**Summary**

In one timeline, Severus lives. In the other, he dies.

In both, he falls in love.

**Notes**

No betas so far, so all the mistakes are my own. If anyone is interested, I can pay you with smutty fanfic.
Chapter 1

The first thing he sees upon waking is the ceiling – patched with metal, scorched with magic.

He is alive.

He is alive.

As he moves, the pain shows up, a late arrival to a wedding. He touches his neck, his jaw, and finds them crusted with dried blood. He turns his head and vomits as pain clenches in his stomach like a sticky fist. For a long while he lies there, willing his heart to stop beating. If the War is over, either way, he is a dead man. Better it happen here, alone. Better here than in front of a squad of Aurors. Better here than under the gasping, starving mouth of a Dementor.

His heart keeps beating.

The Great Hall has become the beating heart of Hogwarts, friends and families clutching at each other in sorrow and joy. Ron and Hermione have their fingers tightly laced, and Harry watches them - the impenetrable mesh of early love. Ginny's gone off with her mum somewhere, and Harry feels about one hundred years older. The ashes of countless Unforgivables grind between his teeth, and there is blood on his face.

On his hands.

Some of it is his. Most of it isn't.

Harry thinks of Snape, then, a twisting knife of sorrow and anger both. Dark hair and darker eyes bleeding out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Snape, who mostly likely lies there still.

"I've got to go," he tells his friends, words pulled helplessly from his mouth, and they do not try to stop him.

After awhile – it might be hours, it might be days – he rolls onto his stomach. Though the pain blinds him momentarily, he pushes himself to his hands and knees. The floor is made of wooden planks, mismatched grain; he stares at them while slivers work their way into his palms.

His hands are very white.

His hands are very white.

Harry takes the stairs three steps at a time, panic sparkling like alcoholic bubbles through his veins. Snape is dead, Harry knows he's dead, but for some reason he needs to get to the Shack. It feels ungrateful - no, unbearable - to leave Snape's body there for even a minute longer.

Snape is in the corners of his eyes, the dark vessels in his eyelids. As Harry runs, he glances down at his hands, hands which once tried to hold together the pieces of a ragged throat. He follows the dark brown river of his life line, love line, the places blood ran and went dry, and in his brief moment of distraction -

- Harry Potter falls.

An uneven step, a piece of stone - he trips and falls and a NO breaks like sweat from the earth,
trembles through fault-lines of old magic and blighted love (on the other side of the mirror, a dark-haired, long-limbed boy continues onward, footing sure and steady. On the other side of the mirror, Harry Potter does not fall.).

As he gets to his knees, the pain rolls over him like a red wave, and he vomits bile again upon the floor. His stomach is empty. His head. His heart.

He makes it to his feet, and falls. The hard floor jars his hip bone, and he lies there, catching his breath. He raises himself up, and tries again. As the room stops spinning, and his vision stops flashing before his eyes, he realizes that he is not alone.

There are wands.

In the dim light, it is impossible to tell if servants of the Order or servants of the Dark Lord stand before him, and Snape tells himself it does not matter. Either one will strike him down, spit on him and call him traitor. On a larger scale, however, the outcome of the war matters a great deal, and he tries to put voice to this belief, scrape out syllables with a tongue gone dry and bloodless.

“Who – ” is all he manages before coughing overtakes him, so violent he expects to feel fresh blood rolling down his neck.

“You’ll shut your mouth, traitor,” a voice in the darkness replies. No answers there, then.

“Just do it,” someone else mutters, “His life is the least that he can pay.”

“Who won?” Snape manages, throat raw and on fire.

There is general laughter from the two wizards - three? - in front of him.

“The wrong side for you, mate.”

Harry Potter falls and his hands jar hard against the rough ground. He falls and his blood mingles with Snape's across the creases of his fingers, the bones of his wrist.

"Fuck," Harry swears, pushing himself up, getting his feet under him.

He doesn't know he's lost three seconds. And those three seconds are enough to save a man or murder him (the mirror cracks, splits evenly down the middle as Harry runs, runs and doesn't look back.).

The Whomping Willow lets him pass without so much as a rustle of its leaves, and then Harry is in the shack and there are **wands**, wands have beaten him there. He had expected silence, silence and black rooms, but something is off. Something's gone wrong.

"Just bloody do it. Fucking scum."

"You know what, I just might."

“Just bloody do it. Fucking scum.”

“**You know what, I just might.**”

Snape raises his head, briefly and blissfully pain free, surging with adrenaline. **He will not die with his eyes on the ground.**

“Just bloody do it,” he sneers, as lights flash behind his eyes and there is the sound of a struggle,
and the pain comes back, wicked sharp and in fine form as ("Stupefy!") as ("Expelliarmus!") as -

As Harry Potter throws himself in front of Snape.

"No!" Harry roars as the curse flashes green and gold across the shack, and Snape locks eyes with him for one heartbeat of time - pupils blown wide and dark with surprise - before being thrown back across the room.

"No!" Harry says again, and wandless magic spikes through his veins, rattling the floorboards, breaking the windows, ripping the foundation from the black earth.

One of the wizards runs, but two are falling, landing hard against the filthy walls. Harry doesn't pay them any thought. He moves to Snape's side, a bundle of black cloth and grey skin. Without thinking, he grabs him, digs shaking fingers into the bones of his narrow shoulders, his wrists where a weak pulse stutters and slows -

"No," Harry murmurs, "No -"

"Don't touch him! Don't you - bloody -"

Harry's hand is hard against his waist, other hand outstretched and ready with his wand, and he smells like blood and smoke and lilac flowers. Snape’s head falls weakly to the boy’s shoulder, and god, his hair.

“It's all right, you're all right,” Harry whispers, while the other wizards scatter like ashes to the wind, but there is a hand on Snape’s waist, holding him upright, and Harry Potter, warm as honey against his skin. “You’re okay.”

“Who –” Snape manages, losing the small threads of consciousness he has left.

“We did,” Harry laughs, turning his head and gusting hot breath over Snape’s unlovely face, “It was us. We won.”

"It was us," Harry whispers to the man in his arms. "We won."

Snape tries to shape words with lips gone bloodless, and Harry thinks that if he just holds on tight enough, he can keep the life within this skinny body, hold it like water in his cupped hands. He feels the shifting world beneath them, the heartbeat of the soil, the forest, the floorboards all reverberating against his body, and he wills that heartbeat into Snape’s narrow chest. He can save him, he knows he can.

In this, and in so much else, Harry Potter is wrong.

*     *     *

This is how it happens.

There is a War. It ends, for most people it ends, but for some people it doesn’t. Some people die, and some people walk away, but some people never walk away, or if they do the War follows them. Some people close their blinds at night, but the War keeps peeling them back and smashing the glass and climbing through. Some people lock their doors, but the War picks locks with bony fingers and is in, is inside.

When all is said and done, Harry and Ron and Hermione – not to mention the dozens of other students whose studies were disrupted by falling Headmasters and Crucius curses – come back to
Hogwarts. They have to take their NEWTS after all, and even though Harry could probably write his own ticket (already the Ministry is clammering to make him a poster boy), he’s too exhausted to even begin to think about his future. He is eighteen years old, and it strikes him that he’s been living on borrowed time for his entire life. He wakes up at the Burrow one night, nightclothes sopping wet with nightmares and clinging to his skin, and realizes he has no idea what he’s going to do with the rest of his life because for the past five years he didn't know for certain that he’d have a rest of his life. He’s alive and Voldemort is dead and all is well – or at least all should be well, but it’s hard for Harry to breathe lately, ash and burning buildings in his lungs. There are angry ghosts everywhere, and he knows he isn’t the only person who’s haunted, but sometimes he can barely pull back his bed curtains, convinced Remus Lupin will be standing, bleeding, on the other side.

Sometimes the most basic spells elude him, wand sputtering like a dying streetlight. Sometimes he has dreams, magic raging through his bones like an angry sea.

In September, he wakes to find half the mirrors in Hogwarts cracked finely down the middle, lightning-bolt shaped shards scattered across the floor.

In December, he blows a hole through the wall of the Arithmancy classroom when someone behind him accidentally drops a textbook.

In March, he leaves Hogwarts forever.

It comes as a surprise, even to him. In this, and so much else really, it's all down to Snape (back up, start earlier).

In February, then: Harry receives a letter informing him that Severus Snape - after nearly one year in Azakaban - is at last standing trial for crimes committed during the war, and Harry is invited to testify. Hermione and Ginny both offer to come with him, but it's something he feels he has to do by himself, and he cannot say why. He is offered a portkey but decides to take the train into London, the everyday average Muggle train, and on the journey he feels something inside his chest ease and give slightly. It is - it is wholly new to be anonymous, to see only the occasional nod of recognition or misplaced gratitude, and Harry feels like he could ride the train forever, loaded up on Muggle sweets and exhausted and blessedly ordinary.

King's Cross is strange and familiar all at once, and Harry buys a massive coffee from a vendor and regrets it almost immediately; his hands shake as he takes the tube to Whitehall, and he gets all sorts of glances from his fellow riders (but not the glances he is used to, so that's something).

"Harry Potter," the woman at reception repeats back to him, unconvinced.

Harry shrugs and nods at her, and it isn't until he finds the toilets and sees himself in the mirror that he understands her confusion. Merlin, he doesn't even recognize himself. He hasn't been consciously avoiding mirrors at Hogwarts, catching spare glimpses of himself here and there, but under the overbearing Ministry lighting, there's no escaping it. He has lost weight - Christ, he didn't even realize how much - and his eyes are lined and hollow. It's embarrassing to be suddenly confronted with your own unfamiliar body; Harry feels like this is something he should have been made aware of much, much earlier.

"All right there, son?" a middle-aged wizard with spidery eyebrows asks him, washing his hands in the basin next.

'Son,' thinks Harry, not 'Mister Potter,' and feels both discomfort and crushing relief.

"Fine, thanks," Harry says quickly, and the man nods once before leaving.
"Fine, thanks," Harry says again to the empty toilets, watching his mouth move in the mirror. It's like the words are coming from somewhere far away, somewhere he's never been.

Somewhere with white sand, he thinks a bit hysterically. White sand and an endless blue sea.

He goes through a series of increasingly invasive security procedures before being admitted to the Wizengamot, and Kingsley Shacklebolt smiles wryly at him from his place in the front row. Harry's first sight of Severus Snape in so many months feels as physical as pain (someone prying their hands apart on the floor of the Shack as the healers arrive from Mungoes: "He'll be fine now, Mr. Potter, you just need to - let go, Harry, you have to let go -")

Snape looks about as terrible as Harry does, bony and lantern-jawed, and their eyes meet once, just once, as Harry is called to testify. Harry feels his knees grow inexplicably weak. He thinks about Occlumency, wonders if Snape can still read minds as easily as he could inspire irrational, bottomless anger. He focuses hard on the words YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE, but Snape shows no sign of understanding, keeping his gaze focused on his long, pale fingers.

Harry tells them everything.

When he's finished, he can't remember half of what he said, only that Snape looked up briefly at him for a moment, and Harry felt the room tilt slightly, the world going off its axis.

After a few hours, there is a short recess involving tea and biscuits, and Harry is surprised to see Snape up and walking about in the small hall that serves as a common area. The man is deep in hushed conversation with an elegant, blonde woman who must be his barrister, but the woman soon leaves, and then it's just Snape - Snape, all alone with a paper cup of tea in his shaking hands, Snape, pretending to stare at his feet while all about him wizards and witches pretend that he is wallpaper, Snape whom Harry hasn't seen since the Aurors tore their hands apart, days and weeks and months ago -

"Mr. Potter." There is a tall, cheerful young man at Harry's side. "Bertrand Quick, Secretary to the Minister. I was wondering if I might speak to you briefly about our Auror training program. This might seem rather sudden, but we have an offer for you that I'd be honoured if you'd hear -"

"Could you give me a minute?" Harry asks absently, drawn to Snape like a ship through rough waters.

He is lucky that Snape is looking down, or else he's certain the man would run. As it is, Snape finally glances up only when Harry's shadow falls over his polished boots.

He does not look happy.

"Mr. Potter," he says softly. "Have you come to collect your reward?"

Snape's voice is like an electric shock; the hairs on Harry's forearms stand on end.

"My reward -"

"I believe a reward is customary when the great hero comes to the aid of the helpless maiden. How very kind of you to bestow your favours upon me."

Only Snape would use the word 'kind' as if it was obscenity, and Harry cannot suppress a small wince of pain. He doesn't really know what he was expecting - certainly not for Snape to embrace him with open arms (that would be more than a little awkward) but he can admit that he had hoped -
He had hoped that maybe things would be a little easier.

"The reunion not going as planned?" Snape cuts in, as if he's reading Harry's mind - which he might well be, oh god.

"I didn't plan anything," Harry lies, "I just wanted to say - to see how you were, I -"

"How I was?" A few nervous glances are darting their way, though Snape is endeavouuring to keep his voice as low as possible. "Try spending ten months in Azkaban, and have that question put to you. I would be interested in your answer."

"You shouldn't have been there," Harry says quickly, a bit louder than he intends. "And if they try to send you back, I -"

"You'll what?" Snape's eyes have gone even darker, if that's possible, and his white mouth trembles just slightly. "Take on the Ministry? Fight off the Dementors single-handed? How very noble of you, Mr. Potter."

Again, Snape wields compliments like the most savage of insults. Harry knows that nothing is going to come of this conversation, but he still feels rooted to the ground at Snape's feet, feels like he couldn't take a step back if he was forced at wand point.

"Five minutes, ladies and gentleman," a page announces, and a vague shuffle toward the door begins.

Snape does not move, however, and Harry physically cannot. They stare at each other in silence, and he wonders nervously what the end game is here. Snape's teeth are bared so fiercely, Harry feels like any moment he might get bitten.

"Don't come back inside," Snape says finally, each word a blade. "I don't need the Golden Boy bearing any further witness to my ignominy."

"I don't know what that word means," Harry says without thinking, and something flickers in Snape's gaze, hot as candle flame.

"It means piss off back to Hogwarts."

They are nearly the only people left in the room, and Snape finally breaks the hold of their proximity, turning away slowly and moving toward the doors. Harry feels like a spell has been lifted - he can breathe and move and think in straight lines again.

"I just - I just wanted to help," he says quietly to Snape's retreating form, and when Snape turns back, there is something broken in the slant of his shoulders, the angle of his jaw. It is something Harry hadn't noticed before, but now it seems so obvious that it is all he can see.

"You are about forty years too late."

Snape leaves, a whirl of black fabric, and Harry stands for a moment in the empty room, watching the heavy oaken doors close against him.

He feels like he is slowly deflating; soon the shell of his body will pool weakly on the floor, no air left to keep him upright. Snape was in Azkaban for ten bloody months, and where the hell was Harry? The past year seems like a blur; he can barely remember what he did yesterday. There was a bunch of time in Mungoes, wasn't there, all those tests to assess any emotional trauma he might be experiencing (not to mention how he was able to come back from the dead.) There was a bit of
concern that he was immortal, or something similarly incredible, and then he had been with those counselors, and working on the Hogwarts restoration project, and then school has started and everything was hard and unpleasant, nothing felt the same at all. The school wasn't his home anymore, it was a battle ground and somewhere out there Snape shone like a distant star. Harry had written letters and he had spoken to Kingsley (okay, one of Kinglsey's assistants), but then he was breaking mirrors and blowing up rooms and the important bits all went grey, and he - he -

He let Snape down. After everything, after all he did, Harry let him down.

He leaves the Ministry to find it raining hard outside, water spiking off the pavement and a sea of black umbrellas. He knows he should go back to school, his friends are no doubt anxious to hear about the trial, but he feels guilt and anger twitching under his skin. He can't settle down, so he walks, ducking from eave to eave but mostly getting soaked. Snape still hangs like a chain around his throat, and Harry calls himself all kinds of coward for leaving the trial, for letting Snape bully him away when what he should have stayed. He should have stayed in that courtroom like a statue, refused to leave until justice was finally done.

Harry doesn't realize how far he's walked until he sees the statue of Charles and realizes he's in Charing Cross. And there, at the corner of Bedford and the Strand is a tiny bookshop that just screams wizard space; Harry can see threads of magic stretching from it at all angles, and in the middle of Muggle London, no less. He doesn't know much about London, aside from the Tower and the Eye and all that tourist stuff, but he's pretty sure that the London University of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Timeo Hominem Unius Libri) is around here somewhere. He couldn't say where exactly. Surely not in the caving down shop in front of him.

Barely avoiding getting run down by a passing cab, Harry crosses the street and goes inside.

There's a fellow posted at the inner set of double doors, a portly young man with thick glasses, and he smiles as Harry approaches.

"Identification, sir?"

Again, Harry feels the thrill of being unknown, even it's for the simple reason that his body is having an independently nervous breakdown. The magic from inside the building calls to him like a siren song, so he shows this fellow his wand, and the doors open immediately.

"Welcome to the WLL, sir," the man says as Harry passes, and Harry doesn't understand his meaning until he steps through the doors (charmed with a quick drying spell) and a vast library stretches out on either side of him.

("The Wizarding Library of London," Hermione tells him, from a conversation long ago, "I've only been once, on holiday, but it's brilliant, really brilliant. We should all take a trip some time, on a weekend, or -" This is where Ron cuts her off with a loud groan, unclear how shelves of textbooks and weekend holidays are compatible on any level.)

"WLL," Harry says quietly, as a stack of books streams past him in the air, and antique wooden shelves rotate and shuffle themselves for meandering patrons. The ceiling is high and rather cavernous, and a lavishly carpeted spiral staircase leads up to a second floor (though many guests are choosing to travel by broom rather than be forced into physical exercise.)

Harry wanders through the maze of high shelves, passes teenagers and adults and children, and finds himself strangely transfixed by the overwhelming quiet. He traces his hands over fine, worn spines and feels his heartbeat gradually slowing, his breathing even out. And the thing is, he never considered himself much of an academic. He can certainly appreciate a good book (in fact, one
might have saved his life every now and then) but he doesn’t salivate at the sight of leather binding or yellowed pages. That's more Hermione’s area. For him, books are something that one uses for a purpose and then largely forgets about: tools, not treasures. His own bookshelf consists of some books on Quidditch, a collection of Dickens, and a few magazines, and yet - and yet this library, this silence -

"You look a bit lost, sir." A soft voice interrupts his thoughts. "Can I be of assistance?"

Harry turns to see a severe looking middle-aged woman hovering in the air behind him. Her hair is pulled back in a tight bun, and she's wearing an old-fashioned high-collared dress. Oh, and she's definitely a ghost.

"Just, um, looking -"

"Oh! You must be here about the job," she interrupts, matter-of-factly. "Do you have references?"

"The job? Um -"

"Never mind, you can submit them later. Have you time for an interview right now? Only the next few days are going to be rather hectic. Spring cleaning and that, but I've got fifteen minutes if you're free."

Harry thinks about Snape and his mum and the Great Hall strewn with bodies and blood on his hands, his face -

"All right," he says, and the world -

*            *            *

- shifts around him, darkness pushed aside by grey, then by lighter grey until everything dissolves in layers of milky white, the colour of blindness.

The man has no name, is without form or substance. He wants nothing, and remembers even less. He only knows he is a man because he can feel the edges of his body, his borders, his beating heart.

He is alive.

There is a word hovering just at the periphery of his consciousness, but it is just a handful of sounds at this point, and he cannot connect them together.

He waits, riding the blankness like a wave. The sounds become a name: Severus.

Points converge and there is a room around him. A room filled with polished oak desks and vials and cast-iron cauldrons. A potions class.

1. That is his name, isn't it? His name is Severus, and he is -

Oh Jesus, he is dead.

Slowly it bleeds back into his memory like a poorly bandaged wound. The Shack. The Snake, and a mouthful of clotted blood, and white hands on his neck - but no, that wasn't it, was it? There was more to it, there was an afterwards, an Epilogue. There was rough wood beneath his palms. Slivers. There were wands in his face and someone else was there too, someone long-limbed and filthy and fine -

Severus cannot recall more than that, his mind veers away like a Snitch - and what does that word
mean? He has no idea, has probably never heard it in his life, and yet it floats honey-coloured and shapeless behind his eyelids.

He gives up memory as a bad job, and focuses on his surroundings as his hands and feet come buzzing back into existence, heavy weights hanging on his hips and shoulders. He reaches for his neck, swallowing against the vague fear that his fingers will come away wet. He feels nothing, nothing at all, no head, no neck, oh God, God -

He studies his hands - lined and yellowed as ever, but clean of any blood - and tells himself he must have a head if he has eyes to see. It occurs to him that his body feels slightly airborne, floating in a grey cloud of nothing, but when he turns his gaze down he finds he is sitting in an upright, hard-backed chair, somewhat haphazardly placed amidst the potions-related clutter. He cannot feel, then. He can see, but cannot feel.

Severus thinks he should test his other senses, measure the extent of his abilities and limits. He should speak, but he can't decide on a word that is appropriate for the situation. It becomes an overwhelming decision (has he been asleep? In a coma? How long, how bloody long?), it becomes the most important choice he has ever made, and words fail him, he's never spoken in his life, he can't remember how, he is afraid, he is -

"Help," Severus says, and he feels the hum of sound deep in his chest. But he hears nothing.

So.

He cannot speak or he cannot hear. Or both.

He would never have put a chair such as this in the middle of the classroom. He examines the hems of his robes, trimmed with emerald-coloured brocade; these are robes he does not own, robes he would never wear.

He is a portrait, then.

As if his understanding wills it to be true, an empty school corridor swims across his vision, somewhere just beyond the edge of the classroom he inhabits. Hogwarts, Severus thinks without any further prompting, because he knows each stone and plank in that school, memorized its hidden corners during a year spent cruel and hated and utterly alone.

"It was us," rings in his ears like a bomb that's just gone off, or a gun. Who said that? Severus knew, once. Didn't he? He did.

He thinks he should at least attempt to explore the room he's trapped in for - for (he tries not to think 'eternity' but the word manifests itself anyway, turning his blood cold. He can feel that, at least, just as he can feel the sharp skip his heartbeat makes in his narrow chest.).

There are things that do not bear thinking about. How is it that every portrait isn't screaming with hysterical despair? Severus rises, or he thinks he does. He cannot feel the ground, but it seems a good deal farther away than it was previously. Tile, he thinks absently, slate grey.

He takes a buoyant step with his numbed limbs, and the resulting panic sends him sideways, crashing into a desk and sliding to the floor. There should be noise, and there should be pain, but Severus hears and feels nothing. He lifts his hands to his face again, and when he pulls them away they are wet.

He can weep, then.
He stares up at the ceiling, the prospect of getting to his feet too daunting for the present. Cedar beams, how extraordinary.

How bloody fucking marvelous.

If he's being perfectly honest, he thought he'd be happier with death. In those last few months (few years, really) he'd longed for it, though not in the fierce romantic way he'd done as a teenager. He hadn't made plans or anything like that, quite confident the war would take care of it, but he'd wondered sometimes - alone, in the dead of night - how much longer he had to continue. He saw the steps he'd have to take leading out across the moors and curving into the dark forest and he'd felt such an exhausting degree of despair it made speech impossible. He was not depressed and he was not sad; he was simply tired. He was ready to finish things. Then.

Now, however -

Severus should have expressly forbid the painting of any portraits. Death but not death, life but not life. Still life, Severus thinks, on the fine edge of madness. He studies his hands, his arms, the blackness of his sleeves. He cannot see brush strokes, can see nothing but skin and fabric, but it is not his body. He closes his eyes briefly, desperate for the relief of nothingness, but when he does he sees green light flashing, feels the floor beneath his back as his heart slowly winds down.

Severus opens his eyes in panic, and the ceiling is still high and unreachable, and his body is still lost completely to him.

"Those bastards fucking murdered me," he says, or attempts to, shock and outrage fighting against each other for dominance. He remembers now: picking himself off the ground, the blood that would not flow, the pulse that would not stop. And then there were other people there, and wands, and they killed him, didn't they? After surviving the bloody snake bite, to be murdered by some inconsequential little - and who were they, come to think of it? He can't remember any names or faces, but he can clearly see someone leaning over him, the bright green of the Killing Curse - but that can't be right, because he was standing when they cursed him, not lying down. What is that colour and what does it mean?

("It was us," a soft voice says in his ear. "We won," and Severus' broken body keens with overwhelming relief.)

The Dark Lord is dead. He must be, because Severus can remember - just for a second, sharpened with pain and adrenaline - happiness. And Hogwarts has been rebuilt, if the corridor in front of him means anything. The Order was successful. Potter must have -

Harry (hands press against a ragged throat, "No, no -" and the smell of lilacs and iron along roof of Severus' gasping mouth.)

The boy tried to save him. He did, and Severus died anyway.

He is suddenly very tired. Exhaustion prickles on his skin like pins and feathers; he feels as if he has been awake for years. Perhaps there is some sort of sleeping enchantment in his new prison. It might explain why so many of the Headmasters' portraits spend their days in a perpetual state of snoring unconsciousness.

He lifts his head to ensure that his body is sufficiently hidden behind a desk. Excepting nights in the infirmary, Severus has never slept in front of another person, and the thought of being observed casually by passing students makes his lungs seize up.
His numbed limbs need no blanket or pillow - one state is just as good as another - and Severus closes his eyes, the sense of falling almost tangible as sleep drags him under.

He does not dream, but the last thing he sees is Harry Potter's outstretched hand, white against the darkness of the Shack, reaching without hope toward Severus' body (which falls, falls, as distant and dying as a star).

He sleeps.

He wakes.

For a moment, he experiences that brief, panicked loss of memory and time that comes with waking in a strange place. It doesn't take long for the panic to become dull despair as the sad story comes back to him (tongue dry against the roof of his mouth, floor hard against the cradle of his skull).

He can feel.

Well, that's something, the scientist in him supplies. It is progress.

Progress in an immotile world, Severus thinks, but he rises just the same. The movement requires more energy than he would normally have expected, but there's no doubt a different set of physics here. Merlin, someone should write a manual on this sort of thing. Perhaps someone already has and Severus didn't show the appropriate amount of interest when he had a pulse.

It's easier to move with sensation in one's limbs, so Severus paces the edges of his prison. It's melodramatic, but drama is all he's been left with, and he may as well use it. The lab is eight desks wide and eight desks long and there is a closed door on either end. He tries them both but his fingers lack the strength to tighten, and the knobs will not turn. After a series of unsuccessful attempts, he pounds one of the doors in frustration, and still cannot hear the resulting bang. Panic swims like bile at the back of his throat and he cannot catch his breath, he's going mad, he cannot breathe, he -

Severus sits down, leans against the door. He holds his breath, and wills his pulse to slow, his hands to stop trembling. He tries every trick he ever used as a bloody spy to quiet his nerves, appear smooth and calm as a placid sea.

"Severus Snape," he mouths with dry lips, and the future stretches before him, an endless series of days like this, emptiness and nothingness and panic forever and ever until someone puts him out of his misery and burns Hogwarts to the ground oh Jesus, Jesus Christ -

"Severus Snape," he says again, but he only hears his mother's voice, Northern accent stronger when she was angry, almost as strong as his grandmother's.

("Severus Snape, stop being silly this instant." Eileen frowns over her spectacles at him, and he helplessly stops crying. Not because he is afraid of her, but because she never cries, does she, even when things are hard as fists and blunt as steel. He's never seen her shed so much as a tear, and he loves her, he loves her without question or limit.)

"Fuck's sake," Severus mumbles, and gets to his feet.

To keep his mind anchored to the present, he examines the cauldrons on each desk. Expensive, certainly, and never used; the artist must have been looking at a photo from a magazine. Severus snorts. He might have expected that his painter would know next to nothing about potions. Unless there was no painter. After all, the portrait of Dumbledore appeared hours after the old wizard died. There couldn't have been an artist, then; the man was painted by Hogwarts itself (after you killed him, you traitor, you monster, you murderous cowardly spy -)
"Stop," Severus says, and his body starts when a low sound ricochets off the polished floor and high walls.

His voice.

He can hear.

He scratches his nails over the rough surface of the cauldron, and is gratified to hear the resulting growl of sound. He laughs, almost hysterically grateful, and he can hear himself laugh, and it is a gift. He tries to push a cauldron off of the desk, desperate for the loud clang that would result, but his arms are too weak. He contents himself with tossing a chair.

I could destroy this room, he thinks. Break the chairs and shred the textbooks and shatter every conceivable piece of glass. What would the staff and students think when they passed my portrait then?

The idea is tempting, but Severus feels that same pull of exhaustion come upon him suddenly, like a lamp being turned off. He manages to fold himself back into the armchair before his eyes are dragged inarguably closed. The world spins around him, and he exhales a small sigh as he loses consciousness again (but he can hear the sigh, can't he, and he is grateful for that much at least.)

He sleeps.

He wakes.

Draco Malfoy is standing in front of him.

Severus startles so violently he almost falls out of his chair (no, no, Draco lived, he must have -) before he realizes that Draco is not, in fact, inside the portrait itself, but standing in the corridor of Hogwarts where the portrait is hung. The boy seems almost as shocked to see Severus as Severus is to see him, and he raises a hand to his chest.

"P-Professor?" Draco says, and his voice shakes.

Severus tries to remember the last time he saw him. Shortly before he fled the school, certainly. The boy did not look like this - gaunt and grey, eyes red as if he'd been crying - and when did Draco cry? Proud, arrogant Draco Malfoy, touched by nothing, defeated by no one -

"Draco," Severus says, and his voice is lower and rougher than he can remember.

"You're - you're awake." Draco's eyes are intent upon Severus' face, and Severus wants to cringe under the scrutiny.

"Evidently."

Draco says nothing, breathing rapid and uneven, and Severus is forced to continue.

"Good Lord, what has happened?"

A manic sort of smile breaks over Draco's face.

"What? You - you haven't been awake. Not for months. Haven't spoken to anybody, and I've come - I've come here to see you, but you wouldn't -"

"How long?" Severus feels fear rise in his throat, choking him.
"Oh, um, since - almost a year now. It's March. I can't believe you're finally -"

1. Bloody fucking March.

"What happened?" Severus says immediately, trying to keep the urgency from his voice but largely unsuccessful. "The war - Draco, you must - you must tell me -"


Severus swallows (when the time comes, the boy must die) and sees green and red behind his eyelids. "Who else?"

"The werewolf and his wife, or whatever she was. One of the Weasleys, but I can't remember which. Rookwood. Greyback. Yaxley. Aunt - Aunt Bella."

Severus hadn't even considered Bellatrix mortal, certain her inky soul would scuttle away from death like a cockroach. Apparently not.

"Who else?" he says again.

"We lost a lot of people," Draco says quietly, and Severus does not know which side he is speaking of. Or if he's even speaking of sides. "You."

Severus is nowhere near as deceased as he would prefer. "Of that, at least, I am aware."

"You don't know what it's like to be a Slytherin now, it's - we're pariahs. It's ridiculously unfair. I can't even go to school it's so bad - even Durmstrang wouldn't have me. I just come here to hand in exams and the rest I do at home." Draco snorts, bitterly. "I'm just lucky Saint Potter's gone or I probably wouldn't have been able to get a moment alone with you."

The name 'Potter' skips like a stone across the smooth waters of Severus' fragile composure ("It was us, we won," and the smell of spring and fear and touch my neck again, my face -)

The latter part of that memory is completely new, wholly unexpected, and Severus almost falls from his chair for a second time.

"Gone. Gone where," he hisses, and it is not a question. He cannot say why he feels so fierce about the information - like every second it evades him costs a heartbeat or a breath - but he does. God help him, he does.

"He dropped out, didn't he?" Draco says like it's common knowledge. Severus could care less; Potter is alive and that is all that matters in the world and in the universe. "I don't know too much about it, but apparently he was at the Wizengamot - defending your memory, by the way - and offered instant admission to the Auror training program. Hasn't even taken his NEWTS - Father says it's completely unheard of, and there ought to be an inquiry. Bloody Ministry sycophants. Anyway, from what I heard he'd been cracking up at Hogwarts, losing his bloody mind. Probably took the first out he could get. I'm sure the staff couldn't wait to be rid of him."

The mention of Potter, at least, has pulled Draco from the brink of despair and deposited him firmly in resentful (and familiar) territory. Severus is a bit relieved. He is well aware he isn't the best person to counsel distraught teenagers, regardless of what he feels for the teenager in question - and if he is being brutally honest, he does love Draco in a grudging sort of way. He smoked cigars with Lucius the day Draco was born, and the moment he held the blond babe in his arms he thought that this child, surely this child was more remarkable and astonishing than all others.
"Anyway, almost every time I've been here in the past months, Potter's been camped out outside your bloody portrait, waiting for you to wake up. Like you were Sleeping Beauty or something." Draco scoffs at the absurdity of his comparison. "I've even overheard him talking to you. It's embarrassing, is what it is."

Potter, speaking to him? Severus tries to recall any recollection of sound, any break from his wide stretch of solitude. He cannot. He feels strangely uneasy about it - Potter watching him sleep, Potter telling him things that Severus had not agreed to listen to - it feels a bit like a violation.

"He always had a lot to say about you, even at the final battle. Waxed romantic about you and his mum in front of the Dark Lord and everyone. Like any of us would believe that -"

"Is Professor McGonagall Headmistress, then?" he asks, changing the subject immediately. Draco holds for a beat, fixing him with an assessing gaze, before continuing.

"Yes. And it's not like she's biased toward Gryffindors or anything. Of course, Dumbledore wasn't any better -" Draco stops speaking immediately, and Severus allows himself to slowly recover from the impact of hearing Albus' name spoken aloud.

("Severus - please," and how many times will Severus see him falling behind his eyelids, and remember how he learned to shape his wand around an Unforgiveable, so long ago and much too young, "You have to mean it, Snivellus, you have to really mean it -")

Severus cannot reply to this. Draco does not apologize, of course he doesn't, but he does go still for a moment, the only remorse a Malfoy is likely to show. He looks unbearably young, and Severus feels a great well of gratitude that it was he who cast the Killing Curse, that Draco is not yet guilty of murder.

"Where exactly in the school am I?" he asks, shaking off the dust of sentimentality.

"Dungeons. One of the back corridors, not too many students," Draco tells him. "I had McGonagall move you the last time I was here. You used to be right outside the potions class, and I thought you would have hated it. When you woke up."

And this child, surely this child is more remarkable and astonishing than all others.

"Any expression of gratitude would doubtless be inadequate."

Draco sniffs, a thin smile twitching on his lips. "I have to go. Mother's waiting in Hogsmeade, and you can imagine how happy she is about it."

Severus nods, feeling his artificial walls move slightly closer. He'd been half in love with loneliness for the better part of his life. Now, however, the thought of it makes him feel vaguely claustrophobic. He wants to claw and scratch and tear the walls apart.

"I'll come back when I can, though. And I won't tell anyone you're awake. Except Mother. She'll want to see you soon, I expect."

"Thank you, Draco."

"Well." Draco shrugs. "Slytherins have to watch out for our own. Goodbye, Professor."

Severus watches Draco grow smaller as he walks away down the corridor, eventually vanishing around a corner. Snatches of the conversation echo like aftershocks through Severus' portrait ("cracking up at Hogwarts, losing his bloody mind") and Severus wonders when - if ever - he will be
able to let go his hold on Lily's son. Because - because his work is done. Severus is a dead man, for Merlin's sake - and yet he wonders where Potter is now, feels drawn to him like a ship through rough waters.

Potter lived, Severus tells himself, and that is all that matters. That was what he promised to do, and his promise was kept. For once in his cringing life, Severus was true to his word.

Potter lived, and the Dark Lord fell, and as far as Severus is concerned, the story -

*   *   *

- begins - really begins - one year later.
Chapter 2

Potter lived, and the Dark Lord fell, and as far as Severus is concerned, the story -

* * *

- begins - really begins - one year later.

Or maybe it begins that day in February - Harry coming back from London, still damp with rain, with a job offer tucked in his back pocket. Maybe it begins with Ron and Hermione and Ginny sitting around him in the Gryffindor Common Room, each of them staring at Harry with differing degrees of disbelief.

"You're leaving Hogwarts?" Ron asks slowly.

"Yes."

"But - you won't finish your NEWTS. You won't graduate," Hermione says, beyond shock.

"Yes."

"But you're going to be an Auror," Ginny says, "I thought - I thought we both were."

To this, Harry has no reply. That had been the plan, hadn't it? The two of them, going through training together, having babies and saving the world. How could he explain that it wasn't his dream anymore, hadn't been his dream for such a long time, and he hadn't realized it until this morning? How could he make her understand the way he felt when he stepped into the library and everything was quiet and no one knew him: the rightness, the sense of peace, the War scrabbling against the windows to get in, but still being rained on like garbage in the street -

"I'm sorry," Harry says, because it's the only thing he can think of saying, "I'm sorry."

Ginny looks at him, betrayal real and scalding in her eyes, and Harry forces himself not to look away.

"Who makes this kind of decision without talking to their girlfriend first? Or their friends?" Ginny asks. "I thought we were - partners, Harry. I thought -"

Ron and Hermione look distinctly uncomfortable, and Harry apologizes again and again, but the whole evening ends with Ginny going to bed and refusing to speak to him.

"She'll come round, mate," Ron tells him, clapping his shoulders as they leave the Common Room. "It's just a bit of a surprise. For all of us."

Harry meets with McGonagall the next day, and his hands are near to shaking the entire time, but
there is no hint of betrayal or disappointment in her eyes.

"Promise me you won't regret it," she says once Harry finishes speaking, and a weary laugh scratches its way up his throat.

"Can anyone promise that?" he asks, and a week later he has a flat in East London and is working at the most famous Wizarding library in the world.

Despite the hush of intellectual silence that falls like heavy snow over every room, the library is a buzzing hive of activity at all hours of the day. It stands sixteen stories high, a narrow stone tower of a building, full of lost passages and hidden rooms, and even the Head Librarian (Mrs. Penny Peggotty, widow and ghost) is not privy to all of the tower’s secrets. Intellectuals flock to its crooked wrought iron gates to get their ink-stained fingers on first editions of Quinlin and Andkudinov; students fold their beleaguered bodies into stiff wooden desks for the privilege of a few hours with whatever rare text has just been assigned by the sadistic profs at LUWW. Wizards from around the world come for the spectacle: the Hall of Screaming Literature, the locked display case of Feral Fiction, the merchandise (most recently a line of jumpers/coffee mugs proclaiming “I Survived the Spiral Staircase at WLL!”) and avid readers come for the latest paperback by Rita Skeeter, or *Fifty Hues of Hazel*, the erotic sensation taking the Wizarding world by storm.

Tourists and visitors call it the Tower of Knowledge. Students refer to it as ‘the Stacks’ or sometimes ‘the Firey Stacks’ or sometimes ‘the Stacks of Hell.’

Harry calls it Will. He shelves books until his back is sore, and makes a pittance, and loves it.

At night, he walks the streets of Muggle London, and finds that the more time he spends, the more he grows to love the city; colourful and ugly and gloriously unmagi. He gets used to anonymity, being unknowing and unknown, until it feels as comfortable as cool sheets or his father's cloak. He walks through London until he can navigate by smell, by sound, by the constellations like a sailor.

He goes back to celebrate when his friends leave Hogwarts (both Ginny and Ron accepted for the Auror training program, and Hermione pushing papers around for the Ministry), and they spend as much time as possible together over the summer, but somehow the summer slides into fall, and then everyone is busy with school and Harry dives again into solitude (headfirst, no splash). Fall shrivels into a cold, dead winter, and Harry lights candles at the Burrow, kisses Ginny on New Years, and does not quite catch his breath until he's back in his sad little flat, putting the kettle on for tea. He takes extra shifts at work, watches dawn break over London Bridge, and slowly transforms into a creature of late nights and early mornings and silence.

He can hardly remember being happier.

Winter becomes a damp spring, and then before he knows it a year has gone by, and summer is crashing like a wave over the city. The flowers wilt and the sidewalk steams, and it is August when they find the first book.

Harry is at the front desk of WLL, fairly empty this early in the morning - though it will fill up once the sun comes out in full force, and there's no civilized way of being out of doors.

He's reading a letter from Ginny; they're doing the letter thing now, writing each other every couple of days, and it's working surprisingly well. It was easy over the winter, but for the spring and summer semesters she and Ron are training in Bulgaria, and they've only been able to snatch a weekend together. They all came down to Harry's flat ("Dead brilliant, mate," Ron says, sitting back on the couch and cracking a beer while Hermione wrinkles her nose, "Setting your own rules - doing whatever you like - I can understand the appeal now. You always were the smart one of our
bunch.” Of course this last part costs him; Hermione is an excellent listener.). With Ron and Hermione on the lilo, however, it's hard to be very romantic and Harry has the feeling that Ginny went back to Bulgaria feeling vaguely unhappy with him. He's going to make it up to her the next time she can sneak away. It'll just be the two of them, and posh restaurants and champagne, and whatever she wants. Next time.

Until then, he writes her letters, and ignores the pangs of guilt in his stomach, the persistent voice telling him he should be doing more. And he's reading one of these letters ("Krum is here. Ron still can't even look at him without blushing, it's pathetic/adorable...") when Ms. Peggotty floats into his personal space looking far more furious than he's ever seen her. Harry doesn't understand - Christ, did he do something wrong, is this somehow going to be his fault - until she places an ancient and skull-crushingly-dull looking textbook down in front of him. He scans the title, all elongated script and S's that look like F's: "Difficulte Potions and How to Brewe Them."

"What is it?" he asks, at a loss, and Ms. Peggotty raises a transparent hand to her trembling mouth.

"Damaged!" she squeaks out a raspy cry. "Defaced! Vandalized!"

She says nothing more, just glowers expectantly down at him, until Harry takes the hint and turns to the first page. He sees nothing out of place, and though the book is obviously hundreds of years old, the pages seem fairly firm, mostly in tact.

"Page three hundred and six," Ms. Peggotty tells him, wincing a bit, "It's dreadful - you can't imagine -"

Harry can indeed imagine the type of vandalism that the Hogwarts textbooks saw regularly, and he is expecting all sorts of crude anatomy lessons. He flips to page three hundred and six to find instead -

The page has been cut clean out. The bottom half of the following page has also been neatly removed. Harry frowns at the head librarian, who seems to be bravely holding back tears.

"You see? You see? Who would do such a thing? What kind of irregular - deviant - brutish -"

Her voice cracks, and Harry wonders what he can possibly say.

"What was on these pages?" He looks for a table of contents without success. "Why would someone want them?"

"Who knows what goes on in the twisted mind of the modern criminal?"

"Can we see who checked it out last or -"

"We certainly can not," Ms. Peggotty interrupts him, snatching the book from the desk and clutching it against herself. "This book does not leave the library - it is one of three known copies existing in the world. The banshees at the main doors would shriek the building to the ground."

"Then how did -"

"It was stolen! Stolen from our rare books vault and - maimed - within the walls of this very building!" Taking a deep breath, Ms. Peggotty attempts to compose herself. "It is. Beyond. Belief."

With that, she turns away, ghosting into the stacks and quickly gone from sight. Harry's seen far worse in his time as a student (he shudders to think what she'd make of the Half-Blood Prince's potions book) but he can't say he's not curious about the particular potion the deviant-irregular-brute-criminal was after.
At the bottom of Ginny's letter, Harry scratches the book's title with his quill. He rolls up the scroll and tucks it into his back pocket, where he largely forgets about it (between the sudden crush of students and the onslaught of wailing children on holiday, Harry is lucky to get out of the library with his life.).

Almost a month later, he's wandering the stacks, gathering the stray books that have been left behind or out of order, when he sees it. Leather bound, inlaid with gold - not any ordinary book. He picks it up, studying the fine writing on its cover: *Les Elixirs Anciennes*. He doesn't speak French, but he can figure this much out.

This is not a book that just anybody could take out of the library.

Harry flips it open, grim with the knowledge of what he's going to find: about halfway in, there are three stubs where pages used to be before someone cut them neatly along the edge.

Again, there is no table of contents, no way of finding out what potions were outlined on the missing pages. Harry knows he'll have to take the book to Peggotty, a task he does not look forward to. But before he does, he takes a pen from his back pocket and writes the title down on the palm of his hand.

Someone is brewing something - something difficult and ancient and rare. Something they don't want anyone else knowing about.

Harry thinks about it, and keeps thinking about it, and it's still on his mind when he meets Hermione for drinks that weekend. Despite her living in the same city, he sees her only a little more than he sees Ron and Ginny. There's nothing Hermione does halfway, and she's approaching even this insignificant admin job as if she's training to be the Minister, or something. Which, granted, she may well be. He misses her, just as he misses all his friends, but he can't say it isn't difficult to go from being an anonymous face in a crowd to the intense and personal scrutiny of his lifelong best friend.

And when did this happen, Harry wonders idly, as Hermione buys the next round? What is wrong with him that spending time with the people he loves most has become a trial, and not a pleasure?

"And how's the job going?" Hermione asks, sitting back down. "Over a year now."

She has to repeat herself twice before he understands (the Muggle pub he chose haphazardly is loud and full of footballers, and he and Hermione have spent most of the evening leaning in so close together their noses nearly touch, just to make out what the other is shouting.).

He snipes good-naturedly about a few of the other assistants (mostly in their mid-twenties and too hip for their own good), but is generally full of nothing but love for his place of employment. He tells her about a few of Will's most difficult patrons, showing off a bit, exaggerating the craziest stories until she laughs so hard she has to cough. When he mentions the vandalized books (mostly as an excuse to do an impression of Ms. Peggotty at her most wrathful) Hermione stops laughing. Her eyebrows knit together, an expression Harry recognizes from seven years of being far too familiar.

"Too bad you can't ask Snape," she says, a suggestion she would never have made had she not had two pints and started on her third.

"Snape?" Harry almost chokes on his lager. His mouth feels scorched from saying the man's name out loud. "Why would I - what would he -"

"He might have heard of these books of yours, might have been able to tell you what was removed. He's probably seen most of them at one point or another, and you remember that massive collection
they took out of Spinner's End."

"Wait - what?" Harry tries to keep up. "What collection?"

"Around Christmas. While he was still in - in Azkaban, they repossessed Spinner's End. The Ministry just came out with it last summer, after his trial finished. Harry, you must have heard about or - read about it."

"I didn't," Harry insists, heartbeat thudding dull and heavy in his ears. "I haven't been - keeping up with the trials, or -" He trails off. "They really repossessed his things? His house? But he was innocent, he was proven innocent, that can't be -"

His heartbeat gets faster, louder - an angry stranger pounding down the door.

"Once the trial was over, surely they had to give it all back. Or - something."

Hermione fixes him with a sad, nervous look. "Well, no, that isn't how it worked. In the Prophet they went into great detail - it was all sold and the funds went to the War Orphans charity." She shakes her head. "I can't believe you didn't know."

"I stopped reading the papers," Harry admits, like he's owning up to an act of treason. "There was just - so much about me. And Ginny and you and Ron - I just -"

"It's okay," Hermione says, reaching across the table to take his hand. "I understand."

"Where is he now? Does anyone know?"

"I don't think so. Apparently there was a big blow up on the last day of the trial, a bunch of press and everything, and Snape wasn't very - he wasn't -" She bites her lip.

"He was his usual self, I'm guessing?"

"Well, yes. And of course that didn't go over very well in the press, and he hasn't been seen since."

Harry can't believe he didn't know any of this; he was so wrapped up in being cut off and isolated and anonymous that he'd missed this huge, heart-breaking injustice. And God knows how Snape must feel. Harry wonders if Snape knew all this when they saw each other at the Wizengamot. He thinks back to Snape's haunted look, Snape's hands around a bloody paper cup, and magic pulses through him, angry and electric and -

"Harry," Hermione says softly, and Harry realizes that both of their pint glasses are hovering an inch or so above the table.

"Please tell me that's you," Hermione says, "because I don't think I've had that much to drink."

The glasses hit the table, and it's only Harry's quick reflexes that stop them from tumbling over.

"Have you spoken to anybody about that?" Hermione asks after a moment, "Even back at Hogwarts you were -"

"It's fine," he interrupts, hand tightening around his glass.

"I'm not trying to pry, but that isn't the first time something like this has happened. Since the War, I mean."

"It's fine," he says again, but gives her a small smile, "It's getting better since I left. Loads better,
actually. Just sometimes when I get scared or - angry, or -"

"Professor Snape was always good for that," Hermione says, but that isn't what Harry meant. Not at all.

That night, he dreams about stealing ingredients from Snape's cabinets - not just enough to make Polyjuice, this time he steals everything, armful after armful of herb and phial and outside the classroom, the War pounds on the door, howls like an angry animal and the locks can't hold, they won't hold -

Harry wakes up twisted in damp sheets, hair clinging to his forehead, and heart beating out a tattoo in his chest.

His clock reads just past five in the morning, pale light creeping through his curtains.

Harry sits at his desk, blank sheet of parchment in his hand. He writes Severus Snape, then Professor Snape, then crosses them both out in disgust. He doesn't know where Snape is living, and even if he did - he hasn't an owl of his own (his fingers move absently, as if he can still vaguely feel snowy-white feathers beneath them.).

Harry crumples up the parchment, grabs his coat, and is out on the street in a matter of minutes. He walks until the sun has fully risen, damp heat radiating from London's cobblestones and mossy roofs and crumbling churches, and slowly he is able to catch his breath.

Weeks pass, and the summer starts to relax its grip on the city, rushing through September with wind and rain for good measure. Harry walks through the front doors of Will, unread letter (long gone soggy) from Ginny clutched in his hand. Her letters of late are of a particular theme and Harry is not looking forward to the pages upon pages of speculation about their relationship - his letters aren't as romantic as they used to be, he's drifting and she can feel it, they still haven't actually had sex for Merlin's sake -

He's putting off opening it, he's not going to lie. All thought of the letter vanishes, however, when he hears Peggotty's raised falsetto from the middle of the first floor stacks, and realizes the vandal has struck again.

"No morals, no values, no character of any kind!" Ms. Peggotty wails at anyone in earshot; as Harry peers around one of the shelves he notices several young patrons slink off to the second floor. "Can you imagine - not only doing harm to such an invaluable piece of literature, but now this - this - degradation! Ah, Mr. Potter."

She hands an antique book to Harry, this one larger than the others and bound in something thin and leathery (Harry prays it isn't skin).

"Return that travesty to my office when you have completed your examination," Ms. Peggotty tells him, and Harry vaguely wonders what his examination is supposed to consist of, and when this became his responsibility. All the other staff members nod approvingly as Ms. Peggotty floats off, so Harry supposes that by general acclamation he's in charge of the vandalism problem. He overhears one sarcastic comment of "Harry Potter to the rescue," as he heads back to the front desk, but isn't that bothered by it (it's most likely from Gavin, who doesn't have any friends outside of his fixie bike).

Sitting behind the front desk, Harry flips through the latest victim: *Venenum Historia by Pliny the Shorter*. He finds the missing pages soon enough, and the additional degradation to which Peggotty referred - a few hastily scrawled notes in the margins of the page. This last book had its pages taken
in some haste; no neat cut, but a jagged tear that left some of the third page behind. Evidently, the vandal had been in a hurry - or was avoiding being caught. Harry squints at the strange loopy handwriting that trails over the remaining corner of the page: \textit{add a clockwise stir after every sev-}

"No," he says aloud, earning a wide-eyed glance from a little girl waiting to check out \textit{The Witch Princess at Unicorn School}. Harry tries to smile reassuringly at her while he takes her card and stamps the book, but he gets the impression she is not fooled.

It doesn't matter. As soon as she and her mum are finished, Harry's eyes are all for the book. He has seen those notes before. He saw those notes in Horace Slughorn's potions class. He saw those notes on the day he brewed a perfect Draught of Living Death and won a tiny, golden vial of Felix Felicis with the help of the Half-Blood Prince.

The writing is not the same, thank Merlin. Harry might be ill if it was. But someone - whoever was tearing up these books - had seen Snape's old potions text. Which - as far as Harry knows - had been burned to a crisp in the Room of Requirement. So they either saw it before it was burned - meaning they went to Hogwarts and was someone Harry sodding knew - or they had spoken to Snape.

Harry's mind veers off at this. He isn't much of a detective, he knows that much (God knows it took him long enough to figure out the Horcrux thing) but there is something about these books that feels wrong to him. And not in the same way they feel wrong to Penny Peggotty (something akin to blasphemy combined with murder) but in a way he can't explain.

It isn't until he takes his lunch break, later in the day, that Harry remembers he still has Ginny's letter. Over tea and a packet of crisps, he unfolds the white parchment, fully expecting an invitation to have a long serious talk about their relationship. He feels suddenly sick to his stomach about it - what is wrong with him, she's perfect, she's wonderful, he'll do whatever it takes to make her happy -

Surprisingly enough, the letter contains nothing of the sort.

\textit{Dear Harry, it reads in Ginny's familiar rounded hand, George just Owled with some terribly sad news. Aberforth Dumbledore is dead.}

Harry reads the last line over again, not really taking in its meaning.

\textit{Aberforth Dumbledore is dead. They're having a service for him next Sunday at a church just outside Hogsmeade. It seems he found religion at the end, or something. I'm not sure how he died, and George was very cryptic - 'something goat related' I think, is the word in Hogsmeade.}

Harry feels a deep well of sorrow in his chest, grief for the bitter, angry man he never really knew, a shield of indifference surrounding bravery and strength and - most surprising of all - hope. Harry wonders how old he was, and how he died, and if he was alone.

\textit{Ron was quite insistent that he and I get leave - I think he's more anxious to see Hermione than pay his respects, but who can blame him - so maybe we'll meet you there? At the Three Broomsticks, noon? I'm very sorry to have to tell you all this, but I thought you should know right away. Can't wait to see you.}

\textit{All my love,}

\textit{Gin}

\textit{P.S. There's going to be a bit of a wake at Rosmerta's after, and YOU and I need to talk.}

He knew it was coming, but still Harry presses his lips together, and the world -
Severus is rarely spoken to, thank Merlin, and he only hopes his black-eyed glare is enough to keep the world perpetually at bay. Young Malfoy and his mother visit him after the leaving feast, Narcissa barely able to hold back her tears, and Severus is as congratulatory as he knows how to be. For all his misanthropy, he finds himself considerably eased by the companionship, the opportunity to trade a few familiar barbs with a former student and his doting mother. Narcissa is another person he would not consider his friend, but she is also someone to whom he owes a great deal. He has heard stories from the mouths of passing children (Narcissa Malfoy said Harry was dead but she lied, she was lying-) and her reasons were purely selfish of course but -

But she lied. And the boy lived.

Severus receives no other visitors for some time, and he vacillates between languishing exhaustion and manic energy, goes from content and dozy slumber to scrabbling at the walls, leaving great gouges with his fingernails.

After an interminable period of this strange, unbalanced stasis, two extraordinary things happen in one day.

The first is that a group of students come tromping by him, the hems of their robes dusted with snow. Snow. It was March when he woke up, and June when Draco visited. It is snowing now, which means that - whether he notices or not - time is passing.

The seasons have changed.

The second extraordinary thing is that Severus opens the door on the left side of the painting.

He does it almost without realizing it. Every day he turns the knob idly and without hope. This time, however, the door opens and he stares into a strange and misty corridor, walls lined with burgundy brick and totally unfamiliar.

Severus steps back into the classroom, slamming the door shut before he realizes what has happened.

He is instantly overwhelmed with regret because - because what if that was the only chance he got, what if the door will never open again and he's trapped, only this time he had a chance, god damn it, he had a chance and he lost it -

The door opens just as easily the second time, and Severus gradually coaxes his heartbeat down from the ceiling. His aptitude for panic is only improving in this environment; he must endeavour to control it.

He takes a hesitant step forward, and then steps hurriedly back. He cannot bring himself to cross the threshold, certain he will turn into a pillar of salt. After lamenting the loss of freedom for so long, Severus cannot move. He cannot leave.

He closes the door.

He tries the door on the right side of the painting to find a similarly misty corridor, and closes it immediately. He calls himself a million kinds of coward, but he does not open the doors again. At some level he knows that these must lead to other paintings. When he was alive, he'd often seen portraits conversing, leaving their frames briefly for another (and there was that embarrassing incident with the two milkmaids across the hall from the Hufflepuff Common Room; Albus ended up
turning both portraits to face the wall, which probably suited the milkmaids quite well."

Severus is not ready for the trip, not quite yet. His mind races with the worst possible things that could happen to him - trapped in darkness, trapped behind the walls in some half-way place between paintings, trapped in nothingness forever and ever and always and -

When all's said and done, he couldn't really be any worse off than he is now.

After a few days of grey stagnation and a few nights of sleeping briefly and restlessly, Severus leaves his portrait (but the night before, Severus dreams. He dreams as a portrait for the first time ever, and he wakes with such a sense of urgency, a sense of longing that he tastes like tears at the back of his throat. He cannot remember the contents of his dream, only vague impressions of his head resting on someone's bony shoulder, hair that smelled like lilacs and a story with no happy ending -)

"Fuck it," Severus says, and steps outside of the painting.

The initial five minutes are terrifying. That much cannot be understated.

He wanders down and down the narrow hallway, puffs of fog hovering in the air like so many ghosts. Severus has never been afraid of enclosed spaces - no, it is the wide and the wild that makes his teeth grind - but as he travels farther and farther away from his tiny, familiar room, he feels cold sweat gather at his hairline, his upper lip.

Jesus wept - he can sweat. Well, he can cry, so this shouldn't be as remarkable as it is. Severus tongues his upper lip, the taste salty and unpleasant, and feels tangible and solid and beating beating like a heart. Feels alive.

It is at this moment that the doors appear, hundreds upon hundreds of doors at every side and angle. The ceiling is lined with doors, the ground and the walls, and every one slightly transparent, revealing only a murky, water-colour impression of the painting on the other side. Severus wants to weep with relief, or sweat with it, or bleed with it (but he hasn't managed that, not yet).

He cannot begin to decide which door to go through. Nor can he fully determine what awaits him on the other side. His only hope, his only wish, is that he does not end up in Albus' portrait (there are some things he cannot be expected to bear) and with that in mind, he closes his eyes and blindly steps through the first doorway in his path.

A meadow swims before him, rolling green hills dotted with blue bells, poesies. A soft wind rustles through the grass, and Severus feels it in his eyelashes and along the roots of his hair. It is strange; for all his aforementioned discomfort in open spaces, he feels oddly calm. It is an overwhelming feeling, a great crush of stillness in his ribs and between his fingers. He thinks he might stay here for hours. He thinks - a bit wildly - that he might never leave. Let Draco and Narcissa (and Potter, his brain supplies, before the name is obscured with white) come looking for him. Let them look for wisdom or absolution; they will look in vain. Severus will be lying on his back in green grass and sunlight, body roughened by wind, skin scented by wildflowers.

Two minutes later, the boy appears and Severus rethinks this plan.

"Hello!" the small child squeaks, peaking out over a tuft of longer grass. He cannot be more than seven, with overlarge blue eyes and perfect blond ringlets that spill from beneath an azure tam. As he marches toward him, Severus notices the boy's old-fashioned, Victorian wardrobe: short pants and a collared jacket.

"What's your name? Do you play chess? Only I haven't got a chess set, not a real one, but I like to
imagine. The other portraits don't often visit this painting, on account of my being overly precious. I don't know what that means, but it is the general feeling. Do you play croquet? Only I haven't got any balls or mallets but mostly I use grass."

This wasn't quite what Severus feared when he set off into the unknown world outside his frame, but it is frightening nonetheless.

"Thank you, no."

"My name's Evelyn, only I'm told that's not a very good name for a boy. At least, the children out there tell me that when I see them, which is why I hide in the grass so much. Of course, soon they'll be gone for Christmas so I can do what I like." Evelyn brightens significantly at that. Severus tries to look outside of the portrait, see if he can find their location within the school. It isn't particularly easy when there's no one speaking to you on the other side - a bit like letting your vision go out of focus. Eventually, Hogwarts appears before his blurred gaze. They are across from the library, a difficult place for a portrait of a silly boy with an old-fashioned name.

"Where are you from?"

"The dungeons," Severus says, peering over his shoulder. The doorway to the portrait has vanished behind him, and a familiar panic begins to set in.

"I wish I were in the dungeons. Only I expect I'd be lonely. It's nice to have other kids to talk to, even if they're a bit mean."

Severus frowns at Evelyn, a twinge of empathy running through him, despite his best efforts.

"Listen, um - young man, how does one get out of a portrait like this? Only this is -"

"You're new!" Evelyn chirps, "That's dead brill! One of the children taught me that, dead brill, I quite like it."

"You're new!" Evelyn chirps, "That's dead brill! One of the children taught me that, dead brill, I quite like it."

"I'm very happy for you."

"It's difficult when you're new. Were you someone real? Only I think it's harder when you were real - you have all your memories and that. And there were some very friendly milkmaids that used to visit me, and they were never real, and just had a grand time. They weren't ever sad about it." Evelyn studies his cherubic hands, while the wind rustles, kicking up a flurry of pollen and white petals. "I think I was real. Only it's difficult to remember. I think my father painted me, after I died. He was an artist. But that was - that was quite long ago. I wonder if anyone painted him? That would be lovely."

Severus has no idea what to say to this.

"You were the Headmaster, weren't you?" Evelyn says after a moment, any trace of melancholy vanishing from his bright eyes. "I recognize you now. Sometimes you would come down this hallway at night, after I was done hiding. Snake?"


"That's too bad. I rather like snakes. I'm not afraid of them, even a bit. I tried to keep one once, but Mrs. Redvers had a footman drown it in a sink, and after that Father bought me a spaniel."

Again, Severus looks over his shoulder, as if the door will materialize simply by the force of his desire.
Surprisingly enough, it does.

"That's how you leave the fields," Evelyn tells him, "You just think about leaving and then a door shows up. I don't like to leave so much. Will you come back, do you think?"

Evelyn is looking at him with so much hope that Severus finds himself momentarily unable to lie. The silence and solitude of his potions lab seems simultaneously repellant and wildly appealing.

"Would you -" Severus begins, stupid and impulsive, "might I shake your hand?"

"Certainly. Put 'er there. The kids sometimes say that, put 'er there, so I'm trying it out."

Severus reaches out, and takes Evelyn's pudgy hand in his. He shakes twice, brusquely, and just that slight contact with another human being - or whatever they are here - is enough to make his throat tighten, a slight hitch rising in his chest.

"Are you quite well?" the boy asks, and Severus nods, beyond speaking.

He nods again in farewell, and Evelyn waves after him as he exits the painting. No sooner has he stepped out of the lush landscape than he finds himself - not back in the hallway of doors - but in his own familiar room. Severus gasps a breath, clutching at his chest where his heart pounds like a drum line. He leans against the wall, squeezing his eyes closed.

"All right, sir?" a low voice asks him, and Severus nearly jumps out of his skin to see a dark-haired young woman (Slytherin) standing in the hallway outside his painting.

Instead, he throws himself behind a desk, heedless of how dramatic he looks, and shouts "Go away!"

When he sticks his head back out again, the girl has gone, so thank heavens for small mercies.

