I Know Not, and I Cannot Know; Yet I Live and I Love

by billowsandsmoke

Summary

Severus Snape has his emotions in check. He knows that he experiences anger and self-loathing and a bitter yearning, and that he rarely deviates from that spectrum… Until the first-year Luna Lovegood arrives to his class wearing a wreath of baby’s breath. Over the next six years, an odd friendship grows between the two, and Snape is not sure how he feels about any of it.

“If a thing loves, it is infinite.” – William Blake

The year is 1992. It is categorized, at least in Severus Snape’s mind, as the second year in which he must keep Harry Potter alive—somehow. Though there is little reason for him to think that this year will prove as hazardous as the one previous, he is continuously finding that his life almost unfailingly holds fast to the adage, “If something can go wrong, it will.” He can only imagine what sort of trouble the boy will get himself into this time, though doing so for any extended period of time leaves him feeling oddly exhausted. Meanwhile, save for Draco Malfoy, who is enough like his father to keep Snape from worrying after him, he does not generally bother himself with thoughts of his other students.

This fact does not change after he first encounters Luna Lovegood. Not immediately.

It is the third day of first-year potions, and the dramatic flair of his now-vaguely lackluster “bottle fame and brew glory” speech has worn off, as the children have quickly realized that there is nothing glorious about slicing burdock roots or stripping lavender sprigs. It is not until he is half way through explaining the proper way to gut a red-throated newt that he notices a small girl in Ravenclaw blue and bronze, a wreath of baby’s breath perched on her lightning-blond hair. His eyes narrow as he
continues to speak, though the girl does not seem to notice that the sudden annoyance radiating off of him is aimed at her. At last he finishes his explanation with a terse, “And I do not want to have to reattach any severed fingers,” before gliding over and glaring down his hooked nose at her.

“Do you mind explaining to me what you were thinking when you decided to bring that nonsense into my classroom?”

She does not seem to understand until his eyes flicker to the crown, and it takes her another split second before she lets out a breathy “ah” and raises her hands to touch the offending white blossoms. The realization changes her expression to one of faint surprise before reverting back to a misty, ambiguous smile. “There’s an aura of sadness down here, and baby’s breath brings light and happiness, especially when worn about the head.”

The answer unbalances him slightly, given that it is delivered as though she is explaining her most recent scientific findings, but the deep frown does not budge from his mouth. “Remove it,” he hisses, lowering his voice into the most menacing, venomous tone he can muster. The other students around him try to make themselves as small as possible, as though to avoid any malice that might be redirected towards them, and this does not fail to please him somewhat.

“Why?” she asks, almost too innocently.

At this, Snape’s mouth hangs open for just a moment; he is not prepared for this. This vicious bravado is a time-tested practice, and he cannot comprehend a situation in which it fails to grant him a few brief moments of self-satisfaction. He cannot comprehend a situation in which the object of his spite asks, “Why?”

He remembers suddenly that he has been asked a question. “Because it is against dress code!” he snarls, and the students around them jump slightly off the seats of their stools.

Still, the girl does not shrink away. She does not lower her eyes or even frown. She lets out a small hum of acknowledgement and gently lifts the crown from her head before laying it inside her bookbag. “Fair enough,” she seems to say, and without further reply, she begins work on her newt.

Snape cannot decide if she is brave or stupid. He suspects the latter, but just to test her, he looms above her workbench for several minutes. He waits for her to make a mistake, but her movements are precise and thoughtful, and when she pauses, it is to glance over at the textbook she has propped open beside her or to his own diagram written on the dusty board. “Be careful,” he snaps at her, but she does not startle.

“Yes, sir,” she says politely, without hesitating.

Somehow this makes him even angrier, and he sweeps off to sneer at a nearby Hufflepuff, who trembles in the appropriate amount of fear.

When class ends and the students rush towards the door in a desperate attempt to rid themselves of his presence, he returns to his desk and pulls out the student roster he was given a few days previous. Amongst a dozen or so tiny photos, hers is the only one not facing outward, as she has instead caught sight of something interesting outside the left side of the frame. He reads her name “Luna Lovegood” in McGonagall’s elegant script, and an odd, distant part of his mind suspects that he might hate her.

…”

When Snape dislikes someone, no one takes notice of it, mostly because Snape does not particularly
like anyone. When Snape hates someone, however, it is very difficult to ignore.

The next day in potions, no one sits next to Luna Lovegood. This does not seem to upset the girl, and when he is finished giving his lesson, she goes about her work looking wholly content. He too goes about his business, but he steals a glance at her from time to time. About half way through the period, he notices her doing something strange. She has picked up the branch of valerian from her ingredients kit and is examining it closely, her mouth tightened into a little frown of concentration, her finger tracing the puff of blossoms as though she is counting each snowy pinprick. When she is satisfied with this, she lifts the branch in her outstretched arm and hefts it slightly, balancing it like a wand or a new extension of herself. She closes one eye, as though judging the arc of it.

He raises his voice suddenly, “Get back to work, Miss Lovegood,” startling what seems to be every student in the classroom except for Miss Lovegood herself.

“I just wanted to know how it’s magic,” she answers, so quietly that he almost does not hear her over the sound of bubbling and clinking glass. He opens his mouth to respond, but pauses when he realizes that he isn’t entirely sure of what she has said. He repeats the odd syntax to himself, “how it is magic?” but by the time he decides that either she is speaking nonsense or he has misheard her, she has already stripped the branch of its flowers and dropped them into her cauldron. He glides to her bench to stand imposingly over her, but when she taps her wand on the cast iron rim three times, the potion turns a perfect shade of goldenrod that even he cannot argue with.

The day after he does not bother her, nor the next day. It is not all-out war, and Snape honestly has better things to do than to expend energy thinking about a girl who barely looks like she has two brain cells to rub together. Of course, in his experience, he also finds that it helps to build a little suspense.

Later that week Miss Lovegood comes to class wearing a pair of earrings that appear to be made out of tiny pinecones that she may or may not have painted herself. In the dim light, Snape doubts he would have even noticed them if he had not been looking, but the dull, golden shine catches his eye as it swings beneath the fold of bright blonde hair.

“Did you pay any attention to the dress code regulations on jewelry,” he sneers, “or are you simply too vain to care about them?” The truth is that no one particularly pays attention to the dress code, including himself until just recently, and a quick look at Miss Lovegood’s off-hours attire—made up of some of the most heinous sweaters that Snape has ever seen—would make any commentary on her vanity seem rather ridiculous.

She looks up at him, her fingers already reaching up to her ears. “Professor Flitwick said they were alright. I asked him.”

“Professor Flitwick does not make the rules in this classroom,” he hisses, knowing full well that she is right. “Five points from Ravenclaw.”

Wordlessly, she removes them and stows them in her cloak before returning to her work in front of her.

After that, Snape tries to work out some sort of strategy. Though general intimidation reduces Neville Longbottom to tears without much effort, Miss Lovegood remains visibly unrattled when he looms above her workstation, even when he snaps at her about working too slowly, or too quickly, or whichever he feels like pointing out on that day in particular. He knocks over her inkwell one day and she apologizes to him, and when he decides to give her bookbag a swift kick on an afternoon that he’s sure it is filled with delicate wildflowers from the grounds, she murmurs a quiet, “Oh dear, I’m always in the way,” and moves it completely under her stool. Though outright unfairness sets
Harry Potter into a self-righteous fury, Miss Lovegood does not even look disappointed, let alone hurt or angry.

She rarely speaks in class, but one day Snape asks, “Can anyone who has actually done the reading tell me the uses of wood betony?”

No one raises their hands, and after Miss Lovegood slowly looks around to make sure that this is the case, she puts her hand in the air. “Miss Lovegood?” he calls, with a smirk so greasy that any other student would have suddenly refused to answer.

“Wood betony is associated with fire, and provides protection against bad dreams, Dark magic, and general negative energy.” She pauses, then adds, “I like to carry a satchel of it when the fire signs are dominant, because even though I’m an Aquarius, it’s the fire stars that don’t agree with me for some reason. I like to mix it with starflower though, because that helps with positive energy too, but it’s got an air alignment that I can connect with.”

Snape frowns, taking this in for a moment. “That would be a rather verbose answer for superstitious grandmothers—surely the stuff of old wives’ tales. I have no patience for such nonsense, and I will ask you to refrain from wasting my time with it. I was looking for the answer from last night’s reading.”

The girl opens her mouth, looking as if she wishes to speak further, then closes it again as though she has thought better of it.

“Do you have something else to add, Miss Lovegood?”

She blinks, takes a moment. “You’re a Capricorn, aren’t you, Professor?”

“Ten points from Ravenclaw.”

The next time the class does not have an answer for one of Snape’s questions, Miss Lovegood raises her hand again, and after he lets out a harsh, “Nobody knows?” the girl lowers it again and places it back in her lap. Unlike Hermione Granger, Miss Lovegood apparently does not demonstrate the incessant need to shove her intelligence (not as though she possesses any) down every else’s throat.

As the weeks wear on and autumn turns to winter, Snape finds it increasingly difficult to continue his onslaught on Miss Lovegood. Unlike Potter, who becomes more combative the more Snape goads him, or Longbottom, who becomes more easily frightened the more Snape taunts him, or Granger, who becomes more determined to speak the more Snape ignores her answers, Miss Lovegood is not combative or frightened or determined to do anything. She is… Blank. Yet somehow also the opposite. Though she is certainly present—lightning hair, pink shoes, bracelets in a dozen colors, unquestionably and unapologetically there—there is also something oddly transient about her, something about the listlessness of her gaze or the often distant, incongruous smile on her face that Snape cannot put his finger on.

He suspects that it is this ephemerality that confounds him most, except when Miss Lovegood is so stridently present and so outrageously odd that he cannot even calculate a response to her antics. On one day in particular, he catches her laying a whole tadpole into her cauldron with a sad, “Goodbye, little Theodore” and a solemn salute, and the only thing he can do is feel angry and slightly appalled, because these are the only feelings vaguely appropriate enough in his emotional vocabulary. The next week he walks into class to find her standing on the rungs of her stool, swinging about a large bouquet of what look like white poppies, much to the varying displeasure and amusement of the few of her classmates who have also arrived early.
From just inside the doorway, Snape throws up his hands. “What are you doing, Miss Lovegood?!”

She turns, and much to his surprise, she is not smiling. Her mouth is set into a tight line and her eyes are full of an ardent resolve. Then, after a split second, she softens, and when she answers, her voice is almost melancholy. “I was just trying to help,” she says, and this does not even make him angry, as his thoughts are immediately occupied with deciphering what she could possibly mean. He does not respond to her, but later he begins to contemplate why the tone of her voice makes him feel something entirely different than the anger or the hurt or the self-loathing that he is used to. Even in the following days, he cannot for life of him put words to whatever that feeling is.

Sometime in late November, she comes to class wearing three gold bands on her fingers, more likely because she has forgotten about them than anything else. Snape descends on her, sneering about her arrogance and her inability to follow dress code, even though simple rings are well within the parameters of what students are allowed to wear. Instead of arguing with him or claiming absentmindedness, Miss Lovegood looks critically at her hands and says, “Oh, they could get hot from the steam, couldn’t they?” She works them off her fingers and puts them in her pocket. “You’re right. That’s very unsafe.”

