still was hurt and
felt betrayed, but now it was accompanied by doubt and shame and a longing for the tranquility between them to last, and for something else he didn’t dare to name yet.

Their time spent on the savannah was nothing like the hurtful struggling of the desert. It was relaxing.

One night – at the end of a day spent with gathering ingredients for Severus, who made use of all the potions paraphernalia to experiment a bit – Harry shared his opinion with Severus, as well.

“It feels like a holiday, really,” he explained. “Even if the circumstances are unusual. Basically we are on the anti-thesis of a honeymoon,” he said jokingly, but as it was dangerous territory, he quickly changed the topic. “This day-long traipsing around in the grass overexerted my leg a bit. I will need that wonder-salve of yours,” he said sheepishly.

“Do you need assistance?” Severus asked. If Harry wasn’t hallucinating, there was a hint of concern in his eyes.

“No, thanks. I will take care of it,” Harry said quickly. “I will just go… inside,” he added shyly. It was a weird situation, given that Severus was his husband.

Inside, he shed his pants and was kneading the ointment into his tired muscles when a spasm contorted his thigh and he lost his balance and fell with a thud. He cried out.

Severus was beside him in an instant. “What happened?” he asked.

“Just a spasm,” Harry hissed as he tried to massage the hard and painful muscle in his leg. “Will be over in a moment.”

“Hogwash!” Severus exclaimed and grabbed the jar from beside Harry. “Let me help you!” he said, and waited.

Harry was torn: on one hand it hurt like hell, on the other he felt vulnerable and exposed. Should he dare to trust Severus with this?

Severus didn’t touch Harry until he nodded his consent.

His hands were so warm and tender, but also firm at the same time. He massaged Harry’s leg with an intense expression on his face for almost thirty minutes, all the time kneeling beside Harry. After the muscles in Harry’s thigh finally let go, he gently rubbed the cream into Harry’s calf and foot, as well.

Severus’ hands had years of experience with mapping Harry’s body, experience with giving both pleasure and comfort. This time, they aimed for comfort but, nonetheless, Harry was rosy-cheeked by the end of the endeavour.

“Thank you, Severus,” he said. He thanked him not only for the massage but for not abusing Harry’s trust.

“You are welcome,” Severus said and left, giving Harry a chance to collect his thoughts and trousers.

The next change of scenery happened by next morning. Where previously there had been only limitless fields of grass, now a path was visible, slithering over the landscape as a grass snake would do.
“What do you think?” Harry asked Severus nervously. “Should we follow?”

“It cannot be a coincidence that suddenly a pathway appeared which practically starts from our current residence. Only the sign ‘Please follow me, imbecile!’ is missing,” he snapped. Whatever he said, the sudden appearance of this new addition unnerved him, too.

For days on and on nothing had happened, and now a path appeared from nowhere. Harry shook his head; he couldn’t understand the logic of this place for the life of him.

Even the map wasn’t able to solve the mystery. The trail was represented by a slaloming line of ink, but no extra information was revealed.

“Only one way to know, I guess,” Harry shrugged. He was reluctant to leave this peaceful place.

“Indeed.”

That was all the agreement they needed; without further discussion, they had breakfast as usual, then gathered their belongings, a few useful things from the building – or useful at least for Severus, whose motto in life was ‘Never leave any potion ingredient behind!’ – and they set off. They had only taken a few dozen steps when Harry, driven by some instinct, looked back. The house they had inhabited until recently wasn’t in existence any more. There was no way back.

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For days they faithfully followed the road set out for them. The landscape kept on changing overnight, and became more and more rich and prolific every day. They were currently in a forest, surrounded by trees and colourful flowers. The road always provided some shelter when they got tired, in the form of a cave or a house similar to the one at the savannah. It was a weird journey, a bit like a pilgrimage.

They had the chance to talk and also to experience silence together, which wasn’t painful anymore. They learnt to listen, to be there without demanding. It was like getting to know each other all over again.

Harry learnt to accept help from Severus when their daily exertion proved to be too much for his leg. It became a routine for them; every night Severus would apply the salve to Harry’s leg, massaging and soothing but also awakening something in Harry’s soul, some yearning Harry didn’t know how to treat. Harry’s blushes became more and more pronounced as the evenings passed, and it took increasingly more time for Severus’ fingers to tear themselves away from Harry’s skin, for his dark gaze to turn away from Harry. There was a fire there that Harry’s own eyes reflected, he was sure of it. But still…

Harry was ambivalent about what to do; what he craved, he also dreaded.