Over the days or weeks (it is impossible to accurately keep track of time) that follow, Severus forces himself to leave his portrait at least once a day. He goes to see Evelyn more often than not, and that's only because he has a crippling Catholic sense of guilt (inherited from his mother). Besides, the boy isn't entirely useless. Severus gleans as much information as he can from the seven year old, and in between bouts of grass-croquet, he actually learns some things. Most of the paintings in Hogwarts were painted during the lifetimes of their subjects, and thus the subjects have no memory of the later years of their lives. The Headmasters' paintings, however, appear automatically, willed into existence by a castle that's more magical than anyone should be comfortable with.

Severus knew this much as a living man, of course he did, but he never thought to apply this knowledge to himself. When he was appointed Headmaster, no (go back, farther back), when he murdered Albus Dumbledore on the top of the Astronomy Tower, he realized that his life was forfeit. It had been forfeit, certainly, for longer than that, and he hadn't held out much hope for a retirement spent by the sea, but when Albus fell...

...when Albus' eyes turned green then grey then blank as parchment, Severus felt his own life slip through his yellowed fingers. Fine as sand, and impossible to gather back together.

Even though he knew these things, even though he knew he was a dead man, and he knew that Albus' portrait hung in Hogwarts a mere few hours after his death, Severus never thought to apply this logic to his own life. To be fair, there were other things weighing rather heavily on him at the time (Harry Potter screaming, running after him like a wild thing, limned in copper and firelight.).

He knew all this, and still he accepted the position of Headmaster, and made no plans, no preparations, did nothing. In all honesty, he deserves to live out the rest of his existence between
heavy gold frames. He deserves it.

It still does not make it any easier.

Evelyn takes him to meet other portraits around the school, and it seems that wherever Severus goes, Lily's son has been there first. Most of the paintings greet him as something of a hero, and there is much hand-shaking and shoulder-patting (Severus often departs quickly to have small nervous breakdowns in the privacy of his own portrait). Evelyn teaches Severus how to travel from frame to frame, calling to mind the portrait you wish to visit next. He introduces Severus to the Fat Lady (Fortunata, as it turns out) whose taste in classical music and literature practically mirrors his own, and the two of them become - acquaintances. Not friends.

Severus can count on one hand the number of people he considers friends.

Evelyn takes Severus out of the school for the first time, which Severus (again) had known was possible, but couldn't begin to work out the mechanics on his own. Apparently, one must be able to envision the painting to which they seek to travel. Evelyn brings Severus along to an enchanted watercolour of sailboats that used to hang in his home; it's in a gallery now, but Severus spends a not entirely unpleasant day being lulled to sleep by the rolling waves, the sour-sweet smell of the ocean in his nostrils and his lungs.

There are numerous paintings in the gallery that Severus endeavours to memorize, making plans for further practice, but in the end there is only one painting that he feels he knows well enough to attempt the journey.

Walburga Black shrieks bloody murder at him, and Severus flees instantly (but with satisfaction.) He does not leave the school often, but it is gratifying to know that he can.

He avoids Albus' portrait for as long as possible. And then, one day, he can avoid the visit no longer; Albus shows up in his classroom without so much as a by-your-leave and Severus thinks his heart might tear cleanly out of his chest.

"My dear boy," Albus says to him, beard white as snow, and spectacles doing nothing to conceal the twinkle in his eye. "Reunited at last."

Severus tries to speak, but his lips are too dry and won't stop shaking.

"I must admit that I was - perhaps - a bit insulted by your absence. Particularly when I hear such stories about you and the Ashdown boy getting up to all kinds of mischief. Mischief, now there is a word I would never has associated with you in life. And yet, here we are."

Severus sits down on the edge of a desk, his legs unable to support his weight.

"Albus," he manages, but it sounds like a crow's cry.

"Not to mention your visits with Fortunata. She has been singing your praises of late, a most unfortunate situation for the House of Gryffindor."

"I cannot -" Severus tries again, but his heart is racing, consuming every drop of blood in his body.

"Now, now," Albus say soothingly. "There is no need to upset yourself."

He wanders slowly through the potions class, violet robes trailing along the floor. Severus bits down hard on the inside of his cheek, and his mouth tastes salt-sick and coppery, and he's bleeding, Merlin, he can bleed -
“A potions class. Of course. I would have thought, perhaps, a library or your office, but then - our beloved school knows best. Still, it is rather impersonal. Could use a nice knitted throw, lavender, I think. Or at least some tea cozies. I shall see if any of our portraits have access to yarn and needles.”

“Albus -”

“Severus Snape,” Albus replies, mouth quirking. “I do not come with the intention of letting you abase yourself, or profess your guilt or regret or anguish. I merely thought it was high time to say hello.”

He smiles sadly, the best and worst of all the men Severus has ever known.

“Hello, Severus.”

“Hello,” Severus replies.

“My brother is dead.”

“Aberforth -” Severus begins, and then cuts himself off. Aberforth had been invaluable to the Order, though he was not a man that Severus had ever been easy with. Granted, there were not many who fit that description. “How -”

“He has been ill these past few months,” Albus tells him, sorrow lining his face, “More ill than I had thought, though he did his best to conceal it from me. As you know, there were many - secrets between my brother and myself.”

“Albus, I am - I am deeply sorry.”

“Your sympathy is appreciated, my boy.” Albus nods. “Aberforth has had no portraits painted, so we shan’t be seeing him any time in the future. But we made our peace, he and I. In the end, we - in the end. He is with Ariana now, and for that, I am certain, he is grateful.”

“Of course.” Severus searches for words.

“There is a service today in Hogsmeade Chapel, and not a portrait to be found, more’s the pity. I shall have to content myself with second-hand accounts, which - perhaps - is more than I deserve.” Dumbledore glances intently up at Severus, eyebrows twitching slightly (that is never a good sign, never). “There is another reason for my visit this morning.”

Dread creeps like vines over Severus' white skin.

“Surely not the pleasure of my company.”

“Heavens, no,” Albus chuckles, and Severus scowls at him. “Only, many of our former students have returned for the funeral. The school is simply rife with Weasleys -”

Severus snorts. “No doubt.”

“And one Harry Potter, who just moments ago spoke with me at great length about his newly established Auror training. He left Hogwarts in March, as it happens. Were you aware of this?”

“I was.” Severus grinds his teeth, waiting for the inevitable fall-out from this preamble.

“He greatly desires to see you.”

Severus knows this, though he does not understand. Their business is concluded, he and Potter.
Surely it ended when Severus' heart stopped beating.

"Of course, dear Harry had to depart for the funeral. There just wasn't time."

Severus tries to sigh inaudibly, shoulders caving with relief.

"But I was certain you would be most eager to meet this afternoon. I informed him of your portrait's new location, so as not to waste the young man's time."

"Albus," Severus snarls, rising instantly from his perch on the desk. He can feel colour rushing to his face, the blotchy redness that always gathered on his cheekbones when he was angry or frightened or -

"Now, no one can keep you in this frame against your wishes. You might have every reason to step out this afternoon, pressing appointments and the like." Albus smiles beatifically, stroking his beard. "But I would hate for the young man to think you were too alarmed to see him. Why, even a casual absence might be misconstrued 'running away.' Though of course that would not be your intent."

"Of course," Severus says quietly, looking at the floor, his hands, the rows upon rows of cauldrons. Harry Potter coming to see him, coming this bloody afternoon -

"Do attempt to be civil," Albus says with a wink, making his way to the door, "I worry for the poor lad, after all. Some times I think, perhaps, that too much was asked of him."

Severus has no response, and Albus smiles again.

"Do not be a stranger, my boy. Or I shall be forced to check up on you from time to time, and I know how fond you are of unexpected visits."

Albus leaves the painting, robes trailing like spider silk after him, and Severus clutches his hands to his chest.

Harry sodding Potter. Lily's sodding son.

Severus could flee, he knows this. He needn't be expected to wait around on Potter's whim, when there is nothing he has to say to the young man. Severus' obligations have been fulfilled and there is - there is no reason for the tension that races through him at the prospect of seeing Potter again. He owes him nothing, nothing.

Severus thinks longingly of a foggy blue sea filled with boats, and the careless shriek of gulls.

Severus thinks of a field of wildflowers where he can lie on his back and be utterly invisible, consumed by leaves and petals.

Severus thinks of white hands on his throat ("look at me") and so much shame it spills like blood across his fingers.

He will not run away.

Silently, he sits down in the chair in the centre of his painting, steeples his fingers, and waits for the end of -

* * *

- the funeral takes place just outside of Hogsmeade, in an old country church.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Sorry for being so slow with the updating. I have been stricken with fanfic insecurity, agonizing over every word before deleting it all and hiding under my bed with the winter sweaters. It has been so long since I've published anything new - what happened to all my livejournal confidence? Hopefully things will be a bit quicker from here on in because of - wine? I don't know. Thanks for hanging in there, and thanks for the lovely comments and kudos. They are air and water.

As always, any feedback is totally adored. I feel like this world has become a bit unfamiliar, so if you think I'm doing it all wrong, please tell me!


Silently, he sits down in the chair in the centre of his painting, steeples his fingers, and waits for the end of -

* * *

the funeral takes place just outside of Hogsmeade, in an old country church. Harry's certain he's never seen it before.

He stops at Hogwarts first to pay his condolences to Dumbledore, and is surprised even then by how unfamiliar the school feels to him. As if the War changed every surface of Harry's former sanctuary to chalk and ashes, leaving marks on Harry's hands and clothing no matter how careful he is, how small he makes himself. Dumbledore says nothing, but even as a painting, Harry can tell that the former Headmaster knows much more than he lets on.

It is a relief to escape into the fresh air again, even if the day is slate-grey and rainy (a day for funerals.)

Harry meets Ron, Hermione and Ginny just outside of Hogwarts, and the three of them walk a winding path through the tall grass until they reach the church.

Ginny seems a bit awkward around him, and Harry feels terrible about it, but what can he do, really? After the funeral is finished, he swears he'll take her for a pint and a meal and they can talk, really talk about what's going on. He watches Hermione and Ron, arms wound around each other, while he can't even work up the nerve to take Ginny's hand. Ginny folds her arms in front of her while they walk, a wall between her body and Harry's.

Numerous members of the Order are milling around the entrance to the church, and Harry is thoroughly hugged by Arthur and Molly Weasley, which makes Ginny's mouth twitch in a grudging smile. Professor - or Headmistress McGonagall shakes Harry's hand, and Fleur kisses him on both cheeks and - as much as it is a funeral - it's also a reunion.

Even George Weasley is there, and - according to Ginny and Ron - it's nearly impossible to get him to leave his apartment these days. He's holed himself up in a flat above the new Wheezes shop in
Hogsmeade, and there's a darkness around his eyes that Harry is far too familiar with. George has lost weight, and looks ten years older, but when he cracks a smile it's as if no time at all has passed, and he's the same boy Harry met nine years ago at Kings Cross.

"Steady on, old son," George laughs, "Look about as terrible as I do. What are they doing to you at that bookstore of yours?"

"It's a library, George," Percy sniffs, overhearing. "And only one of the most prestigious institutions in the world."

"I've insulted his girlfriend," George says quietly as everyone filters inside. He pauses then, as if waiting for someone to continue the joke, fill in the other side of the conversation. No one does, and George claps Harry a bit too hard on the shoulder before finding a seat next to his parents.

Harry doesn't have much of a history with churches, the Dursleys being staunchly agnostic, and most of the Wizarding World not going in for organized religion. The service isn't long - Rosmerta speaks (her voice breaking only once, and Hermione squeezes hard on Harry's wrist) as does McGonagall and a few colourful and foul-mouthed old men who must have been Aberforth's friends. There's no body, thank Merlin; Harry's seen enough bodies to last a lifetime.

When the whole thing is finished, he would really like nothing better than to flee back to London, but he knows that a talk with Gin is long overdue. As he rises, turning toward the back of the church, Harry sees him: a flash of black hair and blacker robes slipping out the doors as silent as smoke.

Severus Snape.

Harry cannot move or speak for a moment.

"Harry?" Ginny asks, "Harry, what's -"

Ron and Hermione are getting to their feet, looking at him oddly.

"I've got to go," Harry tells them, "Snape is here. That was Snape, and I can't let him - I've got to catch him before -"

"Why?" Ginny demands, and it takes Harry a moment to dissect his own urgency. There was a reason, he's certain of it; he has to stop Snape and talk to him because - because -

The books! The books, right. That's why his heart is racing, because this, this is his chance.

Promising to meet his friends at Rosmerta's, Harry weaves around the other mourners, heading for the doors. He bursts outside, where the rain is falling harder, kicking up mist from the cobblestone path that winds back to Hogsmeade. Hurrying down that path is a solitary figure, dressed all in black beneath a small black umbrella. Heedless of the rain, Harry jogs after him.

The sound of the rain thankfully obscures the sound of his footsteps, or Harry is certain Snape would have hexed him before Harry reached his side. As it is, Harry's hand is barely on his shoulder when Snape spins, wand outstretched, thin lips pulled back in an ugly snarl.

"Potter!" Snape spits, "I should have known I wouldn't be so lucky as to escape your notice."

"Snape," Harry says, catching his breath. Water runs down his neck, pooling under the collar of his robes. He wipes his face.
"Oh for god's sake," Snape hisses, "Parapluvia."

The rain stops falling on Harry, kept at bay by the translucent shield that appears just above his head. Snape rolls his eyes disgustedly, before turning on his heel and continuing down the path.

"No, wait," Harry follows. "I have to talk to you."

"So you've said, time and again, Mr. Potter. I fail to see what we have to discuss and am late for engagements infinitely more pressing than this one."

Snape's legs are longer than Harry's, who has to take two steps for each of the older man's. It isn't really the best opportunity to launch into an explanation of a mystery that isn't really a mystery, but Harry doesn't know if he'll ever get another chance.

"I work at the Wizarding Library of London, now. Did you know that?"

Snape does not reply.

"I left Hogwarts for - well, it's not important. I've wanted to get in touch with you -"

"Scintillating stuff, this," Snape says, quickening his step.

"Someone's been vandalizing books where I work, um - potions books, mostly, and I wondered if I might talk to you about it? Maybe you'd have some ideas what -"

Snape stops abruptly, and Harry almost crashes into him. He whirls around, eyes black and furious and Harry steels himself against the oncoming tirade.

"Potter, I believe I made my position on you and whatever it is you have to say a year and a half ago in sodding London - I am not interested. I do not see why you feel compelled to seek me out, unless of course you are seeking some sort of absolution which I damned well will not give. You saved us all, well done you, but I am not one of your admirers and I am not one of your friends, and I have done my part. I am - I am finished with this war."

Harry wasn't completely prepared for that. He lets Snape walk away for just a moment, taking a deep breath against the injury in Snape's words. Disdain, cruelty - those are things Harry can handle, but the pain, the withering sadness beneath Snape's vitriol - it is difficult to bear. Maybe more difficult because Harry knows exactly how he feels.

Harry takes another breath, and still follows.

"I don't need a friend, or an admirer," he tells Snape's back, "I need a potions expert."

"Take out an advert," Snape says, not turning.

"There were notes in one of the books," Harry continues, as Hogsmeade grows ever nearer. "Notes that I recognize from your - your book. Whoever's doing this has seen your copy of Advanced Potions."

Snape snorts. "Or perhaps they just came to similar conclusions. Difficult as it may be to believe, Potter, not everyone is as abysmal at the subject as you."

"Professor -"

"Don't call me that," Snape says, turning as quickly as a snake would strike. "That is not who I am."
He presses his lips together, white against white, and Harry wishes with a deep and frightening intensity that he could make Snape - feel better. His whole "saving people thing" Hermione would say, but it isn't that. This isn't about being selfless. It's something entirely different, and Harry cannot place it.

"I was surprised to see you at the funeral," he says quietly.

"I was surprised to see myself there," Snape replies. "Blasted Ministry hasn't seen fit to restore my Apparation license, so I'm reduced to the sodding Floo. If you want to make yourself useful, start a petition. I know you do so love to come to my rescue."

The hanging sign of the Three Broomsticks creaks in the rising wind, and Snape fixes it with an alarmed look. In that split second of distraction, Harry takes a chance.

"They tore three pages from Venenum Historia by Pliny the Shorter," he says quickly.

Snape turns distractedly back toward him.

"What did you say?"

"Three pages from -"

"Yes, I heard that much. Venenum Historia?" Snape looks positively livid; Harry thinks briefly that Penny Peggotty would love him. "Do you - do you have any idea how old that book is? Any idea how valuable?"

"Some," Harry nods, feeling a bit proud of himself.

"I had no idea your institution even had a copy of it. It must be a fairly recent acquisition, but that would leave the copy in New Delhi and -" Snape narrows his eyes. "Are you - grinning? What is wrong with you?"

"Sorry." Harry forces the grin off his face, bites down on his cheek until he fears he might break the skin.

"What else? What else did they take?"

"Um, a really old French book - I wrote it down -"


"Yeah - wow, good guess."

"That is simply - unthinkable. They aren't employing you as a security guard, are they? That's the only excuse I can fathom."

"Cheers, no. Just an assistant librarian."

Snape does not look reassured. Coming down the path toward them, Harry can make out the ginger hair of several Weasleys, and a sea of black umbrellas. In her mid-length red coat, Ginny stands out like a streetlight, and she is very obviously staring at Harry.

"I have to go," Snape says, following Harry's gaze.

"You won't stay for the wake?"
Snape gives him his patented you-are-being-an-idiot look, and Harry shrugs. He's been given worse looks by Severus Snape.

"Will you help me?" Harry asks, knowing he's pushing it, but seeing no other solutions.

"I will - consider it," Snape nods abruptly and Harry wants to caw with victory (he'll consider it, he'll bloody consider it).

"We could - meet, maybe? Some time? I'll buy you a coffee and you can take a look at the books. In London, or would you rather -"

"Calm yourself, Potter. I'm more than capable of finding my way to Will, like any common tourist."

"Will?" Harry blurts out, before Snape can disappear into Potage's Cauldron Shop.

Snape looks at him, a bit mystified.

"Your place of employment?" he says slowly, "Have you forgotten it so quickly?"

"But you called it Will," Harry says, fighting down another smile.

"Well spotted - that's what I've always called it, what else -" Snape gives up, shaking his head. He doesn't say goodbye, but twists his hand slightly before lowering his umbrella and going inside. Harry mistakes the gesture for a wave, until he feels the cold rain once again running down his neck.

"Caught old Snape, did you?" Ron asks, slinging an arm over Harry's shoulder as he catches up with him.

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."

"And is he going to help you solve some mysteries? Be the Holmes to your Watson?"

"Guess we'll see," Harry says, and does not miss the way Hermione is looking at him, a strange kind of curiosity in her gaze. Ginny is hanging back on the path, and Harry catches her eye, attempts a half smile that he doesn't quite manage.

"Coming Gin?"

Ginny nods, but does not answer, and Harry feels cold from more than just the rain.

It shouldn't come as a surprise when, two hours later, he finds himself broken up with. Somehow, it still does.

"No," is the first word out of Harry's mouth, as if that word can somehow force time to slide back before this moment, like a key locking a door shut. They are sitting alone in a booth at the Three Broomsticks, but the pub is crowded with their friends, the air full of music. This cannot be happening - not here, not where anyone can see, not when he thought he still had time -

"I'm sorry. I just - I can't pretend that this is working any more," Ginny says, staring into her cider. "You shouldn't either. And I'm not going to wait around until we see each other again six months from now, or whenever we manage it. You haven't exactly made an effort to -"

"Well, we've been busy," Harry says, trying to keep his voice low and prevent curious eyes from being drawn to them. "We've both been -"

"I've been busy, Harry. You've been -" She trails off, and sighs. "You've been missing."
They are both silent. Across the bar, Harry can hear drunken shouting from some of Aberforth's friends, and the soft murmurs of recollection from the more sober members of their party. He feels the sting of Ginny's words, but can't bring himself to deny them.

"I knew this would happen," Ginny says, and now that she's looking at him, he can see how red-rimmed her eyes are. "And I want to help you, to be your friend and -" She shakes her head. "You know that this isn't a relationship. Not really. At least, it's not the kind I want." 

"Gin -"

"You chose me because you thought you should. Maybe - maybe that's why I -" Ginny's voice breaks, "Actually, no, I was completely mad about you. But it's not enough. For me. For either of us."

Ron and Hermione approach with fresh drinks. Thankfully, Hermione sees Harry's face and directs Ron firmly toward a different table.

"I love you," Harry says, feeling a great grey wave of emptiness wash over him, draining the colour from the room. He knew things were bad, but he hadn't known how bad they were. He always thought he'd have a chance to make it up to her, a chance to do things differently. A chance that shone somewhere in the far-off future like a lighthouse - beautiful and impossible to reach.

"I love you too." Ginny lays her hand over his on the table. For a few minutes they stay like that, and Harry tries to memorize the warmth of her palm, the calluses from gripping her broomstick, the pulse of her wrist against his arm. He wishes briefly that he could freeze this moment, with the people he loves all around him, and this beautiful girl's soft hand covering his. He's been a terrible boyfriend, and she deserves so much more. Maybe they were only ever together because of the terror of violence and the crushing relief of survival. Maybe - maybe she's right, and he chose her because he thought it was the end of the story, and he couldn't envision anything beyond that.

"I thought - I thought I would die," he says suddenly, and he doesn't know where it comes from, but he has to say it or he'll choke.

Ginny slams her eyes shut.

"I know." When she looks at him again, her mouth is only trembling slightly. "Lots of people did, and some of them - some of them were right. But you didn't die. And I didn't either." She gives his hand a final squeeze, and gets to her feet. "I'm going to go, okay? Can you not - not talk to me for a bit? I know that sounds mean, but I just - until this is easier, I just need -"

"Gin, I'm so sorry -"

"Don't apologize. I'm making this choice. Living means - making choices." Ginny shrugs on her red coat, and pulls her hair out from the collar. "You might think on that, Harry."

She brushes her lips across his cheek, and is gone, leaving whispers of citrus shampoo lingering behind her.

Harry doesn't cry until he's made his way outside, and even then, he isn't sure if it's about Ginny alone or Ginny and everything else. The streetlights shine on the wet pavement, and at first all he can hear is his breathing, but then he can hear something else, scraping like a shovel over stone (the War dragging its sharp heels down the gravel alleyway, getting nearer and nearer, louder, so close Harry can feel its breath against his neck, don't think about it, don't think about it DON'T -)

He's sick just as Ron comes out to look for him, and a window shatters in the shop across the street.
Ron blessedly doesn't mention it. Instead, he sits down beside Harry, puts a hand on Harry's back and a roll-up to his lips.

"You - you smoke now?" Harry manages, too surprised for a moment to remember the spin of the earth below his feet.

"Don't say anything to 'Mione." Ron puffs and sighs. "Ginny did it, then?"

Harry scrubs a hand over his eyes. "Tell me you didn't know."

"Nah. Had a suspicion, though. You okay?"

"I - don't know," Harry says, before he gives himself time to think about it. "A bit hard to tell."

"I know what that's like," Ron says wryly, and his hand does not move from Harry's back.

They sit together in the misty night, Harry watching the rise and fall of Ron's cigarette, the jewel-bright glow of the ember. He thought he would die - but he didn't. Whatever the cost, whatever the weight that hangs on him, he is alive.

It has to count for -

* * *

- something wakes Severus from his foggy portrait dreams, just colours and vague scents, the kind of dream you puzzle over in the morning, unable to remember if you dreamt or not. He fully expects to see a dark-haired boy wizard taking up valuable space in his solitary corridor - but he does not.

Instead, he sees a rather plump, blond young man, standing silently in front of the portrait. He is looking down at his small hands, nervously turning a ring around and around on his fourth finger.

Severus waits for a moment before clearing his throat, and the blond man (a bit familiar, actually) looks up with startled brown eyes.

"Prof - Headmaster -" the man sputters in a soft, high voice, and Severus realizes why exactly the man is familiar. Severus has seen him several times (on various excursions with Evelyn and Fortunata) coming in and out of the dungeons, often carrying great sacks of wilted greenery. Of course, Severus has heard the name before but he's really quite hopeful that this won't be the man in -

"Alcott Prawn, the - uh - the new Potions Master. Here. At Hogwarts, of course, where else would I be - though I studied all over, offered an apprenticeship at Durmstrang but the winters there aren't quite -"

Prawn trails off, and Severus takes a moment to be thankful that at least it isn't Potter, before lamenting the fact that it is Alcott Prawn.

"You remember me, I suppose?" Prawn asks, and Severus does. His first or second year of teaching, Prawn was a mediocre student from a mediocre family, and the fact that he's risen to the rank of Severus' former position is heartening indeed.

Severus does not reply to the question, merely nods, but Prawn seems overwhelmed just the same.

"Of course, of course. Um - I know this might be an imposition, but - but you see I've been having some trouble in the classroom lately. Nothing significant just - you know - this and that, occasional explosions, the regular -"
"Explosions," Severus remarks before he can stop himself. He isn't (frankly) surprised; he can remember the odd explosion from Alcott's day (although the memories have gone pale green around the edges, Severus can feel them fading even now.)

"Yes, just - rather odd, actually. Only two weeks ago we were making the Alihotsy Draught, and nearly every cauldron in the room just - whoosh - went up, just like that." Prawn throws his arms up in the air for dramatic emphasis, and Severus winces. "Of course, you can imagine - the class became completely hysterical, for various reasons and - I just chalked it up to poor chopping form but then this past Friday, I had four - no - five students in for detention and they were brewing a standard Snuffling Potion - elementary stuff and -"

"Explosions?" Severus asks, raising his eyebrow.

"Indeed yes!" Prawn remarks, nodding keenly. "Bizarre, frankly. Which has set me to wondering about the quality of those cauldrons down there - do you think perhaps it's time we upgraded to a newer model? After years of use and disuse, well - one really doesn't know what was done previously, what care was taken -"

"I can assure you, Mr. Prawn," Severus interrupts, "that every care was taken during my time as Potions Master - some sixteen years now. This is your - first year as a professor, is it not?"

"Um - yes, sir, of course sir. No offense meant. I only wondered -"

"What was the age of the Alihotsy you were using? Was it dry or fresh? Where was it purchased?"

"Um -" Prawn's gaze shifts nervously from one corner of the room to the other. "Well, I don't really - it was there when I started so I didn't think it necessary - I didn't -"

"You mean to tell me you are using ingredients the source of which you have not personally verified? Ingredients that could have been mislabeled or expired or contaminated or worse? And you are using these ingredients around children that are in your care, with whose protection you have been charged?"

"Um - well when you put it like that -"

"I would suggest taking inventory of that potions supply room immediately. If you still find yourself having problems, do the responsible thing and resign."

"Now, see here -"

"I'm expecting someone," Severus snaps, and it takes him a good few seconds to realize what he's said. Good god.

Prawn looks a bit purple in the face, and he turns in a huff, footsteps echoing as he stomps away down the hallway. Severus hears those footsteps grow gradually slower, then begin to increase in volume as Prawn returns. Severus cannot quite make out his figure in the dim hallway, but if Prawn is coming back with an angry tirade or something similar, he will find himself more than evenly matched. Severus hasn't flung insults at anyone since he was still alive, and he can't say he doesn't miss it.

Of course it isn't Prawn. Of course it isn't. Severus realizes that much the moment his visitor steps into the pool of torchlight. Severus should have known it much earlier, and if he had been paying attention, if he had been listening, really listening, he would have. There are some people who breathe a certain way, who walk and move with a certain cadence that leaves impressions behind your eyelids, like you looked too long at a bright light.
Harry Potter stands in silence, just staring at him.

Severus stares back. His mouth feels inexplicably dry.

"Hello," Potter says, and his words echo in the emptiness, bat like birds against the canvas (Severus lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.).

He has not seen Potter since - since Severus took his last breath. More than a year ago, now. The boy looks tired, Severus can say that much. He is no taller, but seems more angular somehow, elbows and knees and cheekbones. His eyes are a darker green, and a bit swollen as if he has been crying (over Aberforth, Severus thinks, or something else? He wonders if Potter is the kind of young man who cries at funerals, who isn't afraid to let sorrow spill over, even in public spaces. Even when he could be mocked or beaten for it.).

"You're awake," Potter continues before Severus can respond. "I didn't - I didn't know until this morning. I spoke to Dumbledore."

"I am aware," Severus grinds through clenched teeth.

"You - oh, of course. Probably visits loads with you." Potter fiddles with his hands, the collar of his jacket. Severus thought he would enjoy seeing the boy so discomfited. At Hogwarts, Potter could do no bloody wrong, walked the halls like he owned them.

Not anymore. Whoever this is that stands in Severus' sad little dungeon corridor, he is not the Chosen One. He is infinitely older than the Boy Who Lived.

"Are you Severus Snape?" Potter asks, each word slow and calculating, and Severus stares at him, totally at a loss.

"Is the likeness that abysmal?"

"That's a start," Potter says, but he still seems hesitant, unconvinced. "What do you remember? Do you remember - how you -"

A small room and a young man crouching over him, white hands and a white mouth shaking -

"I do not need a re-telling of events, if that is what you are offering."

Potter fixes him with an assessing look. Severus wonders who the blazes Potter thinks he would be if not Severus Snape - but then not every painting remembers the person it used to be. Some days, Severus thinks he himself is forgetting, losing his past in inches.

"I wanted - I came here - " Potter trails off. "I used to come and talk to you. Before you woke up."

Severus knows this, though he wishes he didn't.

"As flagrant a disregard for my privacy as ever, I see."

"No, it wasn't like - " Potter sighs. He keeps moving hesitantly closer, as if Severus is likely to leap from the canvas and snap at his fingers. "I just wanted to be here. When you woke up."

Severus thinks of fairytales with sleeping maidens trapped behind high and thorny walls. He almost says the words "handsome prince" before he realizes the shape his lips are forming and cuts it off like a dead blossom.

"I - " Potter continues, heedless of the nonsense rolling through Severus' empty skull. "I wanted to
be here. So I could - could see you and say that I -"

"Don't." Severus manages this much at least, willing the word so full of wandless magic that the voice will be stolen from Potter's lungs (he does not need to hear this, he should not be expected to bear -)

"-was sorry, was so sorry," Potter finishes in a rush.

And just like that, the words have been said.

Severus has been expecting them. He had not been expecting the visceral reaction he would have to them, however, throat trying to close up and choke off what little life is left in him. He had not expected the shame (like heat) against his face; if Harry Potter thinks he must atone, god knows what he expects of Severus.

"You do not owe me an apology," Severus manages. He regrets his words as soon as Potter starts to speak.

"I - you died for us, Snape, you - the only reason we won the bloody war was because of you and - you brought the sword and you took the fall - if he had known it was my wand, if he had known it was me, he would never have -" Harry stops speaking, and Severus watches him idly twist at a button on his sleeve. His hands are large and pale, no calluses that Severus can make out. He wonders when the boy stopped playing Quidditch. "We would have lost, without you. I would have - died, probably."

For a brief moment of uncharacteristic selflessness, Severus is glad to be dead. He is. He is glad of the snake that tore out his throat, and the blood that saturated fabric, pooled against floorboards, the wands that circled him, flashing green. The War is over, but Severus would die for Harry Potter over and over again. He did not know this until this very moment, Potter's shadow falling softly over broken brick and polished stone. He did not know this, until Potter's thin fingers undid and redid that black button on his coat.

Good lord.

"But you did not die, Mr. Potter," Severus says, trying unsuccessfully to keep his tone cold. "I have heard much about the outcome of the War. You are the Boy Who Kept Living."

"Don't call me that, please," Potter says quietly. "That's - that's not who I am."

"I have also heard, from Albus, that you are attending Auror training at present. How - appropriate."

Potter nods, and Severus racks his brain for equally innocuous questions. He's never been one for small talk - particularly not in portrait form with the young man who watched him die.

"I don't like it," Potter says quietly, rescuing Severus.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The training. I really don't. Everyone thinks it's something I'm supposed to do, everyone thinks it's my dream, and even I thought it was but - but it's not. I hate it."

This is more emotion than Severus is comfortable with. Several sarcastic comments make their way towards his tongue, but he swallows them. It isn't as if he gives a damn about hurting Potter's feelings, and it isn't as if he's trying to be civil or polite.
But he is concerned. Potter looks as though a strong wind might crack him in half, and Severus cannot bring himself to murder Lily's son with a carelessly thrown insult.

"Then why do you continue?" Severus asks, legitimately curious.

Potter does not do anything for a long moment, almost as if he doesn't know the answer.

"Because - because I've got to do something, don't I? I mean, everyone's expecting me to -"

Severus snorts. "You defeated the most powerful Dark Wizard the world has ever known. No one - no one - expects anything from you."

Potter laughs bitterly, more bitterly than anyone his age ought to manage.

"Know that, do you?" Potter says. "You may not be wrong often, but you're wrong about this."

Severus did not sign up to be a career counselor, no matter how celebrated the recipient (or warranted his advice might be).

"Do what you want, Potter," he manages, "Merlin knows you always have. And if anyone gives you grief, just remind them who vanquished the Dark Lord twice before they turned eighteen."

The corner of Potter's mouth quirks, just slightly, and he glances shyly up at Severus.

"That sounded suspiciously like a compliment."

"Heaven forfend."

"And if it doesn't work?"

"Then send them my way," Severus says, shocking both Potter and himself. Again and again, he comes to Harry Potter's defense, like some sort of sad and loyal terrier. Is he incapable of leaving the boy to his own devices? Surely Potter's survived this long; Severus should be able to breathe easy by now. Severus should be able to consider his debts paid in full and then some.

He cannot. He does not.

"I've left everyone at the Three Broomsticks. That's where the wake is. Oh God - someone has told you about-"

"Yes." Severus cuts Harry off before he can tearfully deliver the news of Aberforth's passing.

Potter's eyes dart to the far corners of the hallway and back again, as if taking in his surroundings for the first time.

"Do you get - lonely down here, or anything? Do people come and see you, or -"

"Far more than I would wish," Severus tells him and Potter laughs.

He laughs.

Severus thinks perhaps it is the first time he has ever made Potter laugh, and he never expected the experience to be so thrilling. Never expected the hot hum of satisfaction, of pleasure even, running up his arms and spine, like a plant being bathed in sunlight.

He did not know his painted body could experience anything of the kind.
"I've always wondered what it must be like to be a portrait. Can you leave your frame? Can you leave the school, even? I remember other paintings doing that."

"How pleasant for you. Yes, I am able to travel, though my destinations are limited."

"Making friends, or -"

Severus stops him with a glare that could curdle milk and wither flowers.

"Loads," he says as sarcastically as possible, and Potter blushes to the roots of his ridiculous hair (Severus helplessly watches the slow-traveling colour, the pink of Queen Elizabeth roses).

"Well, I wouldn't want to keep you from them. I'll go, shall I?"

"No doubt you have many pressing appointments."

Again, Potter's lips twitch, though there is less humour and more bitterness.

"That's me, all right. Pressing appointments." He runs an agitated hand through his fringe, and Severus waits for the inevitable fall out. "Could I come back, ever? Would you want to - talk to someone, or -"

"With regard to what?" Severus snaps, a bit more cruelly than he intends. "Fond memories of old times, perhaps? Forgive me, but I have no interest in swapping war stories with you. You've said your piece, and I have heard you out, and we needn't trouble each other further."

"But -"

"We have nothing more to discuss, as far as I am concerned. I am finished with this war, Mr. Potter." Severus says this, and all the while he knows that he is lying. He is not finished with the War, no more than the War is finished with him (some nights he hears it scratching around the edges of his canvas, pulling threads in its mad haste to get inside).

"You're right. Of course you're right." Potter nods, as if trying to convince himself. "What would we have to talk about?"

Severus says nothing.

"My mother, maybe," Potter says, and if Severus had limbs he might have slapped the imbecile. "The memories you left me -"

Severus radiates fury so hot that by rights the painting should sizzle clean from the wall.

"That is not up for discussion."

"You thought you would die," Harry says quietly. "That's the only reason you were - were honest with me."

"If I recall correctly, I did die, Potter. How remarkable my insight must have been."

"Professor, I'm -"

"Stop." Stop, Merlin please. If Severus has to hear the word 'sorry' again, he will claw his own eyes out.

"I won't say it," Harry says quickly. "I am, but I won't say it anymore."
His lips are pressed thin, but he does not look sad. Only tired.

"Do not keep your friends waiting." When Potter says nothing, Severus foolishly continues. "You have never before seen Arthur Weasley intoxicated. It is not an experience I would rob you of. This dungeon corridor falls short by comparison."

A strange expression crosses Potter's face, like he wants to smile but won't let himself. Severus wishes - suddenly and without reason - that he would.

"Goodbye then, Snape."

"Goodbye then, H-" Severus cuts himself off as his mouth shapes the name 'Harry' through no design of his own. He doesn't say anything for a moment, so astonished by his near mistake, and Potter watches him oddly until Severus grinds out "Potter," between his uneven teeth, forces his body to obey him.

He is not on a first name basis with the bloody Chosen One.

The Chosen One in question nods, turning away and walking down the corridor. Severus looks at his clenched fists, the floor of the potions class, anything so as not to watch Potter walk away.

That will be the end of it, then. He does not imagine that he will see Lily's son again. Perhaps he will hear about him - no doubt Albus won't be able to resist keeping Severus updated on Potter's numerous exploits and accolades (and marriages, certainly), but he cannot imagine Potter will ever feel the need to return to this dank little corner of the world.

It feels odd, really, this sense of finality. It feels a bit like waking up in a strange classroom, without sight or sound or sensation, just blind and clutching grief.

Sitting in his chair, Severus wills his hands to stop digging jagged fingernails into the arms. This will be the end of it, he tells himself. This will be the end.

Except that it isn't.

He cannot say how much time has passed, but it cannot be more than a few hours before Evelyn comes bursting into his portrait, eyes wide with intrigue.

"Mr. Snake!" he cries out, as Severus forces his heart out of his mouth.

"Snape."

"Snape, right - sorry. You'll never guess!"

"Does this have to do with milkmaids?" Severus says archly, but Evelyn looks blessedly ignorant.

"No, sir, it's loads better! I was just talking to Miss Fortunata, who had been talking to Sir Nicholas, and and AAAAAAND -"

Severus rubs his temples. It seems like every day he regains some semblance of his human form. Today, for instance, he is learning that he possesses the wherewithal to have a headache.

"The Headmistress has offered Mr. Harry Potter the Defense Against the Dark Arts position! Can you imagine? Harry Potter teaching at our school?"

Severus can imagine it. He really should have expected as much (because he will never be finished with Harry Potter, not now, not ever. It was too much to hope for.).
"I wonder if he'll ever use the library? I was always too shy to speak with him when he was a student, you know, but I feel loads more confident now. I think it is the result of our close friendship!" Evelyn beam at him, and Severus does not roll his eyes, he does not.

"Are you aware as to whether Mr. Potter has accepted the Headmistress' offer?"

"Oh." Evelyn's face falls. "No, I don't think he has. Sir Nicholas told Miss Fortunata that Mr. Potter told the Headmistress he'd think about it. I think that sounds well promising, don't you?"

"We will see, I suppose." That is a good enough answer for the present. Good god, not hours ago Severus was telling Potter to do whatever he wanted, and that might very well be taking a teaching position at Hogwarts. This, this is why Severus should not be allowed to speak to former students. Or current students. Or anyone, really.

Evelyn sighs, theatrically. "Oh, if he doesn't come teach here, I shall die, I surely will!" He grows serious suddenly, cocking his head and studying Severus. They have had conversations about the affectedness of this whole cocked-head business, but it obviously hasn't made much of an impact.

"Do you hate him?" Evelyn asks.

"What? Who?"

"Mr. Harry Potter. Only you seem to be so angry whenever anyone brings him up. I just thought - was he rude to you?"

Severus snorts. "A bit."

"But he seems so nice. And handsome. Fortunata thinks he's very handsome, anyway. Do you?"

"Certainly not," Severus splutters.

"Then why have you turned all pinky red?"

"Because - because I do not want to have this conversation with you. I have had a long and trying day, and I am tired, and I simply wish to be left -"

"So you don't hate Harry Potter?"

"No, I -" Severus stops. Repeats the last two words he said, silently. Repeats them again, in the desperate hope that they will begin to make sense.

"So you like him, then?"

"Evelyn," Severus snarls, beyond reason at this point. "You are being. Overly. Precious."

"Oh! Sorry." He smiles sheepishly at Severus, who rolls his eyes. This is the reason he is such good friends with a seven year old; he can be as nasty as he likes, and nothing makes a dent. "Well, I suppose I'll see you later. We're going to that Irish landscape tomorrow, yes? Only I told Miss Fortunata I'd bring her some heather."

Severus nods abruptly, and Evelyn favours him with another smile before vanishing through the doorway, leaving Severus alone once again.

Harry Potter will not take over the DADA position. He will not come to Hogwarts. That much is simply out of the question.
Two weeks later, the boy does. Of course he does -

* * *

- not know when he expects Snape to show up at Will.
Two weeks later, the boy does. Of course he does -

***

- not know when he expects Snape to show up at Will, or if he even expects it, truth be told.

Snape could very well have been just trying to get rid of him at the funeral, and while his passion and outrage for the books themselves seemed genuine, Harry still can't forget his furious speech ("I am not your admirer and I am not your friend- "). He is simultaneously filled with dread and anticipation at the thought of seeing Snape again, and it occupies a good deal more of his thoughts than it ought. Not that that's anything new really. For Harry, thinking about Snape has become a bit like poking at a sore tooth. You know it will hurt, and it does hurt - but you can't stop.

Surely it should be Ginny he's obsessing over, Ginny who circles around and around in his late-night, panicked thoughts. He misses her, he does, but the only real evidence of her absence is a lack of letters on his doorstep. They saw each other so infrequently in the past year that the transition from being with Ginny to being alone is surprisingly unremarkable. Harry's felt alone for years, felt alone since a War ended and started chewing at his heels like a stray dog. Harry's felt alone since he put his head in a Pensieve and realized he was wrong, wrong about absolutely everything of importance.

So he thinks about Snape. He thinks about Snape and Harry's mom, and Snape and Dumbledore, and Snape and a great bloody snake, turning the Shrieking Shack scarlet. Sometimes on a tea break Harry will see a dark-haired man across the street and his whole body will go tense, certain it's him (finally, Harry thinks on one such occasion, and has no idea where that word came from). Sometimes when he's reshelfing books, he'll catch the whisper of black robes against the floor and be unable to move or breathe for a good two minutes. He has no idea why he's getting so worked up about it.

And it's never Snape, as it happens.

Until the day it is.

There's been one more vandalized book, an ancient Latin thing that focuses more on herbs than potions. Peggotty's on the warpath, and seems to regard the whole thing more and more as Harry's responsibility. Harry supposes it serves him right for showing an interest, and he's done some cursory research on the books in question, but there aren't any other copies in London - or even in the UK, for that matter. He's considering sending another desperate owl in search of Snape when the man shows up at the front desk as surly and unbothered as ever (not even caring that his presence sends Harry's pulse skyrocketing, makes his hands clench like vices on the edge of the desk, for no bloody reason at all).

It's been raining outside, winter approaching. There are a few drops of moisture in Snape's lank hair, and glinting like diamonds on the shoulders of his huge grey coat. The coat is so large and warm and wooly-looking that Harry feels the need to stare at it, cannot tear his eyes away. He has never seen Snape looking so - so normal. Harry doesn't even realize that he hasn't said or done anything - a word of greeting, a nod, nothing - until Snape clears his throat exaggeratedly.
"Oh," Harry stammers, "Hi. Hi, I - yes. I wasn't expecting to see you."

"I did tell you I was coming. Or do my words just make that little of an impact?"

"No, of course - I just didn't know when. Um." Harry smiles, fumbling for words. "It is good to see you."

Snape looks at him strangely, and Harry finds - just as strangely - that he means it. He hasn't seen Ron or Hermione more than once in the weeks since the funeral, hasn't even spoken to Ginny (he's giving her time, like she asked for) but he hadn't thought he was lonely until Snape came and loomed over him in the library, all dark eyes and sneering lips and ridiculous winter coat (for god's sake, it's not even November yet.).

"You may cease with the pleasantries, Potter. I assure you this isn't a social call. I simply wish to examine the books of which you told me, and then I will be on my way."

"Right. Of course." Harry has all the damaged books in a locked cabinet in the back office. He leaves the front desk to retrieve them, and when he gets back, Penny Peggotty is floating over Snape like a vengeful ghost from his past. Harry almost drops the books in his haste to get between them (and that would probably have cost him his job and his life, right there).

"Ms. Peggotty," he says, smiling. "I see you've met Prof - er, Mr. Snape. He was my Potions Master back at Hogwarts, and he's kindly agreed to -"

"Severus Snape," Peggotty hisses, hands clawing at the air, "I remember you. I remember your dark deeds as if they happened yesterday."

Snape has gone a bit paler than normal, but Harry is more than ready to launch into his well-memorized speech on what Snape did for the war effort, about his tireless self-sacrifice and near death and loyalty above all. He's pulled this speech out on several occasions (usually to his friends' mortification) because there seems no end of drunk blokes in pubs with definite opinions on "Death Eater scum", but Harry doesn't care if he gets sacked right now. No one is allowed to say a word against Severus Snape in his presence, and that's just the bloody way of things.

"Ms. Peggotty," Harry begins, hotly, but she ignores him.

"This type of man belongs nowhere near our precious books. You," the librarian continues, pointing a finger at Snape in accusation, "You owe nearly three pounds in late fees from February 6th, 1982! Of all the disrespectful, heedless, careless -"

Harry releases a short breath. "He does?" He looks at Snape. "You do?"

"I should charge you interest, is what I should do, but the Board of Directors voted against it, and I am not one to challenge authority in this respect. Nevertheless, I really must insist."

"My apologizes, madam," Snape says, corner of his mouth twitching slightly, "I will settle my debts immediately. I must confess it somewhat - slipped my mind. Never again."

"Oh." Peggotty nods, wrath evaporating in a fine mist. "Well, then. The library thanks you for your patronage. Harry, dear, do take the rest of the afternoon off to consult with the Professor. I'll just let the banshees know you'll be taking the books."

She floats off contentedly, and Snape fixes Harry with a thunderous glare.

"You might have warned me."
"How was I to know you were such a delinquent?"

"Shut up."

"Any other library-related crimes I should be told about? Just so I'm prepared for the future. Dog-earing pages, or unauthorized highlighting?"

"Potter, I'm warning you -"

Harry laughs, and then realizes he's laughing with Snape, as if the two of them are sharing a joke or having a friendly conversation. It's unsettling and he drops it quickly.

They end up (after paying Snape's hefty fines) at the coffee shop next to Will. It's exclusively magical, and only then so Muggle patrons don't get alarmed by textbooks with moving pictures or fur and fangs. The charm at the door puts any Muggle person momentarily off carbs and caffeine, and usually results in their immediate departure.

Harry, however, loves it. He happily breaks a piece off of his second blueberry scone as Snape works his way through the pile of victimized literature, occasionally jotting down an observation in his small, black notebook.

"Kindly keep your crumbs to yourself," Snape says, not looking up.

"Do my best," Harry says. "You sure you aren't hungry? There are fresh blueberries in these."

"I am of the rare mind that greasy fingerprints do not belong in texts more than one thousand years my senior. Call me old-fashioned if you will."

Harry almost chuckles, but swallows around it instead. Snape is not his friend, he's made that much perfectly clear, and just because Snape grudgingly let Harry buy him a cup of tea doesn't mean anything has changed.

He passes the last of the books to Snape, who examines it with the same care he showed its predecessor. Harry - despite his best efforts - finds himself entranced by the gentleness of Snape's hands on the fine pages. He always imagined those hands as vicious - slicing through the belly of a toad, scratching vitriol in the margins of a student's essay - but in this situation Snape is utterly changed.

Harry thinks of the books taken from Spinner's End, books Snape no doubt touched with these same hands, and feels guilt like bile settle high in his throat. Christ, all of Snape's bloody books and everything in that shabby house of his - probably Galleons worth of potions equipment - and all for being on their side. All for working for the Order, and following Dumbledore's orders, and having his neck chewed off by a great bloody snake -

"I heard about your house," he says quickly, before he can talk himself out of it.

"Did you." Snape does not look up.

"I can't believe the Ministry would do such a thing. It's - so unjust. And all that time, you were locked up in Azkaban, an innocent -"

The china handle of Snape's mug snaps off cleanly in his hand, and Harry reaches out, startled and unthinking, to take the mug from Snape, or catch the hot tea that threatens to spill on the thousand-year-old book, or - or something, there has to be some reason -
But the mug itself is not cracked, and no tea spills, and Snape's hand is not cut by shards of fine china. Instead, Harry touches his fingers against Snape's - just for a moment - before he realizes that there is no need for his fingers to be there. Nothing is broken.

He snatches his hand back, and Snape sets his mug down quickly. They both stare at the table for a silent moment. Snape picks up the broken handle, frowning blankly at it as if he isn't sure what it is.

"I think -" Harry say quickly, "I think that was my fault."

Snape glares up at him, and his face looks almost unfamiliar - skin pulled tight across his cheekbones and a wild, hunted look in his dark eyes.

"I shouldn't have brought up - god knows you don't have to talk about your personal life, least of all with -"

"Potter, stop." Snape sighs. "Merlin's sake. There is no need for this onslaught of apology. It does no good for either of us."

"I know, I just -"

"And regardless of your youthful convictions, I am not 'innocent' - not by any stretch of the imagination. Whatever you think you know about my character, please keep it to yourself. I am - quite beyond redemption at this point."

Snape drains the last of his tea, avoiding the sharp edges left by the handle, and rises, gathering his things. Harry wasn't expecting his immediate departure, but Snape silences his protests with a raised hand.

"Pleasant though this little chat has been, I believe I can be of no further use to you. I will contact you if I draw any conclusions."

Before Harry can even respond, Snape is sweeping out the door (if one can really sweep anywhere in that ridiculous coat). Harry watches him cross the rainy street, ducking through the crowd.

He feels strangely - disappointed. Which is mad. What did he think was going to happen, he and Snape would become best mates and adopt a cat together? He catches a flash of Snape's coat traveling rapidly up the next block, and suppresses a wince. Perhaps a strong start and weak finish is the best that he will ever be able to expect, as far as the two of them are concerned.

He fills his friends in on Halloween at a party that Luna Lovegood throws. Harry turns down the initial invite and the follow-up, and fully intends on spending Halloween with only a pot of tea for company until Ron and Hermione show up at his door that evening, thrusting a jacket onto his shoulders and a bottle of firewhisky into his hands.

"Nope, don't bother," Ron says as Harry starts to protest, and before he knows it they're in Leeds and Harry's choice in the matter is long bloody gone.

Luna's somehow gotten her hands on a gorgeous (albeit crumbling and completely filthy) three-story brick house, which she's filled with a bunch of street magicians and artists and other oddly beautiful people. Everyone seems to be dating or shagging or somehow involved with everyone else. Harry hasn't quite figured it all out, but he hasn't seen Luna since he left Hogwarts. Her foggy-eyed smile is familiar and so welcome it makes his throat squeeze tight, speech impossible for a good two minutes.

Ron and Hermione sit on the threadbare sofa across from the large loveseat, where Harry sits and
feels Ginny's absence like a tooth that has been pulled. Across the room, Luna seems intent on recruiting Neville into the flat's one spare bedroom - and probably into other things as well. Every available space is crowded with Luna's roommates, but thankfully everyone is either high, pissed or counter-culture enough not to give a shit about the Boy Who Lived.

"I can't believe you had tea with Snape," Ron laughs, cider practically coming out of his pores. "Just like two blokes on a date, or summat."

"Ron." Hermione elbows him.

"Sorry, I'm just saying - it's funny, is all."

"Well, I don't think he found it very funny," Harry tells them. "He practically clawed his way out of the place at the end. He absolutely can't stand me."

"Yeah, well - who can stand him?" Ron asks, and Harry gives him a look that Ron is far too familiar with. "Okay, fine, sorry, Harry. Don't mean to insult your pet cause, or anything."

Ron's had a bit to drink, so Harry lets it go with only a slight frown. Ron doesn't know, does he, he doesn't know anything about Snape. He wasn't there in the memories, didn't see him crying in Dumbledore's office. He didn't see Snape as a little boy with nothing, not a single friend except for Harry's fierce, red-haired mother; Ron didn't see Snape with a broken heart.

Or with his blood all over Harry's hands.

Or with his head, weak and heavy on Harry's shoulder, gasping out a breath that almost was his last.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asks, more perceptive than she has any right to be.

Harry nods, but he isn't. Not really. He looks away from his friend's too-keen eyes, and meets the dark brown gaze of some bloke across the room. He's got coppery-coloured hair, and a silver ring through each of his nostrils, but the piercings somehow only make his face seem prettier, glinting white-hot in the candlelight. He can't be much older than Harry, and for some reason he smiles when he catches Harry's eye, nodding as if they know each other.

"Who's that?" Hermione asks.

"No idea."

Harry smiles back at the stranger. There's something warm in the way his mouth curls, and Harry feels the urge to get up and speak to him, figure out if there's something he's missing.

"Think that chap wants your autograph, Harry," Ron says with a smirk.

The man glances down to study his bottle of lager, and laughs at something a friend says, before looking up and smiling at Harry once again.

"Um - no, I rather think he wants Harry's phone number," Hermione says slowly, and Ron almost chokes on his drink.

Harry tears his gaze away from the other man, blood rushing to his face. He feels his heart pounding like fists against his chest, because no, no - of course not - there's no way someone who looks like that would ever fancy - and Harry's just broken up, he wouldn't possibly - oh right, and he doesn't think about men that way, he hasn't - he hasn't really, he -

Hermione elbows her boyfriend and shoots him a Very Meaningful Look, and Ron stammers out some sort of half-arsed apology.

"Unless of course, that's summat you'd be into which of course is totally fine with me," he says quickly, "Whatever makes you happy, right, and it's not like you just got out of a long-term thing with my baby sister, oh wait -"

"Ron," Hermione warns.

"Anyway, love is love," Ron finishes weakly.

"Both of you can - calm down." Harry takes a swig of lager, just to give himself a few more seconds of panicked inner monologue. "Someone just smiled at me, it doesn't mean I'm about to marry him or anything. And I'm pretty sure he's only being friendly, and - and - and no, I don't - I haven't ever thought about - I mean, just because Ginny finished with me, doesn't mean I'm giving up on women completely."

"See? What did I tell you?" Ron looks at his girlfriend accusingly.

"Of course," Hermione's voice is soft, but her eyes are still serious and fixed on Harry's face. "No one's accusing anyone of anything, besides me accusing Ron of being stuck in the 1950's."

"Hey -"

"Just - don't underestimate your - your appeal, Harry."

"Hey," Ron says again, but Hermione rushes on.

"I know you've just split with Ginny, and it's been terrible, but you're still - handsome and smart and sweet. That fellow is basically taking your clothes off from across the room -"

"Oi!"

"And you can't even see it. Frankly, I don't care who you sleep with, but I do care that you realize that - there are going to be people who want to sleep with you. Lots of people. And not because you're the Boy Who Lived, but because you're - you're a catch."

Harry has no reply besides radiating red with embarrassment and mumbling nonsense into his beer. Hermione glares at Ron.

"And don't you start -"

"Nah, forget it. It was rather sexy there, at the end."

Hermione's hard gaze softens, and she leans forward, pressing a kiss to the corner of Ron's mouth.

For the rest of the night, Harry does not look at the man in the across the room, even though the feeling of being watched prickles like a sunburn against his neck. He drinks more than he should and ends up kipping on Luna's sofa, a situation which never would have happened had he been in his right mind. He doesn't sleep in strange places, never, because he doesn't know what might happen - he might scream his throat hoarse and wake the neighbours, he might light the curtains on fire during a dream about Vincent Crabbe, he might wake sobbing and soaking wet and in no fit state
for human company.

That night, however, his dreams are gentle - there are long white fingers against his skin and he wakes sighing softly, leaning into a touch that was never there.

He almost jumps a foot when he finds Luna watching him, bare legs tucked up under her overlarge *One Direction* t-shirt in the armchair across from him. The dim morning light has her hair shining like silver.

"You scared me," Harry murmurs, and Luna raises a finger to her lips.

"Shh. You'll wake Neville."

Harry was certain Neville left with Ron and Hermione, but apparently not. Luna says nothing, just stares at him until Harry awkwardly fumbles for coherent thoughts.

"Never would have thought you'd be a fan," he says, gesturing toward her shirt.

Luna smiles her odd, slanted smile. "One of them is a wizard, but I'm not to tell you which. Also, I hear you're solving mysteries with Professor Snape."

"Definitely not."

"Oh? That's too bad. I thought he could have used a bit of excitement and romance. Both of you, really."

"Um - it's not -" Harry finds himself making several ridiculous hand gestures, as if he's forgotten how wrists and fingers are supposed to move. "It's not - romantic. Or exciting, really, it's just library business -"

"There was always something about his face," Luna continues, seemingly in her own world. "Like one of the men from those books McGonagall hid in her top desk drawer. Oh - I expect you never found those. I shouldn't have said."

Harry is so unbalanced that he almost asks "What books?" before he thinks better of it. In his silence, Luna regretfully continues.

"I wanted to *lick* Snape the first time I saw him in the Great Hall. His neck - or his nose maybe. And all those black buttons..." Luna's voice is dreamy, and Harry feels his mouth fall open. "Do you think he's a virgin? That would be the saddest thing. No offense, of course."

Harry doesn't bother to deny it, and he doesn't bother asking her how she knows; there's no point in asking how Luna knows anything if you have less than half an hour to spend on conspiracy theories and phases of the moon. As it is, Harry's too distracted by the thought of Snape as someone with a body - someone with a virginity to be lost, a face to be licked, a - what was Luna even saying?

"Luna." Harry interrupts, because if he doesn't say something he might never speak again.

"Oh no!" Luna looks completely wretched. "I've made you uncomfortable."

"No, you've -" Harry can't even find the energy to carry out the lie. "I'm just -"

"I have. You've gone all pinky-red about the ears - it's quite attractive, really. Also, I was sad to hear about Ginny." Somehow that segue is less shocking to Harry, less sharp, than the thought of Snape's untouched skin, or the sad and obvious fact of Harry's virginity.
"Yeah, me too," Harry says after a moment.

"But you'll be okay."

"I - I think so. I mean, I'll have to -"

"No, it wasn't a question. You'll be okay."

Luna's eyes are so clear and full of certainty that Harry feels himself compelled to nod. As if it's that simple. And in that brief moment of certainty, he thinks that Ginny - maybe Ginny was right. Maybe she knew him too well, and did the right thing because she knew he never would. Christ, what a thing to think. It sits high in his throat, equal parts relief and betrayal.

"Let me know how it all turns out with you and Snape," Luna says, veering off-subject once again. "Even if it isn't romantic or exciting."

She winks at that last part, pulling her silvery hair out of her face, and tying it into some haphazard knot on the top of her head. In that moment it is absolutely impossible to guess her age - she could be ten years old, or fifty - and Harry has a wild, mad notion that of all his friends, Luna is the only one he couldn't surprise.

"I'm for coffee." Luna says, rising. "Go back to sleep. It's barely gone three."

Barely gone three? Jesus. Harry rolls onto his back and stares at the spotted ceiling above him. If he squints, the odd mildew stain looks like an angry face, and fantastic he's back to thinking about Snape again - as if Luna planted the seed and just left it to grow wild. Snape, whose hand Harry touched that day in the coffee shop, just a short spark of contact for no reason at all, but still Harry can feel the trace of heat against his fingertips. It's guilt, is what it is, and Harry knows it. He feels guilty for not coming to Snape's rescue when he needed it most, guilty for misjudging him all those years and then leaving him alone to nearly die in dirt and darkness. There's gratitude somewhere in there as well, and anger and - and -

That's all there is, surely.

"I am quite beyond redemption at this point." Snape's voice echoes in Harry's skull, as if the man was speaking to him right now. As if Snape was sitting next to him, and not miles away, doubtlessly sound asleep without a thought for Harry in his mind.

"You're not," Harry says, before he realizes he's speaking out loud. He closes his mouth and shuts his eyes, and if he hears Neville's soft murmur of "Come back to bed, sweetpea," from the kitchen, well - that much can be repressed.

Days later, Harry is shelving books on his knees in the mystery section when he hears someone softly clear their throat. Harry turns around and is momentarily dumbstruck because - because he hadn't been prepared for - he wasn't expecting - there's no reason that -

Snape is standing behind him with two paper cups of coffee in his hands. Harry tries to stand up so quickly he hits his head on one of the shelves, and Snape gives a dry snort of amusement.

"Ow." Harry stands, rubbing his head. "Think that's funny, do you?"

"That would be admitting to a sense of humour, Mr. Potter."

"Oh, of course. The end of the world as we know it. Can't have that."
"Quite." Snape hands him one of the coffees, eyes cast downwards. "I didn't know how you took it, so I added an obscene amount of cream and sugar. Given the state of you, I assume that some caffeine will not go amiss."

Harry knows he still has circles under his eyes, knows that weeks of nightmares are taking a physical toll. He'd thought he'd got it under control for the most part - hadn't ripped the door off his bedroom for months. If Snape is remarking on it, however, Harry must not be doing as well as he thought.

"I'm sure you have an overactive social life, but certainly your admirers will permit you the occasional hour's sleep," Snape continues when it becomes clear Harry isn't going to reply. "If only to keep up appearances."

"Um. No, it's not like that." Harry was not expecting to have this conversation with Snape of all people. "I don't - I have dreams. Bad dreams."

There is a brief moment of silence, during which time Harry can hear nothing over the sudden pounding of his heartbeat in his ears and in his throat. What is he doing? Why is he telling Snape any of this?

"I have come to discuss your vandalism problem." Snape ploughs ahead, thankfully ignoring Harry's over-sharing. "Since the weather is rather favourable, at least for the moment, I thought perhaps we might - take a walk."

Harry looks from the coffee cup in his hand to the sunlight streaming in Will's windows, and thinks he just hit his head harder than he thought. Because - because Snape is buying him coffee and asking him to go for a walk; Harry would sooner expect Voldemort to take him to lunch.

"Okay," Harry says slowly.

Of course, Peggotty is only too pleased to have progress on the case, and Harry is told to take as much time as he needs. He meets Snape on the pavement outside Will, and is shocked to see the man wearing sun specs. It is so bizarrely human - just like that ridiculous grey coat - that Harry is briefly speechless. When the hell did Snape become a real person?

"What?" Snape sneers, and Harry shrugs and looks away, trying to seem casual while behaving as awkwardly as possible. He takes a sip of his coffee, which is ridiculously delicious, and follows Snape down the street.

The two of them end up walking by the Thames, fighting the crush of tourists with cameras and families with prams, bundled up against the cold but still taking advantage of the sunshine while it lasts. Snape seems rather reluctant to say anything, so Harry stays quiet (it's either that or babble incessantly, and he's barely resisting the latter). He looks out over the water, brown and blue and gold when the sunlight hits it, follows the tourist boats' slow progress through the wide river.