He docks fifteen points for “cheek,” even though this makes absolutely no sense—to Miss Lovegood, to her increasingly angry Ravenclaw housemates, and admittedly, to even himself. When Snape gets like this, he often does things that don’t make sense, though he is in all other matters extremely logical. When Snape gets like this, he is pursuing one thing and one thing only: the sweet tonic of superiority, a momentary reprieve from the crushing self-hatred that makes a daily meal of him. “Pay attention to me,” he seems to cry. “Respect me!” And though students like Potter obviously do not hold respect for him, the hatred that the boy exudes still delights him, because he is helpless to stop it. Snape has that power over him, and he relishes it, because it is the only power he has.

But though Miss Lovegood does show him some level of respect—more than Potter does at least—it feels like the wrong sort of respect. Her behavior feels almost like a calculated attack, as though this is personal—and for some reason, this feels profoundly, intimately personal.

It is just before Christmas holiday, and Snape is returning from the staff room when he stops abruptly at the bottom of the spiraling dungeon stairs.

Miss Lovegood has paused outside the potions classroom, and he watches silently from the dark stairwell as she carefully removes her earrings, a bottle cap necklace, and a crown made of what appears to be edelweiss. She places these in her bag and pulls out a pair of black shoes, which she tosses on the floor before beginning to remove the pink flats she has been wearing. As she does this, a few Ravenclaw girls in her year pass by, giggling and sporting flamboyant earrings that they know the potions professor will not reprimand them for wearing. They look at her as though they have just smelled something particularly unpleasant, and it is a look Snape has seen a thousand times.

“Hello,” Miss Lovegood greets them. She smiles as she finishes tying her shoes and continues into the classroom after them. Snape does not follow immediately, but rather stands in the cerulean gloom of the dungeon corridor with his hands shoved deep into his pockets and his eyes fixed firmly on the floor. Something ugly gnaws troublingly at the pit of his stomach.

This is not working.

…

One day, Snape decides, it’s time to get a little personal.
It is the last class block on a Thursday and the students are rambunctious, but when Snape sweeps out of his office, an immediate silence falls over the classroom. “You will be working in pairs today,” he tells the odd-numbered class, his voice low and silky, and he watches with dim satisfaction as the students in Miss Lovegood’s general vicinity practically throw themselves out of her reach. Sure enough, the girl is left sitting alone, and she looks around her to make sure that everyone else has paired up. This realization, just like everything else that Snape has thrown at her, does not seem to faze her in the slightest, and she begins to copy Snape’s instructions off the board without needing to be prompted.

Snape lets the class go on for some time, as though the passing minutes will somehow bear down on her until she is crushed under the weight of her seclusion. This does not happen. Finally, driven by impatience, Snape sweeps over to the bench where she is working. When he speaks, the words are laced with the most vicious tone of derision that he can muster.

“What have you considered why you are working alone today?”

“Oh, I have,” she sighs. “I know I’m giving off a bad aura. We’ve just entered the reign of Sagittarius and I’ve run out of a lot of the flowers that I use to make my satchels. I’ve been carrying some heather as usual and a little larkspur, but it just isn’t the same.”

“I sincerely doubt the stars have anything to do with it, Miss Lovegood, though your peculiar affinity for herbology might…”

“Well,” she says, almost haughtily, throwing Snape for a moment. He has never heard her speak with even a hint of such audacity. “There’s nothing I can do about that.”

He takes a moment, pursing his lips as he regains his bearings. “Astonishing, Miss Lovegood,” he sneers. “It is almost as though you enjoy being completely ostracized by your classmates. Does being an outcast make you feel special? Or are you so disconnected from the world that you have failed to notice the fact that everyone gives you as wide a berth as possible?”

Miss Lovegood looks down into her lap, and for one thrilling instant, Snape thinks he has finally gotten to her. But, when she looks up at him to answer, the hurt in her expression has proven to be only momentary. “It don’t mind working by myself, Professor. I know you think it should bother me, but it really doesn’t. It’s not my fault if people think I’m strange. And I know that they do—you don’t have to prove it to me.”

“That will be a detention for you, Miss Lovegood.” The frown lines in his face deepen, and he looks murderous. “I will not allow you to make a mockery of me in this class.”

The girl looks away, her eyes focused on something on the other side of the room. “What time should I be here?” she asks quietly.

Snape lets out a cold breath of mirthless laughter. “Merlin knows I don’t want you here more than absolutely necessary. You will go down to the Forest. I am in need of more lunaria. It grows out on the edge of the forest but I’m finding it difficult to remember exactly where. You will bring some back to me by tomorrow morning.” His mouth twists into a horrible smirk. “Good luck.”

The patch he is thinking of is actually a little ways past the edge of the forest, and he is certain that he will be getting a summons from Dumbledore sometime the next morning. He will enter the headmaster’s office, decline both a lemon drop and a seat in an overstuffed, floral-printed armchair, and then Dumbledore will say, “Severus, do you mind telling me why Hagrid found Miss Lovegood traipsing about on the edge of the forest last night?”
Snape will shrug and say, “She has been disruptive in my class and I was hoping an unorthodox detention might solve the issue.”

Dumbledore will peer over the top of his half-moon spectacles, a little smile on his face because he knows what Snape has done, and he knows that Snape knows he knows. “Next time,” he will say, “please come up with an unorthodox detention that does not involve sending students into the Forbidden Forest. Though I can’t see what Miss Lovegood could have done to incur your wrath.” He will sigh, raising a nonchalant hand. “But no matter. I will see you at lunchtime, Severus.”

And that will be the end of the conversation. Dumbledore will not scold him; Dumbledore never scolds him for this sort of thing, though none of the staff—Snape included—seems to understand why exactly this is.

This is not what happens.

Though there is no class for the first years the next day, Miss Lovegood marches into the potions room ten minutes before the morning lesson and sets a generous handful of lunaria branches on his desk. She is smiling as usual, and she does not respond to the dark glower that comes over his face as he looks down at the crisp, white pods. She does not wait for him to say anything; she reaches into her bag and pulls out a thin beaker of flowers that she sets onto his desk before turning to walk away. Snape is so taken aback that he does not speak until the girl is almost at the door.

“I did not ask for these, Miss Lovegood!”

The door slams behind her before he can protest further.

It is silent as he frowns at the little white blossoms, hanging like delicate church bells from their stems. Snowdrop, he thinks. Galanthus nivalis, for hope, consolation, sympathy, and a purity of intention. He remembers something the girl had said weeks earlier, “I’m just trying to help,” and a deep resentment wells up in him like a punch to the gut. How dare this stupid girl assume that he needs help, he thinks, let alone her help. He has never needed anyone’s help. With one exception, he has never needed anyone at all, and he believes that with an unshakeable conviction. Still, the anger is dulled by whatever strange, nameless feeling came over him that day, and he finds that his heart is not entirely in it when he lashes out and knocks the beaker to the floor with a tinkling crash. He sighs, rests his chin in his hand, and glances glumly over the side of the desk to where the broken glass glitters in the murky light. He does not feel any better—there is no vindictive satisfaction in it.

He begins to hear the footsteps of students descending the dungeon stairwell and so he rises, waving his wand over the broken shards so that they sparkle and melt into the air. He bends down, taking up the fallen snowdrops, and stalks off towards his storecloset in search of a pickling jar. They are rather difficult to come by this time of year, and he doesn’t have the financial liberty to waste a perfectly good ingredient.

There is a strange, nagging feeling in the back of his mind, and Snape uneasily suspects that just as breaking Luna Lovegood has become somewhat of a pet project for him, Miss Lovegood has made somewhat of a project out of him as well.

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It is just after Valentine’s Day. Snape has been up late working with Professor Sprout and the mandrakes, the latter of which are growing quiet and testy. A few have already fallen completely silent, indicating that within the next few days, they will likely let out their final death cries and be completely useless in creating the petrification cure. There is a building pressure, given how rare fresh mandrakes are. Snape too is growing quiet and testy.
He is gathering the stack of exams that he is about to administer to the first year students when he looks up at just the right moment and sees Arnold Price give Miss Lovegood’s stool a swift kick just as she is about to sit. She tumbles to the floor with a little gasp and the students around her dissolve into quiet snickering.

It almost feels like a chore when he rounds the desk and sweeps over to Miss Lovegood’s bench, and his gait lacks the well-practiced elegance that it usually does.

“I am sure, Miss Lovegood, that I do not need to stress the fact that the potions room is no place for horseplay,” he says, arms crossed in front of him as he glares down at her. “Or do you think it unnecessary to take your time here seriously?” He is sure that this time, this time, she will have to speak up. Even he can feel the sheer injustice biting at his insides.

She does not reply immediately, but first resituates herself on her stool and smooths out her skirt. She looks up at him, eyes wide and earnest. “I’m sorry, Professor,” she says gently. “I was thinking about the nargles I saw out by Hagrid’s house and I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Detention,” he barks, before he even realizes that the word is leaving his mouth. A wave of bitter fury washes over him, and in a startling moment of clarity, the nebulous thought that has been swirling through his mind suddenly has words: “Fight back!” he wants to scream at her. “Fight back!”

Miss Lovegood looks up at him, grey marble eyes calm, and asks, “Shall I go out to the Forest again?”

“No,” he spits. “Here. Five o’clock.” This is right before supper and he knows it. He storms away, his mind already thinking of a dozen things he could make her do—scrub cauldrons by hand, prepare the foul-smelling mulled dragon’s blood for the seventh year class, clean out the jars of expired rat brains that have been stewing in the back of his storecloset for the past few years…

It is not just about satisfaction anymore; Snape thinks he knows why Miss Lovegood’s unshakeable calm feels so personal. It is because life is unfair, he thinks; life is bitterly unfair and you must fight back against it because he knows, he knows, that fighting back is the only way to survive. Only anger can win out for people like him, for people who are weak, and he knows that one must fight, tooth and nail, until they become strong and impenetrable things that can no longer feel hurt. They must become bitter, twisted things that no one dares to hurt. Miss Lovegood might think she is winning her fight, but her infuriating composure will not ward off those who wish to do her harm forever. The world will try to crush her, he thinks, and one day she will break.

Come five o’clock, Snape has a second realization: he is dreading having to be in the same room alone with Miss Lovegood. She arrives, and he spends as little time as possible explaining that she will be weeding through his jars of pogrebin teeth, some of which may be showing signs of rot. He mentions only in passing that they will emit an unpleasant odor, and he does not mention at all that prolonged exposure to them can bring on an acute grief and an eventual unwillingness to go on living. She will likely finish with them before it reaches that point, Snape thinks. Probably.

He has reams of seventh year essays that he needs to get through, and he finishes with several of them before looking up to where Miss Lovegood is working, unfortunately at the bench closest to his desk. He watches as she takes one tooth out of the jar to her right, holds it up to the gloomy light, turns it, and then places it in a pile to her left. She almost looks like she is enjoying herself.

The minutes tick on, and Snape finds that he cannot focus on the papers in front of him. He continues to look up, more frequently now, and Miss Lovegood is neither slowing nor showing signs of distress. His quill dangles loosely in his fingers as he stares down at the words without reading
them, and he feels himself, strangely, growing unbearably tired.

The girl suddenly lets out an enthralled, “hmmm,” and holds one particular tooth up to her eye, examining it closely before holding out in front of her. She pulls it back, waving it a few inches beneath her nose.

“Is there a problem, Miss Lovegood?”

“Oh no,” she says, smiling widely. “I was wondering if this one was more magical than the others. This one’s got three roots on it!”

He does not give her any response, and so she shrugs, sets the odd tooth in front of her, and then continues on working.

Snape looks down at his hands and the sting of shame overtakes him, and the cruel voice inside him that he tries to stifle every moment of his waking life hisses, “You are a terrible human being.”