He wanted to be beside Severus in every meaning of the word. He wanted to smell, touch, feel, taste him. He wanted to be consumed by him and be the consumer of him. More than once he reached out to touch him – to comb the hair out of his face, to smooth out the creases in his robe, to simply hold his hand – just to abort the movement halfway through and withdraw his hand.

He withdrew, because he also wanted to hurt Severus sometimes, especially when Harry imagined him with someone else. He wanted to rave at him for all the times he had been cold and indifferent, when Harry had been all alone even standing right beside his husband. But the heaviest burden on his chest that prevented his reaching out was his doubt. Was he enough? Did Severus want him? And most of all, did Severus love him?
He simply didn’t dare to ask; instead, he walked on dutifully.

One afternoon they reached a pond, deep inside the forest.

“Thank God!” Harry exclaimed. “I have been dreaming about a bath for days. I am so fed up with cleaning charms.”

Severus gave him an indulgent half-smile. “Go ahead!” he said. “I’ll probably join you later, but I saw trumpet flowers over there which I would like to investigate.”

Harry didn’t need more encouragement; he peeled off his clothes, leaving only his boxers on, and jogged to the shore. The water was crystal clear and waited only for Harry. He splashed into it with great pleasure and immersed himself immediately. It was divine. He horsed around in the water happily, once lying on its surface, then somersaulting with abandon or swimming for a while.

Suddenly he felt eyes on himself and looked up to meet Severus’ gaze.

“Hey,” Harry waved to him. “Won’t you come in? The water is perfect.”

Severus looked tense, although Harry couldn’t imagine why. A few minutes earlier he had been perfectly fine.

Finally Severus nodded and started to strip. Harry didn’t want to watch him, honestly, he didn’t, but he was overruled by his eyes, which refused to move away from the feast provided.

Severus disrobed very slowly, all the while looking at Harry.

With every piece of clothing he disposed of, more and more of his milky white skin was revealed, inflaming Harry’s need to touch, taste, consume. Harry’s heart beat an impossibly rapid rhythm while Severus’ long limbs were freed from their confines, leaving him in his shorts, which were tented by his own need. He walked to the shore, right to the waterside, and stopped, clearly waiting for something. It was pure torture.

Please, Harry said, not with his mouth but with the desperation is his eyes, the anticipation running up his spine, the need pulsating within his chest.

Severus must have heard him, because he was wading into the water and marching towards Harry and moments later he was there and he was grabbing, kissing, owning, tasting, biting all at once. And Harry let him do anything he wanted because he didn’t and couldn’t resist anymore. They kissed as the desert kissed the raindrop, devouring it wholly, making it a part of itself. They kissed greedily, hungrily, as they had never kissed before, as if they had been doing this all their lives, as if they never wanted to stop.

Somehow they got out of the water and were lying on the shore, tangled in each other, all limbs and need and more and please. Their hips were grinding against each other while their lips sought out each other again and again, never satisfied without the other.

Then, with a gasp, it all exploded around Harry.

He felt the fiery hotness slowly leaving his body; meanwhile, the weight of Severus was still above him; he was still rubbing against Harry, arching into him, seeking his release. With a whisper of “Harry,” Severus stiffened and came. Loudly panting, he collapsed on top of Harry. He was hot and heavy, while Harry felt cold and sticky and wet and somehow dirty.

‘I came in my pants and I said your name,’ Severus had said in the desert. Exactly like now, Harry’s
mind eagerly supplied.

Was Severus this hot and heavy against that man, too? Was he this out-of-control, this frantic with him, as well?

‘I rutted against him like a fool,’ Severus had said in the desert.

Was that one time with that man this wet and sticky as well? Was it this dirty?

‘A mongrel in heat,’ Severus had said in the desert.

Harry rolled Severus off himself and sat up. Suddenly he felt cold, empty and unsatisfied.

“Was it like this with him as well?” he asked.

Severus seemed alarmed. “Harry,” he said as he sat up and reached towards him, but Harry leaned back.

“Please, just tell me. Was it like this?” he asked again desperately.