"I cannot find records of the contents of your missing pages," Snape says eventually, and Harry's heart only sinks fractionally. If anyone could do it, it would be Snape, but at least the fellow tried.

"Oh. All right."

"But I have managed to ascertain the location of other copies of the very same texts."

"There are other copies?" Harry stops walking to stare at Snape, causing the Muggle couple following to nearly crash into them.

"My apologies," Snape tells them, as Harry ducks out of their way, going to lean on the railing.
"The books are rare, that much cannot be overstated. They will not be easy to access. I have, however, spoken to a contact in Greece, where there is a collection containing both *Venenum Historia* and *Viridi Magicae."

Something about Snape speaking Latin makes Harry's stomach hurt - which is bizarre. He's heard the other man cast spells, and it shouldn't sound that much different, but for some reason it does. Harry's so distracted by Snape's clipped accent that he briefly forgets the meaning behind the words.

"That's brilliant," he says in a rush, trying to cover his momentary lapse. "I can go and copy down the missing pages."

"Not just anyone can handle these books. The collection in question is closed to the public, and access is given strictly to dignitaries and scholars. Perhaps the occasional charitable donor."

"Ah." Harry resists the urge to melt under Snape's withering stare. "I guess I'm out then. At least, that's what your eyebrows seem to be implying."

"You know nothing about my eyebrows," Snape sniffs, but he is looking at Harry in a strange and familiar way, eyes barely visible through his glasses. Harry feels something shiver in the vicinity of his ribs, a flower curling slowly toward a beam of sunlight.

"Potter? Are you quite well?"

Harry realizes that he's staring at Snape in silence, and he shakes his head clear, trying to focus.

"Sudden onset heatstroke?"

"Cheers, no. So the -" Harry trails off again. Snape's eyebrows are rather fascinating, when one thinks about it. Just peeking over the top of his sunspecs, they are bushier than Harry remembers, and finely arched, perpetually ironic.


"Right. I can't look at them, is what you're saying. Even with all my special librarian access codes."

"Your badges and medals and everything," Snape says. Harry laughs, and Snape looks very pointedly away, following the rough paths of the river.

It suddenly occurs to Harry that maybe the reason for Snape's admittedly strange behaviour is that he wants to go to the library himself, and is trying to suss out the library's willingness to send him. Well, it makes sense - Harry has no idea what Snape has been doing with himself since the war, and maybe he'd need money for the trip. Christ, maybe he wants to be paid for the work he's done so far. Harry will have to clear some things with Peggotty, but he's sure she'd be more than willing, particularly since Snape is no longer beholden to the library's financial department.

No wonder Snape's seemed a bit out of sorts. Harry can imagine that he'd rather have his throat ripped out again than ask anyone for money.

"Do you - want to go then?" Harry asks, and Snape looks at him sharply. "I expect you could get in easily enough."

Snape nods, wets his lips. "As I am acquainted with the curator, I think my presence would expedite arrangements. However, given the position I am in -"

"Of course," Harry says quickly, "The expenses won't be a problem, I'll talk to Ms. Peggotty and
she'll have to talk to the board, but -"

"What are you -" Snape cuts him off. "For God's sake, stop before you embarrass yourself. I am not asking you for money."

"Oh." Harry wills his blush to fade. "Then what -"

"Flooing internationally is more trouble than it is worth, believe me. And, as I have remarked to you in the not so distant past - I cannot Apparate, though you've doubtlessly -"

"I did start a petition, I don't know if you heard. It's been sent off already, or I'd let you take a look at it."

"I wonder if you might give me leave to finish one bloody sentence," Snape sniffs, but his tone is not as hostile as it could be. "I am trying to tell you that I would require - accompaniment. At least for the journey." Snape looks away again, and Harry watches him swallow, Adam's apple bobbing awkwardly in his long throat, wrapped in scar tissue like a present wrapped in ribbon.

Accompaniment should be simple enough to arrange, but it doesn't explain why Snape is so nervous. Unless he - unless -

"Are you asking me to go with you?" Harry says quietly, drowned out by the momentary roar of a passing trolley.

"What?"

"Are you asking me to go with you?" Harry says again, louder.

"I'm not asking you anything, I am simply drawing your addled mind toward the most convenient option. Convenient for the library, if not for my own personal sanity."

Harry ignores the attempted insults. From a man who just invited him to Greece, they barely make a dent.

"Where are we going, exactly?"

"Rhodes."

An image swims in Harry's mind, stark shades of bright colour layered against each other, and ruins with more history than he could possibly imagine. "Brilliant. I've never been to Greece. Never gone anywhere outside of the UK, really. Have you been before? Is it beautiful? It looks beautiful in all the photos I've seen, all white buildings and blue sea -"

"Desist in your drooling, Potter, or I'll take a bloody boat. Alone," Snape adds, at Harry's keen look.

"When would you want to go?"

"Will a week be a sufficient time to prepare?" Snape asks, "We can Apparate straight to the island and return the same day. But perhaps you need to secure the blessing of your late employer?"

"She'll just be thrilled that someone's on the case. I think she's a bit of a mystery buff, actually. Found a whole stack of Conan Doyle hidden in her office."

"Charming," Snape responds dryly. "I will Owl you the details then."

"All right. Thanks for the coffee."
"It managed to keep you quiet for fifteen minutes. That is thanks enough."

Snape turns on his heel without so much as a nod of farewell. He leaves Harry standing alone by the water, smiling. He shakes his head, knowing that he looks like some kind of grinning idiot - speaking to no one, smiling at nothing. He tells himself that it's mostly about the books, and just maybe only a tiny little bit about having an interaction with Snape that didn't end with them both spitting curses at the other. He bites down on his lip, the inside of his cheek, but all he can think about is white sand and blue sky and Snape's eyes looking out over the water, looking purposefully away from Harry ("I would require accompaniment. At least for the journey.") It should feel like some sort of trap, because Snape would never want to spend time with Harry if he could help it. I should feel like the beginning of a cruel joke or hostile turnabout, but - but Snape bought him coffee and asked him to Greece. Harry shakes his head, smile becoming a bit mad and ragged at the edges.

He makes his way back to the library, goes on about his work, but for some reason his smile doesn’t -

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- see the new addition to the Hogwart's faculty for over three weeks. Even though though Potter is in residence, even though Evelyn does not fail to mention Potter in their every blessed encounter. Severus does not see him.

Frankly, it seems a bit - odd.

It should be no surprise that Potter is steering clear of Severus' portrait, and it is more than Severus dared to hope for. The greater surprise is that he notices Potter's absence at all, and really, that is all down to Evelyn; the fool child feels the need to narrate Potter's various comings and goings as if he's reporting for Witch Weekly. Apparently Potter has been installed in the Gryffindor wing of the castle. Apparently he is simply observing Professor Zhang's teaching of the class until January, when Zhang will be going on an extended leave of absence (to work on his novel, not that anyone is supposed to know as much). Apparently Potter is very popular with the students (shocking) but has rejected any requests to supervise Quidditch matches or take part in the newly formed staff league. Apparently Potter is quite busy, up at all hours in his small office reading DADA textbooks and going over lesson plans.

The veracity of these accounts can be questioned. Evelyn is hardly a reliable witness, and most of what the boy claims to be fact has been derived from eavesdropping and hearsay. Severus is heartened that Potter hasn't attempted some sort of tearful reunion, but doubts his luck will hold out much longer. Still, the boy's absence makes Potter that much easier to ignore, to forget about. And Severus does forget about him. He does.

He visits the Irish landscape with Evelyn three times in as many weeks, gathers great armfuls of heather at Fortunata's insistence, and Harry Potter does not cross his path. Granted the Irish landscape ("Rolling Hills" is the actual name) is tucked away by the Ravenclaw Common Room, which Potter might have little reason to visit, but Severus happens to be in "Hogwarts by Sunrise" across from the Great Hall just as dinner is letting out, and Potter eludes him there as well.

Severus isn't searching for Potter, or any such thing. It's mere chance that he is in those canvases at all, but the sheer absence of Potter is suspicious in itself.

Severus is never not suspicious. Particularly when it comes to Harry Potter.

The DADA classroom has been rebuilt on the second floor, right across from several small pastoral scenes, and Severus just happens to find himself wandering through the windswept moors over the
course of the next few weeks. He is not waiting for classes to let out, but when they do let out and
he is remarkably present, he sees no trace of Potter. He wonders if Potter is keeping late hours in the
classroom – or perhaps if rumours of his new position have been greatly exaggerated. Severus
wouldn’t put it past Evelyn to lose all sense, but the other portraits he has spoken with (not that he
has asked about Potter, but the subject has arisen naturally) have also remarked on Potter’s presence.
So the boy is either avoiding him or – not that Severus cares of course -

When he finally does manage to stumble across the Chosen One, nearly one month later, it is
completely by chance. Utterly.

There are nights when Severus does not sleep. Not many, which is disturbing. It is far too easy to
drift into the thickly brush-stroked sleep of a portrait; Severus feels the urge pulling on his bones
throughout the day, and when night falls, he barely has a chance to sit down before he's sinking into
darkness. He has begun to guard against these lethargic tendencies. As a living, breathing human
(one must not forget such things), Severus was a light sleeper: a wanderer of corridors, a hoarder of
lost hours. Aside from Filch, Severus was one of the only staff members who didn't grumble over
night patrol, because most nights Severus would be walking those hallways regardless. He liked
Hogwarts at night; one could almost pretend there were no students in it. It was much the same at
Spinner's End - at night the house was quiet, and relatively harmless. You could forget where you
were, imagine a wholly different kind of place - a home, softened by starlight and shadow.

He has begun to force himself back toward these old habits, much as his body protests. Severus
wanders village scenes and empty cafés and lush gardens by moonlight. He sits for hours in dark
forests and listens for any noise, any sign of life besides the creaking pines and rush of stale wind.
He observes, unseen, the nightly goings on of Hogwarts, and for this reason, he should have noticed
Potter much sooner than he does.

The first time Severus sees him, pajama-clad and shockingly pale in the darkness of the third floor
hallway, Severus nearly throws himself to the ground in an attempt to remain unseen. He does not
know why this is his first reaction, only that the crush of panic in his chest moves his limbs before he
consciously chooses to do so, and he ends up on the forest floor, pine needles digging into the palms
of his hands. He listens for the slow retreat of Potter's footsteps, but that is - regrettably - not all that
he hears.

Weeping. Lily's son is weeping.

Severus scrambles to his feet, but by then Potter has already moved on, weaving unsteadily down the
hallway. Severus knows this hallway, knows each painting well, and he should feel ridiculous as he
moves from one gold frame to the other - avoiding slumbering aristocrats, dancers, impromptu tea
parties in his haste to catch the Boy Who Lived - but he does not. Instead, he follows Harry Potter
silently, like a dog tracking a scent, down the staircase and through corridors, waiting until the boy
has found his way back to his rooms in one piece. He should tell someone, Severus realizes,
watching the door shut firmly behind Potter's narrow form. It isn’t safe to wander in darkness
through a school such as this. If Potter were to run into a wall, or bash his head on a floating
candelabra, or fall down the stairs and break his precious neck (the War laps that image up as if it
were blood and cream, whines for more, more -)

Severus feels his breathing accelerating, and he swallows until he sees stars in his vision. He didn't
give his life for the bloody Order to Potter could spend the night weeping his way toward some
needless, pointless injury. Severus has to tell someone.

He does not. Instead, he spends his nights on some wild and half-mad hunt, stalking the boy from
the Astronomy Tower to the Great Hall and back again. Sometimes he doesn't find Potter, and those
nights are infinitely preferable to the ones that he does. When he cannot find Potter, Severus can
assume that the boy is sleeping in a bed, and not weaving hazardously through a crumbling ruin of a
boarding school. It is far preferable to spending the wee hours with his heart in his throat, watching
the solitary figure move like shadow and lamplight, meandering across stone floors without
destination or purpose. Sometimes Potter has the wherewithal to throw on a robe before leaving his
chambers; sometimes he is clothed in nothing other than thin flannel pajamas. Sometimes he is
crying. Sometimes he is talking quietly to himself, eyes slowly drifting shut with each step he takes.

Bloody Evelyn tags along once, and only once, before Severus puts a stop to it. He really indulges
the boy shamefully, and at any rate, he has to leave him snoring in some woodcutter's shack shortly
after midnight. The child is not equipped for late nights (Severus bites back a strange and sudden
twist of envy, having never been that young or that innocent.)

Things might have continued in this way indefinitely had not Alcott Prawn surprised no one by
being a perfect imbecile.

It is the beginning of November, the chill of winter creeping into even Severus’ small, rectangular
world. He is brewing agin, and above the hiss of sizzling clover, he hears the sound of slow
footsteps. Harry Potter swims into his vision, fine-boned and white as milk.

"Professor," Potter says with a nod of his head.

Severus is no longer a professor, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he does not correct
Potter. This time.

"Mr. Potter," Severus replies. A dozen words flutter against his tongue, a dozen questions about
Potter's nighttime activities, the dark circles beneath his eyes, his dreams. Severus rejects all of these,
settling on the most inane. "How are you finding the educational profession?"

Potter shrugs, an elegant one-shouldered gesture.

"Still getting used to it, I suppose," Potter says, "I'm just supervising classes right now. Won't start
teaching properly until next term."

"And your friends," Severus continues, though he doesn't give any sort of damn, "What do they
think of your change in career?"

Something darkly familiar flashes in Potter's gaze, and Severus thinks that Harry's friends must not
be as supportive as the Chosen One would prefer.

"You really want to discuss my friends, Professor?" Potter asks. "I'm sure I could tell you all about
their feelings and relationships and lives, if that's what you'd like. Bill Weasley and his wife Fleur
are going to have a baby, for example and -"

"Your point is taken," Severus mutters, and the corner of Potter's mouth curls shyly.

"What have you been up to, then? I see you can brew potions. Is that what you do all day?"

"In the five minutes that I'm not sitting motionless in that chair, bestowing wisdom and counsel on
numerous troubled children."

Potter bites down on his lower lip to stop from smiling, and Severus watches the slow catch and drag
of tooth on skin before he realizes what he is doing.

"Fine. We won't talk about my friends, and we won't talk about your free time. I'm not here for
myself, as you've made it clear that you didn't - and I wanted to respect - anyway, I've been sent."

Of course he isn't here on his own volition. And why would he be? Severus warned him away, after all; he is grateful that for once the boy is following his instructions. He is similarly grateful that Potter is not aware that he is much more present in Severus' life than he realizes.

"Sent by whom exactly?" If this is Albus' doing -

"Alcott. The new Potions Master - well, you probably know him."

Severus sighs, feels the sigh run from the toes of his polished boots to the jagged tips of his fingernails.

"A fan of his, I take it?"

"I taught young Mr. Prawn over a decade ago, and he has not improved with age. And he sends you to me, like an owl with a scroll, why exactly?"

"Explosions, I think, were the impetus."

Severus snorts, unsurprised. "You don't say."

"Yeah - apparently on Tuesday a bunch of cauldrons caught fire. He didn't explain the situation that clearly, and it was hard to understand with all the trembling."

"You don't say," Severus says again, and Potter raises an eyebrow.

"Is there something you aren't telling me?"

"Always," Severus says, and Potter laughs, small and bitten off, but he laughs and Severus feel wandless, wordless magic spark between his fingers (the first time he lit a candle, opened a door, vanished from an empty room.)

Something is going wrong inside him, that's the only explanation for it. In the presence of Harry Potter, Severus inexplicably feels control leaching from the hard knot of his heart. He is a clock gone slow, a lock worn soft through ages of use.

Dead. He is dead. It is important to remember this.

"Did Prawn mention anything about the contents of his store room?" Severus asks, more to distract himself than because he holds out any hope in Prawn's slight degree of competency.

"Um, no."

"Of course not." Severus feels the urge to bite something. "He asks me for help - no, he doesn't even ask me, he sends a boy in his place, meanwhile he hasn't even the good grace to take stock of the bloody potions store."

"The - wait, a boy? Cheers -"

"- endangering the children in his care and expecting me to come to his imbecilic rescue -"

"I can look at them for you."

Severus is still mid-rant, and he doesn't completely process Potter's words until the boy falls silent.
"What did you say?"

"I said I could look at the potions storeroom for you. If there was something you needed to - it wouldn't be any trouble. As long as Alcott was all right with -"

"Alcott Prawn will be all right with whatever I tell him is all right."

Potter laughs softly, under his breath.

"You're rather funny when you're angry, did you know that? Or maybe it's just funny when you're not angry at me. But if I can be of help -"

"While I appreciate your offer, Mr. Potter, I rather doubt you would recognize the difference between fresh Alihotsy and aged Alihotsy and Alihotsy that has long gone black and rotten, and Alihotsy that is impure, and Alihotsy that has been diluted with dried sage to maximize the profits of certain potions dealers that shall remain nameless, Herbert Carmichael."

Potter stares at him for a moment, mouth slightly open (something is going wrong inside of Severus, that's the only possible explanation).

"You're - probably right. I mean, my potions marks weren't exactly stellar, were they."

"That is the understatement of a lifetime."

"Lovely," Harry says with a sniff. It bothers Severus how unruffled Harry seems - as if Severus' vitriol is just an insect batting up against a window-screen. Where is the boy that could be reduced to smoldering ashes with one curl of Severus' lip? "Well, I've done my bit. The rest is up to Alcott. But I'm more than willing to help out if you need it."

"I no longer teach in this school, in case you have forgotten. Surely the tedious task of basic inventory should not fall on my painted shoulders."

"You're quite -" Harry stops, and shakes his head. "I don't know. Never mind. Sorry to have bothered you."

You didn't, Severus does not say, you didn't. Neither does he ask why Harry is not sleeping, whether he has gone as mad as Draco suggested, whether the War wakes him up with soft, toothy bites the way it does Severus. Severus chokes down any longing for small talk, any ill-advised desire to prolong this inane conversation.

"Let me know if you change your mind. About the whole storroom thing. You could lurk about in a nearby painting and I could bring you - well, it doesn't matter. Anyway."

Severus watches Potter idly play with a button on his cuff. He remembers that gesture from their last meeting - that could be fifty years ago or could be yesterday. Time must pass differently for portraits, must be harder to track or process. Or maybe his interactions with Harry Potter are just more - more -

He cannot possibly finish that sentence. That thought.

"Goodbye, Mr. Potter."

"Bye," Harry says softly, and Severus turns on his heel, walks back into his potions class without even a nod of farewell. He does not watch Potter leave, and he does not think about why. He does not wonder when he will see Potter again, or if the boy will come back.
As it is, the boy does.

Not that night or the next, but it can't have been a week before Severus is woken by the sound of heavy breathing. His first thought is of panic, but that is usually his first thought upon waking, portrait or no. He squints in the darkness but can see nothing in the black of his rooms or the surrounding hallways. He had not meant to sleep that evening. He had not meant to sleep at all.

"Evelyn?" he says softly, for the boy had come to him once in the night, weeping with nightmares of tall and thorny walls. There is no answering high-pitched wail, so it cannot be Evelyn. Instead, Severus hears a sharp intake of breath, and then silence, a silence that seems impossibly louder than the sounds that came before.

"Who the hell is -"

"Lumos," he hears someone say, and the shining face of Harry Potter is suddenly and sharply illuminated. Severus blinks against the brightness, and sees Potter's profile etched in silver behind his eyelids.

"I'm sorry, I'm -" Potter is wiping a palm across his eyes. "I didn't mean to wake you."

He is wearing that familiar burgundy bathrobe over pajamas of some kind, pale blue stripes visible at his wrists and ankles. His feet are bare and Severus will not look at them.

"That - that -" No, this is unacceptable, form some words you stupid bloody - "That somehow fails to ring true, given your presence at my portrait in the dead of night."

Potter presses his lips into a thin, sharp line and gives a thin, sharp nod.

"Right. Right. I'll just - I'm sorry."

He takes a step back and Severus says the word before he finds the will to stop himself.

"Don't."

Potter freezes, eyes bloodshot with tears but wide with surprise. Severus struggles to find a reason for his sudden lapse of sanity.

"I cannot have you - let loose upon the school in this condition. Merlin knows what idiocy you might resort to."

Potter's smile is more of a wince, really, but Severus will take it. Potter does not leave, shuffling reluctantly closer.

"I had a dream," Harry says. "I don't want to tell you about it."

Severus understands that feeling more than he'd like.

"Do you have such dreams often?"

"Often. Yeah. Pretty much constantly, actually. Since - since everything." Potter frowns, and in the dim light from his wand, the circles under the boy's eyes are thrown into even sharper relief. "Anyway, I just - sometimes I wander the halls, I guess. At night, when I'm trying to think of something else."

"I am no stranger to such dreams," Severus says, and regrets it almost instantly. Potter's mouth softens, eyes becoming a bit less frantic, and Severus has to weigh his admission as having been
worry it.

"Have they gone away? The dreams? Now that - now."

"Now that I'm deceased, you mean?"

Potter winces as if Severus had struck him. Severus finds himself more bothered by this than he should be. Why in Merlin's name would he care if Potter regrets his death? Severus is the one that had to sodding live it (pun certainly not intended) and there really is no substitute for firsthand experience when it comes to brutal acts of grievous injury.

"I no longer have nightmares, if that is what you are asking. Would you consider that a reasonable trade?"

Harry pulls his robe more tightly around himself.

"No," he says quietly, the word papery as moth wings in the stillness of the hallway.

Snape has the half-mad urge to reach out, put his fingers on the crease between Potter's eyebrows and push until it's smooth.

"I lied," Potter says quickly, while Severus is still contemplating this senseless gesture. "I wasn't wandering the halls. I was coming to see you."

"You -"

Severus is both shocked and unsettled by the confession - both by the words themselves and the fact that Harry Potter suddenly finds himself unable to lie to his most despised teacher.

"But - why?" His voice cracks on the last word, but Potter has the good grace to ignore it.

"I -" Potter sighs - a heavy, shuddering thing. "Jesus. I've come here before. At night."

"You - you what?"

"You just never woke up," Potter continues, darting delicately around Severus' outrage. "I don't know why, but sometimes I - feel better down here."

"Potter, you are speaking nonsensically." The boy cannot be telling the truth, because Severus would know, surely he would know. He can't have slept, unknowing, while Potter bloody wept in front of his portrait. Severus is the one who is stalking Potter through the hallways, and not the other way around (and stalking is not the appropriate word, of course, Severus is simply ensuring the boy doesn't bash his fool head in.) "I fail to see how -"

"I didn't write my N.E.W.T.s, you know. I couldn't. I left because - Hogwarts wasn't - it wasn't safe anymore. That probably sounds barmy to you, because of course it was safer than before, but for me it was hard to - to separate things. To go to classes, and eat meals, and sleep without dreaming about everything that happened here, everyone that -" Potter scrubs at his eyes again.

"When I left the first time, I thought - no, I'm never coming back. But then - I spoke to you after Aberforth's funeral and it seemed like - even though you clearly didn't want me within two miles of you -"

"Clearly." Severus' voice is rougher than he expected.

"It seemed like maybe I was running away. And I didn't want to do that. And you - you made it
Potter shrugs, ridiculous and vulnerable and yet somehow endearing in his fuzzy bathrobe.

"To stay."

Severus finds himself drawing a slow breath in through his teeth, like a hiss or a sound of pain. He did not ask for this. He shouldn't be expected to bear this sort of responsibility, this sort of obligation. He does not want any hold on Potter's life choices, because how could that end in anything other than grave-deep regret?

"That's why I came down here," Potter continues, "I didn't mean to wake you. Seeing you, sometimes helps me get back to sleep."

“That fascinating am I?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I wish you would explain yourself then. From what brief points of lucidity I can string together, it sounds like you have been coming to the dungeons to watch me sleeping.”

“It is too late at night for you to use words like lucidity.”

“Yes, Merlin forbid you learn anything.”

“It’s because you’re still here,” Potter says in a rush. “Even after what happened - you’re still here. And you remind me how much people sacrificed -”

“Potter -”

“And how much work there still is to do. For me. For - for everyone.”

Throughout this fumbling speech, Potter has not been looking at Severus, keeping his shadowed eyes fixed on the floor. Severus can see a prickle of colour on the boy’s cheekbones, standing out against his usual pallour. It occurs to him that he notices a good deal too much about Harry Potter’s skin.

“And the school feels safer somehow. Like it used to.”

Severus snorts. “Yes, when it was riddled with Basilisks and Dementors and great three-headed mutts.”

“Utterly idyllic.”

Severus feels the corner of his mouth twitch. He wonders how many times Potter has come to see him, and how long the boy stayed, and what he saw. No one (save his mother) has ever watched Severus sleep, and it makes the hairs on his arms stand on end. This makes him notice that he has hairs on his arms which are capable of standing on end, a notable discovery in and of itself.

“I’m sorry,” Potter says to fill the silence, and Severus is sick of apologies. They do no good. They bring no one back from the dead, they mend no broken hearts, they heal no scars. “You’re probably exhausted, and here I am, just babbling on at you.”

“Are you feeling sufficiently - comforted?” Severus sneers, “by my warmth and generosity of spirit?”
Potter laughs, and again it has that strange effect on Severus, something he is certain he did not experience when he was alive. He heard Potter laugh dozens of times in the past, and it never stilled the air that way it seems to now.

“You’ve healed me.”

“I am beyond relief.”

Potter nods, rolls his shoulders, and Severus realizes he is about to leave. This is a good thing, this is what Severus wants, and yet he feels the similar desire to reach out, to put a firm hand on a bony shoulder. Which he cannot do, of course, can no more touch Harry Potter than he can sprout wings from his shoulder blades and leap from the astronomy tower.

And why in Merlin’s name would he want to?

“Should you ever return at a similarly ungodly hour, please make an equal amount of ear-splitting noise. I would rather not be the unknown object of your surveillance.”

Potter is looking strangely at him, a mix of confusion and—something else.

“Is that— are you saying that I can come back?”

“Do not make me repeat myself. My generosity of spirit tends to wear thin.”

“Thank you,” Potter says, too earnestly. “Thank you.” Severus has to look away. “I think I’ll try this sleeping thing again.”

“You needn’t look to me for permission. I am not the one with classes to supervise tomorrow.”

“Fair point.” Potter ducks his head in farewell, turning to go. Severus watches him this time, watches his slow steps, the faint and exhausted hunch of his shoulders.

“Potter,” he calls out at the last moment, apparently beyond shame.

The boy turns and again Severus has to look away, dropping his gaze toward his own hands, long white fingers with bitten nails, potions stains and scars and a pale criss-crossing of blue veins. In the moment, they look like someone else’s hands; Severus is certain they belong to a ninety-year-old man he’s never met.

“Idyllic. Given the lateness of the hour, it is an ambitious choice.”

There is a beat of silence, broken only by the thump of Severus’ heart in his chest.

“Oh, shut up,” Harry says with a shake of his head, but he is smiling as he walks away, smiling—

_Potter_ is smiling. Not Harry.

Severus sits back down in his armchair. He feels wakeful, restless. It is not yet dawn, but he cannot close his eyes.

He stays awake that night, and for the next few nights to come. He does not see Potter wandering the hallways, and that is a good thing— _it is_. Potter is sleeping, and Severus is glad of it. It seems odd, however, now that Severus knows the reason for Potter’s wakefulness. The halls seem so much quieter without the sound of shuffling feet, and Potter’s gradually calming breaths.

It is about a week later when it all goes to hell.
Potter makes a re-appearance some time after midnight, and Severus feels a great, sick lurch of unexpected relief. Relief regarding what exactly, he cannot say. There is no part of him that should be gratified by Potter’s nightmares.

He follows the boy on what has become one of his usual paths. Up to the Astronomy Tower, then to the Owler, down past the library and across the second floor. Severus has spent years learning to step lightly, and he finds that he can follow Potter from only a small distance without being noticed, watching the boy out of the corner of his eye as if they were walking together side by side. Of course, Severus is in moonlit apple orchard and Potter is in a lamplit hallway, idly tucking his dark hair back behind his ear. It’s getting long, Severus realizes, almost hanging in the boy’s eyes, curling like ink across his forehead.

That is when Severus steps on a branch. There is a resounding ‘crack’ from his painting, and Potter freezes. He looks up with wide eyes and sees Severus, Severus who has somehow forgotten how to move, Severus staring at him -

“Professor?” Potter begins, confused, when there is the sound of shattering glass from down the hall. Both men look toward it, and Potter has his wand out and is running before Severus finds the wits God gave him and jerks into motion. He follows Potter, but the boy is fast, and Severus is delayed by each painting he has to shift between. He pursues the sharp echo of Potter’s footsteps, pulse leaping at the boy’s sudden shout. It as if some part of Severus has been conditioned to react to Potter in danger, to constantly assume the worst and trail after him - teeth clenched, magic crackling brokenly at his fingertips.

When he finally catches up with the boy, they are in front of the potions storeroom. The door is open, glass scattered like crystal in the light of Potter’s wand.

“Someone was here,” Potter says without even turning to ensure that Severus is behind him. As if Severus is that predictable, as if his following Potter is an unquestionable outcome. “I chased them down that hall, but - I don’t know where they went. It’s a dead end, just a window and a balcony. You don’t think - think they -”

Severus is no stranger to the sounds of creeping panic in Potter’s voice.

“I doubt whoever it was leapt from a balcony, Potter. At any rate, it was most likely a student. I am certain you recall that dead ends at Hogwarts mean little to those of a more delinquent nature.”

“I was hoping you’d go with ‘enterprising’, but perhaps that was too much to ask.” Potter kneels by the broken glass, where a sparkling grey powder has spread across the floor.

“What is it?” Severus asks and Harry touches the powder, lifts his hand and inhales slightly.

“Like - like nothing. I’m sorry, I’m rubbish at this.”

“What does it smell like?” Severus asks and Harry touches the powder, lifts his hand and inhales slightly.

“Taste it.”

Harry catches Severus’ eye with a strange, shocked expression - before he slowly nods.
“And if it’s deadly nightshade?”

“It’s not. Powdered nightshade is nowhere near that colour. A much darker grey.”

“Christ.” Potter sighs, and Severus watches him lift his index finger to his lips, sees the shocking pink of the boy’s tongue flash between his teeth, feels suddenly blind and dumb and weightless (as if he has just been hit by green light and died with trembling hands against his throat).

“A bit like - lemon actually.”

“Bicorn horn,” Severus says quickly, useful at sodding last.

“Bicorn horn? That’s - do you think someone’s brewing Polyjuice?”

This brings up a whole host of ugly memories, and Severus is about to make another snide remark about Potter’s past - when he sees something toward the end of the hallway. It looks very much like a scrap of parchment.

“What is that?” he says softly, and Potter goes to retrieve it.

“It’s a spell, I think,” Potter says after a moment of hunched concentration, bringing it back for Severus to examine. “I can’t read it.”

Severus blinks in the dim light, trying to make out the words that Potter holds toward him.

“Lift that light a bit higher.” Severus takes in the torn edges of the parchment, the spidery Latin text in ink as dark as blood. “It’s - no.”

“Professor?”

“No,” Severus says again.

His mind tumbles like a river over stones. It cannot possibly be what he thinks it is. It cannot be, but he’d know that writing anywhere, could do a passable forgery when he was in his twenties and gave less of a damn.

“I think that this is -” Severus can barely form the words; it feels akin to blasphemy. “Viridi Magicae.”

He lets the appropriate amount of respectful and outraged silence follow.

“Should I - know what that is?”

Merlin’s sake. “No, I suppose not.” Severus shakes his head, lips still trembling. “Viridi Magicae is one of the most renowned books on herbal potions-making in the known world. It is essentially the foundation of modern brewing. For someone to vandalize it in such a manner - I simply cannot -”

“Are you okay?” Potter asks slowly, and Severus realizes he is breathing rather rapidly, the world flashing like spiderwebs at the corners of his eyes.

“I certainly am not.”

“Ach, laddie, ’tis just a book,” the old witch beside Severus croaks, shaking her head ruefully before promptly falling back to sleep.

“It is not just a book. It is over one thousand years old, it is a piece of history. It is -” Severus trails
off, biting his lip until he tastes the sharp salt of blood. He realizes that Potter is watching him in silence, pupils huge and expression strangely blank.

“So - you think someone tore a page from this book - and then broke into the potions storeroom - to what? To make whatever is written here?”

Severus looks again at the scrap of yellowed paper in Potter’s out-stretched hand. It has been over a decade since he last saw this book, and even then it was behind glass at the Wizarding Library of London (or Will, as he called it, having frequented it enough to be on more familiar terms.)

“I will have to study these instructions further,” Severus says, “to ascertain their exact purpose. But there are only two copies of this book still in existence; if someone has gained access to one of them, with the intent of recreating this potion, we are not dealing with a student of this school. This would be the work of someone vastly more skilled.”

“What do we do?”

The ‘we’ rolls off Potter’s tongue without the boy even flinching or blushing. Severus, on the other hand, feels it like a switchblade between his ribs.

“Potter,” Severus says, regretting the words even as he forms them, “I believe I may require your-”

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“-help is invaluable in this matter, as is your colleague’s,” Ms. Peggotty tells Harry, hovering like a fog over the children’s section. “You simply must go to Rhodes.”

Chapter End Notes

Over a month behind schedule, but here is an update at last. Thanks everyone for sticking with me and for all the amazing encouragement I’ve gotten so far! As this is still more or less unbeta’d, I adore your feedback and your comments. I wish I could say that updates would be more regular from here on in, but as I am going back to grad school NEXT WEEK, it might be more of the same. If you want to say hi, hassle me about writing more, talk social work master's anxiety, or basically affirm our mutual love for Snape and Harry, I'm at mia-ugly.tumblr.com.
Imperator Furiosa voice: "Remember me??"

For anyone still interested, I EXIST. This semester was more stressful and time-consuming than I expected, and I am so sorry that I have not been able to update in such a long time. I promise you, this story has not been abandoned. For everyone that's been commenting and giving me kudos and hanging in there with me - oh my god, you are amazing!! I cannot thank you enough for keeping me motivated throughout the semester and making me believe that I would ONE DAY write something other than an essay, and that people might actually read it.

That said, after four months of full-time grad school and full-time work AND a practicum, it is difficult to weave together the threads of sexy wizard love once more. I hope this update isn't the hot mess I think it is, and IF IT IS all your feedback is so welcome and so helpful!

Chapter 5

“Potter,” Severus says, regretting the words even as he forms them, “I believe I may require your-”

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“-help is invaluable in this matter, as is your colleague’s,” Mrs. Peggotty tells Harry, hovering like a fog over the children’s section. “You simply must go to Rhodes.”

“Even if -”

“I shall have it all approved by the board, never you fear.” The librarian does not wait for Harry to finish. “This is bigger than anything as arbitrary as ‘budgeting restrictions.’ Only give me your word that when you do catch the honourless malefactor that’s been vandalizing our books, you allow me to deal with them.”

“I don’t know if that would be - strictly legal.”

“Well, then,” Peggotty ‘hmmphs.’ “At least try to stick to your ‘per diem’ allowance.”

The next day at work, there is an owl waiting for Harry in the break room, one of those barn-owl types with the sunset-coloured wings and face like a lamb. It resists to release its hold on the sealed letter in its beak until Harry basically tears it away, and that is how he realizes that the bird could belong to no one other than Snape.

Harry makes himself a cup of tea, and drinks it while he reads the note. After a moment, he is shocked to realize how familiar the slanted writing on the page is, how easily recognizable Snape’s Y’s and S’s are. After a moment more, the owl hops up onto Harry’s shoulder and begins to nibble at his hair.
The note contains a potential date for the trip, and a request to reply with confirmation and a meeting place. Harry stops and starts his answer more times than is necessary for something of such little significance, but - to be fair - there is a sharp beak rather close to his ear. He suggests his address as their departure point, but as soon as the owl has the letter in its grasp and has taken off through an open window, Harry feels as if he’s made a mistake. Is it odd to invite Snape round to his? It’s not like he’s inviting him in for a drink or anything, it’s just - did Snape expect to leave from Will, or - is Harry acting too familiar, or is he -

He’s overthinking it. He’s overthinking the hell out of it.

The night before the trip, Harry can’t sleep, and he can’t say why. He has obsessively tidied his flat, swept the kitchen, moved the books and papers off the kitchen table to a shelf at long last. Even still, he feels a strange, restless energy, and he stays up far later than he should rearranging his small number of possessions, opening the blinds and then closing them, polishing the taps until they gleam. It’s the same sense of twitching anticipation he used to get waiting for Snape to show up at Will, but it can’t have to do with Snape - it’s to do with Greece, maybe, with the thrill of travel. It’s to do with the unknown, with nerves and questions about the missing books. It has to be something, because if the presence of a former professor in Harry’s home causes him this much anxiety, he should probably seek professional help.

Snape arrives a half hour earlier than Harry expects, so of course he looks a right mess - hair wet and sticking up at all angles, burgundy robe wrapped tightly around his shower-damp skin.

“Oh! Hello. Sorry for - all this.” He waves his hand at his disheveled state as he opens the door.

“Thought you were coming round nine. The plan was nine, wasn’t it? Or have I lost my mind?”

Snape says nothing, bundled up in that ridiculous grey coat and looking - utterly poleaxed. Harry quickly runs his fingers through his offensive hair. He can’t look that wretched, can he? Or perhaps Snape is upset that Harry wasn’t ready and waiting at the door a good two hours in advance.

“Nine,” Snape says, but his tone is distracted, as if the number has lost all meaning.

“Ha. Vindication. I should make you wait outside, really, but I won’t.”

He leads Snape up the staircase to his apartment, third floor and vaguely the size of a closet. Despite the frantic cleaning, Harry feels a bit embarrassed of it, and wonders what Snape thinks, wonders if (oh jesus) Snape feels bad for Harry, thinks the place is shabby and dim. Or worse, if Snape finds it unremarkable - finds Harry’s small shelf of books proof enough of a uncultured mind, and - and why would that be worse, why would it even matter -

“Are you traveling to Greece in that ensemble?” Snape says, and Harry realizes he’s just been standing motionless in his kitchen, searching Snape for some sort of reaction.

“No. Uh, no. Right. I’ll just - do you want a cup of tea or -”

Snape refuses with a wordless shake of his head, and Harry retreats gratefully to his bedroom. He dresses in whatever he happens to grab first, conscious that every second he’s out of sight is another second that Snape is being left alone to snoop and judge. When Harry emerges from his room, however, he finds Snape examining the potted plant on the windowsill, white fingers tracing the edge of one green leaf. His eyebrows are drawn together, and Harry feels like he is intruding on something private, a strange moment of Snape lost in introspection. Through the window, grey light catches the shine of Snape’s black hair, and the hum of traffic purrs like a cat.

“It’s -” Harry begins.
“A peace lily. I am aware.” Snape does not look up. “You’re overwatering it. And the light is hardly ideal.”

“Oh. Okay. It’s my biggest window, so I thought it was the only place for it.”

“It will bloom more frequently in a South facing room.” Snape steps away from the window. “Are you sufficiently prepared?”

“Yeah. Let me just grab my bag.” Harry slings his satchel over his shoulder, already bursting with notebooks and pens and sunblock.

“You have - Apparated internationally before?”

“Bit late to ask that, don’t you think?” Snape looks vaguely green, so Harry continues quickly. “I have. Takes a bit out of you at first, but - it’s not too bad. Have you?”

“Once or twice.” Snape shrugs out of his coat, and drapes it over the back of Harry’s sofa. “Might I leave this here? I do not believe the weather in Rhodes will be that inclement.”

“Of course.” It feels a bit odd, Snape leaving something at Harry’s. It feels - familiar. The sort of thing a friend might do.

“And you know where we are going?”

Harry rolls his eyes, tucking his wand into his pocket. He doesn’t need it, not for this. He doesn’t tell Snape that he could probably Apparate clear to Canada if he wanted, doesn’t mention the floor-shaking nightmares he used to have back at Hogwarts (the crackle of magic he feels on his skin at every hour of the day, like static electricity just waiting to bleed from his gums and fingertips -)

“Potter?”

Harry ignores him. He has to, just for a moment, just to picture their destination in his mind. He knows the coordinates; he can see the latitude running through the earth like a crack in a mirror, and it calls to him, calls -

“Potter.” There is a trace of alarm in Snape’s voice. Harry doesn’t know when he closed his eyes, but they’re closed now.

"Hold on to me," he says without thinking. He tries to ignore the heat of Snape's hands on his forearms, and the way his fingers tighten as the lurch of Apparation takes over.

When the ground finally reasserts itself beneath their feet, Harry keeps his eyes closed for just a moment longer, forcing down a clench of nausea and dizziness. He can still feel the warmth of Snape’s hands on his, the ghost of Snape’s breath against his face and neck. He waits for his pulse to stop thumping angrily in his wrists, waits for the earth stop tilting. One breath. Another.

Just as he is about to lift his eyelids, his forehead collides with Snape's - a sickening crack - before they pull away from each other.

"Merlin's sake, Potter," Snape spits, releasing his hold on Harry's forearms.

"Sorry, sorry -" Harry rubs his forehead, stars flashing behind his eyes. Brilliant, Potter, bloody brilliant.

When his vision clears, Snape is standing a few feet away. There is an azure sea wide and blue
against his back.

Harry opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. Snape smirks at him, or at least makes some strange amalgamation of a smirk and a wince.

The sky is cloudy, but it does nothing to diminish the vibrant blue of the sea, the white sand that curves like a body against it. In the distance, he can make out the shadowy shapes of rocky cliffs. It is impossibly beautiful and Harry looks at Snape to tell him as much, but the words dry up on his tongue when he catches Snape's unguarded expression (knitted eyebrows and small, sad twist of mouth).

Snape instantly schools his face into a familiar scowl, but Harry feels something flutter in his chest, a bird or a river or something that should not be kept behind locked doors.

"Come," Snape says quickly, "Lindos is only a short distance from here, but we need to reach the library before mid-day."

"I thought we were going to Rhodes."

"The island, not the city. Our books are in Lindos. This way."

Harry follows him down a narrow road, watching the fine narrow lines of Snape's shoulders, the stoop of his spine. He wonders at Snape's familiarity with this path, wonders when he travelled to Greece before, and how old he was. Once again, he's struck by the odd realization of Snape's humanity, of the life he previously led that had nothing to do with Harry or his mum or Hogwarts or anything familiar. It is an unsettling thought.

"Try to keep up," Snape says without looking back, "Surely the year in your library has not atrophied your muscles completely."

Harry does not reply, largely due to the warmth that runs through his bones when Snape refers to Will as *Harry's*.

Lindos turns out to be a tiny white maze of a city, nestled low in the cliffs and over-looked by a crumbling stone acropolis. The streets are cobbled and littered with market stalls, and Harry almost loses Snape numerous times in the crowds. Once, Snape reaches back and grabs the cuff of Harry's sleeve, dragging him along, and it takes a good ten minutes before Snape realizes he's still holding on and all but shoves Harry away from him (granted, Harry should have noticed earlier, but he's perhaps a bit used to being dragged around the globe by infinitely more clever individuals).

They reach the library in question, a small stone building that looks more like a church than a conventional library - although a church is not so bizarre a comparison (there are stranger things to worship than books.) There is a dark-haired woman at the front desk scribbling furiously in a notebook, and at the creak of the opening door she looks up with a scowl. The scowl fades into a smile when she sees Snape (Harry swallows around the strange lump that has somehow formed in his throat.)

Snape says something that Harry doesn't understand and the woman gets up from the desk to shake his hand. It should come as no surprise that Snape speaks fluent Greek, but again Harry can't help but wonder when he learned it, and where he had to use it, and what other languages he speaks. Snape and the woman chat back and forth for a few minutes, and Harry doesn't want to bother them, doesn't want to interrupt this weird moment of Snape being friendly with someone - but he also doesn't know how long he should stand there gaping like a fish at the exchange. Snape sounds like he does when he speaks Latin: a soft, smoky accent in his low voice, an effect that makes Harry feel
light-headed, as if he’s had too much sun. He lifts his hand to his forehead to see if he’s got a fever or something, and that catches the attention of Snape’s friend.

“Harry Potter,” she says. There are strands of silver in her black hair, and lines around her eyes. He cannot possibly place her age, though he’d say she was older than Snape by at least a few years. “I thought -” She trails off, saying something in Greek and Snape snorts.

“She thought you’d be taller,” he translates, and Harry tries his best to look amused. Ha bloody ha. She and Snape deserve each other. “This is Eleni Andreadis.”

“Hi,” Harry says, extending his hand to be shaken, “I’m a librarian too.”

“I am not a librarian,” Eleni responds, as if her entire existence has been belittled. “This is not a library. It is an archive.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, um -” Harry drops his hand. This is going brilliantly. “So how do you two know each other?”

Snape translates the question, and Eleni laughs and says something else in Greek, and Snape shakes his head, mouth quirking in the hint of a smile. Harry feels something like horror shiver over him because - Christ, did these two date? Are they dating right now?

“We have academic interests in common,” Snape says dryly, and that does not answer any of Harry’s questions.

“I used to own a bookstore,” Eleni says, with her soft, melodic accent. “I sold dear Severus his first copy of Most Potente Potions and he has been mad for me since.”

Snape rolls his eyes, but Harry’s mind can’t let go of ‘dear Severus’ - teeth grinding tightly around it. Dear Severus. Mr. Potter?

“Shall we find your books, Mr. Potter?”

Dear Severus. Mr. Potter.

Harry winces, and he doesn’t know why. Neither does he know why he’s here in this library (yes, library, damn it) when there’s nothing he can offer to the investigation. Certainly he can’t speak latin, or translate ancient spells into modern purposes. And Eleni is leaning into Snape, saying something softly in Greek that makes him shake his head and curve his lips -

“I thought I might - look around the town a bit.” Harry forces the words between his teeth. “I’m sure you don’t need me here. You’d probably get more done without someone hanging over your shoulder.”

Eleni nods, how practical, how thoughtful - but Snape’s eyebrows draw together, a dark line creasing his forehead. Just for a second. Barely long enough to notice.

“Of course,” he says and immediately turns back toward his friend, the two of them engrossed in conversation before Harry has even raised his hand in farewell.

Harry stomps out of the building in protest, heading down the street before he realizes that he didn’t arrange a meeting place or time with his travel companion. He’s too embarrassed to stomp back in, so keeps walking. Let Snape figure it out. He’s the one who will need to find a way home.

Harry knows he’s being ridiculous, and there’s no reason at all for him to be in such a mood. Really,
if Eleni and Snape are dating, good for them. It doesn’t matter to Harry, and he can’t be moody because Snape would rather spend time with an actual friend (or girlfriend) than a hated former student. Given the two options, there’s no choice, is there?

Harry resolves to explore for an hour before heading back, and to stop taking Snape’s cool indifference for outright hostility. Cool indifference is much more than Harry should expect, and much more than he deserves.

“Harry Potter!”

An unfamiliar voice startles him, and Harry stops in his tracks. A swarthy man with a bald head and goatee is running towards him, cheeks flushed. He beams when he reaches Harry, grabbing his hand and shaking it fiercely.

“I knew it was you, even at a distance. The Boy Who Lived - what an honour. And what brings you to Lindos, Harry Potter, what happy chance has delivered you to my home?”

Harry finds it difficult to gather his thoughts with his hand being pumped so enthusiastically. He wasn’t expecting to be recognized and is totally unprepared for it. After so long being invisible, it is a complicated shift to make.

“Um - I’m just visiting for the day. A work trip, actually.” He forces himself to focus.

“Arsenio Kakos, at your service. That is my restaurant, just there, my pride and sweat and sorrow.” The man gestures toward a white-walled building half a block away, blue letters reading “Arsenio’s” painted on a hanging wooden sign. “You must come in, you must eat with us. It would be my honour to serve the one who saved us all.”

Oh Jesus. Harry blushes, feeling the praise prickle uncomfortably against his skin. He should be used to this but - but he never will be. He’s torn between the urge to scream at Arsenio about all the people who died so that Harry even had one chance, one bloody chance - and the urge to turn around without another word and lock himself in his flat and never leave, ever again.

“You’re too kind,” he says instead, and Arsenio smiles.

“Tonight. You are in Lindos for the day, correct? You must join us for dinner. We make the finest moussaka in Greece, you will taste it, you will see.”

“I - I’m not just by myself, I’ll have to see what -”

“Any friend of Harry Potter’s is welcome at Arsenio’s. You must come.”

“I’ll try,” Harry says. “I don’t know -”

“The word of Harry Potter is worth its weight in Galleons. I will have a table waiting and ouzo poured.”

“You really don’t have to.” Harry can’t help it, he’s a little bit charmed.

“I really do, Harry Potter. It is the least I could on behalf of the wizards and witches of Greece, the very least. Too little, in fact, but we do what we are able.”

Arsenio gives a short bow and hustles back to his restaurant. Harry immediately heads to the outskirts of town, somewhere close to the water and far from the crowds. He longs for the ocean he saw when they first arrived, and after a few conversations with helpful locals, he finds his way to the
beach. It’s a long stretch of white sand leading to green-blue water that laps gently against the rocky inlet. There are a few people walking along the shoreline and one sailboat skimming the waves.

Harry sits down and leans back on his elbows in the cool sand, closing his eyes against the glint of sunlight on water. For a little while, the War is millions of miles away - so remote it might not even have happened. So distant, Harry might never see it again.

For a little while.

He plans to get up after a few minutes and see the rest of the town. The day is early yet, and there’s so much more to Lindos than just sand and water. Harry tracks the sun’s progress between and behind clouds, and he leans back on his elbows. There’s something hypnotic about the water against the shore, the susurrus of gentle waves amidst the occasional shriek of children. Harry feels utterly transported; he could be anyone, anything - a wide sea of possibility stretching blue and hushed before him.

The sun shifts in the sky. Harry buys a bracelet “guaranteed to ward off the evil eye” from an old woman pushing a cart through the sand, and laughs as she immediately wraps it around his wrist, knotting it carefully.

Harry closes his eyes. When he opens them again the sun is hidden behind clouds and there is a couple having a picnic a short distance from him. He watches the space between their profiles grow ever smaller, their voices low in quiet conversation interspersed with the girl’s ringing laughter.

He closes his eyes. For a while, all he hears is laughter and the waves. If he opens his mouth, Harry can taste salt on his tongue, saturating the air. He decides he will never leave this beach. He will grow old here and Snape will find his bones, bleached white and smoothed by sunlight and sand. He loses himself in thoughts of Snape, and lets his mind drift in that shadowy world for a few moments. Snape’s fingers tracing the edge of one green leaf. Snape’s hands warm on Harry’s forearms. Snape’s -

It's the soft clearing of his throat that gives the man away - an exasperated sound that Harry recognizes immediately. He realizes with a start that he would recognize it anywhere.

He looks up to see Snape looming over him, black shadow against the bright grey sky.

"I startled you," Snape says. He seems on the verge of saying something more before he thinks better of it, and snaps his mouth shut. Harry nods, but it isn't Snape's arrival that he's startled by; it's the voice in his mind asking how much more of Snape he knows (the glimpse of black robes and hunched shoulders at the back of Aberforth’s funeral, calling to Harry like iron to a magnet, and he knew he just knew -)

"It's fine," Harry says. He's gotten too much sun, that's what it is. He's gone mad with salt and heat and beauty. “What time is it? Sorry, I meant to come back.”

“Nearly four.”

“Four?” Harry repeats, stunned. How could an entire day have passed him by?
“T had no idea it had gone so late. How did you -”

“Know where to find you?” Snape rolls his eyes. “Do not act so surprised. You are frightfully predictable.”

Snape has made no move to sit, so Harry reluctantly rises, brushing the sand off his jeans. He supposes he won’t spend the rest of his life on this beach after all.
“What did you find out about our books?” he asks, in the hopes that he can distract Snape from watching him clumsily hop about while attempting to dump the sand out of his shoes. When he nearly falls over for the second time, he leans briefly on Snape for balance. It’s an unconscious gesture, unintentionally done, but after Harry pulls away he realizes that Snape has said nothing in response to his question. Nothing at all.

In fact, the man has gone strangely red.

He’s blushing. It strikes Harry like lightning. Severus Snape is blushing. The whole thing is more than a little disturbing, truth be told. Snape blushed like he does everything else - awkward and unlovely, red blotches flaring high on his cheekbones and the bridge of his hooked nose.

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“Um - you did find something?” Harry blurts, because the thought of Snape blushing is too unsettling to linger over. “About the books?”

Snape blinks at him (dark eyelashes fluttering in a way that can only be described as ‘alarmingly pretty’ and makes Harry shiver inexplicably) and then nods.

"The page taken from Viridi Magicae is a restorative potion. Some translation was required, but it seems as if the purpose is generally of the bone-mending variety."

"What, our vandal’s too good for an Episkey?"

"That is not the kind of mending I mean. Imagine the spell required to mend a crushed limb. The fine bones of an entire left hand. Episkey is children's magic."

Harry can remember the spell coming in handy more than a few times in his short life, but he's not about to defend its honour. Where Snape's concerned, he has a tough enough time defending his own.

“And the other?”

“Venenum Historia’s page contained - it is difficult to explain. It is a growth acceleration potion. There is a healing component there too, but it is - it is not something we use today. It is almost spiritual in quality."

So their vandal was sick, maybe? Or hurt?

“Why would someone need these spells?” Harry asks. “Why not use more modern versions?”

Snape hesitates. When he speaks next, there is a sad sort of longing in his voice.

"This is Old Magic, Potter. There are those who still value it above all others."

"Who?"

"Are you asking me to provide names and addresses?"

"I'm asking you if it's Dark." Harry watches the slow bob of Snape's Adam's apple in his pale throat. "If it's dangerous."

"Not inherently." Snape blinks and looks away from Harry, staring out at the smooth sea. "It is - complicated, I suppose. I will know more once I've ascertained the purpose of the other potions. Eleni seemed confident that she could locate Les Elixirs Anciennes."

"You'll keep helping us?"
"It appears I have little choice in the matter. I hardly expect you'd give me five minutes peace with the great mystery afoot."

"Know me well, do you?"

"Not at all," Snape says, and his tone is so quiet and intense that Harry feels that shiver of discomfort again, a cold static over his entire body. He hopes Snape doesn't notice.

They walk in silence back to town, and by the time they reach Lindos’ cobbled streets, the sun is beginning to drop low on the horizon. The evening air is cool and fragrant, and there is a dark ring of sweat around the collar of Snape's blue shirt. Harry finds it startling somehow - the fact that Snape can sweat. He finds a great many things startling, lately.

It isn't until he's passing Arsenio's that he remembers his dinner plans. His stomach rumbles conveniently at the same time.

"Hungry?" he asks, with what he hopes it a winning smile.

"No," Snape says, without a hitch in his step.

"I could stand a bite to eat," Harry continues, chasing after him, "And we're here - in Greece and it's a beautiful evening and -"

"Potter," Snape glowers over at him.

"And I've made a promise, as it happens. To the owner of the restaurant - that one, there."

Snape glowers for a second longer before he keeps walking briskly down the cobblestones. Harry sighs and follows.

"It's not entirely my fault - I've never been anywhere, you'd think you'd want me to take in some of the local culture or some sort of thing, and the chap who owns it is a wizard for one, and so excited - he all but made me swear an Unbreakable Vow that I'd come -"

"Potter, some of us have appointments to be kept and do not have the time nor the desire to gad about with former students on some bloody holiday -"

"It's just dinner," Harry protests, and Snape stops walking, whirling around to face him.

"I do not wish to have dinner with you," Snape hisses, more upset than the prospect of a meal should really make anyone. "What are you - did Eleni -"

The words die in the air, falling like moths, and Harry shakes his head, utterly bewildered.

"Did Eleni - what?"

"What?" Snape repeats. "Nothing."

They stare at each other for a long moment, Snape looking simultaneously terrified and thunderous. Harry feels like he isn't the only one who's had too much sun.

"It's on me, anyway," he says. Snape still seems convinced that this is all some great joke at his expense. "Least I can do."

The corner of Snape's mouth twitches, and the scowl creasing his forehead begins to dissipate.
"It's on Will," he sniffs, and Harry can't see any problem with that.

Arsenio is even more delighted than their first meeting, if that can be believed. Snape is surprisingly civil as they are ushered toward the 'best table in the house' and things get rapidly out of control from that point on. The first two shots of ouzo are free, and the table is soon piled high with skewers and pita and tzatziki. For the most part, Snape refuses to speak to Harry, and Harry is forced to carry on an awkwardly cheerful one-sided conversation with himself. He pulls out all his best material - the man who got his hand stuck in a particularly amourous enchanted romance novel, the destruction of half the children's section when a new employee (while drunk) left the Feral Fiction unlocked overnight. The men and women who come in daily, looking for "that book with a blue cover," or "the one about magic."

Snape does not laugh. He barely looks up from his meal, but Harry can see his fingers trembling just slightly around his knife and fork, cutting tiny bird-sized bites of food from the massive amount he's left untouched. He follows the path of Snape's fingers up his arm to his narrow shoulder and white throat. Beneath the high collar of Snape's blue button-down, Harry can see a hard knot of scar tissue, almost silver in the candlelight. He wants to touch it, suddenly - his want a tangible thing with teeth. He feels it in his hands, hot and sharp, wants to reach out and prove to himself that Snape is still alive.

Of course, Snape chooses this moment to look up, eyes locking with Harry's own in the split second before Harry finds the presence of mind to look away.

"I know what you are doing."

"Hmm? What?" Harry says, feigning distraction like he has a chance in hell.

"Desist in your open-mouthed staring. I realize I can't be the most pleasant of subjects, but I hope I don't merit outright horror."

Again, Snape bites down on his lips, and Harry feels a strange electric current run across his skin.

"You're - you're teasing me," he says, not quite sure he believes it.

"Hmm? What?" Snape says, taking a sip of his wine and looking the very picture of innocence.

Harry breathes a laugh. He should probably feel more uncomfortable, but it’s difficult to feel anything but brilliant with the food and wine and atmosphere. Maybe even the company. Maybe.

“You could have invited Eleni, you know,” he says carefully, because he can’t help himself, “if you wanted more of a visit. Or to - to thank her.”

He looks away from Snape, suddenly completely fascinated by his wineglass.

“She is a very busy person. I was lucky she was able to devote this afternoon to our purposes.”

“Of course.” Harry traces his fingers along the rim of his glass, half expecting it to start making music. He can see the question coming before he says it, every neuron in his brain screaming at him to stop, stop, what are you even -

“Are you and - she -” Stop, STOP -

Harry hears the clink of Snape’s cutlery against his plate before he finally looks up. Snape is not eating, and is staring at Harry with one eyebrow elegantly raised. He doesn’t look furious, he looks more - entertained than anything. The way a cat is entertained by an injured bird.
“Are she and I what.” It is not a question.

“Just wondering if she’s - it’s none of my business, it just seemed like you two - maybe -.” Fuck’s sake, how does he get out of this? Could he fake some sort of aneurysm or - really, what in god’s name was he thinking -

“It is none of your business. You are correct in that at least.”

“Right. Okay. Sorry,” Harry says quickly, trying to cut off any angry rants that might be heading in his direction. Then Snape’s last sentence registers, and Harry can’t resist, fuck his life. “But not correct in the - the other bit.”

“Good lord, Potter. I’ve met House Elves with more tact. No, Eleni and I are not dating, or whatever juvenile sentiment you seem to be implying. She is a brilliant woman, but my inclinations do not -”

Snape stops speaking. He closes his mouth with an audible click of teeth. Harry doesn’t know what he suddenly seems so upset about, he didn’t -

Oh.

Harry feels heat rush to his face, and there’s no reason, it’s not like - it really doesn’t matter. Snape being gay - if that’s what the man did in fact just reveal - is nothing - it’s nothing. It doesn’t matter whatsoever. The love-lives of the Hogwarts staff were not an infrequent topic of conversation among its students, and being queer didn’t even come close to the worst thing bloody Seamus Finnegan had to say about Snape. It doesn’t change Harry’s opinion of the man in any way, really it doesn’t.

It’s just - Snape was in love with Harry’s mom, right, wasn’t that what Harry saw in the Pensieve? Wasn’t Lily Potter the only reason Snape protected Harry at all? He knows that about Snape, it’s one of the few things Harry knows as a certainty and he can’t find it in him to let go. He has a million questions, none that he dares voice. Whatever it is he says next will have dire consequences for the rest of his life.

“You want the last of this pita?” Harry’s voice is embarrassingly unsteady.

Snape shakes his head, silent.

“Just - just to be clear -”

“This subject matter is closed for discussion. Why it was even open to begin with speaks to my egregious judgement and low tolerance for red wine.”

“Right. Sorry. I shouldn’t have -”

“No, you bloody well should not have.”

Snape raises a white hand in a completely obnoxious and yet somehow elegant gesture, and Arsenio’s wife hurries over with their bill. Harry pays it, and barely escapes with only a handful of embraces and several kisses to each cheek; Arsenio even invites the kitchen staff out to shake Harry’s hand, and though most of them haven’t a clue who he is, Harry smiles and nods and tries to seem every bit the ideal image of the Boy Who Lived. Snape remains in the shadows throughout, and while Harry is sorely tempted to call him over and wax poetic about his accomplishments for the
Order, a quick look at Snape (the man’s terse shake of his head, fingers clenched bone-white against the dark blue of his shirt) sets Harry straight. Snape is making a choice in this moment, and Harry will not take it away from him. However badly he might want to.

They walk back toward the city limits, the sheltered place by the sea where they first arrived this morning. Harry notices his footsteps weaving just slightly, and has a moment of anxiety about how much wine he consumed. He’s not concerned about Apparation - he’s done it successfully in worse states - but he is concerned about the mad whirl of his thoughts in such close proximity to the Potions Master, the weird tension in his skin that seems to register Snape’s every movement, every breath. Snape has lapsed once more into silence, and Harry feels a bit wretched about bringing up Eleni at all, for prying heedlessly into the other man’s personal life. And yet - he cannot regret that strange moment of openness, Snape speaking to him as if he were a confidant, or a friend. The moment before Snape’s teeth snapped together, his hand on his wine glass and his eyes dark as ink where they were fixed on Harry’s own.

Christ, he really shouldn’t have had so much to drink.

When they’re nearly at their destination, Harry turns his gaze out toward the water instead of staring pathetically at his sullen companion. The moon shines like silver over the slow movement of waves, and Harry feels a sudden longing that he did not expect, and cannot ignore. Snape will doubtlessly kill him, but odds were on that outcome anyway.

“Can I have five minutes? Before we leave?”

“Do you think five minutes will be sufficient to achieve a slightly less intoxicated state? I’m mentally preparing myself to be Apparated into a sodding brick wall.”

“I want to do one last thing.” Harry ignores Snape’s previous sniping remark. “Five minutes, I swear.”

Snape grants his permission with an uninterested wave of his hand, and Harry is unlacing his shoes before he can change his mind. He feels a strange frantic energy, something altogether surprising and yet familiar (he is fifteen years old and it is fall at Hogwarts - the air crisp and sharp and cold as Harry slices through the air on his broomstick, years and years laid before him as golden-coloured and sweet as toffee apples.) That’s what the feeling is, Harry realizes as soon as his bare feet touch the sand. It isn’t youth, it isn’t nerves, it isn’t red wine - it’s possibility. God, he hasn’t felt this way in years. The black sea before him seems like an empty canvas, and Harry’s fists are full of glue and glitter.