He thinks of the wave of emotion that overtook him earlier that day, thinks of the need to “fight back” and the need to bask in the few, precious moments of self-satisfaction that he can. He fought back, he thinks and he’s fine, of course, he’s fine…

The third and final realization comes over Snape like a low roll of summer thunder. It is not about fighting back, and this does not feel personal because he believes Miss Lovegood should be strong. It is personal because Miss Lovegood makes him feel weak. By the sheer force of her carelessness, of her impenetrable foolishness, this girl has forced him to look into the filthy chasm of his own psyche —she has rubbed his nose in the mud of the worst part of himself. Miss Lovegood, by the force of that unrelenting smile, has won.

He cannot bring himself to be angry, because although he so often hunts that high of satisfaction, of being superior to someone, of being stronger, in this moment he feels too insignificant, and impotent, and small. The game is petty, but pettiness is all he has, and this is likely the most self-aware that Snape will ever allow himself to be. Any more, and he doubts he could bear to see another day.

Life is bitterly unfair. This is true. But it is not his responsibility to teach her that. If—when—Luna Lovegood breaks, it will not be his doing.

As Snape looks up from his untouched paperwork, his dried-out quill, he hears her stomach give a poignant growl. “Oh, excuse me,” she murmurs to herself, a lilting sweetness about her tone, and she does not cease in her smiling. Snape touches his fingers to his forehead and sighs.

“You may go, Miss Lovegood.”

The girl looks up. “I thought I would be here until eight?”

“Go to supper, Miss Lovegood.”

Without further prompting, she waves her wand over her workspace; the approved teeth fly into the open jar she has prepared for them, and the few rejected ones fall into a small dish beside her. She closes the lid to the jar of unsorted teeth, gathers her things, and approaches his desk before offering him something. He does not even look at her as he holds out his hand, and she drops the three-pronged tooth into his outstretched palm before waltzing out of the classroom without another word. The door closes behind her with a soft thud.

Snape looks up at the yellowing molar, turning it over in his fingers, and he can feel the air of despondency radiating off of it. He quickly tosses it into one of his desk drawers, slamming it shut,
but there is still a churning, awful feeling in Snape’s gut that he knows has very little to do with the tooth. With a malcontented grunt, he folds his arms and slouches in his chair like a petulant child.

He is tired. He is tired and Miss Lovegood is too stupid or too oblivious or too good-natured to play into his twisted game. He is too tired to be angry about it. He is too tired, and too weak, and too petty and insignificant and small.

This agonizing self-awareness eats away at him, and he sits in silence well through the end of dinner. He knows that he hates something, but he has serious doubts about whether that thing is Luna Lovegood after all.

…

One morning, Snape almost spits Earl Grey tea across the staff table.

It is early May, and he has made every attempt to avoid extraneous contact with the strange Ravenclaw girl with the lightning hair. Yet, as he raises his eyes over the porcelain rim of the cup, mid-sip, he cannot possibly ignore the monstrously large, flapping eagle that has somehow affixed itself to her head.

He gives an unexpectedly loud sputter as his eyebrows ricochet upward; Minerva sees this out of the corner of her eye, and she looks at him curiously before turning her head in an attempt to follow his previous line of sight. It takes only a moment for her to see the Ravenclaw mascot hat, which is attempting to abandon its perch in the pursuit of a particularly delicious-looking Slytherin. She beholds it for a second, turns back to Snape, still coughing, and then back to Miss Lovegood again.

Despite all the worry about the Chamber of Secrets and its monster, despite everything that the Deputy Headmistress has on her mind, Minerva McGonagall lets out an uncharacteristically rowdy bark of laughter and immediately erupts into hysterics.

Snape finally clears his windpipe and scowls. He is not sure that he has ever seen the witch laugh quite this heartily: one hand rests on her belly and the other is pressed against her forehead as she tilts backward in her chair, head thrown back as she guffaws up at the ceiling. After several seconds she rocks forward again, and her horn-rimmed glasses end up tangled in her hairline as she buries her face in both palms.

“Extraordinary work,” he hears Filius chuckle to himself from two seats to Snape’s left. “Such creativity.”

At least it’s not a bloody flower crown, he thinks sourly, and gulps down the rest of the tea before rising from the table. Minerva is still laughing as he closes the side wing door behind him, and he cannot decide if she is laughing at the girl, at him, or at the both of them.

…

It is Halloween, 1993. To those around him, Snape only looks more tired than usual; his hair is perhaps a day or two greasier, and the circles beneath his eyes are a hint darker. His temper is shorter, and there is a vague tension about him. Whereas he usually keeps his thoughts very quiet, with the anger and the bitterness melding into a kind of discreet mental static, today his control slips and he is unable to keep his mind from broadcasting these auras more loudly than he would normally allow. The only ones sensitive enough to pick up on this, however, are Dumbledore, who understands it, and Minerva, who moves away from him at breakfast, clearly unsure of what is making her feel so ill at ease.
It has nothing to do with being tired of course, though it’s true that his sleep was brief and riddled with nightmares. Of all days, Halloween is the one day that Snape feels particularly vulnerable, at his rawest, like there are live wires running through his veins or insects crawling under his skin. Grief and guilt settle over him like a heavy winding sheet, smothering him until he feels nothing but a throbbing numbness. Of course, nowadays the numbness is no longer quick to relieve him, what with Lupin’s scarred face appearing around every corner, Sirius Black’s name on every person’s breath, and the exact shape and color of Lily Evans’ eyes burned irreversibly into the insides of his eyelids.

Snape rarely visits the thestrals, as he does not often allow himself the luxury of such comfort, but today he makes an exception. He feels as though he will explode if he does not. It’s Sunday, and there are no papers to grade, so he takes his time walking through the castle and out onto the grounds. The roof of the covered bridge is dusted with frost, and the mist over the ravine turns the landscape into a dreary grey soup. The air is moist, and feels thick in his throat. He feels like he is swimming in it, or drowning. The trees rise up above him like a tide of dark water.

At last he arrives at the clearing, and leans forward to rest his arms on the stone wall that surrounds it. The fog hangs low here, forming an eerie shroud of grey that swirls just above the black earth. With a nearly inaudible sigh, Snape takes out a shabby, greying handkerchief from the inside of his cloak, in which is stowed a few generous handfuls of bacon, furtively stolen bit by bit from the breakfast table each time he was sure no one was looking. He places it carefully on the wall beside him and waits. It is not long before there is a rustling off to his left, and he turns to see one of the largest thestrals picking its way through the underbrush. It is a striking creature: jet black, dead skin stretched tight over a jagged ribcage, the shape of its head more of a skull than a face.

It throws its head, examining him with one milky, faintly glowing eyeball, then the other. He picks up a piece of bacon and gestures out to the creature with it; it needs no further enticement. With a soft grunt, it trots forward and bites the extended bit out of his fingers with the hook of its beak-like muzzle. It chews with lines of razor-sharp incisors, swallows, and delicately accepts the remaining piece from his open palm.

This continues for several minutes, and Snape’s expression is odd. His brow is deeply furrowed and his mouth is tightened into a thin, melancholy smile—it is as though he is simultaneously pleased and also uncomfortable with the fact that he is pleased. Guilty, perhaps. The creature finishes its last bite and affectionately buries its muzzle into the crook of his arm; Snape is vaguely aware of the fact that the affection makes him feel good, though receiving affection and feeling good aren’t generally things that he knows how to experience. Nonetheless, he responds in kind with a gentle pass of his fingertips across the leathery cheekbone, and this too feels hesitantly… Good.

Snape slowly begins to feel more at peace. He is still deeply situated in the valley of his sorrow, but it is more subdued now, a fixture in his being rather than something he must do battle with. The pain is replaced by something more muted, more melancholy than upset, and there is a strange comfort in allowing himself to feel this, though it is not lost on him how fitting it is that he should be comforted by a creature so closely associated with death. In a wave of self-pity, he wonders if death will be the only true comfort he ever finds.

He only half registers the other figure that comes into view on the opposite side of the clearing, and the thestral perks up its horn-like ears and quickly turns to canter towards Miss Lovegood. In the mist, she too looks grey—the pink of her sweater looks under-saturated in the fog, her skin is almost translucent, and even her blonde hair looks white, as though the forest has aged her many decades. For a moment, Snape wonders what has brought the girl here, until the animal gives a delighted toss of its head and nuzzles its nose into the girl’s shoulder; she laughs softly and takes its face in both
hands before kissing it gently on the forehead.

Snape’s eyes widen slightly as his brain slowly computes several things. First, that Miss Lovegood can most certainly see the thestrals, indicating that at some point during this child’s relatively short lifespan, she has had contact with Death itself. Second, this is far from her first visit to the clearing, and third, these visits are something she enjoys. She has not simply come to visit Death—she is friendly with it.

There is the sound of snapping twigs, and Snape looks up to where three more of the herd have started to emerge. One is larger and midnight black like the first, while the other two are smaller and a more faded grey, and they look like embodiments of the mist as they trot forward and prance around the girl, nickering quietly and pawing at the dirt.

She laughs, and then something even more unexpected happens. Miss Lovegood reaches into what looks suspiciously like one of Hagrid’s moleskin sacks, and pulls out the reddest, rawest slab of meat that Snape has ever seen in his life. The color strikes him immediately; it is as though the girl has gouged a bleeding, crimson wound into the fog, and it is vivid, ardent, alive. The next thing that strikes him is the conclusion that this girl is irrevocably strange, not only because normal twelve year-olds do not treat thestrals like oversized ponies, but also because normal twelve year-olds do not generally carry around heaping sacks of raw meat.

He watches, awe-struck, as Miss Lovegood gives the first thestral its meal, then pulls out another bleeding chunk for the next thestral, and then another. They take each piece from her gently, careful not to nip her fingers, and their long, bony tails whip happily back and forth as they chew. The first one grows impatient and reaches over to steal a bite from another, but Miss Lovegood waggles a stern finger at it. “Don’t be greedy,” she tells it, and astonishingly, the animal responds to her scolding. She feeds it what seems to be her last piece while one of the smaller, greying thestrals nibbles at her hair.

And as he watches the girl, who is obviously deeply pleased at the morbid company she keeps, Snape realizes something else: Miss Lovegood does not look sorry for herself.

She notices him then. She waves and offers him a warm smile, though it is tinged with a familiar melancholy, and Snape knows in that moment the answer to a nagging question: Miss Lovegood is not stupid at all. She is not oblivious or unintelligent or unresponsive. In fact, he suspects that this girl knows and feels a great deal more than she ought to.

Snape does not wave back. He turns and silently begins his walk back to the castle. The shroud of sorrow and self-pity no longer hangs about him, but it is replaced with something more complicated: a nebulous swirl of abstract emotion that he does not find himself equipped to understand.

…

After this, Snape takes occasional notice of Miss Lovegood: in particular, the penetrating attention that she pays while completing her assignments. With a twinge of self-loathing, he remembers berating her for lingering over her ingredients, but he sees now that there is an acute thoughtfulness in the way that she examines each herb or animal part. She seeks to understand each ingredient—that makes it function the way it does, why it has a certain texture or color. She seeks to understand the kind of magic it exudes and the source of it, or in her words, “how it is magic.”

She smells everything, and whether or not her expression is one of approval or disgust does not seem to correlate to the agreeability of its scent. There seems to be something different that she is testing for, and though Snape tries to work out a pattern, he cannot manage to figure out what it is. It is something, though; he is sure of it. He is now sure that much of her peculiarity has a perfectly good
reasoning behind it.