“It wasn’t,” Severus said hoarsely.

Was it better? Was the other man…

“There is nothing in this world that feels like being with you,” Severus said firmly.

Harry nodded. There was silence. “I need to think,” Harry said.

He rose to his feet, gathered his clothes into his arms and hugged the bundle tightly to his chest like a security blanket. He needed the small comfort it gave; without it, he feared he would seek it in Severus’ arms. And that, he thought, was a bad idea. It wouldn’t be fair on either of them until he managed to see Severus and not his past behaviour. With a heavy heart, Harry walked away.

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A few hours later, Severus came after him. Harry was sitting under a tree, right next to the path they had been travelling for days.

Severus was fully clothed once more; both his robes and his facial mask of stone were on.

He stopped a few feet away from Harry, who had also stood up. He didn’t want Severus to tower over him. He wanted to be on an equal footing.

“I ask for your forgiveness,” Severus said. “Both for today and for the past. It was foolish of me to think that this wasn’t necessary on my part,” he stated plainly.

Harry sighed. “As it was proven today, I cannot forgive you right now for what happened in the past,” he said sadly. “I am not sure when I will be able to. But I will try.”

“Thank you,” Severus said with a tight bow of his head. “I… I will be waiting,” he promised, and for Harry, this one promise was better than anything else he could have said.

“I also wish to ask for your forgiveness,” Harry said.

Severus was taken aback.
“For what?” he asked.

“For today, because it was my fault as much as it was yours, and for all the things you accused me of in the desert and you were right about,” Harry answered. “I failed you as a husband in many things,” he admitted with an overwhelming sadness settling in his chest.

“I… Thank you. I mean… Your honesty is greatly appreciated.” Severus composed himself. Harry gave him a bittersweet little smile.

“If you are agreeable, we shall depart in an hour,” Severus went on, once again calm and collected, seemingly indifferent. Harry didn’t resent him because of the mask he wore. He knew Severus needed it.

“Sounds good,” Harry agreed.

So they went on.

After the initial awkwardness, they found their voices again. No matter how painful its aftermath was, their lakeside encounter had opened some floodgates. As the hardest part was out in the open, there were fewer taboos sitting on them, fewer topics to avoid. It was kind of liberating.

Harry knew he had to decide if he could forgive his husband or needed to release him. He knew which one he wanted. The question was whether he was able to go along with it. He didn’t know yet.

Shortly, their path took them to a river. It was – like everything else in this odd reality – not quite what it seemed. It wasn’t exactly water flowing in it, as it had some oily, opaque quality. It reminded Harry of the fluid whirling in a Pensieve.

The riverside brought a new awareness to Harry. Somehow, the nearness of the river flooded Harry with a hint of home, as if he was close but not right there yet.

“I miss Teddy terribly,” he admitted to Severus.

“I, too, find myself thinking about him with an alarming frequency.” Harry knew it was the Severus equivalent of a ‘me too’.

“You are good with him, you know,” Harry said truthfully. “I am not sure if I have ever told you this, but you are a fantastic part-time step-godfather to him.”

Severus blushed a little. Probably half was embarrassment, half pleasure.

“I wanted to talk to you about him,” Severus said, surprising Harry.

“Really? Go ahead!”

“In case these negotiations conclude with us going on our separate ways, I still would like to continue on with our tutoring sessions with Teddy,” he said. “Heaven only knows how much he needs it; sometimes he is just as much of a klutz as his mother was,” he complained fondly.

Harry smiled. “Of course, I would be happy if you tutored him, whatever may come. And I am sure he would want to spend time with you, too,” he assured Severus. “I heard it from a reliable source that he adores you.”
“Thank you. I appreciate it. This is my only request regarding divorce negotiations,” Severus stated.

Harry wondered how easy it was to forget that, after all, this was what they were here for. To come to terms with their lives after they divorced. If, his mind supplied insistently. If they divorced.

It was the same afternoon when the pathway abruptly ended; it had brought them to a peaceful bay on the riverside, then simply ceased to exist.

In the bay, a medieval-looking cable ferry was floating on the waves, too small to carry more than three or four people in one turn. It was parked by the pier which leaned above the water’s opaque surface. A tall, masculine figure stood on the pier next to the ferry.

Harry was sure that they needed to cross the river in order to move on.