“What are you -” Snape asks, and then answers his own question as Harry starts to roll up his trousers. “Oh. How - embarrassingly poetic of you, Potter.”

Harry laughs Snape off, and walks to the very edge of the starlit sea, admiring the distorted reflection of lights in the dark water. He dips his toe in and trembles at the unexpected cold. It is almost December, after all. One step further and both feet are submerged, the chills running up Harry’s spine like wet, grey mice. He almost shrieks with shock, but bites down on his lips and turns back to look at Snape, ready to make some joke about his delicate nature. But Snape -

Snape is watching Harry with a completely inscrutable expression on his face. The only real source of illumination is the moon and the distant lights of town, but even in shadow Harry can read Snape’s face - the unhappy slant of his mouth and dark arches of his eyebrows. It’s his eyes that stand out though, looking straight at Harry as if Snape’s never seen him before. In the moonlight, Harry can see them moving, darting back and forth like Snape is searching for something, something he has no hope of finding.
As soon as Harry catches his eye, Snape shifts his expression back toward agitated disapproval. It is an expression Harry is all too familiar with. He considers it Snape’s ‘neutral.’

“Of all the juvenile wastes of time. Some of us have homes to return to.”

“It’s bloody freezing. Certain you don’t want to join me?”

“With a recommendation like that, how could anyone resist? No, I will remain on the shore and hold out hope for an undertow.”

“Charming.”

Harry turns away and wades out a bit farther. Just enough so that his calves are wet, the bottoms of his rolled-up jeans damp from the occasional wave.

“You’ll step on a bloody jellyfish,” Snape calls out behind him.

Harry snorts.

“You’ll slice your foot open on a clam shell. Do not expect me to come to your aid when it turns gangrenous.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Harry calls back, feeling entirely too content for his own good. His skin is beginning to grow accustomed to the temperature, and his blood is warm from wine. He expects that Snape can see him from the shore, glowing in the dark.

“You said five bleeding minutes. I am keeping track of - oh, Merlin’s sake.”

A moment later, Harry hears a hiss of discomfort and a quiet splash. He turns to see Snape with his shoes off and pants rolled, stepping hesitantly into the water, and -

Legs. Christ, Snape’s legs. Harry is looking at them from the knee down, they exist. His legs are very pale, but covered with wiry black hair - much more than Harry expected. He feels like he could stare at Snape’s legs for hours, days - the curve of his calf muscle, the delicate bones of his ankle, the arch of his foot. His mouth opens, and he wrenches his eyes away, meeting Snape’s in hot and open shock. What the hell is happening, what in god’s name is Harry - what is -

Snape scowls, heedless of the frantic rush of Harry’s thoughts, the jagged stained-glass of his imaginings.

“Satisfied?” Snape asks, trudging slowly through the water. He winces distastefully with each step, and Harry cannot look at him. He forces himself to turn away, to focus on the lights of far-off cargo ships, people hundreds of miles away making journeys altogether their own.

A sudden wave crashes higher than the rest, soaking the knees of their trousers and spraying Harry with a fine mist of seawater. Snape snorts with derision (when really he should be thanking Harry for blocking him from the worst of the spray.) Harry grumbles in complaint, wiping his stinging eyes. When he can see again, Snape is standing beside him, eyes slightly wrinkled at the corners. Almost as if the man wants to smile. Harry wishes that he would.

“Ha ha,” he says sarcastically, brushing damp hair off of his forehead. Something is tickling the corner of his eye, and he blinks again, rubbing his hands across his face. Snape watches him impassively, eventually shaking his head.

“No, you’re missing it. Just - there.”
He reaches out and pushes a stray curl back from Harry’s temple.

Harry flinches at the contact, and Snape seems to realize what he’s doing. He pulls his hand away and knots it into a fist, dropping it to his side. Their eyes are locked together, and Harry wants - what does he want? There’s something so close and dire, hovering in his mind and heart like those ship lights in the distance. He can see it, he can almost feel it -

“We should go,” Snape says. “If you are in any fit state to Apparate, which somehow I doubt.”

Harry does not trust his voice, and only barely manages to nod. They return to the shore and their shoes. Snape keeps his face tilted toward the ground, and slams his eyes shut when Harry approaches him.

“What?” Harry asks, and Snape jerks his head, once.

“Hold on to me.” They are the same words from that morning, but somehow they feel kinetic now, each syllable vibrating. Snape holds on, and Harry closes his eyes.

They arrive in Harry’s living room, and there is no crashing of heads together this time. Harry does not release Snape until the forces of physics reinstate themselves, and no sooner are his hands empty then he hears Snape’s quick steps backward, immediately heading for the door.

Harry thinks that’s it, thinks Snape is going to walk out the door without even a goodbye - but the older man lingers there for a moment, pale hand clutching the doorknob like he wants to break it off.

The only sound is the traffic, and the electric hum of rain on a hundred different roofs.

“What?” Harry says, voice softer than he intends.

Snape tilts his head slightly, but does not turn around.

“Do you - can you find your way home from here? Should I call -”

“I’m not an infant, Potter. I am more than capable of navigating the Underground.”

Still Snape does not leave. It’s as if he’s waiting for something, but Harry has no idea what that might be. Something is happening inside him, an almost painful desire to move or shout or do something completely mad. Why hasn’t he turned away yet, why hasn’t Snape left, why is Harry so transfixed by the scar on Snape’s neck, creeping like ivy around the side of his throat?

“It was a nice day.”

Harry regrets the inane comment almost instantly, but Snape only turns slightly more towards him, otherwise unmoved. He presses his lips together, and Harry watches the motion, hypnotized. The shape of Snape’s lips is so precise, a thin cupid’s bow, barely a shade darker than the rest of his skin. Harry wonders if he tastes like ouzo or red wine, wonders if his crooked teeth would be sharp, wonders if there’d be a hint of stubble against his jaw and neck.

But that’s - that’s mad, he’d never - and Snape would never -

“My coat,” Snape says suddenly. “It’s - your couch.”

“Your coat!” Harry is beyond grateful to have something else, anything else to think about. He grabs it off the sofa and crosses the short distance to press it into Snape’s hands.

“Here. Sorry. Almost forgot.” In this close proximity, Harry can smell the dampness of seawater on
Snape’s skin and in his hair. There suddenly doesn’t seem to be enough oxygen in the room.

“It was a nice day,” Harry says again.

“Yes, you’ve said.”

“Thank you. For that. For everything you’re doing for the library, and -”

“I do not want your thanks.”

Snape still hasn’t left, still lingers in Harry’s doorway like an unanswered question. Harry takes a breath, feeling dizzy and wound so tightly that windows might shatter at any moment.

“I know you don’t. But you have it.”

Snape shakes his head. “Goodnight Potter.”

“Good - goodnight.”

Snape twists the doorknob, but that’s as far as he gets before Harry surges forward, the world going white-hot behind his eyelids.

(“My inclinations do not -”)

(“It means piss off back to Hogwarts.”)

(“What do you know about my eyebrows?”)

Snape tastes like ouzo and red wine, and his mouth falls open in a gasp as Harry kisses him.

‘Finally’ rings out like a bell in a tower; Harry can’t be sure whether he spoke it aloud or if the word is throbbing along with his pulse as he traces the outline of Snape’s upper-lip with his tongue. He dimly registers the pressure of two hands on his biceps, fingers clenching to the point of bruising in one brief, convulsive grasp yes yes finally -

- before he’s pushed away.

The absence of Snape’s mouth seems like an injury for the first moment, an unbearable absence that needs to be remedied immediately.

For the first moment.

The moment before Harry’s brain catches up with his body.

He looks with wild, horrified eyes at Snape, who wears a matching expression. Oh god I’m sorry so sorry are bullets through Harry’s brain, but he can’t remember how to make his mouth work; the kiss has broken it, ruined him utterly. Snape, Snape of all people - his mother’s friend, his most hated teacher, the man who killed Dumbledore, a spy and a hero and a martyr and - and -

“You -” Severus says through lips gone white. “You are drunk.”

He takes a step back, and then another. Each footstep sounds like something fragile hitting the ground. Snape wrenches the door open.

“Do not touch me ever again.”
Snape slams the door behind him, rattling the frames on the walls, the plant on the windowsill, Harry’s pounding heart. Fuck, he thinks - the only appropriate word for the situation, and then fuck fuck fuck over and over again, the word racing like adrenaline in his veins. What the hell had he been thinking? To - to drunkenly kiss someone - and for that someone to be Severus Snape -

Harry might be ill, and it has nothing to do with how much alcohol he had with dinner, or how much sun he got that afternoon. Everything, everything was going so well - Snape was tolerating him and they were in Greece and now Harry has - has destroyed it, destroyed everything.

Where the hell had this come from, where did this feeling even begin? Was it just Greece, was it this bloody day with the ocean and sky, or did it start earlier (Snape’s head resting on Harry’s shoulder “who won who won who won -”)

“Fuck,” Harry says out loud, and his voice breaks on the word.

This cannot be happening.

“I kissed Snape,” wakes Hermione from sleep, scrabbling for her wand as Harry stumbles into her bedroom. He really shouldn’t have flooed anywhere in the state he’s in, but there will be plenty of time for regret in the morning.

“You - god, Harry, do you have any idea what time it is?” Hermione turns on her bedside lamp, and Harry covers his eyes against the offensive brightness.

“Hermione -”

“I heard you, I just think that you could have at least rung me first or -”

Harry sees the moment that his previous statement makes an impact, the way her hands inadvertently flutter against the quilt.

“I’ll - put the kettle on.”

Harry nods.

Over two cups of Bengal Spice, he spills the whole ridiculous story, trying to ignore Hermione’s small gasps and coughs of surprise. At first he has to stop and start several times, each word like a splinter in his palm, somehow burying itself deeper with every passing second. After a while, he finds he can breathe a bit easier, speak without his voice trembling, but he absolutely cannot lift his gaze from the teacup in his hands. He cannot look at Hermione’s face and read the obvious disapproval and surprise and sadness that will certainly be there.

“It was a mistake, it was beyond stupid. And now I don’t know how I’m ever going to face him again, how I’m going to look at him and not - not just die of embarrassment. And maybe I won’t have to face him - but that’s almost worse, because if I’ve driven him away forever by doing this totally awful, crazy -”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” Hermione cuts in. “Not to me.”

Harry does look up at her now, and she isn’t wearing the expression he expects. Instead, her gaze is very serious, thoughtful - as if she’s about to write a particularly challenging exam.

“You’ve been - fixated on Snape for ages,” Hermione says slowly, slotting the pieces together in her marvelous brain. “Even before he gave you his memories, even before you saved him in the Shack - you were always watching him. Talking about him. Trying to figure him out.”
“I was suspicious,” Harry protested, because - no, he hadn’t been at school thinking about his
professor in a way that -

No.

“But after you found out where his true loyalties were, you became - I don’t know, his champion or
something. You were a bit fanatical about it. We all heard you at that pub in York, you would have
murdered someone if we hadn’t dragged you away.”

“I would not have. And it wasn’t right, what those pricks were saying - they didn’t know what
happened, they didn’t know him -”

“And you did?” Hermione asks softly. Harry does not reply because - no, of course not. He doesn’t
know Snape at all. “You’ve barely spoken of anything else since he showed up at the library. I had
wondered a bit, whether this was all misplaced guilt, because you have misplaced guilt to spare. But
now I see - maybe -”

“What?”

“Harry, do you -” Hermione looks briefly like she’d rather be doing anything else. “Do you - like
him?”

(The brief, frantic pressure of Snape’s fingers on his arms, the rough gravel of his voice, “You - you
are -”)

“No,” Harry says immediately, the reaction exploding out of him through habit and denial and sheer,
bone-shaking terror. “No. Snape? No. I was dating Ginny not even two months ago, I - I wasn’t
lusting after some bloke old enough to be my dad. And he - and my mom - I know what I saw, I
know that he loved her. He - he would never -”

Hermione says nothing for a moment, just watches Harry until his skin crawls under the scrutiny.

“What do I do?”

Hermione reaches out and puts her hand on his. “After everything you and Professor Snape have
done to each other, I highly doubt that a drunken kiss could be the most damaging. Get some sleep.
Give it some time. Apologize. Things will sort themselves out.” As if it could be that simple. As if
it was that easy. “Though Harry, you shouldn’t just - kiss someone. I know it seems rather romantic
but ask first next time.”

“Next time?” Harry almost chokes on his last sip of tea.

“Next time you kiss anyone, not next time you kiss Snape. Stop looking so horrified.”

Harry sleeps at Hermione’s that night, a blessedly dreamless sleep that he really doesn’t deserve. He
makes her blueberry pancakes the next morning by way of apology, and while he still feels like a
complete prat and imbecile, he can breathe and speak without nearly throwing up - so that’s
something. By the time he returns to his flat, and has the longest and hottest shower his water tank
will allow, he’s come up with a plan. It’s not much of a plan, and it might all backfire spectacularly.
But - it’s a start. If nothing else, it’s a start.

Snape sacrificed everything to protect Harry, and win the War, and even solve a mystery at Will.
Harry repaid him by acting ridiculous and licking into his gorgeous mouth (ouzo and red wine, and
don’t think about that, don’t think about that ever again.)
He has to make it right. Harry has a plan, and he can’t pull it off by himself, but if anyone can do it, he knows --

* * *

“-- it’s morning dew. It has to be. That’s why it’s that silvery colour, right?”

Potter holds the bottle toward Snape’s canvas. Snape has the run of the place tonight, having set Evelyn upon the previous tenant. Currently the two of them are off somewhere looking for seashells.

“It appears to be the right shade. And the taste?”

“Sweet. Like - not like sugar but what’s that - almond extract or -”

“That will suffice. Do not strain your limited vocabulary on my account.”

Potter ignores him, re-stoppering the bottle of dew and shelving it. He grabs the one beside it and squints at the label in the lamplight.

“Salamander blood.”

“If you would be so kind.”

Potter winces, but unstoppers the bottle nonetheless. Making a face, he dabs a tiny drop on his finger and darts it up to his mouth, as if the velocity might lessen his sense of disgust.

“Yes, that’s blood. I’d make a wine-tasting joke, but I’m too upset to be funny right now. When I get all sorts of unspeakable diseases from this, it’ll be up to you to save me.”

“What are unspeakable diseases when measured against the safety of First Year potions students?” Severus asks dryly, “And blood does not just taste like blood. Salamander blood should have a distinctively bitter taste - less salty than the human variety. Also, I would be grateful if you would refrain from any vampire-related humour at this time; I assure you I have heard it all before.”

Potter almost smiles. “I guess it tasted bitter, but - not overly. I don’t know. I’ll let you judge the colour. Please tell me I can have some pumpkin juice now.”

“Go ahead.”

Potter takes a swig from the large glass he brought from the kitchens, swishing the juice around in his mouth before swallowing. Severus does not watch the slow bob of his throat.

“Here.” Potter is on his feet moments later, crossing the hallway to hold the bottle of blood toward Severus’ painting. Even in the dim light the blood looks entirely too clear, a bright ruby instead of the deep garnet red that Severus remembers. It could have been diluted - but without the means to test it himself, Severus has few options.

“I am - uncertain.” He hates to admit it, hates it. “Add it to the suspect ingredients. I’ll have Alcott examine them.”

He and Potter have spent the last few nights in the potions store room. Alcott Prawn may be the most incompetent Potions Master the known world has ever seen, but that does not mean Severus can just sit idly by while the man burns Hogwarts to the ground through shoddy ingredient maintenance. Add to that the fact that someone has most likely been stealing from the store room,
and Severus’ time is suddenly quite sufficiently occupied. His effectiveness is hampered by a lack of any means of interacting with the godforsaken world, but Potter had volunteered so nicely - it almost makes Severus regret the amount of beetle eyes, crushed tube worms, and fangtooth scales the boy has to taste.

Unsurprisingly, a number of ingredients seem to be compromised - though whether it is from age or ignorance or conscious sabotage, Severus cannot be sure. There is one particular jar of saffron that Severus would wager his left hand had been half-emptied and mixed with American saffron - similar in appearance but worlds apart in flavour and purpose. The American variant is much cheaper, and would be a canny replacement for someone who is taking ingredients but does not want to be noticed. Unfortunately, Potter’s sense of taste is less than refined, and few hard conclusions can be drawn. The two of them are rapidly filling a crate with ingredients for Alcott to examine, though any results that sentient ottoman with a teaching degree obtains will be somewhat less than reliable.

“Are we finished for now?” Potter asks, lifting his arms above his head as he stretches. “I’m almost for bed, I think. And I don’t know how well my tastebuds are functioning at this point; that Acromantula venom fried them off.”

Potter is getting more sleep of late, or so it seems. Since the break-in, and their newfound investigation of the potions store room, Potter does not have such deep circles under his eyes, does not have the slightly transparent look of a chronic insomniac.

“I had forgotten how delicate you are,” Severus sniffs.

Potter rolls his eyes, but the gesture is far too amused, far too familiar. It makes Severus vaguely uncomfortable - he should not be familiar with any aspect of Harry Potter.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah? After supper?”

“Perhaps,” Severus manages, fooling no one, least of all himself.

“I’ll have a word with Alcott, see if he wants to take a look at all this.”

“What Alcott Prawn wants is irrelevant at this point.”

“You’re quite right,” Potter says, with another grin that is in danger of becoming a full smile. Severus flees the painting before he risks a glimpse of it. There are some things he should not be expected to bear. There are some things that cannot be witnessed without paying much more than a man like Severus owns.

Potter’s smile is one of those things. Severus may be dead, but he can still feel. The pain of Potter’s smile is a strange, keening sort, and while Severus cannot explain its origin, he is not required to tilt back his head and expose his throat to it. He can leave whenever he wants, and it isn’t called running away, it’s called self-preservation.

During the days, Severus reads over the scrap of parchment they discovered, having transcribed it onto a piece of paper in his potions lab. He is thankful for such small kindnesses as functioning quills and ink (without the ability to scratch a few words down on paper, he’s certain he’d go mad. Or madder, at least.) It is, as he suspected, a potion, and the more he examines it, the more convinced he becomes that *Viridi Magicae* is its source. The turn of phrase and ingredients are described exactly as they were during that particular time period, and Severus is certain the slanted writing is familiar for a reason. It’s a bone mending potion most likely, but an antiquated one. Surely whoever committed this travesty could have found something a little more modern for their purposes. Surely they did not need to destroy a piece of history in their quest to mend a broken arm.
It is a shame he has limited contact with his previous acquaintances in the living world. There was a woman who could have been a great help in this, an archivist that was living in Greece last he heard. He wonders if there are any paintings in Greece that he can remember.

He supposes not.

Severus does not even pretend not to look for Potter in the nights that follow. On evenings that Severus does not meet him at the potions store room, he’ll often find Potter waiting outside his portrait shortly after curfew, arms crossed and soft curve at the corners of his lips.

“Fancy a walk?” Potter asks, and Severus does.

He spends these evenings following Potter around the school in an entirely different way. It should feel identical to their previous strolls, but it does not. Potter usually does not speak, and neither does Severus, but occasionally Potter will glance over and nod in silent greeting. Occasionally Potter will wait for Severus at the end of a hallway, letting Severus choose whether to proceed left or right. It is more relaxing now that Severus doesn’t have to keep his presence a secret. He does not have to step as lightly, does not have to slink like a cat through some of the more brightly lit still lives. He can focus instead on his surroundings - on the sound of Potter’s soft breathing, the rustling of his robe, the way he occasionally pats his right pocket, feeling for the shape of a wand.

It is almost a week since they discovered the vandalized store room when Severus reveals his conclusion. They are wandering up the main staircase, paintings clustered together like patchwork. Severus feels almost like he is walking beside Potter in the same hallway, the same world. Their footsteps are slow and evenly matched.

“What do we do next?” Potter asks.

“I - am not certain. There is only one library I am aware of that has *Viridi Magicae* in its collection, and it would not be available to the general public. I find it difficult to believe that someone could have broken into Will.”

“Will?” Potter asks. Severus should not be surprised by the boy’s lack of culture. Really, he shouldn’t.

“The Wizarding Library of London. Merlin, I thought at least Miss Granger would have introduced you to a landmark of this magnitude, but perhaps Weasley is taking up too much of her time.”

“Yeah, that or destroying Horcruxes and killing a Dark Lord. Either way.”

Severus suppresses a grimace that Potter has not earned.

“I have heard of it,” Potter continues, “just never been. You think they have this book?”

“It was in their collection when last I visited. Granted, that was a long time ago.”

“Hmm.” Potter considers, coming to a stop at the top of the staircase. Severus is in a seaside scene, shoes and cuffs damp from walking along the shoreline. He’ll dry off soon enough, but finds the sensation of water against his skin more than worth the brief discomfort of clinging fabric. As Potter thinks, Severus stands at the very edge of the starlit sea and watches him. There is something - some part of the boy that seems to need watching. Severus cannot place it, but neither can he stop himself.
“Perhaps I should go to this library. I’ve got next weekend free. Hermione would come - she’s in London and she never turns down a chance to look at old books. I could bring the paper we found and see if it matched.”

Severus nods. “It is a place to start, certainly.”

“And if it is this book you keep talking about, this Verdi Magical thing -”

“Do not attempt to say its name again, it causes me physical pain -”

“If it is that book, then - what? What will that tell us?”

Severus rubs the bridge of his nose. “It will tell us that someone is attempting to brew a potion vastly beyond their skill. This is Old Magic, Potter. It is not something one should consider lightly.”

“Is it Dark, then?”

“Not inherently, no. But neither is it particularly Light. It is - complicated.”

Severus watches Potter shiver, can even make out the goosebumps that travel up the back of his neck.

“Are there - any paintings in that library that you remember? Any way you could come -”

“No.” Severus cuts the boy off, the feeling of helpless isolation slicing through him like a razor. He wishes Potter had not asked. “No.”

Potter nods, eyes on the ground. “Of course. Sorry. I - I forget sometimes that -”

“I’m deceased? Beyond the veil? Gone the way of all flesh?”

“You don’t need to be mean about it. I’m not an idiot.”

“Well -”

“I get it,” Potter says again. “Just - it seems so - I wish that -”

If Potter is about to apologize to him again, Severus will fill his pockets with stones and throw himself into the sea (it occurs to him briefly that such a dramatic gesture would doubtless be fruitless, and he would spend eternity weighted down at the bottom of an Old Delft Blue ocean, with flecks of Cobalt Green Turquoise in his eyes and in his hair. And that leads to darker, strangers thoughts - like how far does this sea go? How far could he swim into that cold water before he hit canvas?)

“I wish that there was something I could do. Wish I could tuck you in my bag and take you on the train or something. As if -”

Potter’s voice dries up, and Severus reels back to the present where the ground is still beneath his feet and his pockets are empty. He tells himself that at least it wasn’t another apology, though it was equally pointless.

“I regret that I am quite beyond your help. There are some things even the great Harry Potter cannot set to rights.”

It is meant to rile the boy, but instead it just makes him look - strange, somehow. Sadder and softer and - older even, though Severus does not know what to make of that. While Severus might rejoice in getting under Potter’s skin, his current unplaceable expression only makes Severus feel - sorry.
Guilty. He wants a time-turner to come alive and golden in his palm, pulling back the previous sentence before he can speak it. It is completely absurd, and far too whimsical, but Severus feels regret, sharp as the canine tooth pressing down into his tongue.

Potter shakes his head, which Severus does not expect. Neither does he expect the odd frown to go gentle about the edges, almost like a smile if smiles could be crushed to dust in someone’s clenched fist. He watches as Potter turns and walks away, just a few steps down the hall. He could leave the boy alone if he wanted, could stop following him around like an English setter any time, this evening, this second. Potter takes a few more steps away, and Severus admires the lines of his shoulders and length of his neck in the torchlight.

He hurries to catch up.

The next weekend Potter goes to London, bidding a quick farewell to Severus in the morning before he catches the train. He is wrapped in a heavy cloak, and Severus realizes it is well into December, the end of the year hurtling toward them like a curse. It is astonishing how time passes him by, loose coins that slip through his fingers. Even as Severus tries to grasp them all, to hold them tight, time scatters across the floorboards and another month is gone. Another. Another.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to just exist - no horrors waiting around the corner for you in the dark, no madmen with pale eyes holding wands against your throat, no kindly old wizards offering you as a sacrifice on an altar. It is a much more comfortable existence, but also a more muted one. Sometimes it feels like everything outside his portrait has faded to sepia tones (save for the dark burgundy of Potter’s robes, the flashing green of his eyes, and Merlin knows why these things still shine so brightly but they do. For some reason, in the midst of a dull world, Harry Potter radiates colour.)

With the boy gone for the weekend, Severus feels a bit unbalanced. He spends every night walking with him, and barely knows what to do with a night to himself. He sleeps, strangely enough, sleeps as if he hasn’t slept in years. When he next opens his eyes, it is to the soft clearing of a throat, and Severus roars awake, he’s back, he’s -

Potter is not back, as it happens - not that it matters to Severus one way or another. Rather, Evelyn has never left.

“There is a painting of Quidditch in the school!” the child exclaims. “Can you imagine? Will you take me to a game? Only I’ve never seen one before, and the children are so keen on it. Sometimes I like to imagine it, when I’m by myself. I think I’d be the Sneaker on account of being so fast!”

This is all a lot to process in a short amount of time. Particularly for someone still on the ragged edge of sleep.

“Evelyn,” Severus begins, rubbing his temples. “You - where is this painting? Also I can hear you perfectly well if you speak at a normal volume. I haven’t yet gone completely deaf.”

“My sincere apologies,” Evelyn says solemnly, before immediately resuming his previously unbearable pitch “The painting is on the first floor, by the hospital wing. I haven’t been, I’ve never seen one before, and the children are so keen on it. Sometimes I like to imagine it, when I’m by myself. I think I’d be the Sneaker on account of being so fast!”

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“My sincere apologies,” Evelyn says solemnly, before immediately resuming his previously unbearable pitch “The painting is on the first floor, by the hospital wing. I haven’t been, I’ve just heard about it - that boy in the field who is playing with his dog, you know, the big white dog? He told me about the painting, and he wasn’t very friendly, but at least he let me pet her this time. She has the softest coat, it was just lovely.”

“You can easily visit a painting on your own, you realize. You do not need my permission.” Quidditch, Snape thinks, with a curl of his lip. He’s seen enough to last a lifetime.
“But what if the boy and his dog are there? He calls me Evelame even though he knows it isn’t my name. I don’t really know what he means but it sounds quite nasty, doesn’t it? If you were there he’d probably let me stay and watch the game because everyone’s a bit afraid of - um -”

“Afraid of me?” Severus is not offended, far from it. It does his heart good to know that even in death, he can still intimidate children.

“Not me, of course! I like you!”

The terrible earnestness of the sentiment does things to Severus’ chest and throat, and he blinks until he can speak again. Perhaps the idiot boy deserves a Quidditch match.

Evelyn shows Severus the way to the painting, and it is just as described. They find themselves at the edge of a Quidditch pitch, right beside the packed wooden stands. Players whizz through the sky above their heads, and the sun is just beginning to set in the distance, turning the grounds a disquieting gold. Severus can almost taste nightfall approaching, and there is a crisp autumn wind in the air, almost too cold to be comfortable but not quite, not quite. It is a lovely painting, and Evelyn is too overwhelmed to speak for a good ten minutes, mouth open and head craned backwards.

“Which one is the Sneaker?” he whispers finally, and Severus rolls his eyes.

It occurs to him that he has not seen this painting before - which is surprising, given his familiarity with the school. It might be a new addition, but Minerva is not in the habit of ordering new artwork for the already cluttered walls, and a sports scene does not really seem her style. Severus squints his eyes past the edge of the artwork, seeking out the world beyond it.

He sees a small room, with an unmade bed. There is a nightstand and a rickety bookshelf, mostly empty except for a few Quidditch magazines and glossy paperbacks. There is a narrow window along one wall, below which rests a potted peace lily (obviously not long for this world with the amount of light available to it.) There is a burgundy bathrobe draped haphazardly over the bedframe, and a small framed photo of Lily Evans and James Potter, laughing and smiling and - and -

Severus backs up so quickly he almost knocks Evelyn to the ground.

“Mr. Snape?”

“This is - this is a Professor’s private quarters. It is not -” There is something unsettling about the rumpled sheets on the bed, as if Potter just rolled out of them, as if they might still be warm. “It is not appropriate to - to visit without -”

“Are you all right? You keep stopping and starting.”

“Yes, I am quite - no, I am - we should not be here. It isn’t -”

“But we just got here! And I want to see who wins! Oh, can’t we stay?”

Severus wonders suddenly whether there will be a winner to this game, or whether the players will spend eternity in flight, the crowds endlessly waiting. It seems like a cruel and unusual form of punishment when one thinks of it like that. Though perhaps others with more love for the sport would feel differently.

“You may stay, you may do as you like. I will not violate Potter’s privacy in such a -”

“Is this Professor Potter’s room?” Evelyn gasps, the wonders of Quidditch temporarily forgotten. Severus should have chosen his words more carefully. “No, is it really? He wouldn’t mind us being
here, I’m sure! He’s ever so nice. It’s not very big, is it? Who’s that photo of? What do you suppose he -”

“Evelyn. I am leaving.”

“Must we?” The boy looks wretched, but Severus is not moved. “The boy with the dog comes here all the time. Or at least that’s what he says, but I don’t always know if he’s telling the truth.”

Severus is not about to prolong this discussion any further, and turns sharply away, leaving the roar of the crowd muffled behind him as he steps back into darkness. A few moments later he has arrived back at his own portrait, the sad crumple of Potter’s blankets the farthest thing from his mind. A few moments after that, Evelyn shows up, shrill with apology and refusing to be placated until Severus swears he “isn’t angry and doesn’t hate him utterly.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Evelyn, no. I like you.” He repeats the child’s own words back to him, and tries not to sound as mortified as he feels. It does the trick; Evelyn beams and even attempts to hug Severus before he is successfully fended off.

After the child leaves, Severus falls back to sleep once again, going weightless in the armchair that serves as his bed. He does not think about the peace lily on the windowsill, or the shape of Potter’s hands against dark green leaves.

When he opens his eyes again, Harry Potter is standing before him, cheekbones red with the cold and snow still melting in his hair.

“Hi,” the boy says.

Severus rubs his eyes, and rolls his shoulders, and damns himself for being caught unawares. He should have been prepared for this, had an entire bloody weekend to pull himself together. There is no reason for Potter’s face to set off this kind of reaction in him, a firecracker exploding in the darkness.

“Sorry to wake you. Just got back and came to see you straightaway. It really was a beautiful library. You’re right, I should have visited it ages ago. Took the train down and it was lovely, seems so long since I’ve been on a train. What did you get up to? It feels like -”

“You needn’t share your memoirs with me.” Severus’ voice is still rough with sleep. “And if you’re going to wake me up at - um -”

“Three in the afternoon,” Potter supplies, with a bit of a grin.

Christ. “Yes, well, I would hope there was some type of reason, however insignificant, aside from reminiscing over your lovely holiday. Fascinating though every word out of your mouth surely is -”

“Remind me never to wake you up again, you’re completely unbearable. I did have a reason, as a matter of fact. It just so happens that Will’s copy of Verité -”

“Magicae,” Severus finishes for him, before the boy can butcher the rest of the title. “What of their copy?”

“It’s been vandalized. Someone stole a page from it.” Potter folds his arms as if he’s cracked the sodding case and expects Severus to pin a medal on his chest. Really, he’s beyond ridiculous. Severus is not at all charmed, not even slightly. “And it’s not the only one.”

Whatever pointless thoughts occupied Severus’ mind before flee like foxes from a hunt. Other
books. What other books?

“I wrote them down.” Potter is fumbling in his pockets for a piece of paper, wiping the fog off his glasses so he can read. “*Venenum Historia* by Pliny the Shorter.”

That - that is -

No.

“They took three pages from it, actually. And -”

“*Venenum Historia?*” Severus repeats, because - because perhaps if he speaks the words they will make some semblance of sense. “That cannot be - do you have any idea how old that book is? Any idea how valuable?”

"Some?” Potter says hesitantly.

“What else? What bloody else?”

“Um - *Difficulte Potions and How to Brewe Them.*”

"What - what in Merlin’s name is going on at that library? Can any imbecile with a library card and a pair of scissors take what they want from books that rightfully belong in a museum? Is Will a source of collage material at this point? This is outrageous, this is -”

Potter nods in sympathy, but Severus is not fool enough to believe the boy understands the force of Severus’ ire. What does Potter know of the value of books like these?

“One more. A French one -”

"*Les Elixirs Anciennes,*” Severus says quickly, because of course it is. He hopes that he is wrong, but is not so lucky.

"Yeah - wow, good guess."

“Absurd. Unbelievable! Who are they employing for security, infants?”

“I can’t tell you. But the librarian I spoke to seemed about as upset as you are right now. When I showed her our missing page, I thought she was going to murder me. She still isn’t quite convinced that I’m not the one who’s doing it.”

“A cursory glance through your library of Quidditch magazines would set her to rights. Obviously you aren’t the academic type -”

“Yes well, we can’t all be - wait. What?”

Severus replays the previous sentence. He wets his lips. He was a spy once, wasn’t he? However in God’s name did he survive.

“How do you know what my library looks like?” Potter continues, brows knitting together.

“I - it was - an acquaintance of mine wanted to visit the new painting. I was not aware of the location of the painting in question, not until after the fact. I did not intend to impinge upon your privacy.” No, no, this is too much like an apology, this is too close to an admission of guilt. Sneer, you fool, scowl, or the boy will know, will know *everything* -
Will know what? Severus asks himself, wondering where those last words came from. What could he possibly have to hide from Potter? What secrets could a dead man have at all?

“It’s fine,” Potter says quickly, looking far too amused. “Don’t worry about it. You -and your acquaintance or whatever - are welcome anytime. Only wish I had picked up a bit before you saw the place. I’m not much of a housekeeper.”

“How utterly shocking. I cannot articulate just how shocked I am.”

Potter breaths a laugh, before sneezing suddenly, almost knocking the glasses off his face. “Sorry. Think I caught something in London. Anyway, the library books.”

The books. Of course.

“Whoever it is, taking pages from them -” Potter looks distinctly uncomfortable. “You don’t think they’re a student here, do you? If they’re stealing your ingredients to brew a potion that you said yourself was Dark Magic -”

“I did not say Dark. I said it was complicated.”

“How complicated exactly? Could a student do it, or should we be looking suspiciously at Sinistra?”

“It could not be a student,” Severus says, more to convince himself. “There are very few I can imagine having the skills to both steal from the rare books section of Will and the wherewithal to do anything with the information they procured.”

“If you saw the books, would you know what was on the missing pages?”

“I - perhaps. I cannot say. I read them ages ago, I do not have their contents memorized.”

“What about - the potions store room? If we figured out everything that had been taken or messed about with, could you guess what they were making?”

Potter has too much faith in Severus’ abilities, that much is obvious. There is no way to determine with any specificity the way particular ingredients might be combined and used, particularly when there is the possibility that the thief is also purloining ingredients from elsewhere, or perhaps buying their own. There are a limitless number of choices, and Potter’s expectations are impossibly high. And yet, Severus feels the odd desire to live up to them, to tell Potter that he is capable of anything.

“I can make the attempt.”

“Brilliant,” Potter says, and the word should not affect Severus the way that it does. “Any news from Alcott?”

“I should say not.”

“Right. Well - I might have a bit of a lie in tonight, try to stop this cold before it starts. But I’ll meet you upstairs tomorrow, yeah?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” Potter repeats softly.

Severus watches him go.

They meet the next night, where they determine that the fluxweed has gone off, the Red Myrrh has
been diluted with olive oil, and the Bulbadox juice is missing completely. Severus jots the details down on the piece of parchment he brought with him, mind already attempting to slot unmatched pieces into place. There are any number of things that could be brewed with these ingredients, in combination or otherwise. Potter’s eyes are watery, and he heads off to bed earlier than usual, which Severus should be glad about. At least the boy is getting sleep.

Severus, on the other hand -

That night he stays awake, watching the slow crawl of shadows in the hallway by his portrait, creeping tendrils that look like like fingers. Red Myrrh. Bulbadox juice. Salamander blood. Bicorn horn.

If someone is brewing Old Magic potions in this school, the least they could do is let Severus supervise.

No more than a week has gone by before Evelyn returns, a black and red scarf wound around his neck.

“It’s for the Stonewall Stormers. They’re from Canada! Your friend knit it for me.”

“My - who?” The list is so short that Severus should have no trouble narrowing down the possible candidates. Surely not -

“Mr. Dumbledore! He brought it to my portrait and everything. It’s a Christmas present! I don’t believe I’ve had a Christmas present before. He said it’s on account of me keeping you out of trouble, which is ever so kind of him. He’s knitting one for you as well - oh, I hope we’ll match!”

Severus has a brief pang of guilt regarding his lack of contact with Albus over these past few months. He has no one to blame but himself, and the sharp blade that the old wizard’s limitless kindness and patience carves into his stomach.

“It’s a Quidditch scarf,” Evelyn continues. “For when we watch the game together!”

There it is. Albus, you old meddler.

“I do not think - no,” Severus says quickly, clearing his throat. “That painting is in someone’s private quarters. To visit it uninvited is a gross infringement of Professor Potter’s privacy,” and sweet Merlin, if that title doesn’t catch like a bad joke in his throat.

“But he told me I could visit any time! He was quite friendly, once I got brave enough to speak to him. Oh, can’t we go? He’ll be at class now, anyway. This is when he observes lessons - not that I’ve been keeping track of him. I would never!” Evelyn laughs a bit too shrilly at this, and Severus narrows his eyes in suspicion. “It could be your Christmas present to me. I expect I’ll get loads this year.”

Albus had created a monster, that much is clear.

“If we go this one time, do you promise not to pester me until the New Year?”

“I truly do!”

“And no more stalking Professor Potter through the corridors. It isn’t healthy for a boy your age.”

“Must I wait until I’m as old as you? That’ll take forever!”
“I do not stalk Potter. I simply - we are -”

“You’re friends,” Evelyn supplies brightly. “I know.”

Severus has no reply to this. Evelyn is wrong, so very wrong, but Severus cannot bring himself to tell the child as much.

“I will stay for fifteen minutes and fifteen minutes only. After that, you may remain as you wish, but I am not your minder.”

This seems to be enough for Evelyn, and when they arrive at the painting, the child is every bit as delighted as he was previously. Severus, however, cannot seem to relax, and though the Quidditch players soar above him and the spectators cheer and shout, he can hear something - something soft and steady in the background, a quiet rumbling that was not there before. As if someone is - as if -

Severus looks out into Potter’s chambers, forcing his eyes to focus.

As it happens, Potter is not in class.

There are crumpled up tissues on the floor and several glasses of water and pumpkin juice arranged on his night table. The boy is sleeping on his stomach, mouth open and snoring slightly. He looks a bit feverish and his nose is red; evidently he did bring something back from London. Severus has a brief and panicked memory of their nights testing ingredients (“When I get all sorts of unspeakable diseases from this, it’ll be up to you to save me.”) but he clenches his fist around it. Potter has a cold, it’s obscenely normal.

“Oh no, Mr. Snape,” Evelyn whispers, and Potter thankfully does not stir. “I don’t want to infringe- what was the big word that you used?”

“Infringe,” Severus says absently, because the hair at the back of Potter’s neck is curled softly with sweat, and the fingers of the boy’s right hand are twitching in his sleep. Severus wonders whether Harry dreams, and what he dreams about. A slice of winter sunlight spills across the heavy quilt, and Severus feels as if - as if for a moment, he is so present, so electric, that if he wanted to reach out he could. If he wanted to step out of this frame and walk across the room to where Harry Potter lies sleeping - he could. He can almost feel the boy’s damp hair beneath his palm.

“Mr. Snape,” Evelyn hisses again - and the moment is over. Severus is a man made of oil and pigment and spite, and he will never leave this frame or any other.

He does not say a word as he turns and leaves the painting, Evelyn trailing behind him. When they arrive back in Severus’ portrait, Evelyn gives him an odd, nervous glance before leaving without saying a word. Severus cannot pretend he’s sorry about it. He feels like he’s been hit squarely in the breastbone, a dull and savage blow that knocked the breath from his lungs. He sits down because he has no other choice, hands clenching into fists against his knees.

He is dead. Dead. And Harry sodding Potter is -

Is -

Is completely -

Lovely.

Severus thinks he might be ill.
He knew all this, of course, knew the boy had some sort of appeal, judging from the covers of Witch Weekly and the Prophet. He knows Potter is powerful, and that there are always those who are drawn to power; he knows Potter is famous, and there are lines of people who would blind themselves for a taste of that acclaim, that notice. Severus has never personally seen it, but he knows - in a second-hand sort of general awareness - that Potter is not a hideous troll, wasn’t bullied at school for his hair or his clothing or his bone structure in the way that Severus was. But it is one thing to have that awareness and another to - to -

No. Surely not.

Severus wonders, with a dizzying surge of panic, how long this has been lurking within him, how long he has been watching Potter on the nights they spend together (fingers on his cuff, sunlight of his laugh, lilacs and blood along the roof of Severus’ gasping mouth “who won who won -”)

“No,” Severus says, this time aloud. The single word seems to shatter the stillness of his portrait, bounces off the walls in a thousand echoed fragments of no no no. Lily’s sodding son. The arrogant Gryffindor brat that somehow, against all odds, walked to meet his death and walked back still breathing. The only one who came to look for Severus’ body, but came seconds too late.

That is the key in this revolting puzzle, Severus decides. He didn’t survive the War, and Potter did. What does it matter whether or not he finds the boy lovely, what does it matter if he has brief, feverish thoughts about the hair on the back of his neck? Surely his thoughts are his own (at last), just as they are insignificant. Lily’s son is safe from him, he thinks, while simultaneously trying to to drown out the voice of his inner-panic, that soft malicious whisper of you want him young enough to be your son you monster if Albus knew if Potter KNEW -

He breathes through the wave of self-loathing, ignoring the way his breath hitches like a sob at the end. He is dead, and the boy is not, and in the end, what does it matter? Perhaps if he were alive he might keep his distance from Potter, call himself an old and ugly fool, curse this sudden longing as hopeless, as hideous.

Instead, he returns to the seaside scene in the main staircase.

It is mid-afternoon, and the sky is clear and grey. Severus wades up to his knees in the cold water, hissing as softly as he can manage. After he’s adjusted to the temperature, he wades in deeper, spine curving with the cold. The waves lap at his ribs, saturating the fabric of his robes until they’re like weights against his shoulders and his arms. Severus bends and feels along the ocean floor for stones.

“Of all the ridiculous, pathetic, useless things to happen,” he murmurs to himself, fingers raking paths through the seabed.

He finds only smooth sand and the occasional clamshell, nothing substantial enough to fill one’s pockets.

“Lovely,” he says after a moment, straightening up. His wet clothes cling icily to his skin, and if he squints his eyes he swears he can see painted canvas somewhere far off in the distance, heavy brushstrokes of blue and green and red, the colour of the end of the world.

He stands there for a long time.

Severus does not see Potter for several days. He cannot say he minds so much. The upcoming Christmas holidays and accompanying onslaught of marking have Potter working late into the night, and Severus does not particularly wish to speak to the boy until he has gotten over this strange and
sudden delusion - this complete loss of control. He avoids his own portrait at night, should Potter feel the sudden urge to visit. He avoids the potions store room, should Potter seek him there. Most likely the boy does not, but Severus isn’t willing to take any chances. During those times when Potter is in class (or still bundled up and sniffling in his bed) Severus sits at his desk, scribbling down possible potions that could result from the ingredients they have examined so far. The list is several pages long. The task is an impossible one, but still he writes. It is the only way he is able to keep his mind from certain things, and he is grateful for the diversion, even if it is completely fruitless.

Dreamless sleep.

Polyjuice.

Antivenin.

Two weeks before Christmas, there is a staff holiday function. The school is full of guests, and Severus has to leap behind an elm tree to avoid Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley, come to call on the third in their trio. They disappear into the Great Hall, and Severus promptly heads down toward the dungeons. Lately he feels as if he is a fugitive from justice with the way he is constantly in motion, perpetually in hiding. Minerva herself came to visit him twice in the last week, and both times he pretended he was asleep (he isn’t prepared to speak to anyone with a pulse just yet, certain that even the lines beneath his eyes will betray him.) That night, he leaves his portrait once again, in case Potter should come and suggest a walk. Severus wanders the hallways on his own, and when he hears his name spoken softly, he cannot be blamed for creeping closer, seeking out its source. It is no more than anyone would do.

“Seriously, Snape? You heard him, ‘Mione That’s - it’s odd, isn’t it?”

Severus peers out from behind a table piled high with rotting fruit and bones - a painfully obvious Memento Mori. In the lamplight, he can make out the shine of red hair and halo of frizzy curls. Granger and Weasley, up to something once again. Their faces are very close together, voices lowered, but they are fools if they believe that no one is listening.

“It’s good that they’re making a connection,” Granger says vaguely. “At least Harry isn’t alone -”

“No, he’s spending all his time with a bloody portrait. That’s real healthy.”

Severus makes himself go very quiet and very still. He steps backward, into the shadows of the painting. He waits.

“But you heard him. He’s getting more control, he isn’t having nightmares. However it’s happening, I’d say it’s an improvement.”

“But Snape? Really? I don’t understand how he could possibly - Snape is dead. Harry needs to spend time with people who are - who are not dead.”

“What a compelling argument,” Granger says dryly.

“Oh, don’t give me that. You know it’s not normal. He hasn’t been to visit George even though he lives in the next bloody town, he hasn’t so much as spoken to Gin since they split -”

Severus jerks his head up sharply at this, and then tries to pretend he didn’t.

“He won’t even come visit for Christmas, going on about all the work he and Snape have to do -”

“Ron, it’s -”
“It’s bloody weird, is what it is. Honestly. I think he needs counseling or summat, because this isn’t like him.”

The Granger girl looks thoughtful, which must be difficult in the face of such bleating ginger ignorance. Severus finds himself holding his breath. He should not be witness to this conversation, should not be learning things the Potter chooses not to tell him. Then again, perhaps the boy should have friends that take a bit more care with his privacy.

_Potter and the Weasley girl are no longer together. Potter is spending all his time with you - you, a dead man. A ghost. Less than a ghost._

“I’ll talk to him,” Granger decides, and Severus slams his eyelids shut. She will talk to him. “I’ll see if I can convince him to come for Christmas. You’re right it’s - there’s something about Snape he’s never been able to let go of, something he seems so fixated on. Even before Harry got his memories, even before the Shrieking Shack - he was always watching him. And then after, he became almost fanatical.”

“Remember that pub in York? I thought he was going to kill those blokes. Going on about Death Eater this and traitor that - I had to pull him off the one chap, Jesus.”

Jesus, Severus repeats silently. He wills himself to walk away, wills himself to be the sort of person who does not spy on former students, who does not listen to the intimate and hidden details of the Chosen One’s personal life (and how long has it been since he’s used that title, how long has it been since he’s thought of Potter as anything other than Harry, _Harry_ -)

“I used to think it was all misplaced guilt, maybe. You know Harry and his saving-people thing. But you don’t think -” Granger stops abruptly.

“What?”

“You don’t think he - and Snape -” The girl looks briefly like she’d rather be doing anything else. “Do you think Harry _likes_ him?”

Weasley’s eyes go about as large as Severus’ own, the two of them choking on whatever air is somehow in their lungs. Severus’ brain is full of static, a buzzing violence that obscures all rational thought (_no of course not of course -_)

“No!” Weasley exclaims, almost an echo. “How could you think - no, God no. Don’t even joke, I’ll be ill.”

“I suppose it’s a little ridiculous.”

“A little? Christ, ’Mione, don’t say those sorts of things. Can you imagine? No, he’s obviously lonely and - and the whole guilt thing, like you were saying. He was just dating my sister all of two months ago, let’s give the bloke some credit.”

Severus has heard enough. If he stays any longer, Weasley will no doubt continue in a similar fashion, and Severus only has the stomach for so much. He retreats to his portrait, resisting the urge to hide beneath his desk and bury his face in his hands. He breathes through the panic once again, and when he can finally stand up straight without choking, he decides that something will have to be done. Granger and Weasley’s concern is not ill-founded, and if Potter’s erstwhile friends are taking notice, others may be as well. Severus has indulged the boy shamefully in allowing this - fraternization to continue. Perhaps it was hidden beneath the guise of having a purpose - of aiding Potter in finding sleep, of examining the contents of the potions store room. But Alcott Prawn is
more than capable (well, that may be too generous) of continuing the project, and Potter is sleeping better of late. It is time Severus - it is time he made his position clear. Despite the vandalized books and the outrage that gnaws at Severus’ heels, despite the nights spent walking through forests and restaurants and fields full of wildflowers - Potter is not his friend. Potter is nothing to him.

For the next few nights, he does not leave his portrait. He waits, gritting his teeth, and if he thinks he is prepared to see the boy again, he realizes he is mistaken the moment Potter’s shadow falls across the corridor. Potter’s face is flushed with cold and there are snowflakes on the shoulders of his wool coat. He smiles, and Severus feels something crack in the vicinity of his ribs (he breathes through the panic.)

“Hi,” Potter says softly, drawing closer. “Where have you been hiding? Feels like we kept missing each other.”

This is an opportunity that Severus - if he were still living - would not have wasted. He can feel each cutting remark simmering, unspoken, on his tongue:

Shockingly, I do not have the time to simply wait upon the whims of the Chosen One.

You assume that my absence was unintentional.

Surely you do not believe your company to be that compelling.

Strangely, in the moment, Severus finds he does not wish to speak. Give him one minute more, just one minute of Harry Potter’s open smile and kind regard. Just one more minute before Severus sends it all to hell.

“I have been otherwise engaged,” he says dumbly. Potter seems to accept it.

“Of course. My friends were here visiting, anyway, and I’ve been marking papers for Professor Zhang. It’s busy for everyone, what with Christmas coming up.”

As if Potter thinks portraits care remotely about Christmas, one way or the other. It would be slightly charming if it weren’t so pathetic.

“Just said goodbye to Ron and Hermione. I’m staying here over the holidays, so I won’t see them for awhile.”

“Won’t they lament your absence?”

“They’ve got their own family things going on. I wouldn’t want to intrude or anything. And I don’t feel that welcome at the Burrow since - well.”

That ‘well’ rises like a brick tower over Severus’ curiosity, and it is none of his business - it certainly is not - but for some reason he wants to hear it from the boy directly.

“And Miss Weasley?” For Merlin’s sake, Severus stop stop- “Surely she will require your presence.”

Potter gives him an oddly assessing look, hesitating a moment before he answers.

“Ginny and I - we aren’t together. Anymore. We haven’t been since Aberforth’s funeral. It wasn’t spectacular timing but it’d probably been coming for - why am I telling you this? Sorry, I’m - sorry.”

“Oh,” is all Severus can manage.

“You needn’t look so -” Potter meets Severus’ gaze and his words dry up, lips parting slightly and
Severus bloody Snape stop looking at his lips, think of something to say, *something* -

Severus cannot. His mind has gone as clear and depthless and Potter’s eyes, the wide green of them, fringed in black.

“It’s - all right,” Potter says at last, breaking the odd, suffocating moment. “I’m okay, actually. I’m sure you don’t exactly care, and I don’t know why I’m telling you this - and somehow I’m still talking, you should really really stop me, why haven’t you -”

“Miss Weasley regrets her decision, I am sure. And if she does not presently, she will.”

Potter looks shocked for a split second, though he cannot be as shocked as Severus feels.

“That is - possibly the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Please refrain from thanking me. Or discussing it, or mentioning it ever, or recalling it fondly in your lonely, sleepless hours.”

“Of course not. Wouldn’t dream of it.” Potter runs a hand through his hair, and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He is fidgeting in the obvious manner that manifests whenever he is putting something off, or feeling nervous. It is far too suspicious; the boy has the worst poker face in the world. “Look, I - this is ridiculous but - I got you a Christmas present.”

Severus’ mouth falls weakly open. “You didn’t.”

He has to end this, end this now. Something has to be done.

“I might have. When I was in London with Hermione. There was this chap outside Will selling -”

“Potter, I am *not alive,*” Severus snarls, months of wretched space and futile hope and pointless, pointless existence wrenching their way out of his body. “I live in a sodding portrait, I am one step up from a figment of your limited imagination, what in Merlin’s name could I possibly have use for? I cannot own things, I cannot take things from you, and it does no good pretending that I am not - not -”

“Professor -”

“Dead, Potter. I am dead. Much as I try to ceaselessly remind you, much as you wiped my blood off your pristine hands, I am dead. Even you can’t be so deluded as to forget this.”

Potter looks shell-shocked, eyes gone wide with panic and regret. Severus knows the expression all too well, the “no, no, this wasn’t how it was supposed to go,” that he remembers from his youth, from Lily Potter and a word hurled through the air like a flint-tipped arrow that could never be taken back. Potter’s friends are right, the boy is spending too much time with him and it is unhealthy - this is for Potter’s own good, it is *necessary* -

“I’m sorry,” the boy murmurs, “I didn’t think it would be -”

“How shocking, you didn’t *think.* That certainly is a first where you’re concerned.”

“You’re being particularly nasty right now.”

“No, I’m being honest. I’m seeing sense for the first time in ages, though I would not expect the same from you. I have - humoured your delusions of kinship and coddled you through your bad dreams, but this cannot continue.”
“You don’t mean that,” Potter quickly interrupts, and Severus wishes the boy’s faith was more easily shaken. “Wait, did someone - did Hermione say -”

Potter stops his sentence suddenly, eyes going wide as moons behind his spectacles.

“Did Miss Granger say what?”

"What?" Potter repeats. He looks terrified and Severus tastes alarm at the back of his throat. "Nothing, never mind."

“No one said anything to me.” Severus forges ahead, trying to shake the unsettling feeling that Potter is concealing something critical from him. “You flatter yourself that we lesser mortals have only discussions of you with which to occupy our time.”

“I don’t,” Potter hisses, “I don’t and you know that. Why are you being like this? I thought that we had - I thought -”

“And I thought you had enough sense to differentiate the living from the dead, and kindness from pity.” Severus draws on the worst parts of himself, the way one sucks poison from a snake bite (you may not die in the end, but there will always be blood in your mouth). “The more fool I. Of course, given the company I keep -”

Potter raises his hand, palm out, and Severus has a brief, searing vision of dragging his teeth across Potter’s lifeline before he recognizes the gesture for what it is. Defeat.

“Stop,” Potter murmurs, lips barely moving. “All right? Just stop.”

Severus stops. He realizes that Potter’s eyes are shining, and tells himself it is just a trick of the lamplight. When Potter is gone, Severus plans to see whether his knuckles will bleed if he repeatedly punches the cauldron on his desk, but until that time, Severus can only squeeze his hands into fists and hate himself, hate himself utterly.

“I really - liked spending time with you,” Potter continues in his soft, broken tone. Then he laughs. “Mad, right? Thanks for - um - humouring me, I guess.”

Again, Severus says nothing. He imagines the rough grit of iron on the white skin of his hands. He imagines the spill of cold sunlight across Harry Potter’s quilt.

“Merry Christmas.”

Potter turns to go without looking at him, but has only taken a few steps before he suddenly turns back. Severus does not know what to expect, but he certainly isn’t expecting the boy to reach into his bag and retrieve a small flat parcel, wrapped in green paper. Fingers shaking, Potter tears the paper off, stuffing it carelessly into his bag before shoving its contents towards Severus.

“It’s a painting, okay? It was a painting. Jesus.”

He tosses the small framed painting on the ground before Severus can get a proper look at it, and is gone with a sharp echo of footsteps. They ring in Severus’ ears long after Potter has disappeared from sight.

Good.

Severus is glad he’s gone.
Good.

Potter’s gift lies on the ground beneath Severus’ portrait. He cannot see it. Perhaps if there was a painting across the hall, but there are few in the dungeons. Severus tells himself he does not care, and is content to wait until Filch or another member of the faculty wanders past and tosses it in the rubbish bin. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the first visitor Severus receives is the lamentable Alcott Prawn.

“You’ll be pleased to know that you were - er- indeed correct in your suspicions,” he says by way of greeting, voice only trembling slightly.

It has been six hours since Potter’s departure, and Severus can still hear his footsteps.

“I haven’t been sitting idly by, oh heavens no. A bit of experimentation revealed that the salamander blood had been diluted - with water of all things! And you were right about the saffron as - oh, what’s this?”

Severus has not yet deigned to speak to him. He glances up to see Alcott holding a small painting in his hand. The frame is simple dark wood, and it is no bigger than a paperback novel.

“How charming,” the man exclaims, smiling nervously at Severus. “Is this yours?”

“Yes, just one piece from my vast art collection.”

“Really?”

“No, of course not. I am a portrait, in case it has slipped your bloody notice.”

Prawn turns an ugly shade of red. “Oh. Yes, yes of course. Um - did it just tumble off the wall here? Shall I set it to rights? I wouldn’t want you to be without your - er, neighbour.”

Jesus wept. “Take it with you or burn it or sell it for pocket change, I do not care. Some imbecile left it here.”

“It’s a train,” Alcott says, and for the first time, Severus finds his gaze drawn to it. Alcott is correct; the painting depicts a tiny, furnished train compartment. There is a wooden desk on one end, and several plush armchairs on the other, separated by a tiered brass tea cart. Heavy brocade drapes hang over the large windows, but they are pulled back, revealing green hills and clear skies, the scenery constantly shifting and changing. Now there are a few patches of purple heather, now a cluster of bleating sheep. Severus feels the urge to press his hand up against the window and leave fingerprints on the glass.

(“Wish I could tuck you in my bag and take you on the train or something,” Potter says, eyebrows knitting together while Severus is slowly battered by waves.

“I regret that I am quite beyond your help.”)

“Lovely,” Alcott says again, and Severus wants to choke himself with that word. “I think this might suit the potions classroom, just above my -”

“Is there a reason for this visit?” Severus spits, unable to hear any more. “Or have you simply come to share your opinion on the random bits of detritus that litter these school corridors? Perhaps you have taken over Filch’s duties as caretaker, since he seems infinitely more qualified for your position.”
“Now I say, that isn’t very friendly. I simply wanted to keep you informed about the outcomes of the ingredient testing.”

“Consider me informed. Good day, Professor Prawn.”

“Well,” Alcott grumbles, tucking the painting under his arm and turning on his heel.

Severus scowls after him, grinds his teeth together, and waits until just after midnight before seeking out the potions classroom.

It is a beautiful painting, when one examines it in closer proximity. Severus sits on the armchair by the window, pours himself a steaming cup of tea, and watches the world go by. The day has faded to night, and through the glass he can see the occasional pinprick of constellations, the shimmer of water as it reflects the large and lambent moon.

The canvas is perfectly sized for transportation, could fit easily in a suitcase or satchel. One could travel in this painting. See the Wizarding Library of London, see the ocean, see a million rooms that do not have artwork cluttering their walls. It would be a bit akin to a dog traveling in a purse, and it says something terrible about Severus’ failing dignity that he is even considering such a thing. Still - it is a thought.

He leans back against the armchair, lets the quiet hum of travel wash over him. When was the last time he had been on a train? It must have been the summer before he took over as Headmaster, taking the London Midland up to Spinner’s End while Harry Potter was somewhere far away, saving the world.

When Severus opens his eyes, sunlight is filtering through the window, and students are filtering through the doors of the potions class. He cannot remember a time he slept so soundly and deeply - when he was living or otherwise. He strangely does not wish to leave, but at the first sight of Prawn he flings himself out of the chair and flees to his own portrait.

All in all, Potter’s present is surprisingly - adequate. Severus feels the reckless and impossible urge to tell the boy as much, but of course he will not. Potter has undoubtedly come to his senses and sworn off any further contact between them; neither can Severus bring himself to face the injured crease of Potter’s eyebrows, the sad and hopeful smile that will curve across his mouth, his furious indignation and then grudging acceptance and then - then -

No. Severus cannot bear it.

But that does not mean he cannot do something for Potter in return (Severus latches onto that idea like roots gripping soil.) He will do something for Potter, something small and secretive, something the boy can never trace back to Severus but will appreciate nonetheless. He cannot be the object of Potter’s gratitude, and he cannot look at him without flinching, but he can do something, repay the boy somehow.

The next night, he returns to the train compartment, staring out the window while his stray thoughts knit themselves into webs. The night after, and the night after that - Severus drums idly against the glass, and is gratified to see the fingerprints left behind (paintings are altogether too pristine, too unmarked, and Severus longs more than anything for the grease and grit of ugly, complicated life.) This is when he realizes what Potter needs. The boy has been locked up in high towers for too long, been cloaked in the trauma of violence and the weight of expectation for nearly his entire life. Potter can hide no longer. He needs to live.

Severus makes a decision. If Granger and Weasley think Potter is isolating himself, there is only one
way forward. For once, Severus is --

* * *

-- not prepared for the moment he sees his professor again.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I have a beta! Parker Luce thank you times a million for shaking the dust off this old thing and breathing some new life into it. You have been absolutely invaluable. With a great beta comes great responsibility - there may be a few changes made to the earlier chapters as I try to make more sense of where this was TWO YEARS A-

NEVERMIND, nobody look at the date for the last time I updated this.

Those of you who have still been reading this, you have my whole heart. Those of you who left comments saying you believed I would update someday, you also have my whole heart.

See you in two years (I'm kidding, I've got chapters for you, baby!)

For once, Severus is -

*   *   *

- not prepared for the moment he sees his professor again.

Harry thinks about it constantly, realizes he’s falling back into his old patterns of constant vigilance and perpetual anxiety. It was enough when it was just at Will, but now Snape knows where Harry lives, might knock on his door and hex him back to Greece for that ridiculous, irrational, spine-bending drunken kiss. Christ, it doesn’t bear thinking about (so don’t think about it, stop thinking about it.)

Harry spends Christmas by himself for the first time since he can remember. It isn’t heartbreaking or anything - he surprised himself by not feeling as maudlin on the day as he fears he might. Ron and Hermione both ask him to the Burrow, and he receives an owl from Mrs. Weasley that can’t be seen as anything but sincere, but still - he doesn’t go. He takes every available shift at the library, and sends the Weasleys a Christmas cake (which fails spectacularly, but is so soaked in rum that no one will notice) and sits in his flat alone, toasting the most wonderful time of the year.

As he stares out the rain-battered window, he thinks about Snape - wonders whether the man spends the holidays alone, whether they’re both staring out similarly rain-battered windows and feeling altogether less lonely than they imagined.

Probably not. As Harry’s come to realize, Snape might be with all manner of people, might be drinking wine with Eleni or off to some other exotic destination, living a life that Harry has no part in. It’s good really, Snape deserves it. He deserves something other than the bloody War.