He still catches her naming her more intact ingredients, however, and he doubts that he will ever consider that habit anything but categorically bizarre.

...

Snape lets out a quiet grumble. As an extension of keeping his thoughts quiet, he has also made a habit of not talking aloud to himself, but the nondescript murmur nonetheless translates roughly to “Where the hell did that thing go?”

He’s searching the library stacks for the dark leather binding of *Mysteries of the Caduceus: Greek Alchemical Circles and their Healing Properties*, though it is not in the same place that it was when he checked it out for a project the year before. Instead, he can find only a yellow, peeling copy of *Greek Healers and their Secrets*, which will inevitably be much less helpful than he will need it to be.

After considering it for a few more moments, he reaches out to pluck it off the shelf with a small sigh that is the equivalent of, “Good enough, I suppose,” but he is interrupted by a cheerful voice calling his name. It is not uncommon for students to ask for him—regardless of whether he likes his role as a teacher or not, he at least has responsibilities to fill—but he cannot say he has ever been summoned with so much enthusiasm. As such, he knows immediately who it is, before he even turns to look.

Miss Lovegood has just risen from her seat at one of the nearby tables, which is littered with books and bits of parchment. She holds out a page that looks suspiciously like a restricted section permission slip, and that alone indicates that whatever she is about to ask him is going to be a bit more peculiar than he is generally comfortable with.

“What?” he asks tersely, less because he is displeased at being disturbed and more because he is caught off-guard.

“I was wondering if you could sign this,” she says, holding out what is indeed the suspected permission slip. “I’m doing some very important research.”

Snape does not doubt this. He nods solemnly as he approaches her and accepts the slip, placing it down on the table to sign with the quill that she has offered him. He scans the page to see what exactly this research entails, and he is somehow surprised by the fact that he is not surprised when he reads the title, “*Lying in Wait: The Dark Potential of the Flobberworm.*” He questions whether or not the book really belongs in the restricted section before a profound, morbid curiosity suddenly overtakes him, and he tilts his head slightly to glance at the largest stack of books already on the table: *Searching the Sky: Understanding Prophetic Cloud Patterns*, *Magic of the Himalayas*, *25 Useful Substances for Household Cleaning*, *The Art of Enchanted Tapestry Weaving*, and what he assumes is the library’s unmarked copy of *The Book of Soyga*, judging by the way that the binding gives off a faint orange glow.

To his own astonishment, Snape asks aloud, “What kind of research are you doing?”

“Ah!” Miss Lovegood chirps, “Well, you see, Professor—”

Severus Snape is a very clever man. He knows this. Though his general opinion of himself does not normally exceed “abysmal,” he does consider himself to be well-read, knowledgeable, and a particularly adept scholar.

Snape has no idea what the hell Luna Lovegood is talking about.
It seems to have something to do with Tibetan prayer rugs, yak hair, Ukrainian heirloom beets, and the intercourse of Eastern and Western cold remedies, but he isn’t certain of any of this. (The book about cloud scrying is just for fun, apparently.) Regardless, he does have to admit that she is certainly eloquent, and informed, and she does seem to be arguing her point well, despite the fact that he is not entirely sure of what that point is. After two full minutes he stops trying to comprehend her words and starts wondering how long this is going to go on, and if there is any way that he can gracefully extract himself from the conversation. She moves to draw a complicated sigil in a notebook of pink-tinted paper, making him wonder if she’s the one who has checked out *Mysteries of the Caduceus*, and then she makes a circular hand gesture to suggest that this brings her to her next point. The transition is so seamless that he does not even have the opportunity to interrupt her.

Snape glances over at the clock on the far wall to his right, and he estimates that about six minutes have passed when at last Miss Lovegood finishes, “and so my next step will certainly have to involve a thorough investigation of Celestina Warbeck’s family tree.” All things considered, six minutes is not very much time to explain such a convoluted theory.

It is silent for a few long seconds before he lets out another sound: “Huh.” Which, in Snape-terms, means something like, “That’s… Nice. I will let you get back to that.”

Miss Lovegood seems to have an uncanny understanding of this, and with a nod, she takes the permission slip and turns to skip towards Madame Pince’s desk. Snape leaves the library empty-handed.

…

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Loony Lovegood!”

Snape is cutting through the 3rd floor when he hears a girl’s voice echo across the courtyard. This is not the sort of thing that would normally catch his attention, but the misuse of Miss Lovegood’s name, coupled with the sickeningly familiar tone with which it is used, strikes an old, old, cord that makes him pause to look.

There are five of them—two Ravenclaws girls, two older Slytherin boys, and a second-year Slytherin who is no doubt the protégé of the former two. Miss Lovegood has the means to escape if she wishes, but she chooses not to, and there is a faint smile on her face as she stands before them, cradling her books in her arms. She seems impossibly small as she looks up at the tallest girl, a fourth year named Patricia Stimpson, who appears to be doing most of the talking. “How are you, Loony?” she asks, laughing coldly. “You’re not hunting any more of those stupid—what do you call them? Nuncles?”

“They’re called *nargles*,” Miss Lovegood corrects her, “and they really are quite a nuisance. You shouldn’t laugh about them.”

“Right, right,” says Miss Stimpson with a dismissive wave of her hand, before the eldest Slytherin, Lucian Bole, chimes in.

“We found a copy of your dad’s tosspot magazine in a bin the other day. We read the whole thing cover to cover.”

“I hope you liked it,” she says politely. From the shadow of the corridor, Snape’s fist clenches around the fabric of his cloak, and there is a familiar ache in him that suddenly begins to pang deeper than usual. He wants to call out to her, “*Fight back*!” but he already knows how fruitless this would be. Snape continues to watch in silence as the other students burst into laughter.
“Oh, we had fun alright,” Cassius Warrington sneers. “It just kept getting better and better. That conspiracy theory about the Minister? I thought I was going to piss laughing.”

“Yeah, your dad is barmy,” says the youngest boy, Giles Harper.

“I guess that explains a lot about you,” adds Mr. Bole.

Miss Stimpson suddenly lashes out at Miss Lovegood—Snape startles, thinking that she has struck her—but when she pulls back he sees that she has snatched the sunflower that Miss Lovegood had apparently pinned behind her left ear. Miss Lovegood flinches as several wispy hairs come with it.

“First the Chamber of Secrets, now this whole Sirius Black business… You better hope that Hogwarts doesn’t close for real one of these days.” Miss Stimpson gives a low click of her tongue as the sunflower disappears under the heel of her shoe, and when she draws up close to the younger Ravenclaw, Snape can just barely hear her hiss, “Nowhere else is going to accept a tosser like you, Loony.”

The bell chimes, prompting the girl to forcefully slap the books from Miss Lovegood’s arms, and the small Ravenclaw does not protest as the other students turn and stride off in the opposite direction. “I hope the dementors try and get you next!” Mr. Warrington calls over his shoulder, and the rest of the entourage laughs as they disappear into the nearest corridor. Miss Lovegood drops to one knee while she dusts off her books and replaces them in her bag. She gently picks up her crushed sunflower, studies it for a moment, and finally takes out her wand before waving it over the vibrant petals. The flower responds, blooming again with a soft crackle, and she pins it back in her hair. Though there is undoubtedly a hint of sadness in her eyes, she has not once stopped smiling.

His second year class with the Slytherins starts soon, Snape reminds himself, and he pushes the scene from his mind as he sweeps off towards the dungeons. He doesn’t think any more of it, but the dull ache remains situated deep in his chest, and when he is extra scathing to Miss Granger later that afternoon, he cannot say for certain why.

…

On one day in particular, Snape takes a wrong turn. He is distracted by, what is in his opinion, an appropriate concern about the murderer who is loose in the castle and quickly closing in on Harry Potter—and maybe Snape himself if history is anything to go by—despite the fact that a certain headmaster who shall remain nameless seems generally unconcerned by either issue. Of course, it would be a lie to say that he is not also thinking about the fact that if Draco Malfoy comes to him one more time complaining about Hagrid’s stupid hippogriff, he might also try to kill someone.

He opens the door to what he thinks is the fourth floor’s back stairwell, and immediately realizes that it is, in fact, a broom closet, and also that Miss Lovegood is hanging upside down from the apparently sturdy shelving with an open book in one hand and her wand in the other. There is a pentagram filled with pink carnations and asphodel on the floor in front of her.

“Hello, Professor,” she says gently.

There is a long pause. The altercation in the courtyard flashes in his mind’s eye and he hesitantly asks, “You’re not… Locked in here, are you?”

“Oh no,” she begins to explain, “I was just—”

Snape closes the door and quickly walks away.

…
Snape is in a foul mood. Anyone would be if they had to navigate the ongoing disaster that is his life.

Dumbledore has finally given him the details of the First Task, and part of his brain pictures Lily Evans shrieking, “You let my son get EATEN BY A DRAGON?!” For sure, it is not how he foresaw this whole debt-paying business going, and when he first agreed to it, it was not as though Dumbledore warned him that in fifteen years’ time he would be organizing an international death game to be played with the boy as an illegal fourth competitor. If it can go wrong, it will, Snape reminds himself. The image of Lily’s wrathful face still haunts him, however, and he finds himself in a rare state of feeling acutely upset.

He slowly sweeps about the classroom, eyes darting from one cauldron to the next, until he comes to Miss Lovegood’s bench. By this point, he generally doesn’t concern himself with worrying about the quality of her work, but a deep annoyance coils in his chest when he sees the handful of dandelion roots lying untouched on her workspace. He is about to swoop down and reprimand her for being so inattentive, but he pauses when she suddenly glances over at the roots, casts them a critical look, and then stuffs them into an empty beaker. Out of curiosity, Snape keeps quiet and lets her go about her work in peace. He has more important things to trouble himself with, after all.

Later that evening, Snape is grading the third year samples when he comes across the flask labeled with Miss Lovegood’s name. He shakes it experimentally and holds it up to the light; it does not bubble, and it is completely unclouded, without tint or sheen. So far, no other student has produced a perfectly clear potion, which is to be expected considering how precisely the procedure must be followed to do so.

Snape pulls open one of his desk drawers and takes out a fresh testing stone: a hollow carved into a smooth amethyst geode. He uncorks the bottle, waving it briefly under his nose (it smells faintly of lemongrass), before pouring a few drops of Miss Lovegood’s concoction into the shallow dish, waving his wand over it, and then adding his own control brew.

He works with the stone for at least twenty minutes, rising to fetch some lemongrass and more dandelion roots from his closet, returning to his desk, casting various diagnostic charms over the amethyst, adding various ingredients to the hollow, and so on. At last he sits back in his chair and stares at the clutter that has accumulated on his desk. He is certain. The only alteration she has made is that she has substituted lemongrass for dandelion, and though the two are magically quite similar, there is a chemical difference in the lemongrass which allows for a slight margin of error in adding the other ingredients that the dandelion does not.

If anyone were to ask him, he would say that Miss Lovegood should certainly stick to the textbook—that no thirteen year-old should assume that they know better than what centuries of research has concluded—but he would also know that’s a lie.

The next time he sees her tinkering with ingredients in class he catches her eye, glances down at the belladonna on the table, and then back up at her. “Be careful,” he says, not unkindly. Miss Lovegood nods.

…

It is fairly crowded in the corridor, the walls echoing with the buzz of a dozen voices, and Snape feels somehow separate from them as he passes. He is tired, and his eyes are fixed on the floor as he walks.