Severus and Harry walked towards the tumbledown little ferry. The ferryman was the first living creature they had met since they arrived. Harry had a feeling that he wasn’t quite human, just as the liquid flowing in the river wasn’t quite water.

The ferryman wore a hooded cloak that left his features in its shadows, but he had an ethereal air about him that wasn’t characteristic of humans.

They stood before the man and he measured them.

“Which one of you will pay the fee?” he asked.

“I will,” Severus supplied immediately. The bloody noble git!

The ferryman raised his hand and slowly put it on Severus’ temple; when he withdrew, a silver object sat on his palm. It was shaped like a coin but seemed to be made of swirling silver fog. Then Harry recognized its substance: it was a memory! The fee for their crossing was one of Severus’ memories.

Suddenly, the man threw the coin into the air and it exploded above their heads into silver mist which slowly descended on them.

Severus is standing under the shower, in their home, facing the wall. Hot water is pouring down on him, colouring his alabaster skin an angry, ugly red. He isn’t moving an inch: posture stiff, eyes tightly closed, fists clenched by his side. His head is slightly bent down, his seaweed-like hair sticks to his face. In his unwavering immobility he resembles a statue carved of tension and misery.

He has been standing there for a long time.

Then slowly he raises both of his fists to his face and opens his palms; his skin is heavily wrinkled just like the coat of an overripe apple and it’s bluish-white from the grip his palms were forced into. Severus buries his face into his cupped hands and draws in a deep breath. For endless moments he holds that gulp of air down. Nothing moves but the water. Not his hands, not his chest: for those eternal moments, probably not even his heart.

Then he abruptly strikes out with his fists; he hits the wall with all the force of his previous motionlessness, the force of his desperation, and he hits the tiles again and again and again until his knuckles bleed, until his hands are ugly, angry red to match the colour of his other parts. Then he
frantically starts to murmur under his breath, the same word over and over again. At first it’s almost inaudible but it turns louder with every utterance. “Scourgify!” he says, “Scourgify!” It’s said like a mantra. A plea to above.

Then he opens eyes made of pain liquefied – their ebony depth striking in his deathly white face – and with a feral roar strikes the tiles one last time.

Harry was rendered speechless under the weight of the memory. Severus’ face was carved from stone, once again, as he led Harry to the boat and helped him get on.

Harry was sure that the scene he witnessed had happened on the night Severus had been unfaithful to him. Severus’ hands must have been heavily bruised for days – the masochistic, self-flagellating prick wouldn’t have healed them – and still, Harry had never noticed. Because of his absence or inattention, it didn’t matter. He felt something awfully like shame at the thought.

They took their seats side by side on the narrow bench as the ferryman positioned himself at the stern of the boat and with his long oar pushed the vessel away from the shore.

Severus’ hand was on the bench between them. His wedding ring was sitting innocuously on his ring finger. It was a natural part of him, would have been more obvious in its absence than it was in its presence. That was the same hand Severus had abused in the memory. He had been wearing his ring then, too.

Out of nowhere, halfway between the two shores of the river, Harry finally understood: this was how Severus loved him – constantly. Just like the ring, his love for Harry was also a part of him: internalised, inseparable, indelible. It shone in acts and not in words. Looking back on the path they travelled, it had always been there: in his willingness to let Harry decide, in his promise to wait for Harry, in his care, his support, his encouragement, even in his harsh words. It was there in everything he did, Harry simply didn’t recognize it.

Severus made a mistake once, while Harry failed him a hundred times. But whatever mistakes Harry made, Severus always forgave him. Harry needed to learn from his husband about forgiveness.

Harry also realized that, even if Severus always forgave Harry, he would never forgive himself for his infidelity; he more than likely didn’t even know how to do so if it came to himself. He needed Harry to show him.

With this new insight, Harry decided. It seemed so easy now. Harry didn’t doubt any more if he would be able to do it. Severus would give him the strength he needed. Just like that, Harry let go all the hurt, pain, resentment previously shackling him.

Harry settled his hand on Severus’ and intertwined their fingers.

It had happened the exact same way as before, when they had touched the door together in the Department of Mysteries: there was a jerk, then twisting as if they were trapped in a whirlpool, then falling and falling eternally.

This time, they managed to arrive onto their feet, without the thud. Once more they were back in the circular black room. The same Unspeakable who accompanied them on their way here was waiting
for them.