On the days when he’s not working, Harry travels. The project he decided on after that disastrous kiss (stop thinking about it) keeps him well occupied. It’s expensive but Harry feels driven to finish what he started, and he isn’t backing out now. He visits Eleni in Lindos from time to time, getting feedback on the exorbitant prices he’s paying for Merlin knows what, and he travels to the shadier parts of Wizarding London for auctions he has no place in, and he meets odd quiet men at estate
sales who’ve seen far more of the world than he ever will.

He eventually has to kip on his sofa so the bedroom can be used for storage. It’s worth it though, because he’s doing something for Snape. Of course it won’t be enough, but it’s something, isn’t it? It has to be.

On New Years day, he bites down on the inside of his cheek and goes to Hogwarts. It isn’t as bone-breakingly traumatic as it used to be, but it still takes a good twenty minutes before he can bring himself to walk through the front doors. He wanders the halls a bit, and every time the War starts burning black behind his eyelids, Harry stops. He breathes. He puts his hand against the wall and focuses on the feel of the plaster, the hum of magic beneath it that pulses like a heartbeat.

The War is over and he’s alive.

Voldemort is dead, and Harry’s alive. (Some times when he closes his eyes he sees Ron and Hermione, laughing over cups of tea at the kitchen table. Some times when he closes his eyes he sees Snape up to his knees in seawater, softness in his mouth, looking at Harry likes he’s completely unfamiliar.)

It works, for the most part, and Harry can keep walking. He can shake the panic but loneliness still follows him, no matter how much “mindful breathing” he does. He wishes - briefly - that he hadn’t come to Hogwarts alone.

That there was someone there to walk beside him. Even if they didn’t speak. Even if Harry just listened to them breathing.

He spends an hour with Headmistress McGonagall getting updates (apparently there have been some exploding cauldrons, and their new Potions Master leaves something to be desired, but Harry didn’t hear that from her.) He grabs a drink in Hogsmeade with George on the way home; by all accounts the bloke is alone far too much, and Harry always enjoys his company. George is a bit off, as usual, and it makes Harry more furious with himself than he has a right to be. If he had only ended things quicker, if he had only figured it out sooner, maybe it would have ended differently. Maybe Fred and Lupin and Tonks and everyone would still be alive, if only Harry had been better. Stronger.

This is a dangerous sort of thinking.

Soon the holidays have passed and Harry’s back at the library, eyes perpetually on the door. When Snape turns up - if Snape ever turns up - Harry thinks he will apologize. Or maybe he’ll ignore it all and just let it fester until Snape brings it up himself. Or maybe Harry will somehow convince Snape that the entire thing was in his head, that it was all a nightmare caused by food poisoning or -

Anyway, he’s got loads of plans. Each creak of the door hinges has Harry swallowing against the leap of his heartbeat. Three hundred times a day he finds himself turning with a carefully neutral gaze to see who’s entering the building. Three hundred times a day, Harry is convinced that it’s finally Snape, it’s finally him, and it’s difficult to remember how to breathe without bleeding. Harry turns around, and turns around, and turns around again.

And then one day, he turns around - and it’s him.

Unfortunately, the him in question is a good twenty years younger than Snape, and decidedly fucking blonder.

“What do you want?” Harry strides across the floor to where Draco Malfoy’s standing, looking like he should be paid to be within ten feet of a bookshelf. Like the little weasel even knows how to
“Potter,” Draco spits. It’s as if no time has passed at all and they’re still throwing curses at each other on the Quidditch pitch. “I didn’t realize this was your own private library. Do you come cheaper than a guard dog? I suppose you’d both work for scraps.”

“That’s bloody hilarious.” Harry tries to keep his voice as low as possible because he is employed here after all, and Merlin knows when Peggotty is going to float down through the ceiling. “You’re a real comedian. Now why don’t you bugger off? I don’t know why you’re -”

“What did you do to Severus?” Draco interrupts.

Harry’s mind goes silent -
- before exploding into a kaleidoscope of protests and denials, each of them more ludicrous than the last. Malfoy - Snape told Malfoy? Right here in Will, it’s finally happened: the end of the fucking world.


“Right.” Malfoy eyes him with equal parts disgust and amusement, and Harry feels his hand trembling with the urge to throttle himself.

“Nothing,” he says again, because he may not be able to stitch a sentence together, but two syllables he can manage. “I didn’t.”

“He came back from Greece looking like he’d been shot. Was a right terror over the holidays, worse than normal even, and I know it’s your fault so don’t bother attempting some ridiculous excuse.”

Harry’s heart pounds in his chest so loudly he fears it might be heard. A librarian is going to bloody “shush” him any second now.

“Nothing,” he says.

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “You’re so helpful. Just tell me what it was so I can deal with him - he’s difficult enough to live with already.”

Harry stops himself from saying ‘nothing’ for the fifth damn time, but only through the sheer force of his shock.

“Nothing,” he says.

Malfoy rolls his eyes. “You’re so helpful. Just tell me what it was so I can deal with him - he’s difficult enough to live with already.”

Harry stops himself from saying ‘nothing’ for the fifth damn time, but only through the sheer force of his shock.

“‘He’s living with you?’”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Malfoy releases a slow, long-suffering sigh, something obviously picked up from extended proximity with the Potions Master. “I didn’t come here to give you an update on my personal life, and anyway - what do you care where he lives?”

“I don’t,” Harry protests, because he doesn’t, “I just - he never said.”

“Why would he? Were you planning on dropping by for tea?”

Harry cannot help the image that puts into his head; he and Snape and Malfoy with their cups raised, making conversation over scones. Malfoy probably drinks tea with his bloody pinkie out, he’s so ridiculous.

Panic is making him lose his mind.
“Hello, Harry?  Little help?” a high-pitched voice cuts through the dull roar in Harry’s ears. He turns to see that Isadora has taken over the Information Desk where a small queue has formed. She raises her pale eyebrows meaningfully, and Harry winces an apology at her.

“I’ve got to go,” he says to Draco, who sneers in response.

“The working-class life is certainly charming. I don’t know how you can tear yourself away.”

Harry turns on his heel without a word of goodbye, counting himself lucky to be rid of the git. He’s almost at the Information Desk when Draco calls out behind him.

“I’m going to find out, you know. This isn’t over.”

“Original,” Harry mutters, but otherwise ignores him. Draco sighs and storms off, leaving Harry with a line of library patrons and a clearly too-interested Isadora.

“Your lad’s a posh one, isn’t he?” she asks, quiet enough to be heard by only the first ten people in line. “That his real hair colour?”

“I - what?  No.  No, just - next.” Harry waves the next person in line toward the desk, and prays that this is all just some dream, and he’ll shortly wake up tangled in his quilt.

But it’s not.  If it was a dream there’s no way Snape would just show up at the Information Desk an hour later, like an ordinary, average person.  If it was a dream, Snape would descend from the sky in a riot of flame, cleaving Harry’s head off with the sword of Gryffindor (he’s had that dream more than once, always wakes up before the end.)

“Mr. Potter.”

Malfoy and Snape in one day.  Brilliant.

“Pro-” Harry’s voice cracks and he has to cough and swallow. “-fessor.”

“I have asked you repeatedly to refrain from using that title.”

“Of course. Um, you’re right.  I’m sorry.  Do you -” His mouth is getting away from him, Harry can feel it reeling out of control.  Snape is wearing that coat again, and Harry knows what it feels like now, how warm and soft it is, and - stop, stop this.  “Do you prefer Mister?  Or just Snape?  Or -”

“Perhaps you might not speak to me at all.  That certainly seems like the easiest option.”

“Right.”

Harry swallows the rest of his words, waiting for Snape to continue.  Merlin, he’s fucked isn’t he?  He can barely look at the man without blushing, can feel heat radiating off his cheekbones.  So much for pretending the whole Greece thing never happened.

Isadora is watching with some interest.  Harry and Snape both simultaneously glare at her, and she laughs.

“Okay, okay.  I release you.  Take fifteen or something.”

“It’s library business,” Harry tells her, and she winks horrifically.

“Yes, it’s all library business around here.”
Bloody Isadora. Harry hurries away from the desk, feeling slightly gratified when Snape follows.

“Sorry you had to witness that. She’s convinced everyone is shagging everyone, and if they’re not now they soon -” His words die at the flush spreading up Snape’s throat. Jesus, stop looking at his throat. “So you - what did you, um -”

“I’ve found a copy of *Les Elixirs Anciennes*. I came to enquire whether you feel capable of Apparating across the Atlantic.”

“Yes,” Harry says without thinking, because he knows in his bones that he can. Just thinking about it sends magic thrumming through him, starts the books on the nearest shelf shuffling their pages until Harry bites down hard on his tongue.

“Really.”

“Of course,” he says again. Snape is looking at him dubiously, and Harry feels the strange need to preen in front of him, to be brilliantly powerful and capable of anything. “It won’t be a problem.”

“Done it before have you?”

“How else would I get my Angus steak and American cheese?”

It’s a lie of course, and Harry is out of control, but it makes Snape’s mouth twitch. Maybe that’s worth it. There’s something there in that gesture, pulling at him - a line drawn from the corner of Snape’s twitching mouth to somewhere beneath Harry’s ribs, *tugging*. Harry almost takes a step forward.

“Do you need to speak to your employer about potential travel dates?”

“Probably. Are you living with Malfoy?”


“Today,” Harry interrupts despite the fact that Snape in a rage at Malfoy is brilliant and wonderful and fantastic. “He was in the library, hardly an hour ago. He said - well, a lot of things.”

“I’m certain he’ll be all too eager to re-enact the encounter for me this evening. Though he’ll be much more clever in his version, surely.”

Harry stares at Snape, mouth open, until Snape raises an eyebrow.

“What?”

“That was rather - funny.”

“I am so pleased I entertain you. Regrettably yes, I have taken up residence in Malfoy Manor. When one has no money and no prospects and is known throughout the Wizarding World as a treasonous murderer, choices are rather limited.”

Harry opens his mouth again but Snape cuts him off with a raised hand.

“Do not commiserate, or apologize, or abase yourself as you are so fond of doing. I have no stomach for it this morning.”

“Let me know when you have the stomach for it, then.”
Snape stares evenly at him, before shaking his head. “Speak to your employer. You unfortunately know where to find me for the present.”

“I don’t have an owl,” Harry says. “Not since -” He pauses, trying not to choke. “Not since.”

“I’ll send Finnegan then.”

“All right.” And that should be the end of the conversation, really it should, but Harry’s teeth and tongue are chattering away as if they’re under an enchantment. “Would you like to grab a coffee? Are you hungry or -”

“Good day, Mr. Potter.”

Snape turns viciously, like a dancer almost, before striding away. It’s so overly dramatic that Harry feels his heart clench in his chest. Since when did he find anything about Snape endearing?

Peggotty is all too eager for Harry to continue “unravelling the greatest mystery of the age” and basically gives him carte blanche with dates and budgets (“Do whatever it takes,” she says with a pointedly ominous look, as if fully expecting Harry to have blood on his hands before this is through.) The next day an owl is waiting for him in the break room, the same barn owl that Harry recognizes as Snape’s by the mocking tilt of its head and fondness for ear nibbling.

“Finnegan,” Harry murmurs, petting the creature’s feathers. “Aren’t you pretty.”

The bird has a note in his claws, and Harry is once again struck by the vicious elegance of Snape’s writing: “Cornerbrook, Newfoundland. Please reply with date and time.”

Harry does, though he suggests Will as an apparition point, too nervous to consider having Snape in his house again. The front entrance should be fine - it isn’t warded, and they could leave in the morning before it gets too busy. Unless there’s much of a time difference? Harry hadn’t thought of that, but the owl is already gone, coppery wings beating madly out the window of the break room.

He’s got three days to prepare. Harry checks out a book about Newfoundland, which seems a cheery enough place. He’s never been to Canada, but he likes the look of the Maritimes - rather like Scotland or Ireland, maybe. He contemplates lunch with Hermione before he leaves, but decides against it. She’ll have too many questions he’s not ready to answer (“So you haven’t said anything about the kiss at all? Haven’t apologized? Are you just going to pretend it never happened? Honestly, Harry.”)

“Maybe,” Harry says to himself. Snape would probably die before bringing it up. Maybe Harry can get away with it. If he can just force himself not to remember the dangerously soft texture of the man’s lips, if Harry can just wipe away the memory of a warm gasp against his tongue -

This is not a good way to start.

He meets Snape outside Will while the sun is still hidden behind clouds, a scattering of stars just fading from the lightening sky.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” Snape asks.

“Nice to see you too.”

Snape approaches, tilting his head critically. “You realize it is January. In Canada.”

“Oh.” Harry’s got on the warmest jacket that he owns, but he hadn’t thought to bring mitts or a
muffler or anything. “I guess - I’ll use a hot air charm if I need to. I wasn’t thinking.”

“A first where you’re concerned.” Snape is bundled in his grey coat and appears to be wearing some sort of knitted jumper underneath it. Again, Harry feels that strange sick feeling inside his chest, like he’s going to laugh or start crying or something. What is wrong with him?

“Is something wrong with you?” Snape says, as if he’s reading Harry’s mind. “Beyond the expansive obvious, I mean.”

“Cheers. You ready? Or am I supposed to pop off to Topman for a new winter wardrobe?”

Snape rolls his eyes as they step through the front doors, and stand facing each other in the entrance way. Snape holds out his hands. They’re very white, Harry thinks. As he takes them he realizes they are warm as well. There are callouses on Snape’s palms. This seems like a detail too intimate for Harry to know.

“Give me a sec,” he says, trying to ignore the texture of Snape’s hands and focus on his destination. Cornerbrook. It tugs on him like a magnet, and Harry feels the spell rising like a tidal wave over the both of them. He looks up at the last second, just as the rest of the world begins to shimmer, and meets Severus’ gaze. His eyes are blown black and his lips are parted like he thinks Harry is - is -

“Professor?” Harry murmurs before everything shifts and they are thrown -

*   *   *

- across the hall, still as a statue and looking at Severus like he’s speaking in tongues.

“Just so we are clear,” Draco says slowly, the dim lights of the dungeon flickering around him. “You want me -”

Severus pinches the bridge of his nose and curses whatever Gods there are that made him briefly think this was a good idea.

“- to ask Potter -”

Merlin, Draco can chew the scenery with the best of them. Severus would be more irritated if the boy hadn’t learned it from the best.

“- for a - I’m sorry, a pint?”

“Or coffee, or tea, or out to the sodding chippie - I’m not an event planner,” Severus snaps, even though it’s entirely his fault that this hideous conversation is occurring. “I am only asking you to -”

“Bury the hatchet,” Draco nods, “You’ve said. Has something happened? Has he done something to you? You can tell me.”

Severus releases a slow, long-suffering sigh, perfected through years of teaching magical brats. “Merlin’s sake, no. I am simply attempting to -” He trails off, mouth going dry because - because why?

There is no love lost between Potter and Draco, and the odds that the two will find redemption in each other is infinitesimal. Most likely, Potter will throw a drink in Draco’s face before the evening is out. At least Severus is trying (of course it won’t be enough, but it’s something, isn’t it? It has to be.)
Potter has been alone in this school too long, so long he’s started to think portraits are an appropriate source of companionship. Perhaps Draco is not the most appropriate (or pleasant) reminder of the outside world but he is the only one with whom Severus has regular contact. One must make use of the resources available.

Since their - conversation - Severus has seen Potter rarely. The boy officially started teaching in January and has not had time to traipse around the dungeons. Severus is grateful for that beyond words. He heard from Evelyn that Potter spent Christmas with his friends (Severus curls his lip) in Ottery St. Catchpole. This may or may not have been true; Evelyn is not a reliable source at the best of times, and when it comes to ‘Professor Potter’ there are no lack of stars in the child’s eyes.

Just the same, Severus would like to think that it was true. He feels an uncommon flare of warmth in his chest at the thought of Potter surrounded by Weasleys, drowsy and well-fed and wearing coordinated revolting jumpers (Severus canoot think too long on the roots of these emotions, cannot hold them to the light or examine them too thoroughly. Through whatever lens, a virus is still a virus.)

“You came to me,” he points out to Draco, “You asked if there was anything you could do. There is something.”

“But why this?” Draco is deeply uncomfortable, pulling at a stray thread on his bespoke cashmere coat. “I mean, it’s Potter. I don’t understand.”

“You are not meant to. Will you do this or won’t you?”

Draco makes a face like he’s bitten into a rotten apple, but nods. “Yes, fine. Fine. Just give me a few days to work up to it. And I’m not going to twist his scrawny arm or anything. If he says no, we’re done. Unless you want me to Imperius him?”

Draco seems too enthusiastic about that prospect, so Severus shakes his head.

“I do not condone that course of action.”

“Hmmph.” Draco folds his arms. “Well, law school’s going well, not that you’ve asked. Mother sends her love. Father’s taken up watercolours for his mental health - he’s staying at the London house most of the time, so who knows what’s going on there. Not much difference than when he was at the Manor, to be honest. He was always locked away in some room.”

Severus has little sympathy left in him to spare for Lucius Malfoy, but he does worry about the impact on Draco. Azkaban left Lucius permanently altered, not fit to be much of a father or husband. Severus has not seen him since the end of the War, but from Draco’s accounts, the man is not markedly improved.

“Do give my regards to the rest of the family, then.” It feels unnatural even contemplating the next words. “Thank you, Draco.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Thank me if we don’t hex each other blind before the evening’s over.”

After Draco leaves, Severus contemplates his next steps. As absurd as this course of action is (and he recognizes the absurdity) Severus has limited people at his disposal. Draco is not his first choice of person to connect Potter to the world beyond Hogwarts, but there are no others that can be called on at a moment’s notice (over the holidays, Severus made a list of acquaintances with whom he could get in touch, and found it depressingly short.)

So. It has to be Draco. Potter seems to have some innate urge to right wrongs and mend fences, and
if this urge isn’t satisfied with Severus, perhaps Draco will do the trick. It isn’t a brilliant plan, but it’s what’s available at this time.

Minerva is next, he decides. Severus visits her office for the first time in months and she looks altogether too pleased to see him. Albus’ former office looks much the same except for the sudden influx of Montrose Magpies Quidditch memorabilia and long tartan drapes done up in Gryffindor colours (revolting favouritism, frankly.)

“Was wondering when you’d pop in,” Minerva says, closing up an enormous leather planner. “You certainly get around for a dead man. I’ve been to visit several times but you’re always otherwise occupied.”

Severus wanders through an oil-painted moor rolling with mist until he can see her more clearly. He really doesn’t know what to tell her. He has avoided her in the past, but she shouldn’t take it personally. He avoids everyone when he can help it.

“I am working on something at present.”

“Yes, you’re helping Alcott get the potions stores back in working order. The school certainly appreciates it. I understand Mr. Potter has been assisting -”

“It’s about Potter that I’ve come.” Snape cuts her off. “The whelp has become something of a nuisance. Given his well-known hero complex it isn’t surprising that he would try to ingratiate himself, but I’m hoping you might have some task for him that would give me a moment’s peace now and then.”

Minerva frowns. “A task for Mr. Potter.”

“Something that might get him out of the school at the very least. It can’t be healthy for a young man to spend all his free time within these walls.”

“I recall a young Potions professor spending his evenings similarly occupied.”

“And look how it served me.”

Their conversation is interrupted by a sudden snore, and Severus notices Albus Dumbledore for the first time. He is sleeping in a hammock, strung up between two palm trees in a framed beach scene. Waves drift by gently in the background, and Albus’ long beard trails in the sand as he snores.

Minerva casts a fond look over her shoulder at the old wizard before turning back to Severus.

“Lazy old beggar,” she says, but the affection in her voice is almost smothering. “But I suppose he’s earned a bit of rest. Now, Severus Snape - since when are you concerned how Professor Potter spends his free time?”

“Since he started spending every bloody moment with -” He stops.

Minerva watches him. There is an odd melancholy in her lined eyes.

“My concern is beside the point.” Severus forces himself to continue. “I would think you’d want to ensure your Chosen One and celebrity professor was well-adjusted and well-occupied. Surely there are - staff functions or social gatherings he could attend? Could you make them mandatory?”

“I suspect Madam Hooch would strike if I did,” Minerva says with a smirk. “Well, I’ll think on it. I’m sure Potter will be busier now that he is teaching full-time. He’s been brilliant in the role so far,
by the way.”

“If I wasn’t already dead, I might die of shock.”

“Would you.” Minerva takes a worn pocket watch out of her robes and examines it. “I’m afraid I have detentions to supervise in a few moments time. I do wish you would come to call more often. Albus would particularly enjoy -”

“Thank you, Minerva.” Severus does not want to hear how much Albus might enjoy a visit, or how the old man longs to see him. He cannot stand in the face of such kindness when all he has to offer in return is shame.

He turns to go, satisfied that the Headmistress will think of something to keep Potter sufficiently occupied. He flinches when Minerva clears her throat behind him.

“If I may,” she says, and her voice only trembles slightly. “I don’t believe I’ve had the chance to properly express my thanks. Even though you were a bastard about it, I doubt the school would be here without you.”

Severus swallows. He says nothing and he does not turn around.

“So when it comes to the quality of people with whom Harry Potter spends his time, well.” She pauses briefly, and Snape hears her clear her throat again. “I approve of his choices.”

Severus squeezes his left hand into a fist and bites down hard on the tip of his tongue. Then you’re a fool, he wants to say, but he does not. He isn’t prepared for the way her words twist something inside of him, some terrible lonely place that wishes desperately he could believe her. That he could be - worthy - of Harry sodding Potter. That he could deserve anything that shines so brightly, a man whose spent his life in black robes and dungeon corridors and deep shadows.

He leaves without a response.

Severus takes his time on the way back to his portrait, turning the conversation over in his head. There is a wide mountain range he’s never visited, and he relishes the feeling of snow seeping in over his shoes, frost biting his fingertips. He is just reaching the end of the slushy path he’s carved through the snow when Potter strides into view.

Potter’s breath catches in his throat (almost like he’s choking.)

Potter’s arms are folded, and he is followed by a tall ginger that could only be a Weasley. The man turns slightly and Severus realizes it’s one of the twins. The one who lived (the one whose ear you hexed off you Death Eater scum, you monster, you -)

Stop, Severus tells the War. Enough.

“You should have come,” Weasley is telling Potter, “We all missed you. Just because you and Gin aren’t together -”

George, Severus thinks. The man is thinner than Severus remembers. Both he and Potter wear ghosts across their faces like masks, shades of things they have seen. Haunted, that’s the word Severus is looking for. Both men are haunted.

But only one of them has skin that makes Severus’ teeth clench together, grinding so tightly it’s nearly painful.
Only one has hair black as ink and begging to be touched, begging for Severus’ hands to squeeze into fists around it (Jesus Christ, enough.)

“I’m sorry.” Potter’s eyes are tired. “I’ve been - working on something.”

“Working on something. Yeah, that’s a classic. Good for one Sunday a month, for me at least.”

“Look, George, it’s my first term actually teaching here. I was busy, okay? And besides that, I just didn’t feel -”

“I know, mate. Don’t you think I bloody know?” Suddenly, George’s fingers are tight on Potter’s forearm, almost going white against the fabric of his robes. “Don’t you think it’s the same when I’m there, pretending everything’s ‘happy families’ and ‘Merry Christmas’ and all the while there’s a fucking hole in my fucking chest -”

(Don’t touch him, Severus thinks, stop touching him.)

Potter is silent, staring at the elder Weasley with his sad, sweet eyes. Severus wants to claw his own face off but that would mean looking away, and he cannot.

“I’m sorry George,” Potter says it again. “I’m so sorry.”

George shakes his head. “Right, well, we’re all of us sorry. Might as well eat turkey together and wear bloody jumpers, eh?”

Potter laughs then, and Weasley laughs, and as Potter rests his hand on the other man’s arm, Severus takes a sharp breath in through his nostrils. He does it without thinking, as helpless as a cough or a seizure. Maybe it’s the bloody mountain range, but the sound of his breathing cuts the stillness like the Sword of Gryffindor.

Potter turns.

Weasley, the imbecile, turns as well. Severus isn’t exactly inconspicuous, a smudge of black against white snow, and he locks eyes with Potter before he can flee. He locks eyes with the boy, and realizes that the time apart has done nothing but aggravate his injury.

The boy is still lovely.

Severus is still dead.

He leaves without looking at them, trudging through the snow without a backward glance. Severus travels to the seaside painting to see how long he can hold his breath underwater.

It is a disappointingly short amount of time.

Days go by. Maybe weeks. Severus waits for the hammer to fall, as it were - waits for the inevitable visit from Potter or Malfoy. He does not know which to fear more until the muffled sound of trainers on the floor interrupts his silent brewing. He knows that footfall like his own heartbeat (Severus’ teeth grind sharply together.)

“Malfoy came to see me, did you know?” Potter’s voice is soft but steady.

“Did he.” Severus does not look up from his brewing.

“Yes. He said you wanted him to be my friend.”
Severus does look up at this. The next time he sees Draco he’s going to have him killed.

“What? I - that is not - what? Nothing, no, I -”

It has finally happened, in the halls of Hogwarts. The end of the bloody world.

“Really. I believe his exact words were go out for a pint. He didn’t seem thrilled about it, mostly concerned about what I’d done to you.”

“That little shit,” Severus hisses under his breath, and then hopes that Potter didn’t overhear. Unfortunately, the corner of the boy’s mouth has twitched upwards just slightly.

“Did I do something to you?”

“What could you possibly have done? I have nothing left to wound.”

“You were so angry at Christmas. About the stupid painting. Was this all some plot? Have Draco - I don’t know - humiliate me in public or -”

“Is that what you think of me?” It stings, but it isn’t surprising. “That after all this, after everything, I would want to see you humiliated?”

“I don’t know, do I?” Potter’s tone is sharper, anger slowly being honed. “At school - yes, absolutely. You were weak in the knees for that sort of thing. But since you woke up I thought maybe things were different. And then at Christmas -”

“At Christmas I quite rightly pointed out that you -”

“That you felt bad for me,” Potter interrupts. “And I was confusing pity with friendship. That’s what you said. Is this more pity, trying to get Malfoy to make nice with me? For someone who can’t stand me, I certainly seem to occupy a lot of your free time.”

“You flatter yourself.”

“Do I?” Potter’s eyes dart away, shifting restlessly while he thinks. Severus might previously have made some sort of petty remark in his head, but the petty remarks are pretty thin these days. Instead he stares at the damp curl that clings to Potter’s forehead. He wishes he could brush it out of the young man’s eyes.

“You’re worried about me,” Potter says suddenly.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not. You’re worried about me. You don’t want me spending time with you but you don’t want me to be alone. It’s so -” He stops abruptly, shaking his head.

“Potter, I could not care less about what you do.”

“Evidently.” Potter takes a step closer, and then another. He walks forward until his nose is almost brushing Severus’ canvas. It’s bizarre to be confronted with such a close view of Potter’s face. Severus can see the marks his glasses have left on the bridge of his nose. Can see the damp shine on the very top of his bottom lip.

“You’re worried about me,” Potter says for the third time. Snape tries not to get distracted by the way his lips move at this short distance. “I get that the painting was a bad idea. I can see how it might have been -patronizing or something. I just thought you could come with me. To that library
or wherever. You could talk to the librarian about the missing books. Maybe you’d like to get out of the school. But I get it. I can’t fix this. I can’t bring you back. Or pretend you’re alive.”

Severus says nothing.

“But if you were -”

Potter takes so long to finish the sentence that Severus feels obliged to prompt him.

“If I was...”

“If you were alive, I would want -” Potter’s face flushes pink with embarrassment. He runs a hand through his ridiculous hair. “I would want to be your friend.”

Both men are silent for a moment, the confession hanging like the Dark Mark in the sky above them.

“I missed you. Over Christmas.” Potter doesn’t breathe as he speaks. “I missed talking to you.”

“You -” Severus swallows around the word.

“So if it’s pity, fine.” Potter rushes ahead, and Severus recognizes a young man who fought a Basilisk and killed the Dark Lord. “But I’m not going to pretend I didn’t miss you. And you’re not allowed to pretend that you weren’t worried about me, and didn’t just try to set me up with Malfoy, of all people, Jesus.”

There are two paths in front of Snape. He waits for just a moment, eyes fixed on the flutter of Potter’s pulse in his throat.

Two paths.

He chooses the more treacherous one. The one filled with shards of glass, wrapped in thorny roses.

“I had limited resources at my disposal,” he mutters.

Potter blinks at him, and then is startled into a weak laugh.

“He already had his wand out when he saw me, thought I had you under some sort of spell. Going for a pint with him didn’t seem like the safest of bets.”

“He will absolutely pay for this.”

“Oh, I know he will. Almost makes the awkwardness worthwhile.”

Severus does not say “I missed you too.” Merlin, no. He would never say anything as irreparable as that.

“So can we be mates again?”

The tentative question makes Potter sound impossibly young.

“Let me add: if I promise to spend time with a living, breathing human that isn’t a student or another professor at least - say, once a week?”

“That’s completely -”

“And don’t get you any more presents. And taste all the revolting potions ingredients you can think
of."

“You are - a preposterous human being.”

Potter grins, slow like a sunrise.

“That a yes, professor?”

“Why you would even want to waste your time in such a spectacular fashion is beyond my comprehension but -”

“I’m not hearing ‘no’.”

“Potter.” The contents of his cauldron have completely gone off now, and Severus couldn’t care less about it. Let all his best intentions go hang themselves. Surely his life was a sufficient price to pay. Surely he’s allowed this beautiful maniac of a former student who smiles at Severus like there were never shouted curses or hate or fear or bitterness between them.

Potter’s smiles feel like forgiveness, sometimes. Or what Severus imagines forgiveness feels like.

“I - may be by the potions storeroom tonight after ten o’clock. If you cannot sleep -”

“I’ll be there,” Potter says quietly, and for good or ill, they -

*     *     *

- arrive in the middle of the ice age.

For a moment, Harry thinks maybe he got it wrong, they’ve landed in Antarctica. But no, he wouldn’t have done that. Would he?

This has to be the place.

Cornerbrook was beautiful in the pictures, green trees and green hills on the edge of the ocean. Those pictures were evidently taken in the summertime, and Harry finds himself submerged in knee-high snow and blowing sleet. For a moment the cold is so shocking that he holds onto Snape, fingers clutching at the only warm thing that exists in the world.

Snape pushes him off, stepping back quickly. The heels of his boots slide on the ice, and Harry grabs him before he can fall over. That action is a bit too instinctive. Once they have separated and are steady on their feet, Harry can feel burning heat against his cheekbones, a blush that he hopes he can blame on the cold.

Snape has snowflakes in his eyelashes. Harry wants to lick them (and where the hell did that thought - no, just - no.)

“This way,” Snape says tightly, and they trudge off down the white road toward a white-roofed town. Pine trees loom in the distance like a jagged grey fog, and Harry shivers. He’s never seen winter like this. It’s beautiful (or it will be once he’s inside somewhere warm.)

They go down a few streets that seem to be mostly residential, weathered siding and hastily cleared driveways. One house has its curtains open and a dried-out Christmas tree can be seen through the windows, holidays not quite over. The whiteness of the snow is almost blinding, and Harry has to close his eyes briefly against it. His stomach hasn’t settled after Apparating, and he feels something like pain gathering at his temples. Snape isn’t willing to slow down, so Harry shakes his head and
hurries after him.

The house Snape stops at looks like every other house on the street, and Harry is sure they’re in the wrong place. The rarest and most valuable potions texts in the world cannot be behind the doors of this shabby little bungalow.

“You sure this is it?” Harry asks as Snape clambers over the snowy front steps and knocks. His knuckles are red with the cold.

Snape does not answer. He waits, hands clasped behind his back in a way that straightens his spine, makes his height seem even more imposing. Harry hangs back a bit but is ready to step forward if needed. If he opened his front door to see Snape standing like that, he wouldn’t be all that inclined to let anyone inside.

Snape is about to knock again when the door opens. An older man wearing a thick woolen sweater peeks out, shielding his eyes briefly against the glare of the snow. His skin is so dark it’s almost black, in contrast to his pale grey hair, twisted into a haphazard knot on the top of his head. He appears to be in his late sixties, and before he even speaks, Harry gets the distinct impression that Dumbledore would have liked him.

The man smiles.

“Sev’rus Snape. Didn’t think you were really coming, yes b’y, and here you are. She’s right fucking cold today, isn’t she? You and your friend best come in ‘fore she freezes the tits right off ya.” The musical accent sprinkled with obscenity is almost unintelligible, like Irish but - decidedly not. Snape’s face breaks into a grin, and Harry is so helplessly charmed by that expression that he’s surprised he doesn’t melt right into the snowy water. His head still hurts but it is nothing compared to the warmth he feels at Snape’s awkward affection.

“Henry Inkpen,” Snape says in response, as they’re waved into the small house. “Harry Potter.”

“Go on, I know who this one is. Mr. Potter, fancy seeing you. Cuppa tea? I’ll put the ol’ slut on and you can have a look downstairs while she boils.” He thumps Harry’s shoulder a bit too hard as they walk past him into a tiny living room.

There’s a patched sofa and armchair, and a shelf containing a strange assortment of trinkets and curios: seashells, ships in bottles, oddly shaped stones and vases of dried flowers. On the other side of the room is a doorway with a staircase leading down, and Snape heads toward it while Henry goes somewhere else, presumably to the kitchen (to “put the old slut on?” Harry needs a translator.)

The steps creak beneath their feet, and just like he did with Eleni, Harry feels out of place. Like he’s seeing something he shouldn’t be, intruding into Snape’s private life without an invitation. And yet he wants to intrude further, to know more. What sort of history does Snape have with this man?

When they reach the bottom of the stairs, Harry nearly falls over. He can usually sense wizard space, but he was in no way prepared for the high vaulted ceilings, the shelves upon shelves of books, the raised pedestals with particularly rare volumes encased in glass. It is like a vault, or a gallery, and Harry’s breath catches in his throat.

Snape glances back at him, and his eyes are a bit soft. Harry’s wonder must be obvious.

“Henry is employed by the Canadian Ministry. These are the National Wizarding Archives.”

“Why - why here? In his house? Why not somewhere like -”
“Like Will? Yes, that’s evidently working out brilliantly for our rare texts.”

Harry can’t help but nod. “Fair point.”

Snape is examining their surroundings with outright hunger in his gaze, and Harry feels strangely overheated by the man’s expression. He has never seen Snape direct that look toward anything with a pulse, but - Merlin, just the thought of it is devastating. What would it be like to be the focus of that attention? What would it feel like to be as brilliant as these books?

“Over there.” Snape points toward one of the raised pedestals, where Harry recognizes the glint of gold leaf on the brown leather cover. Snape’s footsteps ring on the polished floor, and he’s across the room, nose nearly touching the glass, before Harry can even take a step.

The stairs creak as Henry Inkpen comes downstairs, carrying two steaming mugs of tea and chuckling to himself.

“He’s clocked it right enough,” he murmurs to Harry, handing him a large ceramic mug. It has a picture of a squirrel on one side, and “Nuts to This!” written on the other.

“Thanks for the tea.”

“No problem b’y. Don’t get any on the books, mind.”

Henry leaves the other mug on a table and goes to whisper at Snape. Harry watches them, sipping his tea from a distance. It’s sweeter than he usually takes it, but the sweetness is a welcome blanket against the cold. His head still aches from the journey, and the ache has spread to his jaw and his neck. He rolls his shoulders.

Across the floor, Snape laughs, a low and musical chuckle that has him lifting a hand to cover his mouth. He catches Harry’s eye and Harry looks away, feeling caught out. He is not Snape’s friend. These moments are not his.

Snape casts a spell that cloaks his hands in a pale, shimmering light before Henry opens the case, taking the book from inside. Snape gently turns the pages, and Harry scalds his tongue on his next sip of tea. He can’t help out here, he knows he can’t, but he isn’t about to wander off into the snow either.

“Fascinating,” Snape says under his breath to Henry.

Harry blows on his tea and goes to wander the stacks a bit. It’s only too easy to lose himself studying Snape, to feel the last threads of his self-control unravelling (white hands, soft laugh, snowflakes in his eyelashes.)

He can hear Snape speaking quietly to Henry but can’t make out the words. The voice does something to him, something helpless and unwelcome.

(“Harry, do you - do you _like_ him?” Hermione had asked, and Harry had sworn up and down, no, no.)

“No,” Harry whispers to himself, lost in memories of that hideous conversation.

Snape is not a likable person. But he is - rather compelling, sometimes. Mean and funny, prickly and brilliant. He takes offense so easily and yet feels free to insult Harry’s intelligence with every other sentence. He tries so hard to make you hate him, even while he’s volunteering to track down vandalized books (and spying on a madman to help Harry win a war.) It’s like - like Snape’s
convinced he’s an awful person, and he’s trying to convince everyone else of that too, no matter how his actions contradict him.

And that’s just the thing, Harry realizes, Snape’s actions do contradict him. The man isn’t half as contemptible as he seems to think he is. So where did all that come from? Who convinced him he was so terrible?

It makes Harry feel a bit sad. Snape’s like a stray cat, Harry thinks, and the image makes him grin. You can put out all the bowls of food you like, but the cat is still going to bite your hand if you try to pet it. Not that he’s going to try to pet Snape, or anything - even though the man’s hair is probably - soft, and -

Harry almost walks into a bookshelf. He stops himself in time, still a bit out of it from Apparating. If he isn’t careful he could get lost in here. It’s like a labyrinth.

He turns the corner, heading down another row and finds a pair of overstuffed armchairs. One is draped with a knitted blanket, and Harry settles into it, sipping his tea. His head aches, and he thinks about Snape. Snape at the doors of Will, Snape going blank as he looks into Harry’s eyes, Snape smirking, smiling, frowning, sighing -

The sweet tea burns hot in Harry’s throat, and he pulls the blanket around his shoulders. His head pounds, and he closes his eyes against the metallic chime of it.

(“Harry, do you - do you like him?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? He doesn’t like me. He’ll never -”)

Harry jolts awake. Something is burning, an acrid smell that has him sitting upright and reaching for his wand (the desks and boxes and brooms are burning, fiendfyre eating through them and Harry can’t breathe against the smoke, can’t see and can’t breathe -)

“Accio -” he chokes out, flailing.

“Potter.”

Harry clutches the arms of his chair as he turns toward the voice.

The room is not on fire.

Harry’s fallen asleep in the armchair. At some point, someone took the mug out of his hands and placed it on the floor beside him. At some point the lights in the archives were dimmed, the tall ceilings only lantern lit, the books swallowed by shadows.

Snape is sitting in the armchair beside him. His fingers are steepled in front of his face, and he is watching Harry. The dim light casts rings beneath his eyes.

His chair is also floating four feet in the air.

“Henry is making supper.” Snape brushes the tip of his index finger against his thin lips. “I believe we can assume that his garlic is burning. Would you be so obliging as to put me down?”

Harry’s heartbeat is still pounding against his collarbone, and he’s entirely too warm. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, and he hates waking up in strange places. He forces himself to exhale slowly, and in a jerking motion, Snape’s chair lowers to the floor.
“I’m sorry,” he begins, but Snape raises a hand.

“Apparate across the Atlantic, can you. Perhaps you pushed your limited capacities to their breaking point.” Snape isn’t looking at him anymore, is studying his hands. “You look even more pale than normal. Which is saying something.”

“It was the smell,” Harry says, feeling mortified and slightly out of control. “The burning. I - during the War –” (Don’t think about it. Don’t think about the smell of burning paper, burning skin -)

“The Room of Requirement.” Snape’s voice is deadly quiet, and he is still not looking at him. “I had heard.”

“Did you find the missing pages?” Harry asks quickly, trying to distract himself before he’s sick all over his jumper.

Snape nods. His eyes shift slightly in the dim light, but he says nothing is response.

“And?”

“Blood,” Snape murmurs. “It is a potion that allows one to brew blood.”

Oh. Well, blood isn’t so scary, Harry’s seen enough of it by now. But the look on Snape’s face is something else. He is chewing at the corner of his mouth, something he’s never done before. He’s fidgeting, like he’s terrified.

“The Dark Lord had me brew something similar once.” Snape speaks distractedly. Like he’s talking to himself, like he doesn’t remember Harry’s there. “When I was younger. He was courting vampires at the time. I can remember the smell. It was quite - and the texture -”

His steepled hands have started to shake. Without thinking, Harry slides out of his chair and kneels in front of Snape, taking the man’s trembling hands in his.

“That’s over,” Harry hisses. “That’s done. You’re not feeding vampires and I’m not burning to death.”

“Blood, Potter,” Snape snarls at him (but he does not pull his hands away. Harry feels Snape’s hammering pulse as if it were his own.) “Blood and bone and growth. What do you imagine is being done with these potions?”

Harry waits a moment, thinking it over. “You’re not going to say ‘healing injured puppies’ are you? I wish you were.”

Snape lets out a tight breath. “I’m not entirely certain. But -”

“Beg pardon, fellas.” Henry has come around the corner unnoticed to find Harry still knelt at Snape’s feet, their hands clenched together. Snape immediately stands up and Harry loses his balance, falling backwards onto his arse. Smooth as always.

“I was sharing our findings with Mr. Potter here,” Snape says quickly, colour rising high onto his cheekbones. It’s strange and unnecessary because - they weren’t doing anything. Snape isn’t lying. He has nothing to be embarrassed about. So why does the soft blush make something tremble in Harry’s chest, tight beneath his ribs.

“Were ya then? Well, fish’s done, best eat if you’re hungry.”
Snape follows Henry and (after a moment to pull himself together) Harry follows Snape. Dinner is a surprisingly quiet affair, though Henry tries his damnedest to enliven things. They eat fried fish in garlic butter, boiled potatoes, and slices of thick rye bread. It’s delicious, but Harry doesn’t have the stomach for much. The headache from the morning is back, pressing unkindly at the base of his skull.

Still though, in the candlelight, Snape’s face seems - softer somehow. He looks tired but calm, his mouth curving slightly at one of Henry’s dirty jokes. Sometimes Harry can’t believe he thought Snape was so ugly back at Hogwarts. The man’s intimidating, angry, petty - sure, but ugly is not a word Harry would use anymore.

No, Snape is -

Snape has -

Pretty eyelashes, Harry decides as Snape blinks and scowls in his direction. A nice mouth, when he smiles. Harry wants to memorize the man’s profile, freeze this small moment when he’s at ease. Harry wants to reach out and see what the thrum of Snape’s pulse feels like beneath the angle-sharp bone of his jaw. Harry wants to -

He wants to - what?

“Bitch of a storm coming up there, eh?” Henry’s voice cuts into his thoughts. “You fellows sure you want to get back out in it?”

No would be the obvious answer. Snow is still falling steadily outside, and the kitchen seems warm and heavenly compared to the temperature that awaits them. Henry offers to make up the pull-out couch if they want to stay the night, but Snape declines immediately. Harry’s grateful for Snape’s quick reply; he was only left to stutter over his words for a second, less than a second, awkward heat choking all reason from his head. He cannot imagine Snape’s angular body next to his, cannot imagine the man in anything less than three layers and buttoned up to the throat. He cannot imagine how warm Snape would be, or the weight of quilts upon them, or their self-conscious rearranging of limbs while they try not to touch each other.

Wait. Oh Christ. He’s imagining it right now.

They say their farewells on the front step of Henry’s home, while snow gathers in Harry’s hair and the collar of his coat.

“Pleased as punch to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter. Thanks for saving the world and all that. This one -” he jerks a thumb in Snape’s direction, “-wouldn’t shut up about it when last we met. He was well sauced at the time, but still. Must have been quite the thing to see.”

“No really?” Harry ignores the electric feeling that sits in the pit of his stomach and casts a look over at Snape (currently pretending he’s lost his sense of hearing.) “To be honest, I did less than most people. Certainly less than Professor Snape.”

In Harry’s peripheral vision, Snape jerks his head up at this.

“Thanks for all your help, Mr. Inkpen. And for dinner,” Harry continues.

“You’re welcome back any time, you and the old b’y. Yes, you’re old now Snape, and don’t pretend otherwise. You lasted longer than I thought you would, thank God for it.”

Snape looks like he doesn’t know what to do with this information, but he shakes Henry’s hand just
the same.

They walk a few blocks away from the house, snow coming down like a sheet. Harry turns his face toward it, enjoying the pinpricks of cold against his forehead.

“How long have you known Mr. Inkpen?” he asks as they navigate the slippery streets.

“Good Lord,” Snape says softly, “About sixteen years, I think. A conference in Canada.”

“Sixteen years,” Harry murmurs, wondering again how Snape could have been so despised at Hogwarts when he’s clearly loved by his friends. Of course - he was pretty much an enormous and insufferable git at Hogwarts, so that might have done it.

They Apparate outside Harry’s apartment in an alleyway. Harry regains his senses to feel Snape clutching hard at his hands. When Harry manages to open his eyes, Snape is looking at him. There are still snowflakes in his hair and eyebrows.

Snape looks away a moment too late.

“I will get in touch when I have information to share about your last damaged book.”

“Thank you.” Harry means it. “Really. You’re doing so much for the library.”

“I’m not doing it for the library. I’m frankly of the mind that you don’t deserve these books if you cannot manage an adequate security system. But I’m afraid Ms. Peggotty is having a rather negative influence on me.”

Harry frowns.

“I would like to see the guilty parties brought to justice,” Snape clarifies. “There are some actions that are simply beyond the pale.”

He meets Harry’s eyes again and his gaze is fierce and electric. Harry feels pinned to the spot, feels his lips part. Snape notices; his eyes move briefly to Harry’s mouth before he steps back.

“Good night, Mr. Potter.” Snape immediately turns to go.

And maybe it’s the headache and maybe it’s the feeling of Snape’s gaze like a razor and maybe it’s something else, but Harry’s speaking before he can stop himself.

“Are we ever going to talk about it?”

Snape freezes, but does not turn back. “Talk about what exactly?”

“You - you know. The last time I saw you. After Greece. I k -”

Snape whirls around, looking like a particularly dangerous black cloud. “You needn’t remind me, I was bloody there. Why in Merlin’s name you wish to revisit that stunning lapse of judgment is beyond me. I had hoped that you were sufficiently mortified as to suppress that memory entirely.”

“Tried that.” Snape’s fury is not having the intended effect. Harry wonders why he spent his childhood filled with equal parts loathing and fear of this man when Snape’s so terribly easy to read - mean when he’s actually anxious or embarrassed, critical when he’s actually hurt. Like a wounded animal, like a child that wasn’t hugged enough. Harry doesn’t feel angry or scared anymore. Not at all.
“I wanted to apologize. I shouldn’t have done it -”

“No you should not have. Do not imagine me surprised by -”

“-without asking.”

“- your regret, I am only surprised you waited this long to express it, to assure me that the Chosen One would never stoop to -”

Of a sudden, Snape stops talking. He stares at Harry in alarm. Harry very rarely sees Snape made speechless, and it is an unsettling sight. There’s not even the frantic rise and fall of Snape’s chest; it’s as if the man has stopped breathing altogether.

“I should have asked,” Harry repeats, because - because he has to say something. If he isn’t talking he’ll start thinking, and if he starts thinking it will be about things he’s got no right to think. “It was - really rude. Sorry.”

“You should have -” Snape trails off, voice going high like he’s asking a question.

Harry takes a step forward, body moving without conscious thought. Snape flinches but stands his ground. Harry steps closer until Snape is right in front of him, until he could reach out and smooth the crease between Snape’s eyebrows.

He doesn’t. Instead, he touches Snape’s sleeve, the wet wool of his coat. He leaves his hand there, just above Snape’s elbow, and feels his heart thumping hard beneath his skin. Snape has gone absolutely still, barely even breathing. He is staring at Harry’s white hand.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Harry says. There are images flooding his mind: Snape’s face in candlelight, Snape’s legs in the ocean, Snape’s head on Harry’s shoulder in the Shrieking Shack, hair damp with sweat and blood but still so soft.

“Can I - can I kiss you?” Harry is shocked even as he forms the words.

Snape all but leaps backward, putting as much distance between them as possible without stepping out into traffic.

“No. Jesus Christ, Potter.”

Harry’s heart keeps beating so fast he’s dizzy. “Can I make you dinner then? Some time.”

“What? Why?” Snape seems utterly baffled, and a little bit furious, as if this is all part of a bad joke that’s being played on him. Harry’s heart aches even as it threatens to rattle out of his chest. Why in God’s name did he decide to do this now? In public, where anyone could walk past and see it happen?

(“Harry, do you - do you like him?”)

“Because I - like you.”

The words ring like an explosion in his ears.

His voice only breaks a little.

He isn’t brave enough to look Snape in the eye, but as Harry repeats the words in his head, he realizes they are true. Jesus Christ, he likes Snape. He likes spending time with him, traveling and
reading and meeting his odd friends (and he really liked kissing him, oh my God.)

“You - like me.” Snape snarls the words, as if he could eviscerate Harry just by speaking them. It’s a near thing. “How completely, utterly, pathetically -”

“It’s okay if you don’t,” Harry interrupts before Snape can spit any more vicious adverbs. “If you don’t want to have dinner. Or if you do, but just as a friend. Or an acquaintance. You don’t have to talk to me or anything. “

“I don’t have to -” Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. “Merlin save me, have you completely lost your mind? No. No, I will not have dinner with you.”

Harry should have expected this reaction, if he had expected any part of this conversation at all. Nowhere in his wildest dreams would things have progressed to the point of dinner invites, and confessions of affection, and the very sudden, very pubic realization that he’s bisexual at the very fucking least.

“Okay.” Harry’s voice is calmer than he feels. “Had to ask.”

Snape looks as if he’s got a small concussion, and when he takes another step back it’s almost a stagger. He shakes his head once, and then again.

“I will blame the effects of long-distance Apparation for this conversation, and do my utmost to forget it - though I rather think there is not enough alcohol in the world to accomplish that formidable goal.” Snape is forming coherent sentences, so the shock must be wearing off. “I would have a lie down if I were you, and visit a mediwizard if your feelings have not improved in the next hour.”

That’s not bloody fair, but when Harry opens his mouth to say as much, Snape holds up his hand.

“We have nothing more to discuss at present. Goodnight, Mr. Potter.” His dark eyes shine in the lamplight with an intensity that threatens to make Harry’s knees buckle. Or maybe it’s desperation, or maybe it’s - something else? He seems like he’s willing the conversation to end with every fibre of his being and he -

He said no.

It doesn’t matter how much Harry thinks about kissing him, or how soft his hair looks, or the whole tangled rope of obligation and anger and guilt and longing that binds them to their history.

Harry nods. “Goodnight, professor.”

Snape turns away. Harry watches him go, listens to the smack of his boots on the pavement fade into nothing. Harry leans against the door to his building, reminding himself to breath and lock his knees. He resists the urge to go after Snape, say the whole thing was a mistake and he's sorry, so sorry.

He resists the urge to bash his head against the bricks behind him (he had to ask.)

Five minutes later it hits him that he was just rejected by a former professor who may have been in love with his mother, and that pretty much takes care of the rest of the night.

He spends a sleepless night on the couch of his flat, alternatively clutching the pillow to his chest and hiding his head underneath it. There’s no way he can survive beneath the crushing weight of his mortification. After everything that has happened, why had he opened his stupid mouth and invited the man to bloody dinner, for God’s sake? Harry could have forgotten the kiss, forgotten the way his
skin prickled with electricity when Snape was nearby, beaten it down like the lost cause it most certainly was, but instead *instead* -

He made it all so much sodding worse.

The situation becomes even more desperate the next morning, when he finds Draco goddamn Malfoy waiting outside of Will, a look on his face like he’s just bitten into something rotten. When the prat sees him, he strides toward Harry with his hand raise, an accusatory finger pointed preemptively.

“*You,*” he snaps, “have done something else.”

*Bloody hell,* Harry thinks so loud it may as well be wandless magic (he’s surprised Ron isn’t summoned directly to the library.) Harry is not prepared in any way for this conversation, barely had the wherewithal to peel himself off the floor that morning. He has no idea how to respond besides backing away slowly.

“I’ve got to get to work.”

“Quite convenient that. I’ll have you know Severus has terrified our housemaid to the point of resignation. Why the hell is he spending time with you, and what the hell do you keep saying to him?”

“Nothing!” Harry insists, but Draco is still following him inside Will, and they cannot have this conversation in front of Harry’s workmates (committing murder within the library will almost definitely get Harry sacked.)

“You’re lying, Potter, and you’re a terrible liar. I swear to Merlin I’m going to stand right here until you tell me. You might have some sympathy for those of us who actually have to spend time with the man. It’s not exactly a picnic, and with you going and setting him off -”

“Okay,” Harry hisses, trying to keep his voice down. “Okay. We’ll talk. But not now. I’ve got to -”

“Work, yes I know. There’s no one else in the world capable of alphabetizing the children’s section.”

Harry clenches his fists so tightly he’s surprised they don’t form diamonds (the anger towards Malfoy is almost comforting, in a way. Familiar as an old friend.)

“I’m off at half six. You can come back -”

“I think I’ll wait around, actually. In case you try to run off early, which I wouldn’t put past you.”

“Great. Wonderful. Looking forward to it.”

And wouldn’t you know, the bastard does wait. Harry finds Malfoy at the double doors on his way out, arms folded and face grim. He leads Harry out into the rain, only to stop so suddenly that Harry almost crashes into him.

“What?” Harry’s fingers curl reflexively around his wand.

Draco glares silently at Harry for a moment, rain plastering his blond hair to his forehead.

“You’re going to tell me what happened,” Malfoy says at last, “and I’m just trying to determine
whether it’s a caffeine or alcohol conversation.”

“Jesus.”

“Alcohol then.” Malfoy nods, and starts walking toward the nearest pub. “Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

* * *

“- over with.” Potter tips the liquid down his throat and makes a (delightfully horrified) face. “Doxy venom supposed to taste like dishwater?”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Holy hell you guys are awesome. Thanks to everyone who has championed this little project - all the readers and commenters and lurkers and cheerleaders and friends. Special thanks to Parker Luce, beta of my heart, and Shaude, who kept the candles lit during my long absence.

I am so grateful for this community, there aren't even words.

This fic starts to earn its rating in this chapter, so prepare thyself. If this isn't your thing, you can skim most parts without missing anything too critical.

I'm mia-ugly on tumblr, come say hi!

“Alcohol then.” Draco nods, and starts walking toward the nearest pub. “Come on. May as well get this -”

* * *

“- over with,” Potter says, tipping the liquid down his throat and making a (frankly delightful horrified) face. “Doxy venom supposed to taste like dishwater?”

“Surprisingly accurate comparison.”

Potter returns the bottle to the shelf. “And you’re certain I’m not about to keel over from this?”

“Do you doubt my competence as a brewer? Just avoid the asphodel and you will be fine. I’m using fine as a relative term, of course.”

“You -” Potter stops himself, shaking his head even as he grins. “You’re a total prat sometimes, you know that?”

The words sound much too fond. Severus feels the prickle of goosebumps on the back of his neck. He says nothing. Potter watches him. There’s a long, still moment in the silence of the hallway, like the pause before a breath.

Severus looks away first.

Soon Potter is yawning and shutting the storeroom up, chattering idly about nothing. This would previously have inspired some sort of dry criticism from Severus, an observation about Potter’s constant need to fill silences, or love affair with his own voice.

Now, Severus is silent.

It’s on this night that the dreams start.

He’s dreamt as a portrait before, but it was all vague and foggy, nothing that felt real or substantial.
The dreams tonight are decidedly - not vague. Severus is in a room - a dark room draped with curtains. It is quiet except for the heavy sounds of breathing. Severus is clutching something warm in his hands, fabric soft as cashmere. It’s a cloak, he realizes, and there is someone inside it.

Potter.

The young man's throat is shockingly pale against the dark cloak, eyes fever bright and wild. He is a creature of shadow and lamplight, and Severus helplessly runs his teeth across the man’s neck, grazing his skin just faintly. His tongue follows, licking a path up to Potter’s jaw, tasting sweat and cinnamon. When Potter tries to move his head forward, tries to meet Severus’ mouth with his own, Severus pulls away.

He gathers a fist of Potter’s dark hair and tilts his head back again. Potter gasps and squeezes his eyes shut. He likes this, Severus thinks, warmth making the room spin. He likes my hands on him.

“Please -”

“No yet.” Severus's teeth snap together above the thump of Potter’s pulse. Potter moans, rocking forward. Severus’ free hand traces the boy’s lower lip, before sliding his thumb into Potter’s mouth. The heat and wetness leave him almost blind with desire. He can imagine his cock sliding between Potter’s lips, can imagine forcing the man to his knees, fisting his hair as he fed Potter every inch -

“You like this,” Severus says, helplessly. Why does that thought feel like sunshine, why does it make some part of him bask? Has he been that starved for Potter’s approval, that starved for physical affection that Potter’s moaning alone has him hard and aching and desperate -

He tries to fumble the cloak from Potter’s body, desperate to touch his skin.

“Severus, Severus,” Potter whispers in his ear, voice soft as the rustling of fabric as Severus wakes up.

Wakes up in a portrait.

Alone.

There is sweat beading on his upper lip, and his mouth is open in a gasp. He glances down at his lap and gains the knowledge that there is one biological function that has not abandoned him the way he previously imagined.

“Fucking hell,” Severus hisses. He is thankful for the black robes that leave much to the imagination. Fucking hell.

Potter.

He hadn’t even been thinking about the man before he fell asleep. He’d been puzzling over the potions storeroom, mind spinning over ingredients until he was dizzy. He certainly hadn’t been fantasizing about Harry sodding Potter - or his mouth - or skin -

“Fucking hell,” Severus says again.

It might be amusing if it weren’t so grotesque. He will not panic, he refuses to panic about something as innocuous as a dream. It’s a matter of random synapses, isn’t it, nothing at all to do with the wretched state of his heart.
Still - he plans on avoiding Potter that evening, just until the taste of the man’s neck is out of his mouth. He makes himself scarce, visiting the most distant corners of the school, spending time in forgotten gardens and tea rooms, blissfully alone. He is not hiding, of course.

“Professor?”

(He will not panic.)

Potter’s voice makes something clench very tightly in Severus’ chest. He turns from “Still Life with Slain Dragon” to see that - against all odds - he has been found. This particular stretch of the fourth floor corridor is usually only home to the more antisocial ghosts and enchanted suits of armour. He should have guessed that Potter would find his way here, like all the other rare and precious things.

“What are you doing up here?” Potter asks.

“I could ask you an identical question.”

“Just - wandering, I suppose. You weren’t at the storeroom, so I thought you were busy or something.”

“Delightful as it may be to watch you ingest all manner of toxic substances -”

“Wait - toxic?”

“- I do have some other activities with which to occupy my time.”

“Of course. So like -” Potter gestures to the dead dragon in the canvas Severus occupies. It is curled in a knot as if sleeping, surrounded by peonies and fern fronds (it’s a bit much, in Severus’ opinion.)

“You didn’t kill him, did you?”

“Merlin, no. Just examining his -” Think, damn you. “Scales. For a potions ingredient. Very potent things, the scales of a slain dragon.”

“He looks sad,” Potter says softly.

Severus studies the dragon’s face, and has to agree. The creature’s eyes have been shut, but there is a slant of melancholy to them, and to the downward drag of its mouth. Severus has never killed a dragon, cannot imagine himself doing so. It strikes him with a strange kind of hysteria that he has killed people, people he loved. As if that was somehow easier and less reprehensible than the murder of the beast before him.

“It’s just a painting,” Severus mutters, only partly to himself. “It isn’t a real dragon.”

“You’re a painting.”

“I’m not a real dragon either.”

Potter laughs. Severus hates the sound of his laughter. It makes him forget he’s dead.

“Tomorrow night, then?”

Severus nods grimly and prays to the Gods for a dreamless sleep.

They do not heed him.

(Severus is watching Potter touch himself. The young man is sprawled naked on his bed, sheets
creased and damp beneath him. Severus is standing over him, close enough to touch. But he doesn’t. He watches Potter’s tanned fingers encircle the head of his cock, a touch so feathery light it will take him ages to come. Potter is drawing it out, trying to make it last, Severus can tell. Potter’s eyes are fixed on him, their gazes caught together and held like something electric, a nerve going raw.


Severus keeps his hands clenched tightly into fists, does not allow himself the velvety softness of Potter’s skin. The silk and sweat of his hair. He says nothing.

“I wish it was you. You touching me.” Potter’s hand moves faster. Severus can see his hips making shallow, unconscious thrusts off the bed. He might make that motion if he was fucking someone. If he was fucking Severus. Severus doesn’t usually take to it, but he would let Harry. He would let Harry fuck him. It would be over quickly and Harry would shake and curse and kiss the back of Severus’ neck as he came. Severus would let him.

“Will you touch me?” Potter begs and Severus bites down on the inside of his cheek.

“I can’t.”

“Please just -”

“I can’t. I can’t.”

_I can’t_, wakes Severus from sleep.

His fingers are clenched around the arms of the chair. He thinks he might be ill, and then he is.

Potter will never know, he tells himself later that day as he listen to Evelyn chatter endlessly about Scotland’s largest lakes. The boy has found an old etching of Loch Awe and convinced Severus to picnic by it with him.

“There was a lake by my house, and I’m certain it was grander than this. It might have been the grandest in the world!”

_Potter will never know. He cannot read your mind. You have no mind to read._

Potter will never know the contents of Severus’ dreams. He will not feel Severus’ eyes on him. He will remain as oblivious to those around him as he always is.

Severus repeats this, like a mantra. He was a spy. He was a soldier.

He repeats it that night while he watches Potter go through the potions storeroom, pathetically unaware of the texture of crushed billywigs or the smell of liquid silver.

Severus is beginning to notice a disturbing pattern in their work. The ingredients most likely to be tampered with are also the rarest. Whoever has been here knows what they are doing, and knows what they are looking for.

“What’s this?” Potter asks. He has moved a small cauldron aside, and is now holding a worn wooden box. It is the size that might hold jewelry. A brass lock swings from its hinges.

“It’s -” Severus had forgotten about that. How had he forgotten? “Conexium.”

Just looking at the box, he can remember the weight in his hands, the roughness of the wood, the smell of damp paper and dried leaves. “It was a gift.”
He should have taken it with him when he left the position of Potions Master. Better yet, he should have left Hogwarts when he had a chance. He should have told Harry Potter what Horcruxes were and killed the snake before it tore his throat out and grown old, alone and bitter in his mother’s house.

(Or else grown penniless and destitute, shunned by society and reduced to living on the Malfoy’s charity like a parasite. If he were being honest, that was the most likely outcome.)

"The box was a gift?” Potter asks.

“No, you simpleton, the contents. The box is merely charmed to preserve it. Conexium is an extremely rare potion. It cannot be brewed at present - some of the ingredients no longer exist in the known world. All that remains is that which was bottled in the past, and much of that has been diluted.”

“And how did you get your hands on some?”

(For luck, Nazanin had told him, pressing the box into his hands.

“I can’t possibly accept this.”

“You can and you will. I’m just happy to find someone who knows what it is.”)