A small, moving sparkle catches his eye, and he stops short as it rolls up to him, bouncing off the toe of his shoe before coming to a halt.
He looks up to where Patricia Stimpson is staring at him like a startled deer, then over to Lucian Bole beside her, and then finally to Miss Lovegood, who is watching him intently. Slowly, he bends down to pick up the object in question; it is a thin golden bracelet with the shape of a leaping hare stretched across it.

He meets Miss Lovegood’s eyes again as he approaches her, and he wordlessly holds out the bracelet. She accepts it with a murmured “thank you,” and her fingers have barely closed around it before he brushes by her and continues towards the dungeons.

Later that day, Snape gives Miss Stimpson a zero for the day because she is talking too loudly, and also because he is a vindictive kind of person and he likes to make a point of it. But it’s not as though that’s always a bad thing.

…

There is a low gurgle, followed by a pop pop pop pop.

Snape spins around to see a plume of crimson smoke erupt from Miss Lovegood’s cauldron, and though she is quick to cast a containment charm over it, it is not enough; Zachariah Smith abandons his stool to avoid the sudden burst of heat.

Snape is at the bench almost instantly. With a calculated twist of his wand, a sheath of dim light encloses the foul-smelling smoke, and with another wave, the contents of the cauldron begins to shimmer and disappear. When it is gone, he raises his free hand against the barrier of light, guiding it as it closes inwards. The smoke resists for a full few minutes, and he furrows his brow in concentration as the ward swells and recedes until it covers only the mouth of the cauldron. With a few more pulses the smoke diffuses and he lifts the charm, leaving only a vague haze in the air.

There is a short pause before Snape turns his attention to the Ravenclaw, who looks appropriately embarrassed.

“Miss Lovegood!” he barks. He is not raising his voice for dramatic effect; he is legitimately angry. “Did you, or did you not hear me say that this potion is delicate?”

“I did, sir,” she says quietly, her face bowed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t listen.”

“I can see that! And now half of Mr. Smith’s workspace is scorched. Lucky for both of you it was not a hand or a leg! It is true that I have allowed you to experiment, but it was with the assumption that you would do so with some responsibility! I expected better from you.”

“I’m very sorry, sir.”

“10 points from Ravenclaw, and you will report for detention tonight after supper. You will complete the assignment using the instructions I give you. In the meantime, help Mr. Smith finish his potion before the end of class. He is no doubt behind on account of you nearly blowing him up.”

She does as she is told. Seven o’clock comes and Miss Lovegood arrives, unpacks her materials, and silently sets to work. She is not frowning, but neither is she smiling, and she does not look at him. Snape is grading a stack of first year exams, and each time he glances up to check her progress, she is working quickly and purposefully. After about forty-five minutes she finishes, siphons the potion into a small flacon, and cleans her workspace before bringing it to his desk.

“I’m sure this will be adequate,” he says as he accepts it. “I trust this will not happen again.”

“No,” she says. Then, with her eyes lowered, she adds, “I’m sorry for disappointing you.”
Snape pauses. He is unsure of why his disappointment should matter to her more than her personal failure or the scorn of her classmates—he is unsure of why his opinion would matter to anyone at all. Then, the word hits him: he is disappointed. There is a moment of clarity in the usual emotional haze that he experiences whenever Miss Lovegood is involved, though it returns again when he realizes that he does not know why he feels disappointed in her, or from where this feeling has come. In this moment, there seem to be a great number of things that he does not know, but it startles him to think that Miss Lovegood might understand what he is feeling even better than he does.

“It’s… alright. Do better next time.”

“Yes, sir.”

She turns to leave, and she is halfway to the door when he calls after her. Though the exact nature of his feelings might escape him, he does comprehend a pressing need to communicate that he is no longer angry with her. More than that, he has for some time felt the growing urge to extend some semblance of apology for all the times he has been angry for less legitimate reasons, though he knows that it is far too late for it to matter. He knows that apologies never matter.

“Miss Lovegood.” She turns back to him. “Though I must ask you to refrain from tinkering in class, I do not wish to…” He pauses, thinking of the correct wording. “Restrict your study. If you would like to conduct additional research, you may use the classroom after hours. Under supervision, of course.”

Miss Lovegood thinks about this for a moment, processing the information, and then an incandescent smile returns to her face. “I would like that very much,” she says. “Thank you.”

She does not close the door behind her when she leaves, and he can hear the echo of her humming as she ascends the staircase out of the dungeons.

He is still genuinely surprised when she takes him up on the offer.

Some evenings she arrives with a page or two of carefully copied instructions, other times she tosses down a sheaf of parchment with a dozen different sets of notes scrawled on it. She works in her cauldron only sometimes; there are evenings when he opens the storage closet for her and she simply examines ingredients, poking or prodding them with her wand before she duly records her findings. She works in silence, with the occasional question: “Do the effects of star grass change depending on what house the moon is in when you harvest it?” or “Has anyone ever tried making an Invisibility Potion with bicorn horn instead of graphorn horn?” or “Is using tongue of dog considered controversial?” or “Do you think there’s a cure for Spattergroit and the Ministry is just keeping it from us?”

He answers her the best that he can, and though at first he responds with no more elaboration than is completely necessary, he finds that as the months wear on, his explanations become less terse and more like conversations, in which they discuss the properties of bicorn horn and whether or not there really is a Ministry conspiracy after all.

Miss Lovegood becomes a regular fixture in the after-hours potions room, and though they never make personal chatter with one another, Snape grows accustomed to the regular company. As the impending isolation of the summer months bears down on him, he might think that it is agreeable to have another human being around, if not for the fact that he is quite sure that he prefers being alone. Miss Lovegood, meanwhile, seems oddly content during her visits—he attributes this to her general disposition, and though he does wonder once or twice if she doesn’t occasionally bring other work with her as well, he can’t think of any reason for her to do so. The thought that the girl might enjoy his company is just as ridiculous as the thought that he might enjoy hers. Strangely, he is less certain
that this is ridiculous, as time goes on.

On one evening in particular, very close to the end of the year, she asks him to teach her the barrier magic that he cast that one day in class: the compound containment charm and *Evanesco* that he uses for especially nasty slip-ups.

“Mistakes happen,” she says, after she completes the spell correctly with only a half hour or so of practice. She gives an enigmatic nod. “Some worse than others.”

He pauses. The observation clearly means something to the girl, but the sentiment resonates somewhere deep within himself as well. “Yes,” he answers at last. “I suppose you’re right.”

…

“What is *that*?!” squawks the pink-clad toad who calls herself Dolores Umbridge. Snape looks up from Ellie Galloway’s cauldron to where the stout witch is poised at the corner of Miss Lovegood’s workstation. Colin Mulhern, the Ravenclaw sitting next to them, is doing his best to stifle a vindictive grin.

Snape makes his way over to them as Umbridge snatches the girl’s quill from her hand and waves it threateningly at her. “You think you know better than the textbook, do you?” She whirls around and points with a finger that is not unlike a raw, miniature sausage. “Is this the kind of behavior you usually allow in your classroom, Professor Snape?”

Snape does not acknowledge Umbridge; he looks down to see that Miss Lovegood has taken to annotating her textbook in swirling, magenta handwriting that is just as meticulous as it is gaudy. Though aesthetically different, Snape’s thoughts cannot help but turn to his own thoroughly marked books, some of which are still in his possession and others of which have been lost over time. He considers the girl and her notes for a moment, sparring with a feeling that is most probably not pride.

“What did I say about tinkering in class, Miss Lovegood?” he says at last. His tone is not unpleasant. “This *works*, Professor.”

He raises his eyebrows slightly, and if he had a pair of spectacles, he would have peered over the top of them in such a way that would have no doubt been a product of spending too much time with Albus Dumbledore. “*Does it*?”

“Yes,” she says resolutely.

There is a pause as Umbridge and Mulhern look at him expectantly, waiting for him to crush this girl, because he is Severus Snape and he is surely a soulless monster who lives only to destroy everything in his path that is even remotely good or moral.

Snape shrugs and slips his hands into his pockets. “Carry on,” he says coolly, as he glides away in a billow of robes. Umbridge and Mulhern are left looking aghast as Miss Lovegood picks up her quill again and begins humming quietly to herself.

He glances back and meets her eye for only a nanosecond; if he had been a different kind of human living a different kind of life, it is possible that he might have winked.

…”

The first time Miss Lovegood arrives to class without shoes, Snape does not comment on it. He’s learned to pick his battles with her, and if she can continue to produce exceptional work while in her
stockings, he is not going to trouble himself with the issue. He wonders for a moment if footwear blocks the flow of positive energy in the body, or if having cold feet wards away Nargles, and then quickly berates himself.

He does not think on the matter again for another week, until the first heavy snowfall. It is late November and as he turns from writing his instructions on the board, he spots Miss Lovegood hunched over on her stool, one leg crossed over the other as she casts a drying spell over one sopping sock. He watches as she switches to the other foot, while several other students leer at her and laugh between themselves. An old, familiar indignation wells up in his chest, filling him, and he shoots a withering glare at the giggling Hufflepuffs as he glides over to the bench.

“Do you own a pair of shoes, Miss Lovegood?” he asks, more exasperated than unkind. “Or have you found better use of them as flower boxes or something similar?”

“Oh, I have real flower boxes,” she says complacently. “I don’t know where my shoes went, though. They disappeared. I’m waiting from them to come back.”

Snape says nothing, but his suspicions are confirmed, and he nods vaguely to himself before sweeping off and beginning his lesson. Miss Lovegood’s words burn themselves into the back of his mind, and as he circles the classroom a short while later, he finds himself unavoidably distracted by them.

He thinks back to that old battle cry, “fight back,” and he knows that this is a temper that Miss Lovegood, as an inherent part of her existence, will never have. Yet, he finds himself puzzled that no one has taken her under their wing, or kept her under a watchful eye. Even he once had the staunch guardianship of Lucius Malfoy—perhaps an ultimately disastrous guardianship, but a guardianship nonetheless. For all his haranguing about fighting back and being strong, even he had never been entirely alone.

A roiling annoyance bubbles up in him. He cannot fathom how busy or oblivious his colleagues must be to not notice a student walking about in her stockings. Have they mistaken it for her peculiarity, as he had, or is it simply that no one cares enough to take notice or ask? The question nags at him: does Luna Lovegood have anyone to fight for her?

Snape is collecting samples at the end of class when, with a start, he realizes that maybe, at least in this moment, this person is himself.

Later that day he is pouring himself a cup of tea in the staff room when Pomona Sprout enters, engaged in animated chatter with Aurora Sinistra. He waits patiently, taking more time to fetch a saucer than is necessary, until they have reached an appropriate lull in their conversation.

“Pomona,” he calls, without looking up from the tea that he is purposefully stirring a dash of milk into, “Miss Lovegood continues to attend my class without shoes, and I believe a few students from your House are the cause of it. Surely you understand the safety risk that this poses.”

“Oh,” says the Herbology professor, her mouth opened into a perfect circle. She doesn’t seem to understand what he’s asking of her at first—she seems unsure if she is even being asked something, as Snape rarely speaks, let alone asks—but after a few moments she collects herself and gives a somber nod. “Of course, Severus. I’ll see to it.”

Snape can tell that his name does not roll easily off her tongue, likely out of disuse, but he does not belabor the issue. He casts a charm over his teacup so that it will not spill and turns in a subtle twirl of robes towards the door. It is a safety hazard he tells himself. Any decent teacher of Potions would require shoes in his classroom; this is normal. He has done nothing of note.
Two days later, Miss Lovegood arrives proudly sporting her strawberry-printed trainers, and it does not even occur to Snape that this is a dress code violation. He is not sure what exactly he is feeling as he watches her swing her feet back and forth beneath her stool, but even he must admit that somewhere in him, not nearly as deep down as he would like, he feels hesitantly... Good.