Their hands, Harry realized, had lost each other during their fall; he already missed the touch, but he knew he would get it back. He wasn’t doubting any more.

“Welcome back, gentlemen,” the Unspeakable greeted them. “It’s good to see you so soon,” he added.

So soon? They had been away for weeks! Their friends must be in a frenzy, Harry supposed. He’d have to send word to them that both Severus and he were back and in one piece.

“Exactly for how long have we been away?” Severus, the ever practical, inquired.

“Twenty-three seconds, in my estimation,” the Unspeakable supplied.

“Twenty-three seconds?” Harry was astonished. “How is that possible?” he wondered.

“Magic, Mr Potter,” the Unspeakable answered before Severus could tell Harry the same.

Severus snorted and Harry gave him a nasty glare. It didn’t have any effect, obviously.

It was unbelievable! Harry’s journey with Severus took no longer then twenty-three seconds. During that time his whole life changed! Or he hoped so. He had the means now to make it work. He let go all of his previous negative emotions and now he was ready to start anew. It was a heady feeling; it was like being a newlywed.

He turned to Severus with a smile befitting any self-respecting Cheshire cat. His answer was a raised eyebrow.

Oh, right! Severus didn’t yet know about Harry’s epiphany, because Harry didn’t find time to tell him yet. Severus probably still thought that they were here to go on their separate ways.

“Shall I escort you to Madam Stapleton’s office immediately?” the Unspeakable asked. “There you will be able to finish the proceedings with an agreement,” he added.

Both of them nodded, and with the Unspeakable’s lead they ascended to the second floor without further ado.

Madam Stapleton had already been waiting for them.

“Oh, you are back!” she greeted them with a smile. She didn’t look as stern as she did last time. Or Harry’s current mood simply allowed him to see her in a more pleasant light. “Come in gentlemen, take a seat!” she invited them in.

“As you are back, I suppose you have managed to come to an agreement?” she asked after all of them were seated comfortably.

“Yes,” Harry replied immediately with a grin.

“I see,” she said. “Then I ask for a few minutes to organize the paperwork,” and with that she hurriedly stood up and left the office.

“Pray tell, in your opinion, what kind of agreement we managed to reach?” Severus asked angrily. Harry knew he masked his confusion. “We talked about young Teddy’s education but on the other matters we didn’t agree...”
“We didn’t have a chance to talk about it in there, but I think the place also registers intent. I decided that I don’t want a divorce, and it more than likely met your own wish,” Harry tried to explain.

Severus’ expression went blank.

“You don’t want a divorce,” he repeated.

“No, not anymore,” Harry said. “I…” Harry trailed off. It was so easy in his own mind. Why was then it so hard to explain?

Severus didn’t help matters with eyeing Harry suspiciously.

“I learnt a lot of things during this few weeks… or twenty-three seconds, it seems… I… When we first… I thought that… Oh, sod it!” he exclaimed frustrated and reached out for Severus’ hand and grabbed it firmly.

“I love you. I trust you. I forgive you,” he stated simply.

At first Severus looked astounded, but it quickly turned into anger.

“Don’t you dare mock me!” he spat and tried to pull his hand away. Harry didn’t let him.

“I’m not mocking you,” he said. “I learnt all these things and more while we were on this journey. I want a life together.”

Severus stopped his struggle to get his hand back.

Harry continued. “I want to be by your side as you always were by mine, I want meaningful silences with you, I want to speak for hours, watch you drink coffee, I want to nurture Teddy into a fine young man with you, I want to travel with you and probably make maps as well, I want to hear about your warding experiments, I want to make love, I want to fight, I want to…”

“I get the picture, Harry, you can stop now,” Severus interrupted. He seemed so vulnerable; Harry’s heart ached.

“Don’t you want these things as well?” Harry asked.

There was a heavy pause.

“Are you sure about this, Harry? What about my… adultery?” Severus asked earnestly.

“I want to leave it in the past and move on. With you,” Harry said unalteringly.

Severus didn’t answer immediately. Harry waited.

“In this case I want to try,” Severus said at last.

Harry beamed. “Thank you,” he said and squeezed Severus’ hand.

Madam Stapleton chose this moment to come back with a pile of paper in her arms. Harry suspected that her timing wasn’t entirely accidental.