“As I said,” Severus swallows, “it was a gift.”

Potter’s mouth curls. It reminds Severus too much of his dreams, and he has to look away.

“Well, I guess this one hasn’t been tampered with. Still locked. Don’t suppose you have the key on you.”

“It doesn’t need a key.” Severus feels a strange weight drop in his stomach. He shouldn’t have left the box unattended for so long. “There’s a password. Hiraeth.”

The brass lock snaps open, and Potter almost drops it in surprise.

“Merlin, sorry. Sorry. This Conexium stuff isn’t going to pop out and bite me or anything?” Potter asks.

“If you somehow managed to kill the Dark Lord and are vanquished by a sudden allergic reaction, well.”

“Well?” Potter grins at him and Severus’ stomach tightens further.

“I’ll tell anyone who will listen that I poisoned you.”

“Good. At least that’s got a bit of drama about it.”

Potter opens the box.

Severus should be surprised to see it empty. But somehow - he is not.

Of course it is empty. And of course the potions storeroom has contaminated ingredients and shreds of Viridi Magicae are being strewn across the Hogwarts hallways.

“Professor?” Potter looks up at him, gaze unsteady.
“Do not call me that,” Severus mutters purely out of habit, though he really hasn’t the energy to care at present. Damn, blast, sodding fucking hell - someone’s broken his wards.

“It’s empty.”

“Yes, I am not blind, only dead.” Severus paces the length of canvas available to him, robes snapping at his ankles. “This may be a more significant breech than I previously suspected.”

“What is this stuff for? Would you need it in that potion formula we found? The one torn from -”

“Don’t say it.” Horrifyingly enough, Severus cannot answer the boy’s first question. He valued the Conexium purely for its rarity, had never intended to use it. He was not a frivolous man and he is furious with himself for owning (and losing) anything that was purely decorative. Of course, he will not admit as much to Potter.

“To my knowledge, the ingredient can be used for a great many things,” Snape hedges. He thinks suddenly about that blasted painting of Potter’s, the disastrous Christmas gift currently in Prawn’s possession. He wonders - for just a moment - how it would travel.

“There is a woman of my acquaintance. My previous acquaintance. Last I heard she had a storefront in Diagon Alley.” He had visited it shortly before he died, so he could not say if it still remained. “She may have some insight to offer us.”

“Diagon Alley?” The corner of Potter’s mouth curls into a shy grin. “You trust me enough for the job? Or -”

“Or.” Severus shifts his eyes, tries not to think about the man from his dreams, hair damp as it clung to a lightning bolt-shaped scar. “There are some things one must do for themselves. With assistance, of course. Your Christmas gift - that is -if you are still willing -”

“Of course!” Potter looks altogether too pleased with himself. Severus feels it’s only justified to dash those hopes a little.

“Do not fool yourself that by venturing out of the castle in a sack or some sort of -”

“I’m not going to put you in a sack, I’m not a - a potato farmer.”

“This doesn’t mean that I’m alive. Or that anything has changed. You must not forget it.”

“As if there was any danger of that, what with you bringing it up every five minutes.”

Sometimes Severus wonders if he is desperate to remind Potter, or himself.

“Anyway, I won’t be around tomorrow night for your amusement,” the boy continues. “I did make someone a promise that I’d spend time with a living person - which you are not, don’t worry I remember - every now and then. I’m meeting a few of the Weasleys in Hogsmeade for a pint.”

“You needn’t feel obliged to keep me abreast of all your social appointments.”

“I don’t feel obliged,” Potter says with a roll of his eyes. “I just thought - in case you were looking for me.”

Their eyes meet and then separate quickly. Potter’s words hit a bit too close to the truth (whether he intends to or not, Severus’ feet find paths that the young man often walks, linger near his classroom or office or favourite bloody stairwell, perpetually hiding from him or seeking him out. Both options
are equally unspeakable.)

“This weekend then,” Severus murmurs, voice rough.

Potter just nods. He swallows, and Severus follows the movement of his throat. “I’ll get out the good sack.”

“You are ridiculous.”

“Yeah, you’ve said.”

Severus tries not to fall asleep that night.

There is something growing in him, a panic, a fever of some kind. It is impossibly connected to the green of Potter’s eyes, his hands around phials and jars in the potions storeroom, the way he chews his lip when he is thinking. Severus cannot possibly sleep. He knows what he will think about. He knows what he will see when his eyelids close.

Nevertheless, the dreams --

*  *  *

-- start the night he sees Malfy.

Harry blames the blond git entirely.

After leaving the library, they find the nearest wine bar posh enough for Malfy to set a delicate foot in. Then they stare at each other in silent hostility, Harry nursing his lager while Malfy sips at a glass of Merlot.

The seconds creep by, killing Harry dead, but he stands firm. If Malfy thinks he can out-wait him, then he’s going to realize he’s sadly mistaken.

“You want another round?” Harry asks about an hour in, when the beverages begin to dwindle.

“On me,” Malfy sneers, and they lapse back into a game of intensely furious eye contact, waiting to see which one blinks.

Two beers in, and Harry suddenly finds the whole thing completely hilarious.

“What?” Malfy snaps at the grin that Harry attempts to hide behind his hand.

“We’ve even turned ‘silence’ into a competition.”

Malfy takes a contemptuous sip of his wine, and that sends Harry into a fit of giggles.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry -”

“So mature, Potter. They shouldn’t let you out without a minder.”

“You just can’t look threatening with pink wine -”

“It’s not pink wine, it’s - why am I trying to reason with you? It’s pointless.”

Harry keeps trying not to laugh and Malfy keeps glaring at him. The lager has gone to his head, and Harry feels a sudden goodwill to the total prat across from him.
“What’s it like living with Snape?” he asks impulsively.

“What? Why?”

“Because - I’m working with him a bit, for the library. I’d like to know him better.”

Malfoy looks suspicious and annoyed and also bored somehow, a combination that he has utterly perfected. Even the arch of his eyebrow seems like it’s trying to put Harry off. “I’m not sat here drinking mediocre American wine for your benefit. If there’s something you want to ask Severus, ask him yourself - if you ever see him again.”

That makes a stone drop in Harry’s stomach. He feels suddenly dizzy. If he never sees Snape again - never gets a chance to -

That thought stops before it starts. Never gets a chance to - what?

“Do you really think he was that upset?”

“Upset? Mother was close to chucking him from the house, he was in such a snit. I obviously underestimated the effects of your idiocy.” Malfoy shakes his head, and then snorts. “I can’t imagine what you might have done. What, did you ask him on a date or something?”

Harry freezes. For just a moment, a blink of an eye, he freezes.

Then he laughs: haha, good one mate. Ask Snape out, who would do a thing like that? Certainly not me.

He is obviously dry-mouthed and borderline hysterical.

He is obviously a half-second too late (Malfoy is staring at him. His face has gone white.)

“You -”

The laugh dies in Harry’s mouth. He feels colour racing into his cheeks. He’s blushing, he’s blushing, and everything is spinning out of control -

“You didn’t,” Malfoy whispers.

“No! Of coUrse nOt,” Harry says but his voice has gone wobbly. He’s suddenly speaking too loud, like a bad actor, someone who’s reading the lines but hasn’t a clue what they mean.

“Oh my God.” Malfoy looks like he’s about to have a panic attack. “Oh my God, you did.”

“I - I -” This cannot be happening. Harry can see the threads unraveling, the moment where it was possible to recover from this massive mistake getting farther and farther away. And he’s still blushing, damn his life, he’s giving everything away without even saying a word.

Well, fuck it.

“I did.”

“What?” Malfoy nearly shrieks. Then he promptly choked on his wine, coughing fit robbing him of his power of speech (thank God.)

The coughing eventually subsides, but even then Malfoy looks pale as death, eyes wide with horror. He tosses the rest of his wine back in a long, desperate gulp.
“Oh my God. I can't - this can't -” Malfoy shudders before putting his glass down. “Wait, you’re gay?”

Harry’s heart thumps painfully. His face is nearly on fire at this point, and the last thing he wants to do is talk about the sexuality spectrum with fucking Malfoy.

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

“You don’t - oh my God. And Severus - oh my God.”

His brain appears to have broken. If Harry knew he could have made the idiot speechless with just a few sentences, he might have done some soul-searching a bit sooner.

“I’m sure you can’t wait to go and spread this around to your little Slytherin cronies, or whatever.” The only way out is through at this point. Harry may as well get it over with. “But you can rest easy knowing that Sev-”

Malfoy jerks his head up at the sound of Snape’s first name.

“Snape,” Harry amends quickly (where did that come from?), “could not get away from me quick enough. Practically stepped out in traffic to end the conversation.”

The hurt still sparks a bit inside him. He can remember that whole stupid evening, Snape smiling at Mr. Inkpen, and the snow on Snape’s eyelashes, and the soft downturn of his lips. Jesus, don't think about his lips, it'll just make everything worse.

“But - but why?” Malfoy asks. “Why would you do it? You must have known what would happen.”

“Don’t ask me what I was thinking, I have no idea.” But that isn’t quite true, is it? Harry knows what he was thinking (I like you. I like spending time with you.) Harry knows what he wanted (You - like me. How completely, utterly, pathetically -)

He wishes he could blame the incident on anything, anything at all, besides his feelings.

“Jesus, Potter.” Draco is taking slow, deep breaths in a clear attempt to calm himself. “This is almost more ammunition than I should be allowed. It rather takes away the challenge.”

Harry can’t muster up the energy to glare.

“I don’t know what to do with this,” Malfoy admits a bit raggedly. “I need a minute. Or a few hours. Maybe a year or ten.”

Harry is only too happy to give him that. They get the bill and get their coats, and then stand awkwardly in the cold air outside.

“It’s hilarious right?” Harry says in a moment of desperate self-pity. “Think Rita Skeeter wants the story? “Boy Who Lived Turned Down by Former Professor Who Also Hates Him and Probably Was In Love With His Mother.” Go on, you can laugh if you want.”

Malfoy does not laugh.

“Are you finished wallowing? By all means continue if you have more awful things to say about yourself, but I do have to work in the morning. Maybe try to say the worst things first, so you get through them all.”
“You’re such a prick.”

“Yes, well.” Malfoy glances around, as if worried that someone might overhear. “I’m going to tell you something about Snape. Okay? It’s entirely more than you deserve but I can’t stand that pathetic look on your face, it’s making me embarrassed for you.”

“Thanks?”

“I don’t believe I’m saying this - Severus is not in love with your dear departed mum. He’s not holding some tragic candle for her.”

“That’s not - how do you know this?”

“I heard him talking to Mother about it once. It was after the War, and you were running your mouth about him to anyone who would listen, how noble, how brave, etcetera. So Mother asked him.”

The sky overhead is troubled, like it might be about to snow. “What did he say?”

“He said that they were friends.” Malfoy watches Harry, a strange look on his face. “That she was his only friend, for a time. And then she wasn’t even that.”

“But he gave me his memories. Before he died, he -”

“I never saw those, did I? All I can tell you is what he said. He didn’t love your mother, not like that anyway. On your long, long, long list of things to feel ashamed of, you can take that off.”

Harry lets out a slow breath. He doesn't know what to think, and he doesn't know how to reconcile the fact that Malfoy of all people is sharing this with him.

"If you ever even think about telling him I told you this -” Malfoy threatens.

“Yeah, right.” Harry tries to sound casual even as his heart is thumping. "You think he’d ever believe we went for a drink together?”

Malfoy scoffs. “I’d tell him I used an Imperius.”

That night Harry goes home and stares for a moment at the contents of his bedroom.

Most of the floor has boxes stacked on it. There are a few on the bed as well. It seemed like such a good idea at the time, but now the thought of all these boxes makes him feel a bit unbalanced. If there was ever any doubt about his feelings toward Snape, here is the physical evidence that Harry is completely, stupidly -

- what?

Another sentence he can't finish (can’t or won’t? a voice asks him, but Harry ignores it.) Neither can he imagine what Snape would think if he ever saw these boxes. He’d probably be humiliated on Harry’s behalf, or think there were strings attached or be furious at the thought of getting treated like a ‘charity case’ (not that Snape is ever going to see Harry’s bedroom. It definitely won’t - that’s not going to - it’s extremely unlikely.)

Harry doesn’t want to give everything back, but he also doesn’t know what to do with it now, after everything that has happened.

He falls asleep on his sofa, and in the stillness and darkness of the night, he can hear Draco’s words over and over in his head: You must have known what would happen.
Harry did. He must have. And he went and kissed the bastard anyway.

(When he opens his eyes to the cool dark there are fingers in his hair. Long, pale fingers winding around his skull, tilting his head backwards. Harry blinks as his eyes adjust, but he still can’t make out more than a smudge of pale skin and dark hair looming above him.

“What do you want, Potter?” Snape’s voice is low and velveteen, and it makes Harry’s mouth unexpectedly wet.

“Anything,” he says, surprising himself. “You.”

“Anything?” the voice in the darkness repeats. “A dangerous word.”

Harry knows that, but he doesn’t care. Snape could lean down and tear Harry’s throat out with his teeth, and Harry would let him. Harry would let Snape take his clothes off. Would let Snape - suck him -

“Kiss me,” Harry says, and then he wakes up.)

Wakes up.

On his sofa.

Alone.

No one is leaning over him, but he is aching in his track pants, and he can’t help but reach down and palm himself. He’s mortified as he does it, but he can still remember the smell of Snape’s breath, and the want that raced like alcohol in his veins, Snape’s skin, Snape’s hair -

“Oh fuck,” Harry murmurs, lifting his hips into his hand, tightening his fingers around the shape of his cock and thrusting -

Snape would be mean, wouldn’t he. He would be all sharp teeth and tight fingers, holding Harry’s wrists down, bruising his hips. Christ, Harry wants that. He’d let Snape do anything to him, all the things that he's thought about but never done. He’d let Snape take his clothes off, finger him, fuck him -

“Oh fucking GOD -”

Harry comes in his pants against the friction of his hand. He takes a few deep, staggering breaths before collapsing back against the sofa.

Fuck.

God damn it.

He just got off thinking about Snape. He just thought about letting Snape fuck him.

This might be a bit of a problem.

The dreams don’t end that night. Harry floats through the next few days on a current of electricity. He feels simultaneously dazed and also horribly, painfully aware of every sensation, every sound and taste and texture that he encounters. Sometimes he feels like he may still be dreaming - his lips still sting, his fingers feel raw as they trail up a bannister or turn a page.

(Harry on his hands in knees, Snape pressing hot, licking kisses to the back of his thighs.)
“What’s up with you then?” Isadora asks him one morning, “Look at you, all aflutter. You in love?”

“No,” Harry squeaks, and then goes off to do whatever menial task takes him farthest from her.

(Harry knelt on the floor in front of Snape’s desk at Hogwarts. His fingers shake on the buttons of the man’s trousers, tremble on his zipper.

“I’m going to come down your throat,” Snape says, imperious and unmoved from somewhere far above him. “You’re going to let me fuck your mouth until I come. Do you understand me, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, yes,” Harry begs.

“Will you let me? Will you -”

“God yes -”

When Harry wakes up, his pants are damp and clinging to him and he is mortified (Okay, fine. It’s more than just a bit of a problem.)

Back at Will, Peggotty eyes Harry hopefully every time their paths cross. He hasn’t the heart to tell her that things may be indefinitely delayed. (“Sorry miss, I know I was meant to be solving a mystery and protecting our rarest and most valuable books, but instead I tried to pull my former professor and he maybe won’t ever speak to me again, let alone help the library. Live and learn, right?”)

Maybe not. He can imagine the fallout and it wouldn’t go well for anyone. Least of all Harry’s current existence.

Eventually he tells Hermione. Not about the dreams, JESUS NO, but about all the rest of it. He worries she might die of second-hand embarrassment, but she only winces and makes him tea (all right, he also leaves out the part about going for drinks with Malfoy because really - he doesn’t want her to think he’s lost it completely.)

He hasn’t seen her since before Christmas, which is - a surprisingly long time. They talk a bit about the damaged books, and Harry watches Hermione consider it silently, probably figuring out more in those five minutes than Harry has over the course of the investigation.


“No, it can’t.” Harry sips his tea, tries to think about anything other than that moment in Mr. Inkpen’s library, on his knees in front of Snape’s chair, clutching the man’s hands in his own while those dark eyes shifted, terrified. “It sounds like healing magic. But why would that have frightened Snape so much?”

“There’s healing,” Hermione says slowly, “and then there’s regeneration. You said before these potions were extremely old. Maybe this goes beyond healing.”

“You don’t think - if it’s regeneration, it can’t be about Voldemort. Can it?” A pulse of fear floods him. “Do you think someone’s trying to bring him back?”

“I don’t know, Harry. Without any Horcruxes, they’d have a pretty tough time of it.”

“Unless there’s still one left.” Harry lifts a shaking hand and flicks at his scar. “What if all of him wasn’t destroyed? What if there’s still a tiny piece in me -”
“Don’t even start with that. There isn’t. If there was, he wouldn’t have died back at Hogwarts. You saw him die. He’s gone, every piece of him.”

“They saw him die before, and he came back.”

Hermione thinks for a moment. “Do you think that the Ministry should be informed?”

“I think -” Harry curses under his breath. “I think I need to talk to Snape.”

“You’re right. He’ll know what to do.”

Her certainty takes Harry aback.

“Since when do you trust Snape so much? He was awful to you at school.”

She nods. “Completely awful. But I trust him because you do.”

And that part is true. It's true. Harry may still be unbalanced and anxious around Snape, may feel a strange combination of fear and awe and humiliation but... but he does trust him. He knows whose side Snape is on, at last. Even if he figured it out too late.

Christ, this was all so much easier when Harry hated him.

(That night he is pressed up against a wall, something damp and brick and smelling like rain. There is a warm body all along the length of his, something hot and hard digging into his thigh as Snape rubs off against him and Harry thinks he might pass out from the smack of lust that runs through him. He’s going to come so hard he'll faint.

Snape’s knuckles are white against Harry’s hips, holding them in place.

“Don’t say anything, don’t -” Snape gasps and then moans low like a note of music. “Don’t stop, you insufferable -”)

Harry wakes up with his cock in his hand, and he comes before he can even make it to the loo.

“Fuck,” he gasps, sliding back against the bathroom wall after he’s cleaned himself up. “Fuck.”

He buries his face in his hands. This has got to stop. This whole sad disaster has got to stop before Harry loses his mind.

He goes to work the next morning feeling completely unbalanced. He needs to speak to Snape, that much is clear. If this missing potions thing has something to do with Voldemort, then Harry needs to know. He needs to speak to Snape, but at the same time is petrified that the sight of the man from his dreams will make Harry spontaneously combust in front of him. Or worse, that Snape will take one look at him and know everything, every hideous detail of Harry's imaginings.

Which would be worse, Harry wonders? The rise of the Dark Lord from his putrid ashes, or Harry facing the object of his sudden erotic fantasies? It’s hard to tell.

As it happens, he doesn’t have to choose.

“Mr. Potter.”

The man is waiting for him outside the library when he arrives. Harry feels his face turn red instantly, the heat of his blush almost making his eyes water. He can’t imagine the expression on his face, but it must be awful, because Snape takes a step back.
“What is -” Snape begins but then stops.

He stares at Harry and Harry stares back, both of them standing like statues in front of Will’s doors. It’s a grey, unlovely day, and Snape looks pale and purple-eyed from lack of sleep. He’s dressed like a Muggle in a dark pullover and jeans (JEANS!), and the look is altogether too human, too soft. Harry has the mad impulse to reach out and touch him (but he’s done that before and he swore he wouldn’t do it again.)

“Hi,” Harry says at last, trying to arrange his face somewhere more towards neutral. “Sorry, um - it’s been awhile.”

“Miss me terribly, did you?”

He forces himself not to say ‘yes.’

“What -uh - brings you here? Do you have news or -”

“No, I’m strictly here for the pleasure of your small talk. Shall we comment on the weather next? Of course I have news, idiot.”

Harry doesn’t even rise to it, too pleased at the sight of Snape’s furious eyebrows and ill-fitting jeans to be offended by anything at all.

“You’ve found the last book?”

“No as such. I have been in communication with the archives in Phnom Penh but they are all too firm in their stance on restricted access. I do not suppose you have friends in high places in Cambodia?”

“Um -”

“I thought not. As for the copy in America, it has been destroyed. A fire, three years ago. I would suspect your involvement if I didn’t have firsthand knowledge that you were busy killing Dark Wizards at the time.”

Three years. Has it been that long? It seems like yesterday and it seems like a lifetime ago (the War whispers at the back of Harry’s neck, I’m here, I’m here, turn around.)

Harry shivers, pulls his coat tighter around his shoulders. He thinks back on his conversation with Hermione. If they know what the other three potions were used for, maybe the last book's contents doesn’t matter as much.

“I was thinking -”

“However.” Snape cuts him off with a raised eyebrow. “I may have a resource. An acquaintance of mine. Last I heard she had a storefront in Diagon Alley, though it was some time ago.”

“She has a copy of the book?”

“There were three known copies of Difficulte Potions and How to Brewe Them in the world, as I have previously told you. Count on your fingers if you must.” Snape scowls at him. “No, she does not possess a copy of one of the rarest and most valuable potions texts of our age. But she did write her thesis on it.”

“Ah.”
“A thesis is an extended dissertation often required for an academic degree, in case you didn’t -”

“Yes, I know what a bloody thesis is. I can read and write and do maths even.”

The corner of Snape’s mouth twitches. “Your many impressive skills aside, I intend to meet this acquaintance today to see if she can offer any insight into the contents of our missing pages. I was on my way to inform your supervisor.”

“You’re going to Diagon Alley this afternoon?” Harry ignores the fact that Snape isn’t here to see him after all, was just coming to see Ms. Peggotty. It shouldn’t be surprising and it shouldn’t sting as much as it does. "Do you want any help?"

“It is hardly the most perilous of tasks. I do not require a chaperone.”

“Maybe I should come with you anyway. Just in case. I don’t want you to run into anyone upset about - about - um. You know.”

Snape’s eyebrows draw together and his voice becomes dangerously soft.

“Upset about what exactly? My role in the War? The death of Albus Dumbledore? Or my actions as a Death Eater at the whims of a bloodthirsty madman? Is that what ‘you know’ is meant to imply?”

“Fine, yes, all of the above. I’m coming with you.” Difficult as it is to look at Snape and not melt into a puddle of awkwardness, Harry doesn’t feel right letting the man go alone. Even though Snape would no doubt prefer it.

“It’s Diagon Alley, Potter. I’ve been walking that street all my life.”

“Don’t make me ask Ms. Peggotty for permission. I’m afraid she might insist.”

“For God’s sake.” Snape whirls away from him, a movement that rather loses its drama when one is wearing a Muggle jumper instead of billowing black robes. “Fine. If you must come with me then I shan’t waste time arguing with you.”

“Brilliant,” Harry says helplessly, and Snape gives him a dubious look. “Give me five minutes and I’ll meet you back here.”

He checks in with Ms. Peggotty (she is a bit too keen; Harry’s certain he doesn’t imagine hearing “the game is afoot,” whispered under her breath as he walks away). Then he wraps his scarf around his throat, risks a quick look in the mirror (he’s ridiculous, he knows it, Snape doesn’t give a damn about his stupid hair) and leaves --

* * *

-- the castle by train.

Well, on a train in a messenger bag that holds a painting of a train (layers upon layers of absurdity) but such are the circumstances in which Severus finds himself.

He told Potter that under no circumstances did he want to be propped up in front of the window, or wheeled about on the drinks cart, or any ridiculous activity the boy might come up with in an attempt to make Severus feel a little less deceased. No, the black night of Potter’s closed messenger bag is preferable. Severus watches the world slip past through the windows in the painting, watches the light skies fade to red-orange, then dark blue, then black. He goes to the tea cart and makes himself a cup, sipping it with his eyes closed. He drifts to sleep as the first stars begin to sparkle overhead, tiny
dots of white paint on canvas.

They look real enough from where he’s sitting. Not real enough to wish on, perhaps, but real enough to look up at and pretend. He supposes that’s all the matters.

Potter has booked a hotel room in Muggle London for one night, and they go there first. Potter steps out for takeaway, leaving Severus at loose ends in the room. It’s small, with a single bed and washroom attached. There’s a Muggle painting of waterlilies over the bed (or rather a poster that has been framed) and Severus studies it from across the room. The world is still rushing by outside the window of his train car. It’s a bit unsettling to see utter mundanity and stillness on one side, and whirling scenery on the other. Severus pulls the shades down, glad for the temporary absence of movement. Still, he wonders if he can feel the lull and jolt of the train beneath his feet, or if that is just his imagination? He never thought he’d say this, but he will be happy when he is back in his own portrait, where things may be quiet and isolated, but more importantly still.

Potter comes back with some sort of meat pie from the shop down the street. He sits on the bed eating it, occasionally dabbing his lips with a napkin or sucking crumbs off his fingers. The train lurches; if Severus wasn’t sitting down he might be knocked to his knees.

“Steak and potato in this,” Potter says around a mouthful. “Not bad.”

“You might have eaten elsewhere. You needn’t feel obligated to leave me under constant supervision.”

“Nah. I’d have missed you terribly.” Harry Potter grins at him. Potter. That is the boy’s name and any other is unacceptable.

Severus stretches out on the seat of the train car, wondering how he’ll survive the night here. The boy is watching him closely.

“The ride okay for you?”

“Like any other train ride.”

“Really? That’s all right then. I was worried you’d be terribly bored.”

“The illusion of travel was momentarily diverting,” Severus admits. “Once I got over that, there was always staring at the wall, or seeing how long I could hold my breath, or studying the pattern on the carpet.”


He finishes his dinner and crosses the room, opening the blinds and looking out onto the city. The lights have just started going on, an entirely different kind of starry sky than the one Severus enjoyed on his journey there. He briefly thinks about asking Potter to put him by the window, but then is too mortified to voice the request.

“I’m exhausted,” Potter says with a yawn. His skin in the lamplight looks impossibly smooth. Severus can imagine that he’d -

That he'd (enough.)

“I’m going to fall asleep standing here if I’m not careful. I don’t know what it is about train rides, but they always seem to knock me out.”
Potter leaves the window to rummage through his suitcase. He pauses for a moment, and Severus recognizes the familiar striped pajamas in his hands. The younger man looks up then, catches Severus watching him, and blushes.

“I’m just going to - I’ll just -” he motions toward the bathroom and disappears quickly inside.

Severus tries not to think of Harry Potter behind that thin door, pulling a faded jumper up over his head, revealing skin by inches. You’re dead, you’re dead and even if you weren’t -

Even if he weren’t, even if Severus were flesh and blood and bone, this appalling and inexplicable fascination would be just as appalling and inexplicable. What would he do - ask Potter on a bloody date? No, absolutely not. He would do nothing of the sort, would rather cut his own heart out than let this idiot know how he felt about him. He can imagine Potter’s face, his mortified reaction to the knowledge, and it makes bile rise in the back of Severus’ throat. He has sacrificed enough for the Boy Saviour. His life. Surely his dignity, such as it is, can be spared.

Potter emerges from the washroom and Severus nearly falls over in his haste to grab a notebook and pen. He at least had the wherewithal to bring those along for the trip, and he scribbles nonsense furiously to avoid looking at Potter (soft, vulnerable, thin material over warm skin ENOUGH) putter around the room awkwardly.

If Severus was living, he thinks, he could flee. Take up studying penguins in the Antarctic, and never again be confronted with the soft fall of Potter’s black hair on the nape of his neck.

“I’m um - do you need anything? Before I go to bed?”

Potter is standing far too close. He’s taken off his glasses, so Severus has no barrier against the wide green of his eyes. He can imagine that Potter’s hair smells like lilacs (and just the thought of that scent leaves him dizzy and terrified, remembering things he wishes he didn’t.)

“What could I need from you?” His tone is harsh with panic.

"Right." Potter blinks at him, slowly. The train sways beneath Severus’ feet. "Fair enough."

Severus wrenches his attention back to his notebook. He hears blankets shift, lamps switch off as Potter tucks himself into bed. The thought of it is enough to leave Severus blind. And the whole thing is completely grotesque - Merlin, the man is young enough to be his son - but Severus’ life has been rather grotesque, so perhaps this is fitting.

Don’t look at him, he tells himself, as Potter sighs softly.

Don’t look up.

In his notebook, Severus is writing lines of ingredients with no connection or purpose whatsoever, just to give his hands something to do.

He hears Potter breathing, slow and steady. He remembers the Quidditch game with Evelyn, and the sudden heartsick realization that Potter was beautiful. It almost makes him laugh thinking back on it, his utter despair, the thought that nothing could possibly be worse. He’d even thrown himself into the sea, old drama queen that he is. Severus shakes his head, grits his teeth and looks up.

Potter is lying on his back, arms twisted above his head. His eyes are closed and his fingers twitch, almost imperceptibly, while he dreams. Moonlight creeps through the blinds and climbs up the bed to spill across his throat.
This. This is worse.

“If I were alive,” Severus murmurs before realizing he’s speaking out loud. Thankfully, Potter does not stir.

(“And then the Hufflepuff girl says she feels perfectly fine, even as these purple spots are breaking out all over her skin, and the rest of the class is going mad in a way that only first year students can,” Potter says, and Severus cannot help but chuckle.

“It sounds like - an interesting class.”

“Oh absolutely. I came off as nothing if not completely competent and in control.”

“Obviously.”

“And then at the end, she seems to notice the spots, and her eyes go all wide and she says ‘Oh I just love purple.’”

Severus bites down on a smile before taking a sip of his wine. Potter’s eyes sparkle in the candlelight of the restaurant. He looks wicked and delicious.

“I tell you - everyone has their eye on Slytherins, but Hufflepuffs are the most dangerous House of all. You can’t defend against that sort of insanity. Totally unpredictable.”

“As former Slytherin Head of House, I cannot comment. I would risk having my dungeon privileges revoked.”

Potter laughs. Severus hates Potter’s throat when he laughs, hates the whiteness of his teeth and the tiny lines at the corners of his eyes.

“I’m glad we did this.” Potter looks briefly around the restaurant. It’s nearly empty at this hour except for a few harried servers and couples lingering over wine and dessert. “This is nice. Also I may have been starving.”

“I admit your classroom misadventures are more entertaining than I expected.”

“I’m sure you have better stories. You were at it longer.”

“Please do not remind me of that fact. The stories I have would only frighten you into early retirement.”

“I bow to your judgement.” Potter’s slim white hand is outstretched on the table, fingers drumming idly. If Severus leaned forward he could cover Potter’s hand with his own, feel the thump of the man’s pulse against his palm.

When Severus puts his wine glass down, he leaves his hand resting beside it. He tries to still a tremor that runs through him.

Potter is watching him, soft curve to his mouth.

“Anyway. Thanks for asking me.”

“This isn’t a date, Mr. Potter,” Severus says, even though -

Even though he wishes it was a lie.
He wants it to be a date. He wants to take Harry home with him, wants to press him against the door to his flat and kiss him until neither of them can breathe.

“Huh,” Potter says softly. His fingers creep slowly across the white tablecloth. “Isn’t it?”

Severus takes a sharp breath in, reaches out his hand and -)

Wakes up in a painting, lying wide-eyed and breathless on the bench seat of a train.

His hand is shaking. The palm of it feels warm, as if he had been holding it over a candle flame and just pulled away when the pain became too sharp.

The room is dark. Potter still lies sleeping in bed, although now he has curled into a knot on his side, blankets tucked tightly beneath his chin. Severus presses a hand over his mouth, staving off a rush of sudden nausea (physical dreams are one thing, sex is one thing, but this, this is unacceptable. This is unconscionable, decimating - Severus cannot be dreaming about dating Potter, about holding his hand, his fantasies cannot have become so soft and commonplace as this. He’s going to scream, he’s going to vomit, he’s going to -)

Potter murmurs something in his sleep, a slow silken whisper that might be Parseltongue, and Severus cannot be here a moment longer.

He flees.

Past the border of the painting, out of his train compartment and down the narrow corridor of the train. He throws himself headlong out of the painting, choosing another one at random from the walls of Hogwarts. He doesn’t care where he ends up, only that he isn’t somewhere he can watch Harry Potter sleep, somewhere he can hear him breathing.

The painting he ends up in depicts a long dock, stretching into a lake. The air is thick with mist, but through it can see green water and tall pine trees encircling him. It is almost entirely silent, except for the incredibly soft lapping of water at the shore, and the occasional whistle of a bird. He’s heard that whistle before. It takes him back to summers at his grandmother’s cottage (before his father stopped speaking to her.)

“Blackbirds,” a voice calls out to him. “Beautiful songs, aren’t they?”

Through the mist, Severus notices the shape of a man at the end of the dock. Severus approaches, and the by time he realizes it is Albus, it is too late to turn back and run.

“Severus Snape. How unexpected and unlikely.”

The wooden planks beneath his feet creak. Severus estimates it would take him nine seconds to escape, nine seconds.

“Come, sit by me. It’s a bit damp but you cannot fault the view.”

Apparently Severus is to have no peace tonight, one way or the other. He nods curtly, walking down the dock to the end where the old wizard sits dangling his bare feet in the water. Albus smiles gently up at him, and after a moment Severus feels like he has no choice but to sit down beside him. He leaves his shoes on, crossing his legs rather awkwardly to keep his feet dry.

“So.” Albus looks out over the water. “What brings you here in the middle of the night? According to young Evelyn, you were taking a weekend’s holiday in London.”
A weekend’s holiday. Severus snorts.

“No doubt he’ll expect me to bring him back some sort of souvenir.”

“It is the way of children to want things. But in this case, the child in question would likely be satisfied by nothing more than your safe return. He’s spoken of little else since - heavens, was it only this afternoon? This does not bode well for the rest of the weekend.” Albus’ eyes twinkle in Severus’ direction. Severus wonders if he had to practice that look in the mirror to achieve just the right combination of kindliness and calculation and (utterly deceptive) harmlessness.

“I shan’t be gone more than a day, barring catastrophe.”

“Excellent. And how is Professor Potter?”

Severus takes a deep, hissing breath, steeling himself against the sound of the man’s name.

“His usual self, I’m afraid.” Impossible. Infuriating. Lovely beyond reckoning.

“Splendid to hear. You know, Severus, you’ve done a world of good for the boy. I was worried about him when he first came to us. He was getting far too little sleep.”

Severus had nurtured that bad habit a bit, but he doesn’t say as much to Albus. He imagines the old wizard already knows.

“Now, however, I might go so far as to say the boy has a spring in his step. ‘The boy has a spring in his step.’ There, I said it.”

“I will take no credit for that.”

“I thought as much. What would you take credit for, I wonder? I suspect you would own up to your faults easily enough.” Albus tugs on his beard. He has braided pieces of it, Severus notes, and there are flowers and feathers tangled there.

Death suits him.

It is an odd thought. Albus as a portrait seems so much - lighter than Albus as a man. There are no schemes to be hatching, no battles to be plotting. Albus is able to simply be.

Severus doubts whether anyone would think that death suited him. If anything, death has made him more on guard than ever.

Or has it? (He can still feel the handfuls of heather against his palms as Evelyn sneezes like a mad child. He can still hear Potter’s wretched, gorgeous laugh as Severus swears he isn’t a real dragon.)

“You are smiling,” Albus tells him. “You think you are hiding it, but I can see it in the creases at the corners of your eyes.”

“You can see no such thing.”

“Perhaps it was a flight of fancy then. Nevertheless. You still haven’t answered my question. Whenever are you back at Hogwarts when you should be in London?”

“My - accommodations were becoming a bit - claustrophobic.”

“Ahh.” In the distance a fish jumps and splashes, breaking the calm surface of the lake. “Yes, a train car, was it? Prawn was most distressed by its disappearance.”
“I shall never sleep again, tormented by guilt.”

Albus nods at him. “I dare say.”

They sit silently for a few moments, and Severus listens to the blackbirds calling to one another. Wasn’t there a poem about blackbirds that he used to know? (Among twenty snowy mountains/the only moving thing/was the eye of the blackbird.) Severus shivers.

It’s colder here than in London.

Helplessly, Severus finds his mind drawn back to the room he left behind, and the restless sleeper waiting for him. He does not know if he has the strength to go back there. He does not know if he can look at Harry Potter any more. It feels like going mad.

“When you died,” Severus begins but that just floods his mind with memories (Albus falling from the Astronomy Tower, floating like spider silk on the breeze, and the sob that stayed in Severus’ throat even as he was fleeing for Draco’s life, even as he was deflecting curses and snarling heat at Potter. When he finally reached the safe house that night he was violently ill and there were tiny pinpricks of blood beneath his eyes and on his cheekbones for days after.)

The memories are enough to leave Severus staggered, speechless. He presses a fist against his mouth and tries to calm his breathing.

Albus says nothing.

“When you woke,” Severus manages after the world stops spinning and he can speak again. “In the castle. Was anything different?”

“Everything was different, my boy. Why do you ask?”

Severus chews on his lip. “I feel different. I - am not myself.”

“I cannot deny that the Severus Snape I knew years ago would not have shown the same grace toward certain overly precious children.”

“The understatement of the century.”

“But I don’t see anything else to be overly concerned with. Death changes you. Days spent within framed walls change you as well. It is surely a more peaceful existence than you were used to.”

“Hmph. A bit.”

“Although that peace may be interrupted somewhat by the presence of a certain Boy Who Lived.”

A blackbird calls out from the treetops, a melancholy snatch of song that Severus feels in his throat and his fists. He swallows.

“You have no idea.”

Albus says nothing. They sit together, looking out over the water.

When Severus finally returns to the train car, it is morning. Potter is sitting on the bed, dressed and red-eyed, and he immediately gets to his feet when he sees Severus.

“Oh my God. You’re back. I thought I’d done something to offend you and you’d run off.”
“You were sleeping, Potter. What could you have done in your sleep?”

Potter goes pale for a moment, eyes wide behind his glasses. Then he looks away, fussing with his collar before grabbing his bag.

“Nothing. Nothing, of course. Anyway, you’re back now and I didn’t offend you and you - don’t hate me?”

Severus has his mouth open, ready to sneer out some sort of half-hearted insult, but then -

But then.

There is something in that question, something that reminds Severus altogether too much of himself.

Something that brings him back to a childhood spent cringing, a childhood so anxious he was hated that he began to assume it was universally true. It was easier that way, cleaner. Easier to know you were hated than to wish - (Severus swallows something acrid that threatens to rise in his throat.)

“I don’t hate you,” he says softly.

Potter looks at him and Severus looks back. Potter reminds him of Lily in that moment (nothing at all of James except for the hair and glasses) and Severus feels a sudden pang of longing for all the years that lie between them, all the things he’ll never tell her. What would she think of the life he had led, the life her son had led? What would she think of Harry Potter, the boy who saved them all? What would she think of the treacherous beating of Severus’ heart, the devotion that rattles through what’s left of his soul?

(“Young enough to be our son, you bloody great perv,” Lily laughs with her eyes closed, strands of red hair perpetually caught in the corner of her smile. “Ah well, if you make him happy. Do you make him happy?”)

She might say something like that.

“Professor?”

Severus has been silent for too long.

“Potter. Are you ready to depart?”

“Been ready for an hour or so. Where did you go? I guess - it’s none of my business, is it, but -”

“And educated guess.” Severus motions toward the door. “Shall we?”

Potter nods, something unresolved and restless in his gaze, but Severus hasn’t the energy to puzzle it out. He turns his attention to the tea cart, steeping a cup of oolong while he waits for Diagon --

* * *

- Alley feels different.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Some violence and smut in this update, in case that's not your cup of tea. THANK YOU to everyone who has left kudos and comments, they keep me going and make me sing. An especially big thanks to Parker Luce, beta extraordinaire. This fic would not be what it is without her.

He turns his attention to the tea cart, steeping a cup of oolong while he waits for Diagon - -

* * *

- - Alley feels different.

Harry should have expected this, but he hadn’t been thinking when he volunteered to go with Snape - or he had been thinking, but about Snape, not himself. He makes his way down the cobblestone streets, and realizes he hasn’t set foot in the place for almost two years. He ignores the quiet murmurs of “is that Harry Potter? It’s Harry Potter!” as he walks, casting an anxious glance at Snape with each passerby.

Snape receives a fair number of glowers and scowls, but he keeps his head high and his lip elegantly curled, like he’s too good for half the nasty looks he’s getting. In another life, Harry might have found it a bit insufferable, but now Snape’s haughty contempt is a bit - well, a bit attractive (now that Harry’s gone round the twist completely, there’s nothing to do but embrace it.)

They pass Flourish and Blott’s and Florean Fortescue’s. They pass Eeylops Owl Emporium, and Harry has to swallow at the soft cooing from the caged birds outside. He hears Snape clear his throat beside him.

“Considering a purchase?”

Harry swallows again. “I’m all right, thanks.”

They keep walking, but Harry feels Snape’s anxious glance against the side of his face. It makes him shiver slightly, even though it isn’t a cold day.

When they reach Nazanin’s Miscellany, Harry is surprised at the size of it. The store is tiny, about a quarter of the size of the other stores on the street. It’s impossible to see inside as the tall, narrow windows are covered with floral-patterned curtains, tightly drawn.

“It’s still here,” Snape murmurs, and Harry shivers again at the softness in his voice.

There’s a hand-painted sign on the door that says “Houres bye Appointemente Onlye” and makes Snape snort with amusement. When Harry tries the knob, however, it’s unlocked. He gestures to Snape.

“After you.”

A set of chimes ring as they enter the dimly lit front room, lined with shelves that are tightly packed
with jars and vials of unidentifiable substances. There are few things that may have been alive once bobbing in containers filled with a bright green liquid, and a tiny dragon skeleton stretches the length of the narrow cash desk. Other than that, the store is empty.

“Hello?” Harry calls out. The dragon skeleton turns its head sharply toward the sound. Snape seems unconcerned but Harry flinches anyway. He hates the feeling of the dragon’s non-existent eyes on him, the empty sockets of its skull tracking their movements as they come closer.

Snape leans against the cash desk, not intimidated by the dragon in the slightest. He clears his throat pointedly, and when there are still no signs of life, he rings the bell on the desk. The dragon skeleton recoils from the sound and snaps its tiny teeth at Snape’s hand, but the man just ‘shoos’ it away.

Moments later, a rather frazzled-looking woman comes out of the back room, smoke following her like a grey cape. She waves her hands against it and blinks at the pair of them from behind large horn-rimmed spectacles. Her hair is the same dark brown as her skin, and part of it is on fire.

“You’re on fire,” Harry says quickly.

“What?” The woman jerks her head and notices her smoldering strands of hair. “Ah.”

“Aqua eructo.” A jet of water streams from Snape’s wand into the woman’s face, extinguishing the fire immediately. The woman splutters, wiping her eyes before tugging at her blackened lock. She wrinkles her nose a bit at the smell of burnt hair. “ Cheers for that. How can I -”

She seems to finally focus on them, and a smile spreads across her face that’s almost blinding.

“Severus Snape! What are you - why didn’t you tell me you were coming? It’s been ages. You know, I was just thinking of you, it’s funny how the mind works, perhaps I willed your presence somehow - I was reading about that the other day, visualization magic, fascinating stuff, have you read any of the philosophical papers of Soutine? I think you would find them -” She stops speaking abruptly, tilting her head to the side. “Oh. You’re Harry Potter.”

“Hi,” Harry says with an awkward wave, and the woman immediately returns her eyes to Snape.

“You’re looking poorly. Sallow skin, brittle hair, how are your fingernails?”

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. “Potter, may I introduce Nazanin Faas.”

Harry reaches out to shake her hand, careful to avoid the reach of a nippy dragon skeleton. “Nice to --

* * *

-- meet you.”

Nazanin only examines Potter’s hand, does not shake it. She glances from the boy’s palm to Severus’ portrait and back again.

“How do I know this isn’t a trick? That it’s really you? The order of Coastal Mages in the Pacific Northwest are able to enchant objects to take the appearance of a loved-one briefly to gain information from vulnerable family members. Well, I should say they are theoretically able, I’ve never seen the spell in action. Um.”

“I can vouch for him.” Severus hears Harry’s voice somewhere behind him. “I know it’s him, he taught me for ages. And he’s just as grouchy now as he was then. Don’t think an enchantment
could fake that.”

Naz considers for a moment before shaking her head.

“No, that won’t do at all. You could be in on it, couldn’t you? All part of your plan.” She pauses. “I suppose the obvious choice is to ask you to tell me something only the real Severus Snape would know but it seems a bit trite. Still, needs must.”

“The box, Mr. Potter,” Severus says, “and bloody well set the painting down somewhere I can see you. Your looting around in the background is making me unwell.”

“A passable impression,” Nazanin says as the room tilts and rearranges itself.

Severus thinks he’s been placed on a desk of some sort, which is far preferable to floating aimlessly through space. The dragon skeleton is only feet away from him now, and it snaps its teeth once in the direction of the portrait.

“Bad Hubie,” Nazanin says sternly. “No bite!”

Potter is finally within Severus’ line of sight, and he watches the boy rummage through his messenger bag, producing the wooden box that formerly held a phial of Tenetur.

“We found this. At Hogwarts.” Potter places the empty box in Nazanin’s open palm.

She looks at it, frowns, then looks at Severus and frowns deeper.

“This belonged to you,” she says. “I gave it to you.”

“You did. Unfortunately the contents have been pilfered from Hogwarts’ potions storeroom.”

“Egads.”

Potter tries to disguise a surprised laugh with a cough, and Severus glares at him.

“Severus Snape.” Nazanin clucks her tongue. “So it is you. What has it been, four years? Last time I saw you you were on the run, I believe. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” Snape says through gritted teeth.

“Terrible time, dark days. Well, it all --”

* * *

-- worked out in the end though, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, it turned out just swimmingly.” Snape rolls his eyes heavenward. “I wonder if I might speak to you in private? There are questions I have in relation to your research.”

“My research?” Nazanin’s eyes light up. “Splendid. How much time do you have? I do not like to rush through things and there are some intricacies that cannot be summarized or explained in layman’s terms, one really needs to have a deep, deep awareness of the nuances of -” The dragon skeleton stops her by rearing back and latching on to one of her fingertips. Nazanin snatches her hand away and sucks the (now bleeding) finger into her mouth.

“Bad Hubert! Very rude. You haven’t even a stomach to eat with, you must unlearn the impulse. I honestly don’t know why I enchanted these bones, he’s more trouble than he’s’s worth, but I had so
many of them lying around, you know, couldn’t stand the waste. Come along into the back, I’ll fix us some tea. Already have a fire going as you know.” She laughs a bit around the finger in her mouth. “Can your boy watch the store for me? Just shout if you need anything and keep well away from Hubie, he can’t fly so you should get on just fine. I don’t expect customers, never have them really.”

Harry stares after the faintly vibrating shape of Nazanin as she turns, pulling aside a curtain and disappearing into the back room.

* * *

-- eyes adjusting to the dim light as Severus is brought into a tiny office.

His ears are still ringing with Nazanin’s previous words. Your boy, he hears over and over again, each time with a twinge of pain. As if there was any possible universe in which Potter could be his.

“Here, I’ll put you on the table. I guess I should prop you up a bit, wait a mo - there we are.”

The room is filled nearly to the ceiling with stacks of papers and books and jars of dried flowers and strange pulpy organisms, but worse still is that there is a small lit fireplace overtop of which a rusted cauldron has been hung. Nazanin is one wrong move from complete immolation.

“Can I get you anything? Pardon me, what am I thinking, you can’t drink tea. Can you? What is the level of your biological functioning? Do you have a pulse? Can you time it for me, I’ve always wondered whether . . .”

“Nazanin,” Severus interrupts.

“Right, right.” She sits across from him, fidgeting with her glasses. “So. You’ve lost your Tenetura. It’s funny you should bring it up.”

“Why is it funny exactly?” An odd feeling settles in Severus’ stomach.

“There was a chap that came in here just the other day. He had a little phial of it, didn’t seem to know what it was. He was rank with Polyjuice, so I wouldn’t tell him much. I hoped at first he was going to try to sell me the stuff, but he decided to keep it. Bloody shame.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Just the basics, that it increases the strength of a potion. It’s been banned in America, did you
know, on account of all the love potions it was being added to. Not that there’s much of it kicking around these days. It’s more of a collector’s item. Did you ever use the bit I gave you?”

“I - did not.”

“Pity. If you’d used it all up the Polyjuice’d chap wouldn’t have been able to steal it from you.”

Severus sighs. “That was my suspicion as well. What didn’t you tell him, then?”

“Well.” Nazanin stands by the fire, silhouetted black against the gold light. “I don’t brew much of the old stuff. I don’t brew much at all these days, a bit on commission, here and there for a collector.”

Severus waits. He watches his old friend tugging on the burnt strands of her hair. She was the type of person that - when Severus was living - seemed altogether otherworldly. Impossibly well read, but liable to forget to eat until she was weak with hunger, or disappear for weeks on quests for odd misshapen leaves that maybe possibly might be useful for untested potions that she had just thought up.

“I wrote my thesis on Difficute Potions, as you know. Farrokhzad was mad about the stuff. He thought that Tenetura was - the translation is a bit off, but a binding agent? A way of taking one potion and connecting it to another and making them - symbiotic, I suppose. It makes more sense in Farsi, you Brits don’t really have the word for it.”

“And it would only bind potions?”

“Well, I’m not certain. In Farrokhzad’s opinion, yes, but there’s so little of it remaining that there isn’t much room to experiment. There was one theorist who claimed to have used it in binding matter - can’t remember the name, some German thing - but I cannot tell you how far its reach extends. Bad luck there, my friend. You should have kept it warded.”

“I did in fact,” Severus sniffs. “But I’m afraid my wards lack their previous strength for reasons somewhat out of my control.”

“Because you’re dead.”

“Well spotted. Yes, because I’m dead. If I were to require more information about this particular substance, who would you recommend?”

“Ebrahimi certainly. Brilliant place to start, and a brilliant book by any measure. Have you read her before? Her potions theory reads like poetry, it’s luscious.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Unfortunately I do not have access to many libraries these days.”

“Whoever your thief is, he probably means to fence it. I don’t expect just anyone to have the wherewithal to brew with that sort of thing. They’d have to have access to some of the classic formulas and you don’t find that sort of stuff lying around.”

Nazanin is not entirely accurate - Severus remembers the scrap of antique parchment left on the floor at Hogwarts. Not to mention Potter’s visit to WILL, and the potions texts that had recently been vandalized. Difficute Potions was among them.

“Your thesis,” Severus starts slowly, and Nazanin’s eyes brighten in the way that only an academic’s can. “What was the conclusion?”
“How much time do you have? I do not like to rush through things and there are some intricacies that cannot be summarized or explained in layman’s terms.”

“As long as you’re content to let Potter keep watch over your precious store, then my time is abundant. Though I do have to catch a train this evening.”

“Ah. Shame I couldn’t keep you for dinner.” Naz sits down across from him. “I should have made you read my thesis, back when you were still alive. Your feedback would have been valuable, and I hoped to have it published some day in the future.”

There is a soft gasp and a shriek from the front rooms, and Nazanin nods empathetically.

“Hubie.” She shakes her head. “My argument in its essence is that - Difficulte Potions seeks to do that which so many of our number have been striving toward for millenia.”

“And that is -”

“What point is magic in the face of death?” Nazanin grins at Severus. “There were some contrary opinions of course, but I believe that Farrokhzad was obsessed with immortality. The potions in this book follow a certain theme, as it were, and that theme is memory. Some early scholars think these are simply memory-enhancing potions but that’s ludicrous. Memories are what make us who we are when Farrokhzad says memory, I think he means ‘mind.’ He is brewing potions that are meant to - to - to recreate our humanity. Or prolong it.”

“I have read passages from the book. I did not have a similar impression.”

“Passages do not represent the whole!” Nazanin looks as though Severus has insulted her grandmother. “Of course you wouldn’t get that impression, you need to look closer at the text, deeper, you need to see the form of it, the rhythm -”

“Do you think he was successful?” Severus asks. “Could the potions in that book allow one to live forever?”

“No.” Nazanin’s answer comes immediately. “His concern is all - theoretical, none of it tangible. If he can recreate memory, that’s one thing, but blood, bone, flesh would still fall victim to decay. You’d need other magic at work to live forever. Or to bring someone back to life.”

Severus thinks, suddenly, of the parchment from Viridi Magicae. A bone-mending potion, he thought at the time. Something decidedly tangible.

“Thank you, Naz. This has been - helpful.”

“You aren’t thinking of getting the boy to brew anything for you?” Nazanin’s eyes narrow, and she seems ten years older suddenly. “Much as I’d like to see you in the land of the living once again - you know those potions aren’t -”

“For Merlin’s sake, of course I -”

“They aren’t safe, Severus. It’s messing about with nature, with fate. I’d never let you -”

“The thought did not cross my mind. My life has been long enough already.”

“Not at all.” Naz tilts her head, looking unexpectedly fond. “It is good to see you. You didn’t deserve - I mean, I wish -”
Good Lord. “Save your wishes for someone that might still be saved. I am not that man.”

“You never were, were you.”

Severus grinds his teeth together. No, he never was.

“Should I bring you back to your friend there? Only I’m not sure how he and Hubert are getting on.”

*Your friend,* Severus thinks, about as far a cry from his and Potter’s relationship as *your boy.*

“Very well. And thank you. My appreciation --”

* - -cannot be overstated in this matter,* Snape is saying quietly as he leaves the back room.

Nazanin’s hand is on his shoulder and she squeezes briefly before letting him go. She’s allowed to touch him, Harry thinks, irrationally uncomfortable about that fact. She touched Snape. And Snape let her.

“As for the other,” the man continues, “I am grateful you brought it to my attention. I believe I will have to do some of that research you recommended.”

“It’s thanks enough to have a visit. And thank you as well, Mr. Potter.” Nazanin’s fond expression shifts when she looks at him. “Severus and I had the most elucidating conversation, I hope it was some help, it’s rare that anyone asks about my research but I relish the opportunity to share my findings whenever possible. You know Severus and I go way back -”

“And on that note, we must depart,” Snape says quickly. “Immediately, as it happens. Potter, shall we?”

“I dunno, I was hoping to hear a bit more about how far back you go.” Harry gives Nazanin what he hopes is a very winning smile.

“Charming young man! You see it was the early nineties when I was a student and Severus was quite different from the man you see before you. I cannot begin to describe his hair -”

“Potter,” Snape snarls, pushing past him on his way to the door. “We really don’t have time for this.”

“Another day then,” Harry tells Nazanin. “Should we set a date now? What do your weekends look like?”

“Come back, any time, any time. I have scads of stories for you. Have you heard of the Muggle rock band called The Cure? Well, one time Severus tried to -”

“That will be all Nazanin,” Snape snaps, taking Harry by the arm and all but hauling him out of the shop. Nazanin waves dreamily after the pair of them while Hubie springs to his feet, lunging at her fluttering fingers. Harry waves back as he’s pulled through the door.

“You are entirely too inquisitive,” Snape murmurs low, obviously eager to put some distance between the shop and themselves.

“She was nice. I liked her. Plus it’s hard not to be inquisitive when she’s such a font of information.”

They’ve walked half a block and Harry suddenly notices the warmth and pressure of Snape’s hand at the crook of his elbow. He glances over at Snape, and the man’s hand drops immediately.
Harry tries not to miss it, tries not to shiver at the ghost of warmth that still lingers on his skin.

“Information about my sordid past, maybe,” Snape says, but there is a flush of colour on his cheeks.

“That’s the best kind of information.” Snape will not look at him, so Harry studies Snape’s jagged profile with longing - the angle of his jaw, the curve of his throat. He tries - unsuccessfully - not to open his mouth. “Did she have any idea about what was taken from Difficulte Potions?”

“I - yes.” Snape gives a terse nod, still not looking at Harry. “Memory potions most likely.”

“All right.” That doesn’t sound so terrible. Maybe - maybe it’s all fine. Maybe this whole thing is just coincidence and there’s nothing sinister going on at Will, nothing at all (Harry imagines, briefly, that that were true.)

“There was something else as well.”

“What else?”

Snape shivers and the way it runs across his shoulders and skin makes Harry’s mouth go briefly dry. “I - may need to do some research. If in fact there are any undamaged books in Will at this time -”

“Oh, very funny.”

“ - I should take advantage of its proximity.”

“Brilliant.” The word comes out a bit too enthusiastically. Harry can’t stop thinking of Snape at one of the desks in Will, Snape taking notes with ink on his fingers, the scent of paper and tweed clinging to his skin. Maybe the research will take more than one day and Snape will have to come back tomorrow. Maybe Harry will run into him while re-shelving books, or turn the corner and see him unexpectedly. The thought of it makes him nervous, and he laughs awkwardly. “Stick with me, I’ll wave you right to the front of the line.”

Snape rolls his eyes, but there is a hint of a smile on his face, and Harry can’t stop staring at it. He’s in huge amounts of trouble, isn’t he?

“No cover charge even, and free drinks all night.”

Snape shakes his head, pretending to ignore him. Diagon Alley is busy with midday crowds, and Harry feels a bit more comfortable now that he’s just another face in a sea of faces. Snape is still on guard, though, eyes moving constantly across the street, over roofs and down alleyways, scanning for danger.

Harry wonders if Snape is ever relaxed. He wonders if Snape ever feels safe (his face back in Rhodes as he stood in the water beside Harry, moonlit and lovely. His mouth as they ate dinner with Mr. Inkpen, the calm warmth in his eyes. Maybe he felt safe then.)

“Do you want lunch or anything before we head back?” Harry asks.

“Don’t you have some sort of job that you are paid to do? It seems like most of your time is spent -”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

A woman’s furious voice rings out over the crowd. Harry doesn’t have time to get his wand out before the spell hits him. He can’t move. He can’t move. The momentum of his frozen body topples him over, face connecting with pavement.
“Crucio -”

“Protego!” Snape snarls behind him.

There is blood in Harry’s mouth. His glasses are broken. Maybe his nose. He can’t see what’s happening but he hears shouts of panic and the sizzle of curses flying through the air.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Incarcerous!”

His heartbeat is racing and he’s at the top of the Astronomy Tower, they’re going to kill Dumbledore and he’s so frightened and so furious and he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe through the blood in his lungs -

“Finite incantatem.” Snape’s voice is suddenly close to his ear. “Potter -”

Harry can move again and he gasps for breath, blood streaming down his face as he looks up. His nose is broken and he can’t get enough air, he’s going to be sick -

“Harry.” Snape is right in front of him, knelt on the ground and holding tight to his shoulders. The man’s face is white. “Breathe. You can breathe. You are all right.”

There are tears in Harry’s eyes, and he can barely see through the veil of them. He flinches with relief as Snape heals his broken nose and then squeezes his eyes shut. There is still a lot of noise from the crowd around them, but Harry doesn’t dare open his eyes to see what is going on. If he does, Snape will realize he’s crying and the man’s pity or scorn is the last thing Harry needs right now. He focuses on his breathing, on the ground beneath his legs and hands. He’s not on the Astronomy Tower. Dumbledore isn’t falling like a star in front of him. Breathe in. Breathe out.

He can hear whispering now, “It’s Harry Potter, she attacked Harry Potter,” coming from the mouths of dozens of strangers. There are hands on his shoulders and “let me through, I’m a mediwitch,” and then someone is tilting his head up, feeling his pulse.

The soft touch makes Harry open his eyes at last. A middle-aged blonde woman is crouched down beside him, looking concerned. Snape has stood up again, face frozen and expressionless as he watches them. He is holding Harry’s broken glasses in his hand, gently, like a bird.

“My brother did nothing, he didn’t do nothing, and he’s in Azkaban because of you!”

Through the gathered bystanders, Harry can dimly see a slim, brown-haired woman bound in shimmering ropes of magic. Her eyes are wild with fury and she struggles against her binding, held firm by two wizards.

“It was all a mistake, he weren’t part of any Death Eaters, you’re a liar! LIAR!”

“Hit your head a bit there, Mr. Potter,” the mediwitch says with a smile, “but your friend here fixed that nose right enough. Your pulse is going too fast for my liking but I expect it’s just because you’ve had a fright.”

Harry nods dumbly, hearing only half of what she’s saying. The woman across the street is still screaming obscenities at him, and Harry’s head pounds. Snape’s wand hand is twitching, very slightly.

“Traitor! Coward! Liar! Let me go, I’ll kill him! My brother -”
“Augustus Rookwood was a murderer of children,” Snape snarls, turning on his heel and stalking over to her.

“You’d know all about murdering! Why aren’t you locked up as well?” The woman spits on the ground at Snape’s feet. “You’re as guilty as anyone, as revolting as Potter -”

“Say one more word about Harry Potter,” Snape’s wand is out, pressed against the woman’s throat, “and see what happens.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“One more word.”

“Snape,” Harry says softly.

Somehow, even across the street, even over the shouts from the crowd, the other man hears him. He strides back toward Harry, lowering his wand and looking righteous with fury. Harry tries to rise to his feet but he’s suddenly dizzier than he thought he was, and he sways. Snape is within arms’ reach in an instant, holding out a hand to steady him.

“Sorry, thanks,” Harry murmurs. “It’s okay, I’m -”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish before Snape launches into his tirade.

“Did you forget what your wand is for? Or is Harry Potter too good for a basic defensive spell now and then? Is that something only for us mere mortals?”

Harry feels a flare of hurt that dies just as suddenly. Snape may think he’s wearing a mask but he’s so bloody obvious now. It’s a bit ridiculous how expressive the man’s face is when you know what to look for.

“Perhaps I should have predicted you would trod blindly into the path of a Death Eater’s mad sister, given your need for heroism and acclaim at every opportunity, but even so you’ve exceeded my wildest expectations by being unable to walk ten steps down Diagon Alley -”

“Snape,” Harry says gently. The man’s hand is still warm on his hip, but it’s gone too soon. “I’m okay. I’m fine.”

“Two sodding minutes ago you were weeping on the pavement and couldn’t stand unassisted. Your definition of ‘fine’ is questionable.”

So much for avoiding the man’s pity - Snape knew he’d been freaking out. Harry sighed. Nothing to be done for it now.

“It took me back, is all,” he says awkwardly. “The Astronomy Tower. The - the night.”

Snape frowns, and looks like wants to say something, but instead he just nods curtly. Harry fixes his glasses wordlessly, and takes them, unbroken, from Snape’s hand. Snape only stares at him, his gaze a strange mix of anger and surprise that makes Harry’s breath stutter in his lungs.

There are Aurors then, asking Harry questions, giving Snape suspicious looks, taking the shrieking woman away to be interviewed. Harry is free to go, with a recommendation from the medi witch that he stay the night with a friend to make sure he’s not concussed.

“Come on,” Harry says, only too pleased to get away. There are still crowds gathered around them,
but he ignores them as he makes his way through. “Let’s get out of here. I thought you had some
research to do.”

“You can’t be insinuating that you’re in any state to return to work. Is there or is there not still blood
all over your shirt?”

A camera bulb flashes at them and Harry winces, quickening his pace.

“I’m not hurt, Snape. You fixed my nose, I’ll spell some of this blood off and be right as rain.”