Later, when the good feeling still sits, bright and bubbling in his chest, it dawns on Snape that for the first time in many years, without any sneering or looming or belittling, he feels genuinely important.

...  

“Professor Snape!”

Snape turns to where the girl has just emerged from the Transfiguration classroom. Today she is wearing a thin wreath of bittersweet, and an oversized scarf printed with pink rabbits. “I have a question for you,” she says solemnly, setting her hands on her hips. “I forgot to ask you yesterday and it’s very important.”

“I will do my best to answer,” he says with a nod. He knows that she’s spent her last few visits working with armadillo bile and honeywater, and he must admit that he’s curious to see where this line of research is taking her.

“Are you a vampire?”

Snape opens his mouth and no words come out of it. His hand rises and thrusts itself outward of its own accord, the appendage itself disbelieving. “Wh— What?!” His mouth hangs open for another second before he gestures violently towards the brightly lit windows. “Miss Lovegood, I am standing in the sun right now!” She narrows her eyes as though this is not a satisfactory response, and his mouth tightens into a line of irritation. “No,” he says, “I am not.”

“Hm,” she murmurs under her breath, her hand going to her chin. “Well that’s interesting. Thank you.”

She turns and walks away, leaving Snape to look expectantly around him, eyebrows raised and an incredulous hand clapped to his head, seeking confirmation from some passerby that this girl is unquestionably strange.

...  

It is a cold Sunday morning, and it is silent in the Hogwarts corridors. The world, it seems, is frozen; the view from the windows reveals a landscape locked beneath a layer of ice and snow. Even with Snape’s general inclination towards personal neglect, he is wearing his heaviest cloak and has an old, fraying scarf wrapped about his neck.

There is a soft voice echoing somewhere down the corridor, and Snape is surprised that any student has chosen to leave their dormitory on such a morning. Yet, the voice may or may not be a familiar one, and so he follows the sound and pauses when it is at its loudest. “Expecto Patronum,” comes a quiet, but undoubtedly firm voice from inside the Charms classroom. “Expecto Patronum!” Snape feels a tickle of magic on the back of his neck, and he opens the door to find Miss Lovegood twirling in a baby blue cloak and bathed in a swirl of silver light. From the haze leaps the form of a spritely hare, long and lean, and it prances about the girl as she laughs. She looks like some kind of dazzling winter fay, he thinks.

She turns and sees him standing in the doorway, and though she stops twirling, she does not look terribly startled. “Good morning, Professor,” she greets him.
“I hope you know that Professor Umbridge has banned the use of magic outside of classes,” he says evenly. He squints at the hare, which is waggling its tail in an attempt to entice Miss Lovegood to play. “In addition to that charm in particular, I believe.”

“Ah.” Miss Lovegood does not lower her wand, and she watches her patronus intently. Without looking from it, she asks, “What animal is your patronus, Professor?”

His cannot help the way his eyebrows rise up his forehead, or the way his mouth falls open just a fraction. “That’s…” He pauses, then continues with a stern frown, “That is a very personal question, Miss Lovegood.”

“Is it?” She seems to be asking herself more than she is asking him, and her brow furrows as she continues to contemplate the silver hare that is nibbling at her fingers. For a moment a cloud of sadness washes over her face, and she lets out a little coo as the creature dissolves through her fingertips and disappears. “Oh… I’m sorry. I guess you’re right. I hadn’t thought of it like that.” If Snape had been angry, the melancholy tone of her voice banishes any trace of it from his mind.

They stand in silence for several long seconds as Miss Lovegood stares down into her empty hand, but when she looks up to speak again, the brightness has returned to her voice. “I have another potions question.” She waits for him to nod before she continues. “I want to learn how to make a blood replenishing potion, but it’s very difficult, and I was wondering if you would teach me.” She gives a little, respectful bow of her head. “Please. If you have time.”

“I believe blood replenishing is on the long list of potions that Professor Umbridge has forbidden me to teach,” he begins, “however, I believe she is scheduled to be bothering Professor Vector this evening, and...” He shrugs and meets her eyes. “I do not think highly of her list.”

“After dinner, then?” she asks, looking wholly pleased.

“Eat quickly. It takes several hours and you should not be out after curfew.” He turns to leave, but there is something nagging at the back of his mind. He turns back momentarily. “Is there a reason you need this potion in particular, Miss Lovegood?”

“No, sir. I just thought it would be a good thing to know.”

Snape senses that she is lying to him for some reason, but he doubts her intentions are malicious and so he lets the case rest for the time being.

When Miss Lovegood arrives that evening, Snape has set up his workstation at one of the student benches, and she does not need to be prompted to set down her things next to him. “Good evening, Professor,” she says as she hefts her cauldron up and onto the table. He does not answer, but he does stop her as she takes out a copy of *Advanced Healing Potions for the Gifted Witch or Wizard*.

“We’ll be using my personal copy,” he says, gesturing to the book he has already set down between them. He opens to the page he has bookmarked, and a brilliant smile comes over her face when she sees the black, spiky annotations and additions. He does not acknowledge it.

“I notice sometimes that the instructions you put on the board are different than the ones in the book.”

Snape does not look up from the thistle powder that he is measuring out. “Did you think you were the only one who thought you could do better than the textbook?” He does not miss how she lets out a little breath that sounds suspiciously like laughter.

They work in silence for a few minutes as Snape arranges their ingredients, though he occasionally
watches her out of the corner of his eye. She meticulously spreads out her cutting board, her measuring spoons, her scales. Most of the students do not bother with keeping handkerchiefs to clean their equipment between uses, but she keeps a stack of three, only barely greying and with purple embroidery around the edge. She reaches over to take the ingredients he has offered to her with a quiet “thank you” and she glances at his workstation to copy the way he has laid them out.

“I don’t see you as often as I used to,” Snape says suddenly. It occurs to him that this might be the first time he has initiated such casual conversation with a student, discounting snide remarks or inquiries about unfinished homework. It’s just that nowadays he only sees her after class once or twice a week and he’s genuinely wondering why. At the same time, he knows that couching the question in some overly cantankerous sneer or another is a waste of energy, and so he settles for sounding vaguely disinterested.

“I study with Ginny Weasley now. I know you don’t like the Gryffindors, but she’s very nice.”

Snape has seen the two of them together, and though he has certainly harbored a slight pang of annoyance that she has taken up Gryffindor company—with a Weasley no less—he is surprised that she would even consider his thoughts on the matter. “I fail to see how my opinion of Gryffindor House is at all relevant.”

“I just didn’t want you to think anything bad about her, because she is, she’s...” Miss Lovegood smiles sadly down at her cauldron. “She’s nice to me.”

It is obvious that Snape is uncomfortable with this kind of personal disclosure, and he’s not exactly sure why she’s telling him this or what she expects him to do with the information. He lets out an ungainly “ah, I mean I—” and in a rare gesture of anxiety, moves to tuck his hair behind his ear. “I... I’m glad to hear that,” he says at last.

As though Miss Lovegood senses that she has already burdened Snape with enough unnecessary feelings for the time being, she gives a curt nod and says, “I’m ready to start now.”

Snape clears his throat. “Yes. Of course.” He reaches for his silver knife. “We’ll be splitting the arrow roots first. They are difficult to come by unless you are in a medical profession, so be careful.”

While the potion can be made in one sitting, it is still quite labor-intensive. They work for the better part of three hours, though Snape does not feel the time pass. He explains why he has made the alterations he has, engages the girl with questions along the way (“Do you know why we add holy thistle after the nightshade?” “To neutralize and reverse the poison.” “Very good.”), and he is pleased by the effort that she is putting in. He waves his wand over his cauldron and Miss Lovegood stops him, “Wait, could I see that again?” and he repeats the gesture twice more before she copies him attentively. The girl is genuinely trying to learn, and Snape must admit that this is one of the only times he has actually enjoyed being a teacher. It is oddly fulfilling, and he is not sure if this is more satisfying than antagonizing Neville Longbottom, or if this is, somehow, simply a better kind of satisfying.

They are waiting for the potion to turn a delicate shade of blue when Miss Lovegood asks, “Would it be possible to take a few of the ingredients from the storecloset? I was thinking I’d like to make a few more batches.”

Snape looks over at her, and the nagging feeling from that morning returns. Something feels amiss, perhaps because Miss Lovegood is usually so open—discreet is not exactly in her vocabulary. He brushes her with just a hint of Legilimency, reading her aura more than her mind, and he knows for a fact that there is something she is keeping from him. When he speaks, it is clear that he is displeased. “You are not planning on ‘making a few more batches,’ Miss Lovegood. Do not lie to me.”
She looks up at him, meets his eyes, and then looks guiltily down at her cutting board. “I wanted to teach some of my friends,” she says quietly.

This is still not the whole truth, Snape senses, and this causes something to click in his mind. Even Miss Lovegood would unlikely be able to learn a patronus charm simply by reading a book, and her interest in specifically banned spells and potions reeks of a particular brand of noble troublemaking. What Miss Lovegood is not telling him, he suspects, is that some students have gathered in secret to provide some remedial lessons in lieu of Umbridge’s laughable excuse for a class, and he certainly would bet a few Galleons on who is responsible. Yet, it is so vastly unlike Miss Lovegood to lie, and he doubts that it is her own decision.

“You are not allowed to tell me more than that, am I correct?” Miss Lovegood nods, looking vaguely ashamed. “Though I can incidentally note that Mr. Potter is particularly apt at the Patronus charm, and would hypothetically be able to teach it to a group of his peers.” He looks down at her, and the slightly cocked eyebrow indicates that he is not angry. “Hypothetically.”

Miss Lovegood gives a sheepish smile and looks away, confirming his theory. It is annoying, he thinks, but this is probably one of the less troublesome things that Potter has managed to do. If nothing else, Dumbledore will be particularly interested in this little development.

“I will copy out my instructions and make a small parcel of ingredients for you, but your friends will have to supply the rest. Unlike Potter, I am not made of money.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“The potion needs to settle for a few minutes before we bottle it. I have something else you can show your friends as well, but only as long as you’re sure the information isn’t coming from me.”

“I would like that.”

They continue to work, and as promised, Snape reaches into his coat when it is time for the potion to sit. There is an old, worn leather pouch snapped over his belt, and he pulls it loose before setting it on the table and opening it. There are five vials inside that he sets in front of Miss Lovegood, and she looks at him for permission before picking them up to examine them. “Many Potions Masters carry a kit like this,” Snape begins. “Moreso during the war, but they are always handy. As you can see, the blood replenishing potion is one of the potions I choose to keep in mine. That,” he gestures to the vial Miss Lovegood has just picked up, “is a Calming Draught. Unlike the Draught of Peace, which is for general anxiety, the Calming Draught is for acute shock or trauma. The green one is bezoar antidote—I am sure I do not need to explain that—and the clear one is essence of dittany, which is also self-explanatory. I suppose you could substitute it with murtlap essence, but I find dittany to be easier to find and more versatile in its usefulness. The last one is a girding potion, which is more or less a solution of—”

“Roseroot,” Miss Lovegood says. “There’s a lot of it out by the stone circle.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Have you ever needed to use any of these?”

Snape pauses. “A few times,” he says quietly. “It is certainly worth carrying.”

“Are those cleaning rags?”