“What is your decision, gentlemen?” she asked them after settling back behind her desk.

Severus looked at Harry, who nodded.
Severus then turned towards Madam Stapleton and spoke. “Although we are grateful for the Ministry’s help, we decided to withdraw our petition for a divorce.”

Madam Stapleton smiled at them.

“In that case you only need to sign two statements,” she said while she lifted two parchments from the top of her pile and gave them to Severus and Harry. “Please sign on the first page with your full names. Yes, yes, right there. The second page is a standard statement that you won’t sue the Ministry of Magic on the grounds of mistreatment, kidnap, restriction in the right of freedom or any financial harm caused throughout the process.”

“Er… does that happen often, that somebody sues the Ministry?” Harry asked.

“Not every story ends happily,” she said. “But the majority of those who travel through the Ever-Locked Room benefit from the experience,” she added with a soft smile.

After they had given back the papers to her, they thanked her for the assistance and stood up to leave.

“I wish you a long and happy journey together, gentlemen,” she offered as goodbye.

On their way outside, Harry’s hand somehow found Severus’ and refused to let it go again. Severus didn’t seem to mind.

* *

At home, Harry led Severus to their bedroom, still holding his hand.

“Would you care for a proper shower for a change?” Harry asked.

When Severus nodded, Harry reached out and slowly unbuttoned his husband’s robes. He let them slide down from Severus’ shoulders. Then he started to unbutton Severus’ shirt. He was almost finished when an insistent hand tugged on his own T-shirt. He let Severus remove the offending piece of clothing before he resumed his task. He rolled the shirt down from Severus’ shoulders, down his arms, all along the way caressing Severus’ white skin with his palms. It was unbelievably soft.

Harry lowered himself on his knees and buried his nose in Severus’ still fabric-covered crotch, just for a moment he rubbed his face into the bulge coming to life there. Then he unfastened the trousers and pulled the zip down. The trousers slipped effortlessly down, leaving Severus in his boxers. Those were the next to go, with the utmost care. Severus’ cock proudly jumped to attention and Harry couldn’t resist the temptation and breathed the briefest kiss onto its head. By then only the socks remained, so Harry held Severus’ ankle in one hand and with the other he pulled the first sock down. He repeated the process with the other leg, meanwhile peppering Severus’ ankles and calf with feather light kisses.

When Severus’ every square inch was free from its restraints, Harry rose to his feet. Severus helped him, holding him by his elbow, and made Harry – with that one tender gesture – feel cherished and safe.

They removed the remaining clothes from Harry’s body, walked into the bathroom together and stepped under the shower. Only under the warm downpour did they kiss each other.

They kissed not only with their lips; their kiss involved the toes elevating Harry to be able to reach more of Severus, it involved the skin seeking out each other’s heat, the hands craving contact, the
locks of hair anchoring the gripping palms, the spines arching their bodies into each other. It involved their hearts, beating together, their lungs, sharing the same mouthful of air. Their souls, coming home together.

This kiss was not rushed, there was no need to hurry. It slowed down, then sped up again; they had the luxury to cherish each other with the lightest touches of their lips before hungrily devouring each other once again.

They took their time because they could. They had all of this night and they would have all the other nights as well, to make love.

Later, they lay in bed together exhausted, limbs intertwined, Harry’s head on Severus’ chest, Severus’ fingers buried in Harry’s hair, playing with his locks.

Harry’s wedding ring was once again in its rightful place on Harry’s hand. Severus put it there, accompanied by a hundred butterfly kisses on Harry’s fingers, his palm, his wrist.

“Thank you,” Harry said on the verge of sleep. “For forgiving me, for loving me even if you don’t say it.”

There was silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable at all.

“I once read something in a book that now seems fitting,” Severus said. “If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more,” he quoted.

Harry buried his nose into Severus’ chest and breathed in deeply.

“Hmm. Sounds very romantic,” he said. “I wonder where you read such a sentiment.”

“That is none of your business, brat. After all, I have a reputation to preserve,” Severus said haughtily.

“You git!” Harry mumbled; he was too sleepy to come up with a proper insult. “You know your secret is safe with me – Anyway, who would believe me?”

Severus folded his arms around Harry.

Harry fell asleep to the sound of Severus’ heartbeat.

-The End-

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