“Right as rain,” Snape sneers, lip curled. But he still follows Harry, silently. There is a ringing sound
in Harry’s ears but he shakes his head to clear it.

“Besides, I’d rather be at Will thinking about work than - than at home thinking about other things.”

Snape has no reply to that.

As they are about to reach the Leaky Cauldron, Harry catches Snape’s sleeve with his hand,
stopping the man beside him.

“Thank you, by the way. If you hadn’t been there -”

Snape shrugs Harry’s hand off. “I learned quickly that you have a tendency to walk about with your
head in the proverbial sand, caring little for the dangers around you. How you made it this far in one
piece - more or less - is more of a miracle than your victory over the Dark Lord.”

Harry smiles at him, hearing nothing but concern in Snape’s low voice. It makes his breath catch
again but then - looking at Snape often does.

“You could just say ‘you’re welcome.’”

“In this case, you are decidedly not welcome, Mr. Potter. What would be welcome is a newfound
sense of self-bloody-preservation.” Snape turns away, heading --

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-- out of Nazanin’s shop, in the darkness of Potter’s messenger bag.

They said their brief goodbyes, and Severus is glad for some time to think about the contents of their
conversation (he is also glad that Potter was convinced to leave before Nazanin revealed all the
sordid details of Severus’ past. She certainly seemed to enjoy hinting at them ever-so-much, what a
loyal and valuable friend.)

“You all right in there?” Potter asks and Severus sighs loud enough for the boy to hear. “I’ll take that
as a yes?”

“Take that as a ‘stop speaking into your messenger bag, people will think you’ve suffered a nervous
breakdown.’”

“They think that anyway after I dropped out of the Aurors.”

“Well, now the Prophet will have incontrovertible proof.”

“Fine, fine.”

Severus knows that he could leave the train car painting, that he does not have to wait around for
Potter to return to Hogwarts. It would be a matter of moments to slip from this painting to another, to be waiting when Potter arrives back at the castle (being dead certainly reduces travel time significantly.) Severus does not have to sit in the tiny train car, drinking tea and wasting his time spectacularly.

And yet -

He will not finish that last thought. It leads to some darker places that Severus is not prepared to visit. Places where he lingers with Potter for the pleasure of his company. Places where he stays for the sound of Potter’s voice, the brief shy glimpse of his smile. Places where Severus’ life and soul (and heart) are utterly forfeit.

Best not think on it.

“You still there?”

“For Merlin’s -”

“Petrificus Totalus!”

A woman’s furious voice cuts through the dull murmur of the crowd and something - happens. Severus’ world is tilted and shook; there is a crash that feels like an earthquake, the ground beneath him shuddering once, violently, before going still.

Severus holds on tightly to the window ledge. “Potter,” he murmurs, and then a bit louder, “Potter?”

“Crucio,” is all he hears in response.

And then Harry starts screaming.

“Potter!” Snape shouts.

He can see nothing outside of the train car; it is dark, dark all around him and rage mixed with terror fills his body (if Potter's hurt, if he’s been taken, if he’s dead dead dead -)

“No,” Severus says without meaning to. He can hear a roar of conversation around him, and “Stop her!” and “Let me through, I’m a mediwitch,” and “Help me, someone -”

“Harry.” Snape tries to shout, but his mouth has gone dry and he can’t raise his voice above a whisper.

For the second time that day, he runs.

He is at Hogwarts within moments, bursting into the misty moor hung in Minerva’s office.

“Potter -” he gasps. “Something has happened. Minerva -”

The woman is at her desk, but she stands up at Severus’ first words.

“Where is he?” she asks, right to the bone as always.

“We were in Diagon Alley. Someone attacked him - I heard the boy screaming. Minerva, please -”

“I’ll find him.” Minerva has her cloak wrapped around her shoulders and her hand on her wand as she strides out the door. “I will let you know as soon as I can. Get Filius, and tell him where I’ve gone. He is acting Headmaster in my absence.”
Severus can only nod at her while he watches her leave. He feels like his heart is going to beat itself right out of his chest, and has no more strength to form words. He tracks down Filius Flitwick in the library and explains as best he can. Then there is nothing to do but wait.

Severus returns to Minerva’s office. The moment she arrives at the school, he wants to know of it. Albus’ portrait is thankfully empty, and Severus finds a patch of bracken, sits cross-legged and lets the mist roll over his skin. It’s cold here, and damp, but he cannot bring himself to leave. He cannot bear the thought of seeing Evelyn, or Albus for that matter. What would he say to them? That he took Harry Potter from the school and could do nothing while he was attacked? Severus stares straight ahead, feeling utterly and despicably useless.

If the boy dies –

If the boy is dead already –

Severus will burn down the world.

He picks at his cuticles until a small rivulet of blood runs from the nail bed of his ring finger. He studies the line of red against his pale skin and tries not to vomit. The Dark Lord had him brew the stuff once and he can still remember the smell - the texture -

He’s seen Potter bleeding before, more than once, the boy’s perfect skin broken with lines of scarlet and blackened with soil.

He’s bled all over Potter’s hands in the Shrieking Shack, weeping memories that he had no business sharing with anybody. A moment of weakness. Another in a long line of weak moments, stained with blood.

He is having difficulty breathing, world going spotty like a painting by Seurat. He should have been there - been there with a wand in his hand, ready to kill anyone that would try to hurt Harry Potter, anyone that would even try to touch him. Severus should have been alive to protect him, or bled to death trying.

Time passes and Severus does not move. His nails are bitten nearly to the quick, fingertips red and raw. He does not let himself fall asleep; Merlin knows the sort of dreams he would be forced to endure.

He waits.

When the office door finally opens and Minerva comes inside, Severus is so shocked that he almost falls over. He gets to his feet instantly, watching the woman as she shakes rain of her hat and dark green cloak.

“Severus,” she says, breathlessly. “Have you been here all this time?”

Always, he does not say, but he thinks the word, bitter as arsenic against his tongue.

“He’s all right. He’s here. We brought him back to the school at his request.”

A tiny bit of air forces its way into Severus’ lungs. Almost as if he is alive.

“He was attacked by a woman, Augustus Rookwood’s sister. She believes Potter was involved in some conspiracy to wrongfully imprison her brother. She’s in custody now, of course.”

Augustus Rookwood’s sister. Severus didn’t know the man had one. Last he heard, Rookwood was
in Azkaban where he belonged and would remain there for the foreseeable future.

“I heard Potter scream.” He is still barely able to put one word in front of another. It feels like he’s stumbling through the dark.

“He was hit by a Cruciatus curse but he is recovering. There were others around that were able to apprehend the woman, and a mediwitch was on the scene.”

“Where is he?”

“The Infirmary. Just for tonight. Poppy wants him monitored for concussion; he had a rather hard blow to the head. But tomorrow he should be back to rights. Though I may insist he takes a day off from his classes.”

There are no paintings in the Infirmary. That is just as well. Severus does not know what he would say if he saw Potter in a sickbed (‘Did you forget what your wand is for? Or is Harry Potter too good for a basic defensive spell now and then? Is that something only for us mere mortals? I should have predicted you would tred blindly into the path of a Death Eater’s mad sister, given your need for heroism and acclaim at every opportunity, but even so you’ve exceeded my wildest expectations by being unable to walk ten steps down Diagon Alley -”)

Stop.

The conversation could continue in Severus’ mind for hours, a long screed of vitriol that is no less than Potter deserves for being - vulnerable. Human.

Death has given Severus too much time for personal scrutiny. He is aware that it is far easier to be furious than terrified, particularly where the Potter brat is concerned. Rookwood’s sister is lucky the Aurors have her, and lucky that Severus is dead. If he wasn’t - if he knew where she was -

“Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are with him at present, came with him from Mungoes. Merlin, your face - he’ll be all right. You needn’t -”

“He should not have been there.” Severus swallows. “He was there because of me.”

“Rubbish. He isn’t a china doll. You -” Minerva stops. “It is no longer your job to protect him. Your obligation to Albus -”

“To Albus?” Severus chokes on the name. A bitter laugh escapes his throat. “It isn’t an obligation, Minerva, it hasn’t been for -”

He stops.

He realizes what he’s said.

“It -” Severus tries again but can only manage the one word.

Something happens to Minerva’s face, a shifting of emotions like the shades of a sunset. Yellow to orange to red to purple (confusion to surprise to sorrow to -)

“Oh, Severus.”

“It -” he says again. He knots his hand into a fist when the rest of the sentence does not present itself (it wasn’t for Albus, it’s him, it’s Harry - or sentiments equally poisonous. Severus wants to scrub his brain with bleach for even thinking such a thing.)
“My boy, that - cannot be -”

“For God’s sake, do not speak of it.” Severus will not beg Minerva to never mention this to a sodding soul, but - it’s a near thing.

“Of course not. Never. But -”

“I’m leaving the school.” He makes the decision in the moment he forms the words. “I must.”

“To go where?”

Severus racks his frantic mind. There is a painting in the Three Broomsticks, isn’t there? A random feast scene beside the bar, wizards and witches in medieval garments raising tankards of ale. He’s certain he remembers it.

He is - nearly certain.

“Hogsmeade,” he manages, unwilling to go into specifics. The painting may have been given to a collector or chucked in the rubbish bin, and then where will he be?

“Of course you’re free to go where you will, but he’ll ask for -”

“Tell him I am - doing research.”

“Research.” The Headmistress raises an eyebrow. “And what will I tell young Mr. Ashdown? Or Fortunata or Albus or -”

“Tell them I’m dead,” Severus snaps, ready to be on his way now that he has a destination. “It is the truth, after all. Though heavens forbid we acknowledge it.”

“Severus -” Minerva’s tone is so patient, so empathetic that Severus cannot stand it.

“Thank you for finding him,” he manages, but cannot look at her a moment longer.

He turns away, hurrying through the mist until the painting fades from his sight and he can make his way back to his own portrait. As he arrives, he has the irrational thought of ‘home’ and isn’t that the most pathetic depths to which a man can sink? He feels like he should pack something, but what could possibly hold any meaning for him here? He scans the room before gathering some papers and ink, a few of the textbooks that he hasn’t gotten to yet and -

“Mr. Snake! Hooray! I have ever so much to tell you!” Evelyn rolls out from beneath one of the desks, blond hair plastered awkwardly to the side of his face. “I was waiting for you to get back by sleeping under this desk, because I didn’t want to miss you for one minute! In your absence, I had a series of - are we going on a picnic?”

Severus glances down at his armful of meager belongings. “Not as such.”

“You always bring too many books when we go on picnics and then you’re awfully sorry. Where are we going then? Not to the seaside?”

“We are -” Severus takes a breath. “-not going anywhere. I will be leaving the school for a - short time to do some important research.” (Not to hide, not to wallow, not to find some dark corner and lick my wounds in solitude.)

“But you just got back!”
“I am aware. But it is of the utmost importance that leave at once.”

“For how long?”

“I cannot say just yet.”

“That’s - that’s not fair!”

Evelyn’s face is starting to turn red. His lower lip is trembling. If he starts to cry, Severus suspects he will have a panic attack.

“It’s not fair!” Evelyn says again, pitch rising. “I missed you and I wanted to tell you stories and you’re not even going to bring me with you and you’re my best friend and -”

“Evelyn,” Severus says sharply, kneeling on the ground in front of the child and taking him firmly by the shoulders. “I have a very serious, very important job for you. Do you understand? While I am gone. I was concerned at first that it would be asking too much of you, but you have just convinced me otherwise.”

Surprise derails Evelyn’s despair for a brief moment. He blinks watery eyes at Severus while Severus replays the last few sentences (“you’re my best friend” and the husk of his heart only breaks a little.)

“What job?” the child asks at last.

“I need you to watch out for Professor Potter. Yes, I know that you do that anyway, but this is different. He was attacked while we were gone -”

Evelyn’s eyes go wide. “He never was!”

“-and the culprit may still be at large. Potter requires protection. Someone to keep him safe. Can you do that?”

“Like - like a bodyguard?”

“Yes, exactly. You’re the only person clever enough for the job.”

“But - but - but what if someone comes to get him? I can’t do magic, can I, not in a painting. And I never got a wand, Father was waiting until my birthday.”

“If someone comes -” No, Severus cannot think about that possibility. Potter will be safe in Hogwarts. The war is over, and if anywhere is safe, it is this school. “If there is trouble, you tell the Headmistress. She will know what to do.”

“But you’ll be back before then, I expect.”

“I - expect.” He drops his hands and gets back to his feet. “What do you think? Are you up to the task?”

Evelyn nods very solemnly. “I won’t let anything happen to him.” He crosses his finger over his heart and Severus winces.

As he re-gathers his belongings, his gaze falls upon the bookshelf in one corner of the room. There is a sprig of dried heather in an empty bottle that Evelyn gave him after one of their many trips to the Irish landscape. The bottle is surrounded by a neat pile of seashells, gathered on a visit to the sailboat watercolour, and a pinecone from their picnic by Loch Awe.
As discretely as he can, Severus pockets a seashell. Then he turns back to Evelyn, holding out his palm.

“Put ‘er there,” he says stiffly.

The mortification he feels is nothing when compared to the delight in Evelyn’s face as they shake hands.

“We’re all going to miss you,” the boy says, ridiculous blue eyes shining. “Come back soon, Mr. Snake.”

Severus grits his teeth, and nods out a lie.

He finds the painting in the Broomsticks surprisingly easily. It is exactly as he recalled it, though the celebrating wizards and witches within are currently snoozing over the table laden with food, empty tankards cast aside. The sound of snoring hums like static through the room. Severus cannot fathom spending more than two minutes in the location; the floor is sticky with spilled ale, and the air smells ripe with an ugly combination of spices. He needs to find an alternative and quickly.

Severus stares across the mostly empty Three Broomsticks, where only a few patrons linger. They pay him no heed at all, bent over their lagers and grumbling about the weather. Rosmerta doesn’t notice either; Severus watches her gathering empty pint glasses, making her way gracefully between chairs and tables while balancing a tray full of mugs like a dancer. That’s when he sees it - the painting across the room. Hung above an out of the way booth, dangling crookedly from a nail.

It’s a landscape scene in oils, a narrow path leading up to a stone tower perched high on a hill. The sun is beginning to set, the sky going an uneasy copper, and the grass rustles slightly in the breeze. Severus stares at it until it swims flawlessly behind his eyelids, and then he is there, navigating silently up the path toward the tower, uneven stone slipping beneath his boots. The grass may be rustling but the air seems quiet, no birds, no crickets, just calm. The tower approaches (is it supposed to be Clifford’s Tower in Yorkshire? That’s a bit grim; Severus should have looked at the nameplate), white brick walls with tiny windows. He longs to go inside, bolt the door, disappear. And damn whoever is stealing ingredients and sabotaging books. Let someone else figure it out, let them get dragged along in a messenger bag like an old lunch. Let someone else study Potter’s laugh, and the circles beneath his eyes, let someone else fret for his safety, let someone else -

(Severus’ feet slide on the ice, but Potter’s hands are warm on his shoulders, holding him upright. Severus blinks his eyelashes free of snowflakes to stare in wonder at the young man’s face, flushed red and impossibly close, surrounded by white-roofed houses and Christmas trees and -)

Severus comes to a stop on the path.

That was not a memory. It could not have been a memory. He was never anywhere with Potter and that dreadful amount of snow, Potter never touched him as he was falling. Was it a dream? It must have been. And yet it felt like a memory, or a memory behind glass (ice cold and sweet against his tongue.)

He continues his journey, reaching the tower just as the sun slips beneath the horizon. The wooden doors open beneath his hand and Severus finds himself in an entrance hall, cobwebbed and cloudy with dust, hung with decaying green banners. Well, he can’t fault the colour. Or the silence. If he has to live somewhere (“live” in quotation marks, as it were) this might be a tolerable option.

He turns over his shoulder before going any farther, before closing the door behind him. Rosmerta
seems about to close, wiping down tables and saying goodnights to some of the last customers to leave. Severus lets the murmured conversation wash over him,

And then, just as the last customer has left, the bell over the door rings. Rosmerta looks up. And into the Three Broomsticks (Merlin save us from Gryffindors) walks --

* * *

-- through the stacks, sending a few stragglers on their way as he does his final rounds.

It’s nearly time for Will to close, and Harry collects misplaced books and spells the lanterns out as he walks. He certainly does not look for Snape. If he sees the man, fine, but he’s not - like - obsessed or anything. The moment they returned from the nearly disastrous trip to Nazanin’s, Snape vanished into the stacks and that was the last Harry saw of him. Snape’s probably gone home by now. It’s fine.

His head has stopped hurting at least, and he’s no longer flinching at shadows, so that’s something. He meant what he said to Snape - he’s glad for the distraction of work and the sense of peace that Will affords him. And it’s not like he hasn’t had attempts on his life before. Best take it in stride, shake it off, move on (the War creeps around the edges of the room, a hissing, rank and rotten cat, all bones and tendons, waiting, waiting -)

“Potter.”

Harry nearly drops the books in his hands when he sees a ridiculous grey coat hung on the back of a chair. Snape is looking over his shoulder from the desk where he’s sat, pages scattered in front of him.

“You’re still here,” Harry says, heart so high in his throat it might choke him.

“You have the most remarkable skill for stating the obvious.”

“I thought you’d left ages ago. Without even saying goodbye, I might add. It had my nose completely out of joint.” He tries to sound more flippant about it than he feels.

“I trust I am sufficiently forgiven.”

“It’s still a bit raw, to be honest.”

Even though his eyes are tired, Snape almost smiles. He almost laughs. Harry can almost taste the sweetness of that sound; he bets it tastes like honey and rosemary and sunlight.

“I’ll have to ask you to leave anyway, I’m afraid. We’re closing up in ten. You don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here, etcetera.”

“Of course.” Snape starts to shrug on his jacket, closing a notebook and tucking it into his pocket. Harry studies the width of his shoulders, length of his neck, utterly forgetting that he still has books to collect. He remembers himself only when Snape gives him an odd glance.

“I can find my way out, I assure you.”

Harry fidgets with the pages of the book clutched in his hands, a soft anxious fluttering like the feeling in his stomach. “Where are you headed?”

“The train.”
“The train? It’s nearly ten. If you’re going back to Malfoy’s, what is that, three hours?”

Snape frowns and glances at the library clock. “I do not turn into a pumpkin at midnight if that is your concern.”

“I could Apparate with you. Save you the trip.”

“Says the man possibly suffering the effects of concussion. Gracious as that terrifying offer is I’m afraid I will have to decline.”

“There’s no way you’ll get a connecting train.”

“I might yet if you saw fit to end this inane conversation and let me go on my way. If I have to spend a night in a station, I’ll survive. I assure you, I’ve slept worse places.”

Harry doesn’t want to think about the “worse places” Snape might have slept. Places like cells, or hospital beds, or - or Azkaban -

“What if - what if you stayed with me?”

Snape swallows.

“My couch is a fold-out,” Harry clarifies quickly. “You could sleep there. On the couch.”

“Potter.” With a sigh, Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. He seems to make that gesture a lot, or maybe just when he’s around Harry. “We’ve discussed this. I -”

“It’s not about - that.” If Harry starts blushing, he’ll Obliviate himself. “It’s late. If you don’t want to stay, that’s fine. I just thought I should offer. You were here ‘til all hours trying to figure out who’s cutting up our books. A fold-out couch is the least I could do. And they said before that I shouldn’t be alone tonight because of the whole head injury thing. If you say no, I can probably kip at Hermione’s but - all she’s got is a lilo, it’s really the worst.”

Snape rolls his eyes heavenward, looking briefly like he’s doing silent mathematical calculations. Eventually, he folds his arms and sighs.

“The whole head injury thing,” he repeats dryly. “What a wordsmith. Any sign of lingering damage or would it be impossible to tell in your case?”

“I’m fine, thanks so much for your concern.”

“And how much longer does the library require your invaluable services?”

“You asking me what time I get off?” Harry says with a grin. He regrets it when Snape just stares at him blankly. “Er, just a few more minutes. Security will be coming in, and the cleaners.”

“If I’m still outside when you depart, you have my answer.” Snape walks away from him, heading to the mouth of the spiral staircase that leads to the ground floor.

Harry has never done the final rounds so fast in his life. It’s probably some sort of record, but when he gets outside, Snape is nowhere in sight.

Fine. That’s fine. If the man’s caught the train, good for him.

Then Snape steps out from the shadows of the shop across the street, and nothing is fine at all, not even a bit.
“Loathe as I am to say you are right, it seems I am going to miss my connection.” The man’s lips are pursed. He obviously isn’t happy. “Will I catch something, do you think, if I sleep on your ill-used couch?”

“What do you mean ill-used?” Harry smiles, he can’t help it. Snape is bloody adorable when his feather are all ruffled.

“I do not want to get into the specifics. Do you have clean bedding or should I -”

“Oh my God, it’s not - Snape, you’ve been to my bloody place before! I think you’ve lived with the Malfoys too long, starting to look down on us regular peasants.”

Snape doesn’t rise to the bait, but a flush of colour is just visible on his cheekbones. Harry wants to - to bite them (couch, Harry, he’s staying on your couch. Oh hell, the couch that Harry’s been sleeping on due to the whole - collection in his bedroom. Well, he’ll have to figure something out, now is not the time to go into that whole disaster.)

“You are certain it is not an imposition?”

“Not at all.” Harry tries to sound casual. “Besides, you’re doing me a favour, making sure I don’t die in the middle of the night or something.”

“Then,” Snape makes an elegant ‘lead on’ gesture with his white hand, and Harry is so captivated by the movement of the man’s fingers that he forgets briefly what’s being asked of him. Right, right, he’s taking Snape home.

He’s going home with Snape. It’s fine.

His heart beats faster the closer they get to his flat. Snape is mostly silent, and Harry aches every time he looks at him. The man’s profile is illuminated gold in the streetlights, and Harry wonders when this happened - when snarky, bitter, vicious Snape became so fascinating.

Snape turns his head sharply and catches Harry looking. He scowls, but it’s too weary to be convincing.

“There is something I have not told you about our visit to Diagon Alley. Nazanin suspects that something of mine has been stolen. A person in her shop was making inquiries about it.”

“Something of yours - like what?”

“An extremely rare potion. I left it, rather injudiciously, in the Hogwarts storage room.”

“You still have stuff at Hogwarts?” That shouldn’t have been Harry’s first question, but it’s something he hadn’t thought of before. Snape rolls his eyes so dramatically he must make himself dizzy.

“Evidently,” he snaps. “Most of my belongings were gathered as evidence in the case against me, and some were shipped to me upon my release from - from -” Snape does not finish. “But there appears to be some things I overlooked. I may have to visit the school myself to determine if Naz is correct.”

“When is the last time you were there?” Harry asks.

Snape pauses. “The - Shrieking Shack,” he says quickly, as if the words taste bad.
That’s going to be a tough visit then. Harry felt traumatized enough going back, but at least he was welcomed with open arms. Snape’s reception might be slightly different, cleared name or no.

“Do you want company?”

Snape says nothing, so Harry rushes ahead awkwardly.

“It helps. Or I think it would help. It was hard for me that first time.” The only time so far, but he doesn’t need to tell Snape that. “When I went back.”

Snape still does not respond, looking thoughtful but keeping his eyes straight ahead. Harry’s used to Snape’s odd lapses into silence, his gloomy rumination, so he lets the man alone. He listens to his breathing, his footsteps beside him.

They reach Harry’s apartment, and Harry unlocks the main door, the key stiff in his uneasy hands. He tries not to trip on the stairs as he leads Snape up to his flat, tries not to think about the man’s presence so close behind him. When he reaches his own door he opens it quickly, ushering Snape inside. Harry closes the door behind himself, and when he turns back to Snape, the man hasn’t moved an inch. He is looming over Harry, and Harry stumbles against his door in surprise.

“Did you go back?” Snape’s tone is sharp but his voice is deceptively soft. It takes Harry a moment to remember what they were talking about.

“Yeah, I went to Hogwarts at New Years.”

“You do not yet have an owl. Or another familiar.”

“I don’t really need - I mean I’m not -”

“I was under the impression you were left Grimmauld Place -”

“I don’t want to talk about Sirius.” Harry cuts him off.

“- and yet you are living here.”

Harry’s heart is racing now, pounding in his ears. He feels like he’s under attack for some reason. “Grimmauld Place is - too big for just me. It feels empty.”

“When is the last time you visited?”

“Um.”

“When is the last time you saw your godson? Or the charming family of redheads you called friends?”

“I don’t want to talk about the Weasleys.”

“What do you want to talk about, Mr. Potter?” Snape’s lips are white and so close. “You haven’t gone back. Not truly. So don’t suggest that I take comfort in your brave, upstanding company. You - are - hiding.”

He says the last like it’s the worst sort of imprecation, leaning back as if he’s just proved his point. Harry’s suddenly filled with the sort of frantic anger that only Snape seems to inspire.

“Oh, and what are you doing then? Living at the Malfoy’s, not even going back to Hogwarts to get your stuff. At least I -”
“Yes, how very courageous you must have been to return to the place where you saved the Wizarding World to great acclaim and adoration. Idiot boy. I watched Albus Dumbledore die in that school. I stood by while children were tortured, all in the service of some mad scheme that nearly led to both our deaths.”

“But you didn’t want to do that, I know you didn’t.”

“You are a hero,” Snape sneers at him. “I am a monster. Such will be the stories of our lives.”

“You’re wrong, You’re wrong. I know what you did. I -” Harry takes a breath, gathers his courage. “I know who you are.”

Snape shakes his head, slamming his eyes shut.

“You don’t know anything.” The anger has gone out of his voice, replaced by an emptiness.

“I know who you are,” Harry says again. It’s a mad presumption but he feels the truth of it in his bones. He looks at Snape and sees a man who has been at war most of his life. He looks at Snape and sees a boy who wasn’t hugged enough, a boy who had to fight for every scrap of kindness.

He looks at Snape and sees himself.

Harry’s heart can’t stand it. He raises his hand, drags a thumb against the hollow below Snape’s sharp cheekbones. Snape doesn’t open his eyes but he does flinch at the contact and takes a sharp breath in. His skin is so soft, like moth wings, and so pale he’s almost silver. Harry should drop his hand, he should, but there is something so transfixing about the sight of his fingers against Snape’s skin.

Then Snape opens his eyes.

“I - I told you never to touch me.”

Harry drops his hand instantly. “You’re right. Sorry. I’m - sorry.”

Snape stares at him like it’s causing him pain. Then he twists his hands into the fabric of Harry’s jacket, hauling him forward and kissing him.

It isn’t a soft, pretty kiss, tasting like ouzo and the sea. Snape’s tongue is in his mouth the moment Harry gasps a breath, then his teeth are grinding hard on Harry’s lower lip. Harry goes dizzy immediately, and because this may be his only chance, he threads his fingers into Snape’s hair and pulls. The man groans into his mouth, and Harry groans back. It is nothing like kissing Ginny or Cho - it’s not gentle and easy, it’s bruising and hot-sharp and devastating. Harry never wants it to stop.

He can feel cold fingers where his shirt rides up over the belt of his trousers, and he clutches at Snape’s coat, tugging the man closer until they’re pressed against each other. It’s too much, too good - Snape’s touching him, kissing him, just like all of Harry’s dreams come to life. And oh God - if Snape moves like that, keeps moving like that, Harry’s going to come just like this, just by rubbing up against him and -

“Stop.” Snape pulls back. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, holding Harry still but not letting go.

Harry tries to slow his heartbeat, to calm his breath. Then Snape starts to loosen his hold on Harry’s shoulders and the world cracks in half.

“I should not have -”
“No,” Harry pleads. He holds onto Snape’s waist, feels the man’s hip bones through his coat. “Please.”

“Potter, I - this is mad. I am not myself.”

“Harry. That’s my name.” He barely recognizes Snape - the flush of his cheeks, his swollen lips and disheveled hair.

“Harry,” Snape says and then winces, eyes squeezing shut. “I’m old enough to be -”

“Don’t say it.” Harry leans forward, brushing his lips across Snape’s sharp jaw, dragging his mouth up until he reaches Snape’s earlobe, kissing the shell of his ear, the soft place behind where he tucks his hair. He feels Snape sigh against him.

“I think about you all the time.”

“You cannot possibly -” Snape begins but then he’s kissing Harry again, mouth open and warm and unbearably soft now. Harry thinks he might melt into a puddle at Snape’s feet, and he pushes Snape’s huge grey coat off of his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Snape immediately pulls away, retrieving the jacket and hanging it on the coatrack, which Harry finds so endearingly fastidious that he has to kiss him again.

They move together somehow, but Harry refuses to take his mouth away from Snape’s lips or neck or jaw and he can’t see where they’re going. The sofa is underneath them at some point, and Harry pushes his blankets off the edge as he pulls Snape down beside him. His heart is rattling like mad and Snape is making the most delicious sounds against Harry’s starving mouth, their hands tangled in each other’s clothing.

Harry bites the skin of Snape’s throat, and when that earns him an almost desperate cry, he does it again. And again. Why the hell does Snape still wear clothing with so many buttons? Harry tries to undo the top button of the man’s black collared shirt, but his hands are too clumsy and Snape keeps distracting him with licks to the lobe of his ear.

“I can’t focus when you do that,” Harry gasps. He feels out of control, moments away from falling apart. Why hasn’t he felt like this before? Is this how it’s supposed to feel?

“Yes,” Snape murmurs against his neck, and damn it all Harry said that last part out loud.

Somehow the buttons at Snape’s collar give way, and Harry can navigate Snape’s collarbones, the thin patch of hair on his chest. More buttons and Harry sees a pale nipple that he has to bite, sees smooth white skin that tastes like tea and wool, hears a noise from above him that sounds like someone dying.

“Pott- Harry. Slow - slow down.”

“I can’t. I can’t slow down.”

His hands are shaking on the buckle of Snape’s belt, the zipper of his fly, it’s all moving so fast and he wants everything at once.

“God, please -” Harry can’t stop. If he stops he’ll start to think, to question, and then maybe he’ll never get this chance again. He lowers his head, pressing his mouth to the wiry trail of hair that bisects Snape’s stomach, leading down, down. It’s sharp against his tongue, rough where the man’s pale skin is soft as cream. Harry presses his hands against Snape’s hips, moves in and in and in until Snape gasps brokenly.
His cock is suddenly beneath the palm of Harry’s hand, hard and warm where it leaks against his black underwear. Harry thinks for a moment that he’s so turned on he actually might die, can feel the dizzy flutter of his pulse.

“Can - can I?”

Out of his mind or not, the question is important. There is no answer for a long moment, and Harry’s face flames while his mouth waters. He doesn’t want to look at Snape and see - see whatever horrible expression is waiting on the man’s face - but he forces himself to glance up.

Snape -

Snape looks if he has been Stupified. His eyes are wide, lips open and shining as if he’s been biting them. Harry licks his own lips just thinking about it, and Snape’s eyes followed the gesture. With his shirt hanging open and his mouth swollen, Snape looks - bloody gorgeous. He looks ravenous. He looks flushed and well-kissed and fuck, sexy as hell (is Harry saying things out loud again? Judging by the colour traveling up Snape’s pale neck, he might be.)

Slowly, Snape lifts one hand. He reaches out. Harry doesn’t move. He watches Snape’s fingers tremble through the air, feels his heart beating in his throat, feels heat radiating from the skin of the man beneath him.

Snape’s fingers skim the side of Harry’s face, a ghost of a touch against his mouth before threading through Harry’s dark hair.

“You’re shaking,” Snape says, and his voice is broken.

“I know.”

Snape bites his lip. He nods.

“Thank God,” Harry breathes, lowering his face instantly to mouth Snape’s cock through his pants. He tastes salt-sweet and bitterness, and pulls at the elastic waistband to get his hand on skin.

Snape’s cock is darker than the rest of him, almost purple at the tip. Harry’s never done this before and in this moment he can’t believe he waited so long (you were hiding rings in his ears, and he knows Snape is right.) He wets his lips after taking a (hopefully inconspicuous) breath and then darts his tongue out for a taste. It tastes like Snape, like the edge of Snape’s jaw, and Harry loves it. Like an idiot, he goes too far too fast, taking Snape as deep into his mouth as he can, gagging and pulling back.

“You - you’re oh God -” Snape’s fingers tighten in Harry’s hair, and it disturbs Harry a bit to learn how much that turns him on.

The man’s hips are making shallow, helpless thrusts and Harry swallows and swallows, mouth watering with desperation. Fucking his mouth, Harry thinks, that’s what this is called. Snape is fucking his mouth. He wants everything all at once, can’t think straight, can’t see straight. He wants to make Snape come but at the same time he never wants this to end. He wants Snape’s shaking
hands fisted in his hair forever. He wants the sounds Snape is making, the breathless, almost pained noises that Harry’s never heard the man make before. He’s going to come in his pants like a teenager just thinking about it. He’s going to die, he’s going to light on fire -

“Oh - oh hell -”

There’s a bitterness at the back of Harry’s throat, and the taste makes him feel even hotter. He wants to lick the skin of Snape’s thighs, the creases between his legs, wants to suck on his - toes, ankles, nipples, wants everything -

“Potter, Potter - fuck, Harry -”

Snape is tugging at his hair now, trying to pull him off. Harry can imagine what that means, and he won’t stand for it. He digs one hand into the muscle of Snape’s thigh, feeling a prickle of wiry hair beneath his fingers. He tries to take more of Snape, hollowing his cheeks and relaxing his throat until Snape gasps out a cry, hips moving in tiny, frantic thrusts.

“You don’t - now - oh, now -”

With a moan that sounds like pain, Snape arches his back, filling Harry’s mouth with something hot and bitter. ‘He came in your mouth,’ Harry thinks, ‘he’s coming in your mouth.’

He swallows around the head of Snape’s cock, swallows the thickness leaking down his throat, even as tears prickle in his eyes. Harry can’t believe he’s lasted this long, that he isn’t completely wrecked and dripping at Snape’s feet. He can’t speak, can only breathe, breathe, and wait for his heart to stop pounding.

“Come here.” Snape’s voice is rough and sexy as hell. Trembling, Harry climbs up his body. It takes a matter of seconds for Snape to get Harry’s trousers undone, and then his cock is in Snape’s fist and Harry’s harder than he’s been in his life.

He presses his sweating forehead against Snape’s, squeezes his eyes shut and just feels the delicious and awful sensation - awful because nothing is ever going to feel this good again, nothing could possibly -

“Open your eyes.” Snape’s words are damp against his skin. “Open -”

It’s harder than Harry expects but he wrenches his eyes open, pulling back slightly so that he can focus on Snape’s face. He lowers his gaze to his waist, where the red tip of his cock appears and disappears from the ring of Snape’s pale fingers. That’s the hottest thing he’s ever seen. That’s his body. Snape’s hands are on his body, something no one else has ever touched.


“I’m going to -” Harry blushes. “- come if I keep looking, I can’t -”

“Yes.” Snape’s strokes speed up, a wicked thumb swirling through the wetness and then dragging it downwards. “Yes, I want you to.”

“Oh God, oh my God -” Harry’s hips are moving unconsciously now, chasing Snape’s hand even as it leads him off the edge of a cliff. “Oh please, don’t stop, please.”

It’s perfect, it’s better than perfect, it’s like nothing he’s ever felt before. He’s going to come in Snape’s hand and it’s going to destroy him.
“Yes,” he pants, “Yes, Sev-Severus.” Snape’s name is on his lips as bright heat pulses through him and he comes, the tightness of Snape’s hand drawing it out. It goes on and on, Harry making mortifying sounds as he tries to just survive it, until he’s wrung out and utterly limp with pleasure.

He can’t remember how to form words so instead he opens his mouth and kisses his feelings against Snape’s teeth - gratitude and longing and everything that Harry still doesn’t have words for. He’s panting but his pulse is slowing down, and he wants to collapse onto Snape’s naked chest and lick every inch of skin that’s bare to him.

Their lips part reluctantly. Snape blinks at Harry. The man’s fingers are wet and his black shirt is stained where - where Harry -

He can’t even think about it. It’s too much.

“You - that was -”

There is a soft, open look on Snape’s face, and Harry suddenly can’t finish his sentence.

“It was,” Snape agrees quietly, then shifts to reach for his wand. A few quick cleaning spells get rid of the mess on his hands and his stomach, and Harry can’t help but feel just a bit disappointed. Sure, he doesn’t fancy being stuck together, but he will admit he enjoyed the sight of Snape all messy from sex.

“Can I just lie here for a minute?” he asks, pressing his face to the hollow of Snape’s throat.

“I do not feel capable of moving you at the moment.” Snape leans back against the arm of the couch.

“Do as you wish.”

Harry breathes deeply, intoxicated by whatever it is Snape smells like - something dark and sweet with a hint of campfire smoke. He can’t remember feeling this exhausted or content ever in his life. He closes his eyes.

When he wakes up, Snape’s hands are in his hair. The man is not asleep beneath him (Harry can tell from the way he is breathing) but neither are his muscles rigid with discomfort. He seems to be quite content to card his fingers through Harry’s hair, and Harry feels the mortifying urge to purr.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, mouth still clumsy. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to - what time is it?”

“Nearly midnight.” Snape’s slow-moving hands do not waver. Harry can hear the man’s heartbeat beneath his ear.

The warmth and closeness and smell of Snape is doing things to Harry that he cannot control; he tries unsuccessfully not to lean into Snape’s hands, bask in the slide of his fingers.

Then his stomach rumbles loudly, breaking the stillness. Harry remembers he hasn’t had anything to eat since noon and he sits up, feeling ridiculous.

“Charming.” Snape drops his hands and Harry hates it.

“Are you hungry?” Harry asks, taking in the planes of Snape’s body where his shirt still hangs open. He has scars on his ribs that Harry never noticed before, and the thickness of them makes his heart ache. They must have been deep scars, must not have healed properly. Was Snape walking around teaching potions at Hogwarts while his chest was all bandaged up, clenching his teeth every time he breathed or moved a certain way?
Snape must notice his regard, because he sits up, pulling his shirt around himself a bit awkwardly. “It seems at least one of us is.”

Harry turns his back as he straightens himself, getting his trousers done up and straightening his jumper. He feels absurdly self-conscious, which doesn’t make sense given what the two of them just did. Harry’s afraid that he’ll make one wrong move and Snape will just leave, as if this never happened. If Harry even looks a certain way, it will be enough to provoke Snape to run.

“Guess I finally talked you into that dinner,” he says with a weak laugh and then flees to the kitchen before he can ruin everything.

They eat re-heated soup side by side at the kitchen table. Harry had actually been to the shops the day before, so he has a loaf of French bread that he toasts and butters. He pours himself and Snape a glass of red wine, and it’s not much of a dinner, but it’s - almost one.

“I swear I can cook better than this,” Harry tells Snape, “I can actually cook a proper meal. I usually bake my own bread even.”

“It’s more than adequate.” Snape is quiet. Every so often Harry catches him glancing up from under his heavy eyebrows, examining Harry in secret.

Harry wants to lean over and kiss him on the cheek. He wants to reach across the table and hold his hand, feel the thump of the man’s pulse against his palm.

“You were right, I think,” he says instead.

“I know that much. About what specifically?”

“About me - hiding. You’re right.” He pauses. “I don’t know why. I just turned off, or something. I guess nothing felt - it wasn’t safe anymore. That probably sounds barmy to you, because of course everything was safer than before, but for me it was hard to - to separate things.”

“Separate things?”

“Like - to go to classes, and eat meals, and sleep without dreaming about everything that happened. How do you sit at a table and not just see the people who are missing?”

“I am not your psychotherapist, Potter.” Snape sighs, studying his wine glass. “I am certain, however, that Mungoes would only be too pleased to provide one for you.”

“Are you saying I need therapy?”

“You lived through a war at age eighteen. Of course you need therapy.”

Even though Snape’s tone is bitter, Harry grins. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“I must be over-tired.” Snape drains the last of his glass and rises from the table. “Do not read too much into it.”

It is gone one by the time Harry sets up the sofa with blankets and sheets and pillows. He stands with his arms folded, unsure of what to do next.

“Do you need anything?” he asks Snape. “Want to borrow a nightshirt or -”

“Good Lord, Potter.” Snape sits down on the edge of the sofa, tugging at his hair. “I’m a wizard. If I have need of anything, there are means of obtaining it.”
“Right. Of course. And you’re sure this will be okay?”

“It’s fine.”

This is Harry’s cue to leave but he doesn’t think he can. Not without a proper goodnight anyway. Not two hours ago, he had the man’s prick in his mouth and now Snape can barely look at him.

“Thank you. That is. For before.” Harry’s going to turn bright red and die, he can feel it happening with every word he says. “It was - I don’t really have words for what it was.”

“You needn’t search for them on my account. You might have an aneurysm.”

“Right.” Harry sighs. Snape’s shoulders are hunched on the sofa, and Harry wants desperately to put his hand out, knead the muscles in Snape’s back, tilt the man’s head back and kiss him, kiss him.

“Potter,” Snape interrupts a series of images that were at risk of spiraling out of control. “You’re falling asleep where you stand. Go to bed.”

Harry wasn’t falling asleep, not at all, but he’s grateful for the excuse.

“You’re - feeling okay about everything? Everything that we -”

“I have neither the energy nor the desire to continue this conversation at present. Surely there are things that do not need to be dissected at one in the bloody morning.”

“Okay. I just - don’t know what to say.”

“Say goodnight.” Snape looks up at him at last. His eyes feel like electricity, lashing over Harry’s skin, leaving him raw and humming.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Harry.”

The sound of his name in Snape’s low, unsteady voice will be something that follows Harry through his dreams for the foreseeable future. He will lie awake and hear it, a bell ringing sweetly through his skin. He will imagine the gust of breath as Snape speaks against the back of his neck, the lobe of his ear.

Tonight, though, Harry nods. He goes to bed (sleeping on the half of the bed that isn’t covered with boxes, trying his best to keep very still.)

When he wakes in the morning, Snape is --

* * *

“-- gone apparently,” Granger says to Weasley, paying no mind to the painting of Clifford’s Tower hung crookedly over their table.
Chapter Notes

I can't even begin to thank Parker Luce for her betaing efforts, as well as for putting up with my nonsense. She's amazing and I don't deserve her.

Also all y'all who've been sending me comments, gentle encouragement and feedback, you've got my whole heart. I'm mia-ugly on tumblr if you want to talk about Snarry, drag race or MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES because boy howdy.

The next update should be up within a week or so!

When he wakes in the morning, Snape is --

* * *

“-- gone apparently,” Granger says to Weasley, paying no mind to the painting of Clifford’s Tower hung crookedly over their table.

“Bloody hell.” Weasley looks tired and a bit worn down. What is the boy doing now, something with the Ministry? If he managed to qualify for Auror training, Severus fears for the future of the Wizarding world. “Harry’s going to be well furious.”

“Don’t say anything to him yet, not until he’s feeling better. The Headmistress didn’t want anything upsetting him.”

“He must have hit his head harder than we thought if he’s upset about Snape doing a runner.”

Severus stiffens slowly, like a leafless tree.

Granger doesn’t respond, just stares down the ginger twit until he sighs and rubs his eyes with his thumbs.

“Fine, right, I know. Don’t say another word about it, I still haven’t recovered from our last conversation.”

He cannot parse the meaning of that, but he doesn’t have to. Moments later, the door to the Cauldron slams open, an icy gust of wind blowing in a skinny newcomer in a colourful patchwork parka. When he pulls his hood down, it turns out to be none other than the living Weasley twin. Severus is ever so glad to be included in the blessed Gryffindor reunion (a muscle just below his eye has started twitching, but he will not flee, not yet.)

“George!” The other Weasley waves, and the young man goes to join his friends.

Roslerta, professional as always, has a pint in front of him before he’s even taken his coat off. The man’s hands shake around the glass. George Weasley looks - terrible. His eyes are rimmed with purple, and his face is even paler than Severus remembers.

Severus saved his life once. Made a bloody mess of it, but at least the man is still breathing. His hair
has grown long, covering up the scar tissue where his ear used to be (Severus wants to throw himself off the top of Clifford’s Tower.)

“I came - I came as soon as I heard,” George stammers, barely looking at his brother. “Is he - he’s okay, yeah? He has to be -”

“He’s fine,” Granger assures him. “Or as fine as he can be, given the day he’s had. He’s being monitored for concussion - from the fall. They think he hit his head a bit -”

“A bit? ‘Mione he broke his bloody nose -”

“But he’ll be okay.” Granger cuts a worried look at the surviving twin. “George - he’ll be all right. You -”

Her words die at the sound of George Weasley’s frantic breaths, the man gasping for air in relief or terror or both. Severus cannot say, can only watch the thin man bow his head, cover his face with his hands and hiss in sharp bites of air, trembling. Trembling.

“George,” the other Weasley says sharply, clutching at his brother’s shoulder.

George nods, breaths still rapid and ragged, eyes wide and white when Severus can see them. He can recognize panic attacks, but this does not look like one. It looks like - something else. Relief of a kind, a deadly, killing sort of relief (it hits Severus like his father’s fists: Weasley is in love.)

“I was worried, all right?” George stammers, “I thought - Merlin, I don’t know what. Fuck. Sorry, sorry - it’s been a day.”

“Yeah, we can tell.” The younger Weasley’s voice is soft and troubled. “You look dreadful, mate. No offense.”

“Like you’re some sort of Tom Hardy. Nah, don’t ask. Muggle actor.”

“I know who Tom Hardy is.” Granger is suddenly keen.

“Wow, ten points to Gryffindor,” Ronald says with a scowl. “George, we’re all worried about Harry. Some of us are more worried about Harry than really we ought to be.” He cuts his eyes in Granger’s direction. “But that’s nothing unusual. You don’t need to keep it to yourself or anything. If you ever want to - if you need someone to -”

The young man’s ears are flaming red with all the talk of feelings, while George Weasley is still a ghastly shade of grey.

“It’s fine. I’m - sorry, I’m a mess today. Just don’t know what would happen if we - lost him. Right? I don’t know what I’d do.” George is putting his pint back very quickly. “What was he doing down in Diagon anyway? I thought you two were having trouble getting him out of the school.”

“Oh no, he won’t leave the school for us. But for bloody Snape, he’ll Apparate across the sodding Atlantic.”

Severus flinches at a sudden stab of pain in his chest. It starts between his ribs like a knife sliding smooth and clean into butter.

“Ron,” Granger says, disapprovingly.

“Is that not an accurate statement?”
“It’s not - wrong, but -”

“What’s old Snape got to do with any of this?” George asks. “I knew his portrait was kicking about, but I didn’t know it was giving Harry any trouble.”

The pain spreads, radiating out from Severus’ ribs like a starfish. He can well remember the conversation he overheard at Christmastime, Weasley and Granger whispering their concerns over his and Harry’s - companionship. Or whatever it was. There doesn’t seem to be a word that is appropriate but also doesn’t make Severus want to crack his own skull open.

“Snape’s not giving Harry any trouble. I think it’s rather the other way ‘round.”

“Yeah right.” George snorts.

“No really. You talk to Harry and it’s all ‘oh I did such and such with Snape’ or ‘I couldn’t find Snape today’ or ‘I bought Snape a precious painting so I put can him in my pocket and carry him with me always.”

“Ron -”

“It’s true, innit? It’s disturbing. I can’t be certain there isn’t some sort of charm on him.”

“There isn’t a charm on him,” Granger sighs. “He just - um. You know.”

George stares at her with the same intensity as Severus.

“What? Know what?”

Now Granger is turning the same shade as the younger Weasley. “I just suspect that - Harry’s always been a bit intense about him - what I mean is -”

“She thinks Harry fancies him,” Ronald interrupts. “A painting. Of our dead professor. Because that is a completely normal thought to have.”

The pain is in Severus’ neck now, his shoulders and his throat. Is this what a heart attack feels like? He may be having a heart attack. No wait - he’s dead already. Surely he cannot expire a second time? There may be rules he is not aware of.

George Weasley is choking on his beer, his younger brother slapping his back half-hearted while casting meaningful looks at the Muggle girl.

Severus leaves before the laughter can start, before the revolting absurdity of Potter fancying Severus Snape causes George Weasley to die from the hilarity. This is a conversation that he isn’t capable of witnessing. Laughter aside, the sight of George Weasley pining to such an obvious extent is similarly unbearable. Severus goes back to his tower, like Sir Walter bloody Raleigh. He closes the door behind him and bolts it.

He knows that Harry does not fancy him. And good Lord, even the word ‘fancy’ turns his stomach, the gross incongruity of such a word applying to Severus in any context, at any point in his life. Ever.

He thinks back on the morning, how simply everything started and how it ended up here - Potter in the infirmary and Snape a recluse in some sodding tower.

He wonders how Potter is feeling. What sort of healing spells is Pomfrey using? A potion would be a
safer bet, a guard against any sort of magical interaction, perhaps Severus should -no.

No. Enough, you ugly old fool.

The Gryffindors said the boy was fine. Will be fine. There is no reason to dwell on it.

Severus could go back to Hogwarts at any time. If he wanted to see Potter, he could go back. If he wanted to confirm his continued existence (unseen, of course, unnoticed) Severus could do it. It isn’t necessary but - he could.

He hears Potter’s soft voice (“You still there?”) before the attack, the anxious way he peered down at Severus, the shine of his green eyes.

“Stupid,” he whispers to himself, wiping down the dust of his new home. “Stupid, pathetic -”

“Useless,” he murmurs, sweeping the winding staircase that leads up to an arched room that may have been a chapel (South facing windows - an adequate place for an herb garden.)

“Foolish,” he says, as he shakes out linens from a medieval canopy bed.

When he has finished, days have passed, and the tower is - not uninhabitable. There are still more rooms to explore, but so far he’s found beds, bathtubs, a kitchen with a larder and wine cellar (Severus has not looked at that yet, hasn’t dared to get his hopes up.)

“Dead,” he says.

Then he dusts off his hands and turns his thoughts elsewhere (the stairwell to the roof is bolted shut, and blocked with an armoire. For now, at least.)

When he isn’t cleaning, he’s thinking. More often than not, his thoughts return to Diagon Alley (snapping fangs and crackling flames, back before the boy was hurt and Severus was fleeing for his sanity once again.)

*Tenetura.* What had Nazanin said before everything went to hell? A binding agent. And a book of potions meant to what - bring someone back from the dead? Or at least bring back their memories. Severus sits in an arched stone window, considering the horizon. It’s Old Magic, through and through, the beautiful but deadly kind, the kind that witches and wizards practiced millennia ago, before they were called witches or wizards. Magic bound up with the elements, and the humours and the Gods without names.

The sky goes grey as a headache, and rain comes through the walls at night while Severus tries to sleep. He builds a fire in the grate of his room, sits up at night against the cold.

*Difficulte Potions.*

*Les Elixirs Anciennes.*

*Venenum Historia.*

*Viridi Magicae.*

Who knows if there have been any additional books vandalized that they haven’t discovered? Potter visited Will before Christmas, and Severus never had a chance to examine the defaced pages himself. For all his - less objectionable qualities - no one would say that Potter is the sharpest weapon when it comes to picking up subtle details within classic works of potions theory. Despite
Severus’ protestations back in December, he wonders now if perhaps there is a way to get himself to Will. Surely the librarian there would be amenable to a conversation with Severus if it was his intent to help find the person responsible. He would only need a painting that could be easily transported, and someone willing to travel with him (besides Potter, the list is deplorably short. But there is still a list.)

Damn it all to hell.

When Severus at last works up the courage to leave his tower, the Three Broomsticks is dark and mercifully unoccupied.

By the living, at least.

“I don’t suppose any of you are Malfoys?”

Severus interrupts the merry-makers in the frame opposite his own. They’re awake again, and have started a series of appalling drinking songs, the lyrics of which have not aged well at all.

He is ignored in favour of a dance that involves the rhythmic clinking of beer steins. Severus tries again.

“I said - are any of you Malfoys?”

Again he is ignored. Desperate times call for desperate measures, that old cliché. Severus disappears back into the tower, and braves the wine cellar. He feels that perhaps he’s earned a small miracle. For once, he’s right.

“And her Blood was as Muddy as -”

The witches and wizards stop singing at the sight of Severus rolling a barrel of ale down the hill from the tower. He can feel their eyes on him as he makes his way toward the edge of his painting, taking care not to let the barrel roll out of his grasp.

“I am looking for a Malfoy,” Severus says again. “I have this for whomever can find me one.”

There is a beat of tipsy silence before there is sudden rush of murmuring. A particularly buxom witch confers with a ruddy-cheeked wizard, both of them tilting slightly off their chairs.

“His second cousin’ were Leofrick Malfoy. That right, Ulric?”

“Tis true! Leofrick Malfoy, of the Hampshire Malfoys.”

“And does this second cousin have a portrait that you know of?” Severus waits as the pair starts whispering again, drumming his fingers on the barrel resting beside him.

“Nay, I think not! Alack!”

“Ah. Pity.”

“Though his wife might,” the bleary-eyed Ulric continues. “Fair Genevieve Malfoy, the White Lady, whose very touch could cure a man of gout. Why, they say that on the day she was born -”

“Yes, she sounds very - impressive. Could you take me to her?”

“Well.” Ulric gives it some thought, slipping further out of his chair. “Let me think on it. How many of those casks have ye?”
Which is how Severus ends up several casks lighter, watching Draco Malfoy attempt to stay awake over his copy of *Acing the LLB*.

Of course, Ulric could only get Severus as far as a kitchen scene in Paris that had hung in Genevieve’s home briefly as a child, and a maid from that scene brought him to a watercolour in Scotland, and from there a neighbouring portrait took him to the Gallery of Wizarding England where (in what was previously the “Great Families” section and re-named “Our Past” after the War) a terribly cheerful oil-painting of a young Genevieve Malfoy brought him to an older portrait of herself in the library of Malfoy Manor -

- where Draco’s head was in danger of sliding off of his folded hands and smacking onto the carved oak desk he’s sitting at. The boy is lucky he hasn’t concussed himself already.

“Mr. Malfoy -”

“Grand larceny!” Draco shouts, head jerking up and eyes going wide. “What. What -”

He abruptly realizes that there is no one in the room who could be speaking to him. Warily, he spins in his (frankly ridiculous) Muggle desk chair, scanning his surroundings until coming to a stop at Genevieve’s portrait.

On a hard-backed velveteen chaise lounge, Severus glowers at him. Genevieve Malfoys the younger and the elder flank him on either side.

“Um.” Draco swallows.

“Deepest apologies young Master Malfoy for interrupting your studies.” The elder Genevieve speaks before Severus can. “You have a visitor who - although he possesses no invitation to call upon my portrait, and is not a descendent from the most noble House of Malfoy, claims to be a Prince of some sort. Most likely a half-blood, potentially Ephraim Prince’s great-great grandson? They have the same unfortunate countenance, but it is impossible to be certain without a copy of the Peerage.”

Genevieve’s smile drops briefly as she looks at Severus, then widens when she returns her gaze to Draco.

“He found me in the Gallery,” the younger Genevieve says. “It’s ever so lovely to have visitors. And look at what you’ve done to this room! Those drapes are new, and that statue... And you’re young Master Malfoy? If I may say, you are looking well fit. What do you think about that, well fit? The children in the tour groups say that all the time, I wanted to try it.”

“Revolting.” Genevieve the elder folds her arms, beyond disappointed.

“How long have you been there?” Draco looks a bit dazed with the direction of the conversation.

Severus raises an eyebrow but doesn’t answer the question.

Just for fun, really.

“I require your assistance, Mr. Malfoy.”

“No.” Draco slams his textbook shut. “No. I did what you asked with bloody Potter, and it all went to hell. I’m not asking him out for drinks again, I can’t even start - the look on his face - Professor, you have no -”

“I do not require you to interact with Potter in any form whatsoever.” Severus watches Draco’s shoulders drop slightly away from his ears. Sweet Merlin - at what point did Severus think that was
an acceptable idea? “My previous request was a miscalculation and I do not wish to discuss it. Neither do I wish to discuss the fall-out from your astonishing lack of discretion, although if you 

*insist-*”

“No! No, you needn’t - let’s forget about it. If this isn’t about Potter -”

“It isn’t.” It rather is, but Severus chooses to omit that particular detail. “It’s about the Wizarding Library of London.”

Which is how Severus ends up in Will, speaking to one Penny Peggotty (Head Librarian, widow and ghost) about the vandalized potions books. There is a brief bit of unpleasantness in which extended late fees are discussed (Draco thankfully clears this up with a roll of his eyes and a fistful of galleons) but other than that, most things run smoothly. Despite his rather dubious past, Peggotty seems to find a kinship in Severus’ comparable outrage. She allows Draco access to all of the books that have had pages taken from them, and Severus watches from a small oil painting of hunting dogs that the boy props up on the desk (it was the only painting that could be easily transported, a very loud and exceedingly pungent means of travel.)

Draco shows Severus the exact places where the pages have been removed, or - in the hideous case of *Venenum Historia* by Pliny the Shorter - torn out.

“Wait - bring that one closer. There’s something written -”

Severus’ voice dies the moment he can make out the words.

They’re *his* words, Merlin damn him, the words *he* wrote in the margins of that bloody potions textbook, one hundred years ago when he was arrogant and caustic and so, so sodding young.


“Professor?” Draco asks.

“I am not. Your. Professor.”

Severus’ mind reels. Their vandal is from Hogwarts. They have to be from Hogwarts. Potter was the last one who had that book in his possession but - no, that isn’t Potter’s indecipherable scribblings (Severus might have been unwell if it was.)

The writing *is* familiar though. Another professor? Or a former student? The loops of those ‘L’s remind him of late nights grading essays from idiots, savaging scrolls with a quill and red ink.

Or do they? Are his memories even credible at this point?

“Snape?” Draco looks worried. “What is it?”

Some sort of rust-coloured hound has Severus’ sleeve between his teeth and is tugging at his arm. Severus absently gives the poor thing a pet.

“This has been most helpful, Mr. Malfoy. I appreciate your time.” After all this, he has to go back to Hogwarts. Immediately. He has to tell Potter, find out what happened to that blasted book.

It may be nothing in the end, but it - may not be. After all his protestations, Severus can’t --

* * *

-- stop thinking about it.
He’s had sex. Harry has had sex.
He goes to work and he’s had sex.
Home for a cup of tea and he’s had sex.
The words play in his head, over and over; he’s surprised that everyone can’t hear them. It’s like music, ringing.
You’ve had sex with a bloke, he tells himself.
You’ve had sex with Snape.
Severus Snape.
He thinks back to Hogwarts, potions classes and odd, hateful glances from across the Great Hall. If someone had said to him then, “one day you’re going to have sex with that man,” Harry would have thought it had to do with Voldemort, or some sort of terrible curse.
He wouldn’t have expected the - the ache he would feel after it was done. The weight of his heart at the sight of the empty sofa, blankets still smelling like Snape. The heat of every memory, waking him up gasping and hard and more than anything - alone.
Not that he’d expected Snape to be there in the morning. He wonders if Snape even lasted the night or if he snuck out while it was still dark, walked alone to the train station in the rain. That’s a depressing thought, but not an unbelievable one.
He wishes he had kissed Snape, one more time. Wishes he had rubbed the tension out of Snape’s bony shoulders. Wishes he had - told Snape that he’d never done anything like that before, that he’d never even kissed another man -
But if he told Snape that, none of it probably would have happened, right? Snape would have gotten all angry and guilty, or treated Harry like a child who didn’t know what he wanted.
When Harry knows exactly what he wants.
He wants - more of those desperate, biting kisses. The pressure of Snape’s hands on his waist, the smell of his hair. He wants Snape’s odd, aborted smiles, and the heat of his gaze, and his wool coat, damp from the rain. He wants everything and it’s keeping him up at night, white-hot and shining.
He needs to talk to someone about it (okay, he really needs to talk to Hermione) but at the same time, he wants to keep it secret. Not because he’s embarrassed or afraid but because it feels - private. Precious somehow, something that’s only his. The whole night seems like a dream or a fantasy; telling someone would make it real. And if it’s real, well, then it can fall apart. It can become awkward or ugly. If it’s real Harry will have to deal with the fact that he’s losing his mind over the man who killed Dumbledore and knew Harry’s mum better than Harry ever will, who was a Death Eater and a spy and a completely shite teacher but -
(“Look,” Snape murmurs, “look at yourself,” and Harry tilts his head back, a terrifying sense of rightness moving through his body like lightning.)
Is it only this intense because it’s his first time with a - with a man?
Harry had (obviously) liked kissing girls, but it never felt as critical, as inevitable as kissing Snape. Harry never wanted to kiss Ginny so badly he thought that he would die, while the very thought of
Snape makes his lips part unconsciously and his pulse start racing.

Harry thinks about some of the other men he knows - did he fancy anyone like this at Hogwarts? Oliver Wood was admittedly handsome and Blaise Zabini has a certain, regrettable magnetism to him (though Harry would deny that to the death if questioned) but he can’t imagine doing with them - any of the things he wants to do to Snape.

Is it an older man thing? Harry doesn’t think so. Though - Jesus - who even knows? Harry’s twenty-one years old, he’s barely dated two people in his life, and he doesn’t want Snape to think he’s imprinted on him like a baby duck.

Even if it’s all he can think about.

Maybe it’s just a Snape thing. Snape with his eyebrows and white hands and scarred throat. Snape with those eyes that look at Harry sometimes - not all the time, but sometimes - like Harry can’t be real. Like Harry’s dangerous, and valuable, and so bright he’s blinding.

It might be a Snape thing. And isn’t that the most terrifying option of all? That Harry had all this feeling in him, all this simmering hunger, just waiting for nasty old Snape to come back into his life and look at him the right way before spilling over.

Days pass (Harry has had sex.) He waits, half in love and half in terror, for Snape to appear at the library and it all to fall apart.

For Snape to arch an eyebrow and Harry to become his stammering, idiotic self, and immediately put the man off. For this odd lovely dream to be over, dashed into shards on the cobblestones.

When the man finally does make an appearance, Harry is tucked away in the largely ignored and out-of-date Alchemy section (Merlin knows how Snape found him.) It takes a good ten seconds for Harry to convince himself it’s really happening, Snape’s really there and not just the product of sheer, frustrated longing.

Snape scowls at him from the end of the row. Harry loves the sodding crease between his eyebrows.

“I have been to Hogwarts. It went about as well as you predicted.”

“Oh.” Words, Harry, use your bloody words. “Uh, right. Sorry. about that.”

He takes a few steps closer. He wants to touch Snape’s shoulder and prove that he is real. “I would have gone with you.”

“So you said.” Snape frowns. “I was not at my best. It was not something to which you needed to be subjected.”

He frowns again, shaking his head as if regretting the words. In the moment of distraction, Harry closes the distance between them, stepping forward to touch Snape’s arm. His coat is damp. He smells like rain and petrol.

“All the other time we’ve spent together, you’ve been at your best, eh?”

It’s the right thing to say. Snape’s lips twitch. “Surely you could tell.”

For a wild moment, Harry thinks about kissing him. Wonders what would happen if he just leaned forward - it would only take a tiny movement (his face goes hot and he doesn’t dare. Snape’s too
cagey, too close to bolting. An injured bird that’ll fly off the moment you get close enough to help it.)