“A few spare handkerchiefs.” He pulls them out of the kit, glad to have the subject changed. “I use them to gather ingredients. Buying all of your materials can get expensive, and it is useful to be able
to carry back a few herbs if I see them while I’m out on the grounds.”

“Ah,” the girl hums. “I see.” She stands on the rungs of her stool and leans over her cauldron, which is now emitting a faint lilac steam. “I think it’s ready.”

Snape nods, and reaches for a vial and a long-stemmed ladle. They finish their work in silence, siphoning their potions into three vials each, then setting to work cleaning their cauldrons and knives and other implements. It always interests Snape to see someone so prone to daydreaming work with such precision and care, and he cannot help but be reminded of the seriousness with which he used to take his own work when he was a student. Something that he did not notice before piques his interest, however, and so he stops her when she about to leave.

“Before you go, Miss Lovegood, I must ask you.” He gestures to the braided necklace of herbs around the girl’s neck. “Is that mugwort?”

Miss Lovegood smiles brightly. “Yes. The Druid Seers used it to increase their psychic fortitude and protect their minds against bad auras.”

“So they did,” he says thoughtfully. “Do you find that it helps you?”

“Oh yes, certainly.”

“Ah.”

Though the two do not breach the topic of either the medical kit or the mugwort again, Snape does begin to add mugwort to his special blend of tea, and Miss Lovegood begins sporting a little pink purse at her side. As usual, he does not know how to feel about any of this.

…

That’s the thing about Luna Lovegood.

Snape has always been familiar with a certain set of emotions. He knows anger well, and frustration, and an acute loneliness that manifests as an even deeper bitterness. He knows guilt and grief and sorrow and he does not often diverge from these; extraneous feeling is particularly hazardous in his line of work, and he takes care to limit himself and maintain what can only be described as a constant emotional white noise. Anger and bitterness create a protective boundary around him, and even the strength of the Darkest wizard alive cannot penetrate it. He takes an odd comfort in this narrow spectrum of feeling, in this perceived protection. These nameable, discernable things are easily manipulated and channeled, after all, and it puts him at ease knowing that there is at least something about himself and his life that he can control.

But Miss Lovegood, by the unrelenting might of her being, or perhaps the strange and roundabout resemblance she bears to him in his own youth, forces him to stray from these. He spends little time examining his own feelings or psyche, but when he experiences these outlying emotions he thinks of them as only “feelings,” without name or category. He feels, yes—he is an emotional creature, for sure—but he realizes that he does not understand what exactly it is that he feels. Oddly, Miss Lovegood leaves him no choice but to examine these nebulous and dimly inadmissible humors.

All of these thoughts flash instantaneously through Snape’s mind one morning in the Hospital Wing, as he has just finished tending to some particularly nasty, tentacle-shaped burns covering Ronald Weasley.

“Idiot Gryffindors,” he thinks to himself with a click of his tongue, surveying the room in the early light of the dawn.
Then, as if she had only just materialized in the ray of light at the other end of the hall, Snape notices none other than Miss Lovegood perched on a stool, her pink purse open at her side as she dabs a purple-trimmed handkerchief along the series of cuts that spread up the left side of her face. She looks at him and her usual smile erupts into an unapologetic grin, before this appears to pain her and she goes back to holding the handkerchief to her cheek.

He goes to her, still surprised, and he can pick up the faint scent of dittany in the air. “Did Madame Pomfrey not see to you?” he asks hesitantly.

“Oh, I told her to take care of Ginny first. I’m doing alright.”

He pulls out his wand again, but he realizes that the words he wishes to say are strange to him, something like “Do you need help?” or “May I take a closer look?” or “I can fix that for you.” These are things that he **does**, surely, but rarely is he in a position to ask, and there is never such a… gentleness about the question.

“I think Madame Pomfrey is going to be a while,” she says, as if she has read his thoughts. “Can you help me instead?”

He nods and pulls up a stool, accepting the dittany-stained handkerchief when she hands it to him. Without touching her, he gestures upwards so that she raises her chin slightly, and then he sets to work.

There is a blue glow, and the song that comes from him is not a spell so much as an outpouring of magic, a melodic prayer to something greater than himself, “*Let this be healed. Let this be healed.*”

Miss Lovegood, though she does not move, looks startled, and she stares at him for several long seconds out of the corner of her eye. She is studying him, the wheels of her mind clearly spinning, but then she closes her eyes and the concentration fades from her face, leaving her expression calm and vaguely content. A smile pulls at the corners of her lips as she listens.

There is Dark magic in the wounds, and it takes a few minutes of casting, pausing to wipe the residue from her face, and then continuing. At last the wounds heal and the scars fill in, leaving her skin pink and raw, but unmarked. “Thank you,” Miss Lovegood says. “That magic is very beautiful.”

Even after all this time, Miss Lovegood still manages to say things that leave him without words. He shrugs. “Those were some nasty cuts.”

Miss Lovegood lets out a soft breath of laughter. “Oh, that was nothing. You should have seen the other bloke.” The wide, almost devilish grin from before returns to her face, and she pops off her stool with a bright, “I’m going to go make sure Harry is okay. He was looking very sad when I left him last.” She scampers out of the Hospital Wing, leaving Snape still sitting, and feeling strange as he often does.

He cannot help but try and discern the exact nature of the feeling that wells up in the pit of his stomach. Pride, perhaps? Respect? Relief? He purses his lips, the uncertainty forcing him to look fretfully down at the flagstones at his feet, and he decides that he is glad that she is relatively unharmed, and also impressed by her apparent competence in battle. The combination of the two borders dangerously at a vague affection, and he is startled to find that this feeling is already familiar to him.

He corrects himself for yet another miscalculation, and thinks, at the very least, that Luna Lovegood does indeed know how to fight back.
It is early September, and the only thing occupying Snape’s mind is the image of a mangled, blackened hand. He cannot say for sure if he is angry or frightened, or some volatile mixture of the two, but as he leans against one of the pillars around the Transfiguration courtyard, he finds himself wanting a cigarette for the first time in many years. He closes his eyes momentarily and takes a deep breath of cool autumn air, allowing its crispness to calm and center him. It is not the hot smoke that he craves, but it serves its purpose well enough. When he opens his eyes again, there is a flash of color in his periphery that was not there before.

Miss Lovegood stands about twenty meters to his right, and as he glances curiously over at her, she dons the most outlandish pair of glasses he has ever seen in his life. They are bright, bubblegum pink, with wide-winged frames and purple-tinted lenses. Yet, Snape does not find them nearly as strange as the expression on the girl’s face. She studies him like a particularly complicated potion before lifting the glasses off of her nose, studying him again, and then reaffixing them as though to confirm some observation or another. She repeats this motion twice more while Snape stands, frozen, and then she gives a satisfied nod as though she has learned something from her little experiment.

The girl turns and absentmindedly walks off, the scrutinizing deliberateness of her posture suddenly gone. It is several moments before Snape lets out a deep breath, just realizing that he had been holding it in. He can’t help but wonder if the girl had actually seen something hanging about him, or if she was just being odd as usual, and the question plagues him for several days after.

It’s not that Snape wants to be at Slughorn’s party. If nothing else, he really should have declined as a matter of protest—for sure, he was never invited when he was a student. Too much of a political statement, he thinks dryly. He’s wearing his best coat; his best in that it is noticeably less faded, and the edges of his sleeves are neither worn nor stained. So far, he has caught a few interesting snippets of information that he will surely pass on to Dumbledore when he gets the opportunity, but that isn’t his only objective this evening.

He eyes a large carafe of merlot, thinking that he might actually consider helping himself if he wasn’t too busy being on the lookout for Draco Malfoy, who he hopes will not make a surprise appearance or do anything completely inane.

Though he is distracted by this thought for only an instant, it is just enough time for Slughorn to catch him off-guard with an arm around his shoulders and a hearty, “Oh ho!”

Snape finds himself scooped into the Potions professor’s surprisingly powerful grip, and turned to face none other than The Boy Who Lived himself. Miss Lovegood stands beside him, dressed in a gown that looks vaguely reminiscent of silver Christmas tinsel, but he does not have much faith that she will improve the situation a great deal.

“I was just complimenting Mr. Potter on his exceptional Potions skills!” booms Slughorn. “He really is something else, Severus, he really is!”

“Is that so,” Snape drawls. He sounds as unenthused as humanly possible.

“Now, what NEWTS did you say you were taking, my boy?”

Snape listens as Potter recites his list of classes, contempt curling in the pit of his stomach, and he gives a cold, mirthless smile when he is finished. “All the classes required,” he hums unpleasantly, “to be an auror, are they not?”
“Well yeah.” At seventeen, Potter is now very nearly Snape’s height, and he meets his eyes straight on, folding his arms in such a way that strikes Snape as especially smug. “That’s what I’d like to be.”

“I do not think there is a place for you at the Auror’s Office, Mr. Potter.”

“Oh, you’re right, Professor,” Miss Lovegood interrupts, beaming radiantly at him. He falters; her smile is positively disarming, and the icy sneer falls away almost of its own accord. At the same time, he finds himself chiefly confused by her agreement, so he dips his chin slightly, urging her on. She continues, “The Auror’s Office is part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, you see. They want to bring down the Ministry using Dark magic and gum disease, and I don’t know if even Harry can change it from the inside.”

Potter lets out a loud snort and disappears, laughing, into his mug of butterbeer.

Though he knows it was not Miss Lovegood’s intention, Snape suddenly feels very foolish. Yet, for the first time since he can remember, the sensation is not accompanied by a sense of self-loathing, nor of biting inadequacy. Her comment about Potter’s career choice is just as absurd as his own, and when he turns his eyes from the cackling Gryffindor back towards Miss Lovegood, he sees that her smile is full of an odd wisdom and understanding. A breath of laughter tickles the back of his throat, just slightly, and he wonders if he has the urge to laugh at himself, at her, or at the both of them.

Snape does not smile back at her, but the tight lines of his face slacken somewhat, and there is just a hint of warm amusement in his eyes. There is a chance that he might open his mouth with the intent to convey even a minute shred of this sentiment, but he is interrupted by Draco Malfoy doing something completely and unsurprisingly inane.

…

Snape walks through the castle as though in a stupor; he does this fairly often now that he knows what he must do, and he uses the time to steel himself against it. “You are empty,” he repeats to himself. “You are empty, you are empty.” He wanders silently through the chilly hallways with their frostbitten windows, down stairs that weave like arteries through the clocktower’s ticking innards. He has found that the clocktower courtyard is a good place for his meditation; something about the steady sound of the time and the echoing cistern soothes him. The cistern is empty, and his heart is nothing more than a ticking clock.

The courtyard itself is also empty, and he stands there in his solitude for quite some time, just breathing, feeling nothing.

He is finally about to turn back when a splash of color snaps him from his trance, and he looks down to see a familiar pair of pink glasses obscured by the ivy that stretches across the cobblestones. He bends down, brushing away the foliage, and picks up the object in question. Sure enough, they are Miss Lovegood’s odd spectacles, though the left temple is snapped in two, and both lenses are cracked. He looks upwards to the open balcony at the top of the tower and thinks it reasonable to assume what happened.

He sighs. The feeling slowly returns to him, like coming inside from the cold, and he takes out his wand and passes the tip over the broken temple piece in his palm. It reattaches itself with a sharp click before his next charm travels the length of each violet fracture, and with another click they too are mended. He begins to feel vaguely human again.

The clock chimes noontime, finally injecting the silent, empty vacuum with some semblance of time and life. Snape pockets the glasses before starting up the tower stairs and making his way back into the warm heart of the castle. The buzzing hallways welcome him back to the world of the living,
though it is several minutes until he feels like he belongs there again.