“Did you find out anything?”

“I - yes.” Snape swallows. “We should speak about it somewhere - perhaps -”

“Have dinner with me,” Harry says, in the place of a kiss. It feels the same, as daring and as dangerous.

Snape swallows again. “All right.”

“All right.” Harry has to bite out the words, then bite down on his lips or else he’ll smile and ruin everything (he said yes, he said -)

“Should I return when your shift is finished?”

“Done in ten. Will you wait?”

Snape hesitates before he nods. Harry wishes he could bottle the feeling in the pit of his stomach and keep it on a shelf for the rest of his life.

“See you then.” Harry turns away because he has to, because if Snape swallows again or something, Harry might just lose control completely. He walks away, dreamily adjusting books and moving papers, drifting through the library like he’s in some sort of terrible romance novel. He’s shelved the same book three times over before Isadora notices and raises an eyebrow.

“You on something? Is Mattie selling to you? Peggotty will skin you both alive -”

“And that’s me finished,” Harry interrupts, looking at his watch.

He manages to escape without further commentary from the pink-haired witch, and the sight of Snape waiting outside for him is almost more than Harry can physically bear.

Is this what a heart attack feels like? He may be having a heart attack.

They fall into the first divey pub that they come across (shadowy corners and high wooden benches) where Harry gets the bizarre pleasure of watching Snape primly sip from a pint of ale, foam clinging for one sweet moment to his upper lip before it is licked away. Jesus Christ - Harry drops his eyes to the scarred tabletop so that his staring isn’t so obvious. He traces his fingers over the initials carved there with pocket knives and pens: AC + CG. Lola loves Eleanor. Fuckthapolice.

“Someone is stealing from Hogwarts.”

Harry has to look up at that. “Seriously? Stealing what?”

“Potions ingredients. I returned to the school to ascertain whether the ingredient Nazanin mentioned was no longer in my possession. It seems she was correct in her suspicions. Upon further investigation, it was not the only substance conspicuously missing from the potions storeroom.”

Snape sounds so offended that Harry feels compelled to purposefully ignore any and all forays into the potions storeroom that his friends may have had during their time at Hogwarts.

“What else?”

“It would take more time to fully discover the extent of things, but at present it is safe to assume that -
the potions storeroom has been significantly compromised. The professor they have in place currently, one Alcott Prawn, has been ignorant of this fact until recently. This says volumes about his diligence as an instructor.”

“Alcott Prawn.” The name makes Harry feel a bit headachy. He’s heard it before but he can’t say where. “Do I know him?”

“I certainly can’t tell you. He was at Hogwarts long before you graced us with your glorious presence, though perhaps he is one of your many ardent fans.”

Harry covers his laugh with a swallow of beer and a shake of his head. “Okay, so someone’s stealing from Hogwarts. And you think this has to do with the library books?”

“A cursory examination suggests that most of what has been taken is valuable. Rare. The sort of ingredients necessary for advanced Old Magic. Of course, it’s impossible to say definitively but -”

“But the notes, yeah? In the, whatsit, Venenum Historia book. Those were from your old potions textbook. It makes sense if someone from Hogwarts -”

“It does.” Snape cuts him off. “Where is that textbook currently?”

Harry winces. “Pretty sure it burned up on the - the last night. It was in the Room of Requirement. Sorry.”

“Ha.” Snape lets out a dry, one-syllable bark of laughter. “Do not apologize. You have spared future generations from my singularly adolescent self-absorption.”

Harry likes the way Snape laughs. He likes the way Snape talks, biting off words like they’re too hot in his mouth (pastry from the oven or tea straight out of the kettle.)

“You weren’t all that bad. Before I knew it was you, I rather liked the Half-Blood Prince.” Harry blushes though he doesn’t know why. “Thought he was mean and funny and smart as hell.”

Snape looks at him sharply. “Before you knew it was me.”

“I mean - I think all that about you now. As well.” Harry avoids Snape’s eyes as he says it. “And other things. I -”

“Do refrain from sharing those things with me. I do not know how my fragile ego would survive.”

“I’m trying to compliment you, you - whatever. Fine. What do we do next?”

“Some additional research may be necessary. The more information I have about the potential uses of the potions, the easier it will be to identify possible suspects.”

It makes sense to Harry, who tallies up what they know as he waits at the bar for another round and two orders of shepherd’s pie. Snape said that the last potion was about memory. So that makes ‘blood’, ‘bone’, ‘growth’ and ‘memory’ - plus whatever they’d stolen from Snape at Hogwarts. It sits uneasily in his stomach that the uses for these potions seem obvious, the purpose singular. Snape must know, and the only reason he isn’t speaking of it is - is probably to protect Harry.


“Perhaps.” Snape looks uncomfortable, fingers white against the dark beer in his glass.
“So it could be - anyone. Anyone who lost someone in the war. Anyone who thought Voldemort should have won.” He sees Snape wince at the name but continues. “Any Death Eater’s kid that went to Hogwarts before I did. Or while I did. Or while you did.”

“Yes, the possibilities are numerous. But that does not -”

“And it’s probably Voldemort, right?” Harry finds himself speaking more quickly, getting louder with every word. “We can say it’s someone else, but it’s probably Voldemort, it’s always Voldemort-”

“That name,” Snape spits the words as if they’re scalding, “If you must say it, which you apparently must, does it have to be every second sodding word?”

Harry barely hears him. The War is starting to rattle the cutlery on the table, the bell above the door, the ringing of the till with every purchase, higher and shriller and carving cleanly down Harry’s spine -

“So if they bring him back again, because they’ve brought him back before, I’ll have to find him and kill him before he can make any more Horcruxes, or maybe it’s too late, maybe it’s done and he’s already made them, maybe -”

“Harry.”

Snape’s hand is suddenly on his.

It’s warm, warm and heavy. The rant of panic dies on Harry’s lips. He stares at Snape’s white knuckles. One long thumb digs into the pulse point on his wrist, and Harry knows it’s racing, can feel it thumping against Snape’s skin. He can feel it in the hinge of his jaw as he grinds his teeth together.

If Harry isn’t careful, his teeth are going to start chattering. He tries to focus on the heat of Snape’s palm, the rough grain of the table beneath their joined hands, $AC + CG$. If he stops thinking about these things for even a moment he might reach for his wand, and he doesn’t want to do that right now. He doesn’t.

“Sorry,” Harry manages.

“Do not apologize.” Snape doesn’t pull away, and Harry is unspeakably glad about it. “This is not something you have to apologize for.”

“I - I know. I’m sorry.”

Snape’s expression is strange as his eyes meet Harry’s. Harry can’t think of a word to describe it, it’s like sadness and anger and something else, something fragile -

“This is not something you have to apologize for,” Snape says again.

“He can’t come back.” Harry’s voice does not break, but it’s a near thing. “Not after -he can’t. He can’t.”

“He most assuredly will not.” Snape holds his gaze, as steady as he holds his hand. “Whomever the intended target may be, I can tell you this: the potions in question cannot bring anyone back from the dead. It is entirely theoretical and even if it were not, there are ingredients that cannot be obtained to complete them.”
“What ingredients?” Harry cuts in, needing names, certainties.

What you are thinking - it is impossible.”

“Right.” Harry takes a deep breath, which stutters slightly. “Sorry.”

Snape winces. “Potter -”

Their food chooses that moment to arrive. Snape immediately pulls his hand away.

Harry’s sorry about that as well, but at least he doesn’t say it.

They eat in silence for a bit, Harry still recovering from the gut punch of fear and adrenalin, and Snape - well, he’s never sure what Snape is thinking. The shepherd’s pie is delicious and hot, however, and the pub is full of light and noise; you almost can’t hear the War once Open Mic night gets started. Despite the events of the past half hour (and the Morrissey cover that is slowly murdering his eardrums) Harry starts to feel slightly more - okay.

Still mortified, but okay.

“Another?” he asks, after their second pints are finished.

Snape shakes his head and there is a leap of panic in Harry’s chest. Somehow he has to prolong their time together - he should have had a plan in place, a question or a favour or some way to keep Snape from leaving so quickly.

“Do you have to head back to the Manor tonight?”

Snape considers him from beneath his eyebrows.

“I do not.” His hand is tracing the edge of his empty pint glass, the movements of his fingers a bit hypnotic. Harry tries not to look too long at it.

“Then, um, where are you -”

“I booked a room. Not far from Will. I was not certain whether -” Snape trails off and Harry watches the colour traveling over his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose. It’s terribly unfair of Snape to blush like that. It makes Harry want to do all sorts of stupid things.

“I’ll walk you,” Harry says, one of the stupider things on offer. “If you like.”

“Yes, you did such an excellent job escorting me through Diagon Alley. It’s a wonder you haven’t gone into the protection detail business.”

“So we’re joking about attempts on my life now? Brilliant, so glad we’re at that place in our -” Harry stops talking because he doesn’t know what to say. Relationship? Friendship? Is there a word that won’t make Snape run screaming from the pub?

Snape watches him for a moment, hot and still. And then:

“If you have nothing more important with which to occupy your time.”

“Nothing.” The word comes out in a rush, pathetically sincere. Harry winces and starts fiddling with the very important buttons on his sleeve, just so he doesn’t have to look at Snape’s reaction.

“All right.”
Harry swallows. “All right.”

It has gone dark when they get outside, fairy lights strung from restaurant awnings and people crowding the pavement to hide from the rain. Harry follows Snape down the street, hurrying to keep up with the man’s longer strides. Their arms occasionally brush against each other as they walk, small shivers of contact that make goosebumps run up Harry’s spine.

There are things he needs to say. Now that the clock is winding down, Harry knows he needs to say it. He can’t possibly let Snape leave without - discussing that thing that happened. That night. Sure, there may be Dark wizards rising from the grave bent on revenge and destruction - but Harry also knows what the pressure of Snape’s fingers in his hair feels like, the softness of his stomach where Harry kissed his way down and down -

He wants to ask Snape if he goes home with people all the time. Ask him if it (don’t do it, don’t) meant something.

Because it meant something to Harry.

But he has no idea how to, not yet. The whole Gryffindor-courage-thing is an utter joke when it comes to conversations that matter. Maybe Snape is the kind of bloke who has impulsive one night stands. With former students. Maybe that sort of thing is just a weekly occurrence for him (and if Snape says as much, Harry might choke on his own heart, the heart that’s been steadily rising to the back of his throat all evening.)

“So - you’ll be back at Will then? Doing research?” Reasonable questions. Not too personal, good start.

“I think it will be necessary. I may also have to return to Nazanin’s. There is an - element to a potion that I am not certain I am translating correctly.”

Harry tries to focus, not get hung up on the fact that Snape will be at his workplace in the foreseeable future. Snape will be close enough for Harry to touch, close enough to stumble upon accidentally and -

“Harry?” a voice behind them asks.

In his peripheral vision, Harry sees Snape’s hand go to his waist where his wand is hidden, a silent and instantaneous motion. After what happened in Diagon, Harry should be a bit quicker on the draw.

He catches Snape’s eye as he turns around, gives a nod of grim appreciation - to find a stranger standing behind them.

A really pretty stranger, but still.

He’s young, about Harry’s age, with coppery coloured hair and a face full of piercings. The man is smiling, like Harry should know him, but -

“You don’t remember me, do you? Shite, sorry.” There’s a bit of a Scottish lilt to his voice. “You were at Luna’s party right? At Halloween?”

“Luna’s.” Harry finally puts the pieces together. He can vaguely remember the man now, a curled mouth on the other side of the room, dark eyes staring intently at him. “Oh, of course. Um - hi. I don’t think I ever got your name?”
“You didn’t.” The man grins. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Luna talks about you all the time, and your face is - Um. Recognizable. Anyway. I’m Luke.”

Harry hears a pointed cough beside him.

Fuck. He turns to see Snape has his arms crossed, and is looking blankly at the newcomer.

“Well, hullo there.” Luke reaches out his hand to shake. Snape doesn’t move, just looks at it, as if Luke is trying to hand him a live wire or a human heart.

Luke drops his hand, keeping his eyes on Harry.

“Yeah running into you here. Do you live nearby?”

“I work in the area.”

“Me too. Where do you work?”

“A bookstore.”

“I should get your number,” Luke is already getting out his mobile. “Maybe we could grab lunch or a drink some -”

At this, Snape turns on his heel and walks away. Harry hears the scraping of footsteps on stone and moves without really thinking it through. He jogs a few steps after Snape before throwing an apologetic look back at Luke.

“Sorry, he’s in a hurry and we’ve got - errands to run. Maybe I’ll see you around, nice talking to you -”

Harry hustles down the road after Snape, leaving Luke standing alone behind them. Snape can cover a lot of distance without looking like he’s trying to and Harry has to almost break into a run to catch up with him. Even then Snape refuses to slow down.

“Hey,” Harry protests, heart pounding with a sudden surge of adrenaline. “That was kind of - um, weird. You didn’t have to -”

“My apologies, I did not realize I was obligated to bear witness to the minutiae of your social life. Were you hoping that I could take the details to the Prophet? Harry Potter, eligible bachelor, fighting off admirers -”

“Admirers?” Harry repeats incredulously. They turn a corner, thank God, so Luke doesn’t have to witness any of this. “I’ve never even spoken to that man before. I barely recognized him from -”

“He certainly recognized you. You must have made quite an impression.”

“I don’t know! There was no reason to just run off like -”

Snape stops so abruptly that Harry almost crashes into him. He reaches out to steady himself and without thinking puts his hand on Snape’s chest. He drops his hand immediately, stepping backwards before Snape snarl at him for it.

“Like what? Like myself? It may come as a surprise Potter but allow me to elucidate - I am not a
pleasant person. You were clearly aware of the fact while at Hogwarts and now it seems to have escaped your -”

“Stop. We’ve been over this.”

“Clearly not, if you’re so shocked by my lack of patience for your little fan club. I suppose next time I’ll simply stand there while you exchange numbers with any interested Muggle you meet.”

“Hold up.” He shouldn’t say it, and he’s maybe going to get himself killed, but Harry’s never been particularly good at self-preservation. “You’re jealous.”

“Don’t be absurd.” Snape turns away and starts walking again.

“No, wait.” Fueled by some strange new power, Harry follows after him, grabbing his hand and pulling him out of the crowded street. There’s an alleyway between a wine bar and a House of Vapes; Harry drags Snape away from the lights and noise.

“You are. You’re jealous.”

“I’d thank you to keep your schoolboy fantasies - as well as your hands - to yourself,” Snape bites out. His pulse is fluttering high in his throat.

“But - you know, right?” Harry manages, feeling a bit panicked. “You have to know. How could you not know? You’re so -”

“Potter, this non-sensical rambling is wearing my patience rather thin.”

“You don’t have to be jealous.” Harry’s starting to shiver and he doesn’t know why. He digs his teeth into his bottom lip so Snape won’t notice it shaking.

There is a beat of stillness as Snape’s eyes are drawn to his mouth and then stutter away. Snape looks horrified with himself, like he’s committed some sort of crime.

“Of anyone,” Harry forces himself to keep talking, “Do you - do you understand? Snape, you have to -”

He doesn’t know who moves first, but suddenly Snape’s lips are hard and sharp against Harry’s, his hands fisted in the front of Harry’s coat. The rest of Harry’s sentence is lost against Snape’s tongue, and it’s like a battle, not like a kiss at all. Harry’s glasses are mashed against his face, and there are tears in his eyes and he doesn’t know why. He loves this, he loves the strength of Snape’s hands against him. He feels like his knees might give out, and Snape seems to realize this because he grabs Harry roughly, pressing him back into the brick and pinning him in place with his body.

“Oh my god,” Harry murmurs against Snape’s neck. “Oh - oh my god.”

Their hips shift restlessly together, and Harry feels something hot and impossibly hard pressing against him. He spreads his legs and Snape moans, a vibration that travels down Harry’s spine and makes his back arch. It’s so good like this, it’s the best thing in the world, and he wants - more, more, all of it. Snape’s fingers are cold against his neck, his mouth latched on to the edge of Harry’s jaw, so sharp it might leave a mark. Fuck, Harry hopes it does. His heart is racing, and if they keep kissing like this he might possibly die. He might die or he might come in his pants like a teenager, and he doesn’t know which would be bloody worse.

“Please,” he begs, his teeth clicking on Snape’s, “Please,” not sure what he’s begging for but only
knowing that he has to beg, was waiting his whole life to beg for this.

Snape is the first to come to his senses.

He pulls back with a hiss of breath, pulls his mouth away with an anguished sort of noise. It sounds a bit like pain, and that’s - that’s not fair. Harry tries to lean forward, capture the man’s lips again, but Snape holds him firmly in place.

“Wait, wait -” Snape’s voice is unsteady. Harry’s never heard him sound like that before. He sounds wrecked, and it’s the sexiest, most gorgeous sound ever (he sounds like that because of you, because of touching you -)

“We cannot - I do not -” Snape is pulling away from him, millimeter by millimeter. and every movement leaves cold air in its place.

“Can we talk about this?” Harry asks. There is a frantic energy running through him, an electricity that makes him want to grab Snape, get under his manky coat and under his skin, do something, feel more -

“No - not here.” Snape’s eyes cast furtive looks into the shadow behind them, and back towards the mouth of the alley. Couples are walking by hand in hand, along with loud, laughing groups of blokes, and the odd family with kids. There’s no one paying them any notice but - Jesus, there could be. How long ago was Harry hexed in broad daylight, with only Snape to thank for saving him? And yet he’s still trying to kiss the life out of Snape in a public place where anyone could see, anyone could be waiting -

“Okay.” Harry tries to catch his breath, tries to force himself to calm down. “You’re right. Not here. We can talk at - at your hotel.”

“Potter -”

“Just talk. I swear. I mean... unless -”

“You are not instilling within me a great deal of confidence.”

“Have I ever?”

Snape sighs deeply, closing his eyes. He rubs his temples, a gesture that reminds Harry so much of his time at Hogwarts that he almost can’t breathe for a moment.

“Very well.”

Snape’s staying in a Muggle hotel, surprisingly (or maybe not surprisingly at all) - small and a bit posh. He checks in under the name ‘Lucius Malfoy,’ casting a warning glance in Harry’s direction as he does so.

“Pleasure to have you back, Mr. Malfoy,” the desk clerk tells him with a wide smile. Harry resists the urge to snort. What’s Lucius Malfoy getting up to that he needs to be a regular at this sort of smart hotel?

They take the lift in silence, but Harry doesn’t miss the twitching of Snape’s fingers by his side, or the dark furrow in his brow.

When they get to Snape’s room, he fumbles for a keycard in the pocket of his coat. His hands are uncharacteristically clumsy as he feeds the card into the lock; he almost drops it twice.
Harry gathers every shred of his courage (you killed Voldemort, you faced death and came back, you can do this, you idiot) and speaks.

“You should invite me in.” He forces himself to meet Snape’s gaze.

The key beeps in the lock and the door clicks open. Snape clears his throat.

“Would you -”

“Yes,” Harry answers too quickly, stepping inside.

Snape is all moonlight and shadow in the darkness of the room, his pale skin only visible where the street lights hit it, his hair shining blue when he turns his head away. Harry closes the door behind them.

The room is small but crowded - a bed, a side table, a wrought-iron coatrack, a couple of colourful stained-glass lamps on either side of a leather armchair. Snape sits silently in the chair, not even bothering to take off his coat. Harry wants to see him better, wishes for light suddenly and fiercely (both lamps go on without his even having to think of the spell.)

Snape glances from the lamps and back to Harry. His eyes are wide and dark as ink.

“Why are you here?” Snape asks.

Harry opens his mouth to speak - and then stops. There is something between them, something that pulls on Harry even when they’re standing in the same room. He can feel the tug somewhere under his ribs, like Snape’s magic is silk winding around him, drawing him closer. Can Snape feel it too? Harry takes an unsteady step closer, letting the feeling wash over him, spill from his fingertips.

“You wanted to talk.” Snape tries to affect a glare, but Harry can see through it now, can see the fear and exhaustion and - please, please something else reflected in Snape’s eyes. He takes another step closer.

“What happened that - night cannot happen again.”

The words stop Harry in his tracks. “Why?” he asks blankly.

“The fact that you even have to ask that question -” Snape trails off, shaking his head.

For God’s sake - Nox.”

The lamps go off and Harry blinks against the darkness. “Why?” he asks again.

“I object to being studied in such a manner.” Snape looks away. “Potter, we - I - made an extraordinarily poor decision, which is - telling, given my history. I felt reasonably certain you would not need to be convinced of this fact, particularly after my - actions this evening.”

“Your actions? Like - when you held my hand when I was bordering on a panic attack? Or when you kissed the breath out of me up against a brick wall?”

“Don’t be deliberately obtuse. Have you forgotten your charming little friend, who I left panting after you like a stray crup?” Snape’s voice is thick with loathing. “Surely you realize -”

“You’re shaking,” Harry interrupts. He can see Snape’s fingers trembling as they twine together, the shudder of his shoulders beneath his coat. “Are you - okay?”

In response, the man lets out a breath of slightly hysterical laughter. “Am I okay. People would be
asking that question of you if they knew whose hotel room you currently stood in. We’re lucky an Auror didn’t see us on the street tonight, they would have."

“So that’s what this is about. What other people might think.” He wants to scream all of a sudden, but instead a strangled laugh forces its way out of his throat. It’s so fucking unfair - he’s been living his whole bloody life for other people. Can’t he want something of his own, just once?

Harry unwinds his scarf, tossing it toward the coatrack but not waiting to see if it catches.

“What are you doing?”

“You know, I am really - past the point of caring what other people think.” Harry starts on the buttons of his coat. “I’ve been thinking about you for - for months and I missed you and everyone else can hang, I don’t care, I -”

Snape rises like a furious black wave, hands clenched into fists. “I’m very pleased for your sudden bout of self-sufficiency, but some of us do not have that luxury. Some of us are only alive by the grace of other people’s pity, some of us are bloody homeless at present. Public opinion may mean nothing to you Potter, but it could very well mean the end of me.”

On some level Harry knew this. He did, he does, but it strikes him much more sharply now. He has to take a shallow breath in because it hurts a bit, that knowledge. It always hurts a bit when he thinks about Snape and the way things went for him. It hurts him to think about Snape’s beautiful scarred skin, and his shoulders hunched from brewing.

Snape’s right about this. Damn it all to hell, Snape’s right.

One of them has so much more to lose than the other.

“I’m sorry,” Harry says, and regrets the apology instantly. As if Snape needed another reason to chuck him out on his ear.

“Go home, Potter.” Snape takes a step away from him, folding his arms. “Get some sleep. Come to your senses.”

Harry can’t speak, so he nods.

He leaves.

He hasn’t quite made it to the end of the hallway before he stops changes his mind.

If Snape doesn’t want him that’s one thing, but if it’s some form of self-denial or self-preservation, that’s another. Harry doesn’t flatter himself that he’s irresistible or anything other than skinny and odd and ordinary but - but the way Snape kissed him like he was starving - the way Snape’s hands shook as they touched him - the way -

You know what, fuck this.

Harry turns on his heel and heads back to Snape’s door. He’ll probably hate himself in ten minutes but odds of that were good anyway, whether he went after Snape or not. His shoes are silent on the thickly carpeted floor, and he’s so nervous he almost can’t breathe. He tries to formulate a plan, a speech, something that will get to the heart of it. Something that will force Snape to give him an answer that’s honest, that isn’t about other people but is about him and Harry. Because what else matters really, at the end of it? It’s just the two of them, perpetually circling each other like planets. Everything else is just starlight and darkness.
Harry doesn’t even get a chance to knock.

The door opens just as Harry lifts his arm. Snape is standing in the doorway, holding Harry’s knitted scarf in his hands. He looks completely blank for a moment, his eyes moving frantically over Harry’s shape in the brightly-lit hallway.

Harry reaches out.

They’re kissing immediately before Snape can even pull Harry inside the room. Harry’s mouth is hot on Snape’s, his hands clutching at everything in reach. He grabs handfuls of Snape’s jacket, wanting him closer, wanting everything harder and sharper and now. The door gets kicked shut behind them, the scarf gets dropped on the floor and somehow Harry’s on his back in the narrow bed, forcing Snape’s face against his. Snape is biting and vicious, and exactly what Harry wants. He tears that coat off Snape’s shoulders, throwing it somewhere in the darkness to be lost forever. Snape’s fingers are on the buttons of Harry’s shirt, and Harry squeezes his eyes shut so tightly he sees fireworks.

“Touch me, please, fuck –” Harry begs, filth and poetry on his lips, shining with Snape’s kisses.

“Damn you.” Snape smells like a storm, and his teeth are jagged on Harry’s jaw, his neck, the shell of his ear. “I can’t -”

Harry’s shaking and utterly useless, but he manages to pull up the man’s sweater to get his hands on warm skin (and Merlin, these Muggle clothes on Snape are going to be the death of him.)

Snape breaks off with a gasp. “You’re freezing.”

Harry does not feel freezing, he feels like the centre of the bloody earth, molten liquid and carnelian. He tries to catch his breath but even his lungs are burning. Snape is on top of him, fucking finally, their bodies pressed together with no space at all between them. The pressure makes something in Harry come alive, like a diamond being formed, like a newborn star. He can’t believe he’s gone this long in his life without knowing this feeling, can’t believe he was able to breathe and eat and go to work without it. He grabs Snape’s hips, desperate to keep him where he is, and the sound Snape makes will ring in his ears for the rest of his life.

“What do you want?” Snape asks, voice like velvet over shards of glass.

You you you you you.

Harry bites down on the word. Even still, it threatens to rattle out between his teeth.

“Anything,” Harry says instead, and Snape’s gaze goes even darker. One hand is on the buckle of Harry’s belt, deftly sliding it open.

“You are.” Snape opens Harry’s trousers, forces his hand inside. “Utterly.” Slides backwards off the bed, onto his knees. “Impossibly -”

“Please,” Harry gasps as Snape drags his tongue in a long, hot stripe up Harry’s stomach. “I - I’ve never -”

Snape hisses out a breath, eyes slamming shut. “Gods above, Potter.”

Harry’s trousers and then pants are pushed down his hips, but he’s too turned on to be self-conscious right now. Sharp nails trace his inner thighs, sharp teeth fasten on his hip bone.
“You want this?” comes the warm voice between his legs, damp breath on the tip of his cock. It’s all Harry can do not to buck his hips and cry out in desperation. He’s going to die, Snape’s going to kill him -

“S-Severus -” He’s shaking, every muscle in his body begging for more. “Yes. Yes - please -”

There is a sound like a sigh somewhere down below him, and then Snape takes him in his mouth.

It’s -

It is -

It’s happening. And it’s Snape.

It’s Snape on his knees in front of Harry, Snape swallowing wet and hot around him. The man is gentle, so gentle - for all his vicious words and sharp teeth, his mouth is soft. Harry reaches down, finds fine dark hair that winds around his fingers like ribbon.

Snape’s hair is as soft as his mouth.

Harry realizes he’s going to come.

“Oh,” he breathes, stomach tensing as Snape pulls back to nuzzle at his inner thigh, follow the line of his iliac crest with wet kisses.

“You want this,” Snape says, no longer questioning.

“Yes, yes.” Harry would say the words over and over forever if it meant Snape kept touching him, kept sucking him -

“From me.”

“Yes -”

“And you’re going to come in my mouth.” Pale hands circle Harry’s cock but they are gentle as well - too gentle. The world has gone watercoloured, weightless and slow. Pleasure ripples out from the centre of Harry, pleasure sings down his veins and the bones of his hands. “Will you - I want to -”

“Yes,” Harry moans, and Snape’s breath hitches in his chest like a sob before he lowers his mouth to Harry’s aching cock, hands spreading Harry’s knees wide so he can lift them onto Snape’s shoulders. Harry’s going to come and it’s going to be ruinous, it’s going to be the end of the world -

“Oh god, oh god, oh please please -” Harry’s babbling and begging and can’t seem to stop. Snape starts sucking him in earnest, moaning around Harry’s cock like he loves it, like he’s desperate for it, and that’s it, it’s over - Harry screams and gasps and everything crashes down on him, pulsing through his cock in an orgasm that doesn’t end. He arches his back and can’t help a few shallow thrusts of his hips, even as Snape holds him in place, hands so tight against his thighs that Harry will probably have bruises. For some reason that turns him on even more and he’s not stopping, he’s still coming (and probably yanking at Snape’s hair but it feels like a lifeline now, like an anchor, the only thing real in the world) oh god oh fuck oh -

Snape pulls back. Pulls away slowly, as if he’s reluctant. The cold air is shocking around Harry’s prick, and Harry doesn’t think he’ll be able to walk again.

He breathes out. Breathes in.
Snape is still on his knees between Harry’s thighs, watching him with eyes blown black. Harry stares down at him: harsh white skin, dark shadow, open mouth. Snape’s arm is moving just past the line of Harry’s sight, and there is the sound of fabric rustling, and Snape - Snape must be -

“Oh god,” Harry whispers for the thousandth time, and Snape’s eyebrows draw together. His tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip, and he makes a sound like he’s in pain.

“You - have -” Snape hisses, movements of his arm becoming frantic, “no idea -”

Maybe Harry doesn’t, but there’s no way in the Wizarding goddamn World he’s going to lie back and watch Snape get himself off when they’re close enough to touch. He bonelessly pushes himself off the bed, climbing onto Snape’s lap and stopping the man’s hand with his own.

“Potter -” Snape’s voice is a warning.

The room is dark and smells like sweat and rosewater. There is rough hotel carpeting beneath Harry’s feet, and the heat of Snape’s cock in his hand feels like a gift. The stutter in Snape’s breathing feels like a gift as well.

Harry touches him softly, slides his hand from the base of his cock to the tip, fingers growing slick as he moves. Snape’s eyes close at the first stroke of Harry’s hand, and a low, quiet moan escapes his pale mouth.

Harry’s in love with him.

No.

No, no, no.

No he’s not. No. And let’s just - pretend that thought didn’t ever occur to anyone, let’s just - focus on the feeling of Snape’s skin, the heat and the taste of him - don’t - Jesus, Potter, don’t start thinking that sort of -

“Christ, yes - like that.”

Harry presses his face against Snape’s neck, as if he can hide from his own thoughts. There are scars beneath his lips, Snape’s history healed in a spiderweb of fine lines. Harry wonders if anyone’s touched these scars before, if anyone has pressed their lips to them and told Snape that he’s lovely.

Harry imagines saying it now. Imagines saying ‘You’re lovely,’ against Snape’s throat, imagines pushing the hair back from the man’s eyes and kissing his forehead, his eyebrows, the bridge of his nose. His mouth waters with the wanting of it.

He tightens his grip on Snape’s cock, stroking him hard and steady until Snape’s hips jerk restlessly beneath him. Snape’s arms have climbed up Harry’s back, holding him still and close. Harry loves this too, loves the wiry strength of Snape against him and all around him.

“He tightens his grip on Snape’s cock, stroking him hard and steady until Snape’s hips jerk restlessly beneath him. Snape’s arms have climbed up Harry’s back, holding him still and close. Harry loves this too, loves the wiry strength of Snape against him and all around him.

“Like that, just - oh, fucking hell -” Snape’s eyes are closed now, mouth slack. Harry licks his way inside it, and Snape shudders, gasps, and comes in Harry’s hand.

“Harry.” Snape says the name as if he’s surprised to find it on his lips, “Harry -” and Harry strokes him through it, doesn’t stop until Snape melts against him, panting against his skin.

Harry closes his eyes, and breathes. He feels drunk suddenly, though he knows he didn’t drink nearly enough. He feels dizzy with the smell of Snape, clinging to his lips and to his fingers.
Snape’s hair is damp with sweat against Harry’s neck.

And Harry is in love with him.

NO, stop it - Harry pulls Snape into a kiss to silence that terrifying thought. Snape startles him by rising up on his knees, backing Harry onto the bed and climbing on top of him until they’re pressed together again. Harry grabs at Snape’s sweater and Snape is --

* * *

-- back at Hogwarts. Yet again.
Chapter Notes

A shorter update but there’s more to come. (And I have to say thank you and thank you and thank you to anyone that’s still reading this and everyone that’s reached out to me about it. I can’t tell you what it means.)

Harry grabs at Snape’s sweater and Snape is --

* * *

-- back at Hogwarts. Yet again.

He can’t even say how long he’s been away. The days in his solitary tower ran together, but surely it hasn’t been more than a week. So much for any remaining shreds of his dignity.

Find Potter, determine the book’s whereabouts, escape.

Evelyn will never forgive him.

Unfortunately, finding Potter proves more difficult than estimated. Clearly the boy is no longer in the Infirmary (Severus does a cursory check just to be sure, and he is not holding his breath.) Potter isn’t in the Great Hall having supper and he isn’t supervising detentions in his classroom. Severus knows the paths that Harry walks most evenings - has followed them himself, stalked alongside the boy like some sort of ridge-backed wild animal, chasing a scent. Tonight, though, when he re-traces his footsteps, he can find no sign of Har- Potter, not Harry (get it through your head, or throw yourself off a bridge.)

So perhaps Potter - has gone out.

Which is fine.

It is rather good, actually. While it does delay Severus’ escape from the school, he is pleased that Potter is finally taking Severus’ advice and spending time amongst the living. Granted, the last time he did, things ended rather poorly (Severus can still taste the panic at the back of his throat, the sour-bitter certainty that if Potter is dead, the world has ended, if Potter has been struck down in Diagon Alley, Severus’ portrait will weep paint until it turns to blood -)

Which he did not. Because Potter is fine. He’s fine.

Severus was assured that he was all right, that there was no sign of lingering damage (or would it be impossible to tell in Potter’s case?). Still - perhaps he should have stayed. To determine the truth of the situation himself, only that. Just to be sure. Who knows what Poppy might have missed, or what Potter might have misguided concealed to prevent his admirers from going mad with distress (gnashing teeth, rending skin) over his wellbeing?

Regardless, now Severus has no choice but to wait for the boy’s reappearance from - from whatever fool’s errand he’s chosen to run at this hour. To pass the time, he returns to his portrait.
And finds it altered.

Some fool has tromped muddy footprints all across the hardwood floor, and left bundles of heather in empty glass bottles. One of the cauldrons is full of sand and seashells, and another has a bouquet of branches, tied up together with ribbons.

Evelyn has clearly been making himself quite at home (as well as completing his transformation into some sort of magpie.)

Severus peers over a loose stack of parchment and sees various images of himself, scratched crudely in ink and pencil. In some of the pictures, Evelyn is standing beside him. In others, Harry bloody Potter is there as well. And in one - good Christ - they are all holding hands.

Severus drops the picture as if burned.

He contemplates building a small fire and incinerating the lot, but - the response from the artist would probably be more trouble than the brief satisfaction is worth. Instead, he leaves the whole mess where it is and vows to have a serious conversation with young Evelyn about personal space in the near future.

It’s not as if Severus doesn’t have other places to go.

It’s not as if Evelyn knew Severus would be back.

He sighs, and leaves the scene of the crime. He wanders Potter’s late night path once again, with no more luck this time. No sign of the young man in the library or staff room (though he does have brief, awkward eye contact with Minerva before hastily making a retreat.) No sign of him in the Defense classroom or Great Hall.

Perhaps Potter is at the top of the Astronomy Tower, watching the slow-moving winter constellations. Severus used to prefer the winter sky to all others, and he wonders if Potter is the same (but wait, wait. Winter has slipped through his fists and now it is spring.)

Snape has followed Potter occasionally to the base of the Astronomy Tower, but there are no paintings leading up that winding staircase, and he can’t remember any portraits in the tower itself. The stars are, for now at least, out of his reach.

Not that Severus would visit if he had the choice. Not that he has been up there - since (Albus is falling, dreamlike and slow, a snowflake spiraling down through the dark sky -)

Stop.

Severus roams Hogwarts restlessly, waiting for Potter’s return. When the hour goes nine, a thought strikes him - perhaps Potter is in his room. The man might have made an early night of it, missed supper or ate alone (Severus often took food to his rooms, ate hunched over a book to avoid small talk and insincere gestures of tolerance from the rest of the staff. Albus frowned on this, of course, but Severus was used to being frowned upon.)

Potter’s rooms are a place Severus cannot go.

He remembers the last disastrous time he was there, the sight of Potter sick in bed bringing the world crashing to its knees, planting hideous words like ‘lovely’ in the hemlock of Severus’ brain. He cannot risk such a violation again. He doesn’t dare cross the threshold of that room.

Unless -
What if Potter is sick? If so, Severus should know of it. If Potter is suffering from concussion but trying to put on a brave face for the outside world, Severus is no doubt the only one willing to confront him about his idiocy. And if Potter is well but hiding in his room regardless - Severus should probably know of that as well.

Besides, it may be percipient to discuss the Half-Blood Prince’s textbook in private. The less information spread around the castle (he mentally glares at Evelyn) the better. Potter’s rooms would be an adequate setting.

Severus will just - check.

If Potter’s there, so much the better. Severus can speak to him, find the book, and leave. If Potter is not there, no harm has been caused.

It will be fine.

And if Potter is sleeping, Severus will leave. And he will not look at him, not even for a moment (not even if his hair is curled and damp with sweat, begging to be carded through. Not even if his skin is like spring against his blankets, and would smell like apple blossoms. Not even then.)

Severus makes a decision.

The Quidditch painting is as he remembered, though empty at this late hour. The stands are bare, the only sound are pennants snapping softly with the wind.

Evelyn is not there, thank the gods.

Neither is Potter. His bedroom is empty, save the usual detritus that litters the bookshelf and night table. It is quiet and dark, the last dregs of sunset filtering through the windowpane, kissing the leaves of a dying peace lily before spilling across the floor.

Severus barely has time to take a breath of relief before the door to Potter’s bedroom opens and slams shut. Someone barks out a harsh laugh, and before Severus can summon the presence of mind to leave, Harry Potter has stumbled into view.

“Of course, of bloody -” Potter shrugs off his coat, throwing it toward the coat hook (and missing.) “Welcome, make yourself at home. Bloody unbelievable.”

Potter is - not at his best.

Severus studies the boy’s uneasy movements, and amends that last thought to: Potter is drunk.

“I had hoped to speak with you about something of importance. That was clearly misguided. You are in no condition to speak sensibly about anything.”


He sprawls down on his bed, kicking his shoes off and leaving them on the floor. There is something too intimate about seeing Potter in this state, feet covered by heavy woolen socks, legs stretched out and surprisingly muscular beneath worn denim. A sliver of skin between his sweater and his waistband as he stretches -

Stop (you swore you wouldn’t look at him, you swore it.)

Severus swallows. “In that case, I -”
“You should be glad and all. Have some nerve getting all in a snit just cuz I left the castle. Thought that was what you wanted.”

“What I wanted?” (In a snit? How bloody dare he?)

“Spending time amongst the living, and all that. Wasn’t that your mission there? Cuz I was clinging a bit too hard, right? I have that tendency, I guess you’ve noticed. When I like someone-”

Harry’s jaw snaps shut. Potter’s jaw (Potter’s teeth, Potter’s mouth.)

Severus cannot say anything. He puts a hand out to steady himself, but there is nothing to hold on to.

“Christ.” Potter is covering his face with his hands, laughing a bit hysterically, “Brilliant. I’m utterly - fucking -”

He sits up, and Severus wishes he hadn’t. The young man’s eyes are shining with alcohol but his glasses are askew; there is no barrier against that green.

Severus knows he has a heartbeat. Even though he is dead, he has felt a pulse beneath his skin when he was anxious or afraid. But his heart has never done the things it is doing now (“when I like someone”) a violent, unbalanced rhythm that makes him feel light-headed.

“I was in London,” Potter says, swaying slightly. “I went for a pint with a - friend. Luke, he’s this bloke that - doesn’t matter. I went out. So there.”

Severus’ heart clenches into a fist. “Why you think I would be interested in the minutiae of your social life is beyond me.”

“Minutiaaaae...” Potter repeats slowly. Stupidly. “Someone bought me a drink, didyou know? A man. No one’s bought me a drink before, not like - that.”

“I suppose you want some sort of congratulations? A trophy?”

Potter ignores him. “Luke said I could have taken him home. Should’ve, maybe. I’ve never -” He suddenly gets to his feet, moving towards the Quidditch painting.

Severus resists the urge to take a step back. He holds his ground, just barely, as Potter takes off his glasses. The man’s tongue wets his lower lip.

“Shit, I am really drunk. Sorry. This is - not what I wanted.”

And then Potter takes his sweater off.

Severus stands absolutely still. Beneath the sweater, Potter is wearing a soft-looking white vest. When he starts to tug it over his head, Severus closes his eyes.

“Potter,” he says, damning himself for how rough his voice sounds. “What are you doing?”

“Hm, what? Just - I’m going to bed, Snape.”

He hears Potter laugh, hears a rustle of fabric, and doesn’t dare open his eyes.

“You know what’s fun? Lemme tell you. It’s getting my head practically caved in by some Death Eater’s mad sister, and waking up bloody terrified - not for myself, though. No, of course not. What’s fun is making my friends think I’m mental because I’m still in the Infirmary and all I can talk about is where -” He breaks off, laughing again. There is no humour in it. “About where you went.”
Severus winces.

“Like maybe something happened to you, I thought - I dropped the painting, what if it broke or something -”

“Broke? Potter, I doubt a dented frame would cause any significant -”

“Well I didn’t know that, did I? No one knew where you were, I thought somethin’ terrible must’ve happened. Then McGonagall told me you’d gone off somewhere. Couldn’t even wait until I was conscious, eh? Had to avoid any possible sight of me?”

Severus opens his eyes.

Potter is sitting on the edge of his bed. He’s changed into disgustingly Gryffindor coloured pajama pants, and a matching shirt. It hangs unbuttoned on his shoulders, which is a disaster. An injury. Blunt-force trauma to the skull. Severus can see the pale lines of Potter’s chest. He can see the hollow of his collar bones.

There is a sparse trail of ink black hair around Potter’s naval, leading down his stomach and disappearing beneath his waistband. Severus knows instinctively that if he pressed his open mouth to that spot on Potter’s body, it would taste like cloves. It would smell like lilacs.

He realizes he is staring.

A moment later (too late, too late) he realizes Potter is watching him.

Potter swallows. His eyes are foggy. “The way you look at me -”

“I - do not look at you.” Severus is barely able to string together the words. He doesn’t look at Potter. He has perfected the art of not looking. Of looking away.

“You do. Or - you did. Sometimes I think -”

“Was there ever a time when I was interested in what you think, Mr. Potter?” Severus lets anger overwhelm every other feeling beneath his skin, lets rage and condescension be his shield.

“Yeah, actually. You cared when I was - crying outside your painting at night. When I was going through the potions ingredients with you. When you were so worried about me being alone that you had to ask Malfoy of all people to look out for me.” Harry stands up. His shirt hangs open, and Severus tears his eyes away from the lines of lean muscle.

“Potter -”

“Maybe I look at you, then. What about that?”

The look in Potter’s eyes is making Severus feel panicked. He is suddenly grateful to be dead. If he hadn’t been, that look might make him do something - rash. He can almost feel his right hand lifting of its own volition, and he knows that Potter’s throat would be cool to the touch. He knows that Potter’s jaw would be slightly stubbled and his cheekbone smooth as moonstone against Severus’ palm.

He thinks he might be sick.

“Maybe I -” Potter takes a step closer, “look at you. Maybe I - I think about you -”

A stronger man would have run by now. Severus always knew he was a spineless, traitorous
coward, but when it comes to self-preservation, he really thought he was better than this.

Because Harry fucking Potter (bad choice of words there, don’t think about fucking and Potter in the same sentence or you’ll go mad) is bare-chested and walking towards him. Because Severus can see the pulse leaping in the man’s throat, and he wants to bite it. Because Potter’s nipples are the colour of rose water and he’s foggy-eyed and flawless and alive, alive. Against all odds, Severus kept him alive just long enough to defeat the Dark Lord, just long enough to fall unspeakably, profanely in love with him -

NO.

No no no no no.

Severus is not in love with Potter.

He isn’t.

Severus has never been in love, not once in his life. No. Never. His heart was not built to survive anything but the most pale echo of affection; it is a piece of ash, a cigarette burn. A nail clipping.

“You are drunk.” Severus is not in love with Potter, the very idea is obscenity. “Anything you say now - anything you think you might feel - will doubtlessly evaporate in the presence of daylight and a sober head. I will not think of it, or ever speak of it again. I suggest you do the same.”

“If you were alive -” Potter takes another step closer. There is a mole on his hipbone. If Severus were alive he would press his thumb to just that spot, hard enough to leave a bruise. “If you were alive, I would want -”

Severus can remember their conversation after that disastrous Christmas present (“If you were alive, I would want to be your friend,” Potter had said, and the memory is enough to make Severus choke. He will never be friends with Harry Potter.)

“What, Potter?” Severus snaps, angry beyond reason that the younger man hasn’t buttoned his shirt up yet, and that Severus hasn’t had the decency to leave. “What would you want, what -”

“You.”

A breath. A heartbeat.

“Just you.” Potter sighs out a weak laugh. “I shouldn’t have drank so much. Drunk? Drank. I dunno.”

If Severus was alive he would press Potter against the wall and wrap his hands around that perfect throat because - because there is no reality in which the Chosen One and Saviour of the Wizarding World carries a torch for his nasty, ugly old Potions teacher. Potter is drunk, and nonsensical, and will forget every word they’ve just spoken to each other.

Severus will not forget. He has been cursed with a long and accurate memory of anything involving Harry Potter, particularly if the incident is painful and humiliating. It is one of his many talents, but he’s well-practiced at the art of surgical compartmentalization (cut the repellent memory out of your body and hide it somewhere. A desk drawer, perhaps, or behind a row of books.)

Potter swivels around, as if trying to remember why he’s standing in the middle of the room. At long last, he begins to button up his bloody shirt and turns down the blankets on his bed.
Damning himself a fool for waiting so long, Severus turns to leave.

“Will you be here tomorrow?” Potter asks softly behind him. There is the rustling of sheets as the boy climbs into bed. “At Hogwarts?”

Severus stops. Everything aches - his ribs, his teeth, his heart (it was not built to survive this.)

“Severus,” comes the quiet voice. “Will you stay?”

Potter will forget what he’s saying. He’ll no doubt forget anything that Severus says in response. What could it hurt, he’ll forget it all anyway, say it, say it - “Yes.”

He hears Potter’s contented sigh behind him as he leaves, and it isn’t until he reaches his portrait that he realizes he forgot to ask about the sodding textbook.

Add it to the long list of tonight’s successes.

* * *

Advanced fucking Potion-Making, the reason he’s at the school at all, the reason he had to seek Potter out in the first --

* * *

-- time Harry wakes up, there are dark eyes watching him.

Snape is lying on his side, facing Harry in the bed. One of his hands rests at the hinge of Harry’s jaw. Harry can feel his pulse flutter against the man’s long fingers.

As soon as Harry opens his eyes, Snape flinches. “I did not want to wake you.”

“It’s fine. How long have I been asleep?”

“No more than an hour.” Snape slowly pulls his hand from Harry’s neck, the rough drag of his fingers leaving goosebumps all over Harry’s skin.

They’re lying on top of the blankets on the narrow bed, but Harry feels Snape’s warmth like a furnace, heat radiating from him. As a kid, he thought Snape would be cold all the time, would feel like the sharp edge of a clamshell, or the slimy skin of an eel. He did not expect this warmth.

“I’m sorry I passed out on you. Again.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” Snape says dryly. “Or at least a sign of your inability to get the requisite amount of sleep when I am not around.”

“How is it that you’ve still got all your kit on?” Harry lost his shirt and his trousers at some point, his pants resting low on his hips. Snape, on the other hand, hasn’t even taken his sweater off. His trousers are undone and the only skin available to Harry is Snape’s white stomach.

“Common courtesy.”

Harry rolls his eyes but pets Snape’s stomach anyway, scratching his nails through the dark hair that bisects it.

Snape exhales slowly. Harry recognizes that sound, is beginning to understand that it represents needless self-control, Snape constantly holding himself back from what they both want. He is learning Snape’s tells now, could absolutely devastate the man at poker. If Harry knew how to play.
“Doesn’t seem fair,” he says, tracing Snape’s skin softly with his fingertips. “You being all buttoned up.”

“You should take my current state of dress as a kindness, Potter.” Snape swallows, anxiously (Harry can read him like the opposite of tea leaves.) “I am not - unmarked - by two wars.”

“Neither am I.” Harry pushes back his stupid hair that hides the silvery scar at his hairline. Jagged as a strike of lightning, a crack in the foundation.

Snape touches it gently. His hands are shaking.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Harry asks (instead of answering a question that’s been on his mind since their first desperate kiss. “Besides watching me sleep, obviously.”

Snape winces. “I absolutely refuse to cater to your vanity -”

“It’s all right. I know how gorgeous I am.” Harry flutters his eyelashes, affecting a confidence he’s never felt.

Snape shuts him up by grasping a fistful of his wild hair, tilting Harry’s head back just slightly. It takes Harry’s breath away, as does the intense look in Snape’s eyes. There’s a bit of pain in the tug, and a bit of electricity too. It makes Harry’s whole body feel like a humming violin string.

“You don’t though, do you?” Snape asks, voice low. “You have - absolutely no idea.”

The pressure of Snape’s hand is doing things to Harry’s self-control. He arches his back, shifts his body as close as he can to Snape’s. “Kiss me.”

“Making demands now, are we?”

“Please.”

That word changes something in Snape’s eyes, makes them go intent and heavy-lidded. He leans into Harry and they kiss, and kiss, and kiss. It’s softer than anything they’ve done previously, but somehow more affecting. Snape’s kisses are deep and searching, like he can’t help himself, like he can’t get enough. He keeps one hand twisted in Harry’s hair, and it makes Harry feel like he’s sinking to the bottom of the ocean (he closes his eyes and lets the dark water pull him under.)

The next time Harry wakes up, there is a wand at his throat.

He feels the pressure of it first, but doesn’t know what it is.

Gradually his senses return to him, his nervous system alerted to the presence of a threat. Harry opens his eyes slowly, but otherwise doesn’t move. He can hear someone breathing heavily beside him, and as his vision adjusts to the dim light he realizes that someone is Snape.

Snape, who Harry - Christ - fell asleep on once again.

Snape, whose eyes are glazed and sick with terror.

“I know who you are.” Snape’s voice is lower than normal, menacing. “I won’t let you.”

“Severus.” Harry draws out each syllable, slow and even. The wand at his throat jabs sharply.
“Be silent!” Snape snarls, showing his teeth. “How did you get in? How did you find me?”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Harry tries to keep his breathing steady.

“It’s okay,” he says quietly. “You’re dreaming. It’s okay.”

“I know who you are, and I swear -”

“Professor,” Harry tries again, and that word seems to break through the walls of Snape’s nightmare. He blinks his eyes once, gaze focusing slightly.

“Potter?” His voice is soft now, confused. It makes Harry’s heart ache.

“It’s me. You were dreaming.”

“Harry Potter.” Snape blinks again. His wand is shaking, pressed hard enough to bruise against Harry’s clavicle.

“Yeah. Yes. It’s just me.”

Snape seems to realize what his wand is doing, and he draws back with a curse. He all but flings the wand away from him, and Harry hears it clatter somewhere across the room.

“It’s okay, I’m fine, you didn’t -”

“It is not fucking okay.” Snape is out of the bed and away from Harry like a shot.

“Snape -”

“Get out.”

The door to the washroom slams behind him, followed by the sound of the lock being turned.

Harry’s heart is beating so fast he feels like he can’t breathe. He tears his hands through his hair, gulping down air as quickly as he can get it, anything to stay calm, anything to keep those long shadows from creeping catlike across the floor toward the bed.

The bed that smells like sex and sweat and - Snape (couples and citrus, smoke and pine and matches.) The bed where Harry is shirtless, nearly naked (lips purple-red, bite marks on his collar bone like a run of violets).

_Do something, Harry._

Harry forces himself to his feet, switching on a lamp and searching for his clothing. His hands are shaking, legs unsteady. He takes a breath and holds it as he gets dressed, holds it so long he starts to see colours flashing at the corners of his eyes. Takes another breath. Holds it.

When he’s dressed, he crosses to the washroom door, presses his ear to the wood.

He can hear someone inside, a soft hitch in every breath they take.

“Severus,” Harry says quietly.

There is no reply.

Harry stands there, wondering what would be the helpful thing to do in this situation. What would he
want if it were him?

“Can I -“ He pauses. “Get you anything?”

“Go. Away.” Snape snarls on the other side.

Harry doesn’t want to leave him. Doesn’t want Snape to be by himself. He knows what it’s like to
wake up in the dark, feel the weight of it like shovelfuls of dirt falling over you, pressing you down
and down into nothing.

But he also knows that sometimes having another person around doesn’t help as much as you want it
to. Sometimes a witness just makes everything more - permanent. Real.

Harry rests his head against the door. Imagines Snape on the other side, all buttoned up.  All alone.

He takes a breath and holds it. Then he grabs his scarf from the floor where it was tossed last night,
holds it tight in his hands. He snags the keycard from the dresser, and taps on the washroom door
gently before he leaves. “I’ll be back in five minutes, okay? But then I’ll go, promise.”

He stops at the café next to the hotel which is thankfully open already. Harry buys coffee and fruit
and a bunch of sugary pastries and brings them back to Snape’s room, arranges them quietly on the
side table. On his way out, he leans against the door again, makes sure he can hear someone on the
other side.

“Snape - er, Severus? I guess you never said that I could call you that. Just seems - weird now that -
okay, I’m going. And I’m fine, all right? I left you some - breakfast. In case you wanted -” Harry
has a brief flash of last night, Snape on his knees in front of him, and it derails everything completely.  “Are you going to be -”

His words die as Snape wrenches the washroom door open and is suddenly nose to nose with him.

Harry almost takes a step back, but against all odds he holds his ground. Snape is shaking, a fine
vibration running through him. His teeth are chattering and there are beads of sweat on his upper lip.

“Can I -”

“Did I hurt you?” Snape bites out quickly, looking not at Harry’s face, but at his neck.

“No.”

“Show me.”

Harry tilts his head back, tugs at his collar. He doesn’t know if his neck will be red or swollen or
bruised - and maybe he should have thought of this first - but it certainly doesn’t hurt anymore. Not
as much as seeing Snape in a state like this.

Snape unfolds one of his clenched, white hands. He reaches out in a halting, jerky motion - as if he
might touch Harry - before immediately pulling his hand back, and dropping it. Then he steps
backward in the washroom and closes the door again.

He doesn’t quite slam it as loudly this time. Must be feeling a bit better.

“Okay. Well.” Harry waves stupidly at the closed door before he realizes what he’s doing. “See you
later then.”

Harry’s not going to take a panic attack personally, he’s been through enough to see the
foolishness in that. But that doesn’t stop him from worrying - worrying that maybe Snape will never get over what just happened, never trust himself around Harry again. It’d be so fucking like him to - no, stop, don’t go there yet.

Harry takes the elevator down to the main floor, decides to walk a bit before Apparating home. It’s nearly dawn and the streets are just starting to come alive. Harry realizes that he’s keeping his hand resting over his wand, just in case. Snape’s paranoia is maybe getting to him.

Maybe. Just a bit.

Damn, they’re a pair. Yesterday Harry was panicking about Voldemort in a crowded pub, and then this morning, Snape’s fighting for his life as if the War has just kicked the door in. Harry wishes there was a spell to fix this. Fix both of them. Fix all the people who lost someone they loved. Heal all the people who lost themselves too.

Harry stops along the water, looks at the light reflected in the dark.

Somewhere out there, someone is trying to make a potion that could do just that. Heal a broken heart. Bring someone back.

_Blood. Bone. Memory. Growth._

So fine, it’s about resurrection. But on a long, long list of Dark Wizards who’ve lost someone, who could actually pull it off? Who would be clever enough to get past the security at Will, and the protections at Hogwarts? (If there’s one person who might be able to answer that question, at least Harry knows where he lives.)

On his next day off, Harry pays an overdue visit to Hogsmeade. It's good to get out of the city and his flat, good to go somewhere that he can be distracted and not see the ghost of Snape everywhere he looks (when he's eating breakfast, walking to work, lying in bed, where _where where are you right now?_ always running through his mind like a terrible song, like a love spell.)

George Weasley is waiting for him at Rosmerta’s when Harry gets there, and - it honestly takes Harry a second to recognize him.

When George hugs him, Harry can feel the bones of his shoulder blades right through his jumper. When George smiles, all Harry can see is the red of his gums and the purple beneath his eyes.

“Hiya Harry. Fancy meeting you here.” George slaps him on the back, with barely any weight to it. “Good to see you mate.”

“You too.” Grief looks different on different people, Harry reminds himself. He’s going to talk to Ron and Hermione after this, though. Just to be safe. “How’s the shop?”

After they order drinks and a sandwich each, George tells stories about all the ridiculous new products at Wheezes. He’s gotten a couple kids fresh out of Hogwarts to take on the front of the store, and is fully immersed in product development now.

“R & D, old son,” George calls it, with a raised eyebrow that makes Harry see a shadow of the person he used to be. “It’s brilliant. Means I get to piss around all day, trying to determine what sort of Salazar’s Slithering Slime will be the most effective at terrorizing grans or getting revenge on younger siblings. Course there’s always a bit of danger from the noxious fumes. But, as mother always said: _a bit of noxious fumes in moderation never killed anyone. Maimed, sure, but never killed._ I’m pretty sure she said that. Might have had it stitched on a pillow somewhere.”
“I hope you’re being careful,” Harry says, even as he laughs. “And not just doing all this in the flat above the shop.”

“No, no. Rented an empty space in Hogsmeade, just down at the end of Hastings Street. I could show you after this if you like! How do you feel about noxious fumes?”

“Um. Maybe another time.” As they eat their food, Harry gradually feels slightly better about the state of George Weasley. George might look rubbish, but he’s still as mad and bright as ever, and it makes Harry miss Fred so fiercely his stomach aches.

When the conversation starts to wind down (or devolve into gossip about who Ginny’s shacking up with, which is - fine, but not really something Harry wants to talk about) Harry finally broaches the subject that brought him here.

“Snape thinks someone’s stealing from Hogwarts.”

George darts his eyes at him. “Old Snape. Huh. Ron mentioned the two of you were working together. What does he think has been nicked?”

“A bunch of things. Potions things, mainly.” Harry takes a sip of his pint. “I thought you might have advice about how someone would be getting in. Since you know all the -”

“Why, Harry,” George cuts him off with a grin. “Surely you’re not suggesting that I ever in my history as a student of Hogwarts behaved as anything other than the upstanding, scrupulous, and highly law-abiding young man that I am today?”

“Of course not.” Harry shakes his head. “Slander.”

“Libel, even! Thank Merlin you weren’t suggesting that. I’m a responsible business owner now, have to protect my reputation.” George’s smile flickers briefly, but holds. “Though there was this dreadful ginger reprobate I recall - Fred was his name, I believe. He would be the one to talk to about this.”

Harry says nothing. Since the funeral, Harry hasn’t heard George as much as say Fred’s name, let alone joke about him. He bites his tongue, giving George as much space as he needs to continue.

“Now, this Fred fellow - he seemed to think there were loads of secret passages. Some had been mapped out, but there were some that probably even he didn’t know about. It’d be impossible to shut them all up, or guard them all. The bowels of that school is like an anthill, just run through with tunnels. Or - I mean, so Fred would have told you. I myself wouldn’t know.” George winks a him. “What makes you think it’s not someone on the inside? A student or professor or something?”

“Just - there are some other pieces. It doesn’t seem likely.”

“Holding your cards close to your chest, eh? Regular detective work, this. Should be on Muggle television.”

“Shut up.”

“Dad’s getting into it now, he watches all the mystery shows. I can see it now, you and Snape traveling the country, solving crimes, breaking hearts.”

Harry doesn’t want to think about Snape - breaking anyone’s heart, just now, so he orders another pint to distract George (and himself). He heads off shortly after, making a promise to come back again soon - and it’s a promise that he strangely wants to keep. He’s no better off than he was before
- of course there are a million passageways into Hogwarts. What’s Harry going to do, guard each one? The real question is who would know which one to take to get them (quickly, quietly) to the potions store room?

When he gets home, he putters around the flat, trying to think about anything but Snape. Because thinking about Snape - hurts. Harry doesn’t know when it started hurting. Or maybe it always did, and the ache has just changed its locus. Changed its colour, gone from the scarlet of anger to the queasy green of guilt to - what colour is it now? (The swimming green-blue of the sea in Greece. The grey of a ridiculous wool coat. The amber of lamplight spilling over books. The pale milk of skin.)

Shit. He’s thinking about Snape again.

As if on cue, he realizes his feet have delivered him to his wreck of a bedroom, the one that hasn’t been slept in for months.

Harry leans against the door frame, taking it all in. The - results of his collecting (or hoarding or whatever) are stacked or boxed on most surfaces. What is he even doing? More than that, what is he going to do? He could get a storage space, maybe. Leave a couple boxes in Hermione’s car-park (Grimmauld End sits old and mouldering in the back of his memory but he - he isn’t ready to go there again. It’s not his, and it has its own ghosts; it doesn’t need any of Harry’s.)

The obvious solution is to - to just give all this away. Which was what Harry intended from the beginning. The longer he puts it off the worse it might turn out (Harry inhales through his clenched teeth at the thought of Snape’s reaction. He can’t imagine it will be pretty.)

Well, he’s not going to get rid of anything tonight. Holding tightly to his wand, Harry transfigures the mess into a few pieces of wooden furniture - a standing wardrobe, a vanity and a trunk. They look musty and ill-made, but they aren’t completely out of place in the room. Aside from a few odd seams here and there, you wouldn’t think there was anything unusual about them.

Harry casts a quick Scourgify, which doesn’t seem to make an impact, and then he goes over the new furniture with a damp rag. The dust doesn’t want to leave. Since the dust might in fact be responsible for holding everything together, Harry decides ignore it.

It occurs to him that he could have done this a long time ago, and actually slept in his own bed. But - that would mean confronting his idiocy head-on and there are limits to his courage.

He wonders when he’ll see Snape again. Wonders how long Snape will keep his distance before he scuttles into Will once again, spitting and hissing like a stray cat. Or ignoring everyone and acting furtive and full of secrets, like - a different stray cat.

Harry hopes it isn’t long.

The next day dawns bright and warm. The sky is the troubling, sunshiny grey of winter fighting off spring. Harry walks into his library, feeling that ridiculous spring energy humming through his hands, making the hairs on his arms stand on end. He smiles at Isadora, hangs up his coat and is -

“MR. POTTER!”

- immediately confronted by a wrathful ghost.

Peggotty hovers above him, eyes huge with fury. Her previously tidy bun has come loose, white hair winding through the air like tentacles.
“No,” Harry says immediately because - no, it can’t -

“Yes,” Peggotty hisses back at him. “Our villain has -”

* * *

“- returned! I’m ever so glad about it! Did you find the drawings I left you?”

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