He stops in the staff room briefly to check his inbox; he’s fairly certain that Minerva has put out the faculty meeting schedule for the next month and sure enough, when he peers into his pigeonhole, the meticulously copied calendar is waiting for him. He pulls it out, examines it, and sets it down in front of him. He pulls out Miss Lovegood’s glasses and goes to place them inside Filius’ mail tray when something strange happens.

A strong feeling overtakes him, and the image of Miss Lovegood’s perplexed expression flashes in his mind like a photograph, her eyes squinting slightly as she studies him. He pauses, momentarily overwhelmed, and it is the power of that particular curiosity which persuades him to slowly open them. He contemplates the purple lenses, and then, almost nervously, he raises them to his face and settles them on his nose. He takes a deep breath.

For one, everything is now a dull shade of violet.

He looks about the staff room, half expecting to see wrackspurts pouring from the cabinets or nargles hiding under the table. He almost expects to see the strange, alternate reality that Miss Lovegood sometimes seems to inhabit, but they do not show him anything more than what a normal pair of spectacles would, except for perhaps an odd glow that is no doubt the effect of the light passing through the colored lens.

Snape is almost disappointed, but then he thinks again of the glasses’ owner. Slowly, very hesitantly, he tries to let go of the emptiness and the anger and the hurt and the knowledge of what is to come. He clears his mind, but not in the way that he does while on his silent walks. This is an openness, rather than an emptiness, and it begs to be filled. It is one of the hardest things Snape has ever done, against everything he has ever tried to do, but the force of Miss Lovegood’s being and the desire to understand her compels him, and so he stands and tries to truly see, allowing the glasses to show him what they will. He breathes.

He breathes.

He does not see anything, but soon, he does feel something.

The air begins to have weight. Not a physical weight, but a significance, like the pure conception that precedes a nonverbal spell, or the sensation of a fading dream that one feels in the morning but cannot remember. It exists separate from the realm of language—it has no need for it, would be blemished by it. The air has meaning, hanging like dust in the light, and he does not know but he feels, and there seems to be more truth in that than in knowing.

He might even hear music—the singing one thinks they might hear at the exact moment the sun cracks like a burst of flame over the horizon at dawn, or the hum that fresh sweetgrass makes when it is ready to be harvested at dusk. It is the singing one thinks they might hear when they look up into the night sky and find themselves lost in the vastness of the blazing star-scape before realizing that these were the stars they were born under and they are calling because this is it—this is the point. This arcane magic, this ineffable essence of meaning, is all there is, and he wonders if the source of Luna Lovegood’s peculiarity is that she is trying to put words to this mystifying, primordial substance.

Snape suddenly snatches the glasses from his face and throws them back onto the counter with what seems to him like an ear-shattering clatter.

It is silent. Even his own heavy breathing seems oddly muted. There is a vague headache welling up in the root of his brainstem, and he suddenly feels uncomfortably aware of his own being—of his
lungs and his heart and his veins and his other, less tangible parts.

This is a deep magic, an old magic, a very particular kind of magic. He has dabbled in it before, in his work with nonverbal spells, in a magic that is more feeling than words. For an instant his mind recalls the image of Miss Lovegood, eyes closed and smiling as she listens to what he calls *Vulnera Sanentur* only because he saw fit to give it a name in passing—a jotted “V.S.” in his notes. He hears her voice, “*That magic is beautiful,*” and her understanding that sometimes magic is more than a spell or incantation. That sometimes, feeling and intention and the contents of the soul are magic too.

This vision is not as alien or as groundbreaking as Snape would like to admit, and he wonders with an unsettled feeling whether the glasses were to blame for it after all. He wonders if he and Miss Lovegood have more in common than he ever would have suspected.

The door opens behind him. There is a low, nasally humming, signaling that Filius has just entered the room, though the humming stops presumably when the Charms professor notices Snape standing there. He comes up beside him and climbs the wooden stepstool that is kept there so that he can reach his mailbox, which is a tray on the counter rather than one of the pigeonholes above. “Hello,” Filius greets him in his usual manner, the word quiet but also sing-songy, a low “he-llooo” that strikes Snape as Filius’ way of being affable, without being cheerful enough to get on Snape’s particularly delicate nerves. This seems to be the end of their exchange, until he sees Filius gesture down at the glasses.

“Those belong to Miss Lovegood, don’t they?”

“Oh,” hums Snape, as though he had forgotten about them, “I found them floating about earlier today. Silly girl can’t keep track of her own belongings, apparently.”

“Ah yes, I suppose she has other things occupying that head of hers,” he says conversationally. “She and I had her career advising meeting yesterday, and— well.” Filius does not continue, however, as though he has suddenly remembered that “conversationally” and “Snape” do not generally go together. He seems startled when Snape prompts him further.

“And?”

“Oh, I…” He pauses. “I didn’t realize that was of interest to you.”

“She has shown great aptitude in my class,” he says, without hesitation. “I only wonder if she wishes to pursue the field; the Society of Potioneers has startlingly few women at the moment.” He raises a critical eyebrow. “Is that so odd?”

“No!” Filius says quickly. “No, not at all. Though I hate to disappoint you—she wants to study magical creatures.”

“Really.”

Flitwick gives a little laugh and shrugs. “She’s was telling me about the research trip she wants to take, to study the Crumple-horned Snorkack in Sweden.”

“The…?” Snape cracks just a hint of a smile. “Of course she does. And I take it she has already planned this trip?”

“I’m sure she would have, but apparently she doesn’t have the funds. I gave her a few ideas regarding grants to apply for, but without meaning any offense to Miss Lovegood, I think we know how that’s going to turn out.”
Snape makes an interested hum and looks back down at the glasses sitting on the counter. He reaches out and picks them up again, running his thumb along the bottom of the right-side frame, and he ponders them in silence for several long seconds. The odd aura that settled on him during his experience with them still has not lifted. He still feels full of something vast and evocative. He feels strangely at peace.

“Well,” he says finally. “Perhaps the Society will get lucky, and she will change her mind before she graduates.”

Flitwick is not oblivious to the sudden peculiarity of Snape’s demeanor, and his eyes shift from the defense professor’s calm expression, to the glasses, and back. “I can give those back to Miss Lovegood,” he says slowly, as though he is anticipating that Snape will decline.

Sure enough, he answers, “I will be seeing her shortly.” This is a lie, and Snape is unsure of why he feels the need to tell it. He pockets the glasses again, gathers his papers, and wordlessly turns to leave.

He is walking to dinner that evening when he spots the tell-tale cascade of blonde hair. Miss Lovegood sits in one of the window alcoves with Miss Weasley, the warm yellow lamplight pouring over them, and he stands at a distance when he calls to her.

“Miss Lovegood.”

Both girls look up, and the Ravenclaw rises to her feet as Miss Weasley eyes him suspiciously. As though to placate her, he pulls the glasses from his coat and holds them out to announce his intentions; Miss Lovegood lets out a little gasp of delight and trots over to him, beaming.

“You should keep a closer watch on your things, Miss Lovegood.”

“I know.”

“I would be very disappointed to see your potions equipment broken and lying about like that. It’s bad form for a scholar such as yourself.”

“They were broken?” Snape pauses, caught off-guard. Of course, he thinks; if Miss Lovegood saw someone throw her glasses from the clocktower, why would she have not gone down to fetch them herself? Before he can muster up some answer, she turns them over in her hands and gives a pleased hum. “You fixed them.”

“I didn’t— I—” He can’t remember the last time he was caught in a lie. He sighs, not entirely discontent. “Yes. I fixed them.”

“Did you try them on?”

“Of course not.” This time he does not falter or hesitate. “I would look very silly, don’t you think?”

“Oh, looking silly doesn’t matter.”

He thinks on this sentiment, perhaps for the first time understanding what does matter to Miss Lovegood, but the pause signals to him that this conversation is finished. “You and Miss Weasley should be on your way to supper,” he says quietly.

“Yes.” She sets the glasses back on her face where they belong. “Thank you, Professor.”

She turns and goes back to where Miss Weasley is waiting for her, bookbag in her outstretched hand.
Miss Lovegood accepts it and they begin walking in the direction of the Great Hall. Snape watches them for only a moment.

“Do not lose those again,” he calls after her, causing her to turn back. And then, after a short pause, he adds, “They are very special, Miss Lovegood.” He is dimly aware that what he means to say is, “You are very special, Miss Lovegood.”

…

One day, on the morning of the big Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match, Snape is walking down to the grounds when he hears a shout amongst the buzz of the corridor, “Oi, where’re you going, Loony?”

“Professor Snape!” comes a familiar voice, and he turns to where Miss Lovegood has just appeared beside him. She’s wearing her magenta overalls, the rabbit scarf, and a spray of mugwort behind her left ear. “Are you going to the game?”

“I am.”

“Ginny is preparing,” she says, as if this explains something. “May I walk with you?”

Snape looks back to where three Gryffindors from Miss Lovegood’s year are standing, vaguely slackjawed, and he gives them the special glare that he usually reserves for Wormtail and a few others: the one that says, “If you are not very careful, you will not see the bottom of tomorrow’s morning tea.” They scamper off in the opposite direction, but by the time he turns back to Miss Lovegood, any trace of the expression is gone. “Of course,” he says mildly, bidding her to follow him.

They walk in silence for several moments, before Miss Lovegood lets out a soft, “Oh, I almost forgot,” and reaches into her pocket to pull out a small, handkerchief-wrapped bundle. Snape stops and looks at her curiously when she holds it out to him.

“I wanted to give you this,” she begins as he reaches out to take it. “I was visiting the thestrals a few days ago and I found some Hart’s Tongue along the edge of one of the clearings. There’s not much of it there, but I know it’s rare and expensive and so I thought you could use it. And yes,” she adds, “I did make sure to leave the roots intact so it can grow back.”

Snape examines the half dozen curling fronds, his mouth just slightly open and his brow raised into an expression that is equal parts surprised and oddly moved. “That’s…” Even after all this time, he finds it inconceivable that the girl might have any kind of partiality towards him, but as he looks from the handful of ferns to her bright, expectant face, he cannot help but try and wrap his mind around the fact that no, he has not been imagining it. Miss Lovegood genuinely likes him. “That is very kind of you,” he says at last, and these resplendently truthful words come as naturally to him as any lie he’s ever told. “I will use it well. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome.”

He allows the smallest smile to play at his mouth as he stows the parcel away and starts again towards the stairwell. “Now, do tell me. Did you ever come to a conclusion on your saltpeter experiment?”

“Oh yes,” Miss Lovegood begins, before launching into her explanation of the issue. He listens attentively until it is time to take their seats, and then they part ways.

Later that week, Snape uses the Hart’s Tongue in a new potion for dreamless sleep that he’s being
toying with. He finds himself feeling profoundly contented, and it is only in part because the brew is a success.

... "It’s a beautiful day to be alive."

Snape is not sure if Dumbledore is mocking him or not. The two of them walk together through the noontime sun that streams through the open casements, and it is a familiar sight for some: of the headmaster, dressed in lavish seafoam and gold, with the black-clad Potions Master gliding just behind his left elbow, like a shadow.

Snape lets out a quiet murmur that serves as a form of acknowledgement. There is a flurry of motion by the window that catches his eye, and he glances over to see Miss Lovegood finish stuffing the rest of her books into her bag as she approaches them. She has woven buttercups into her hair today, and her pink glasses are fixed on top of her head, though now he notices that they have the additional protection of a thin, beaded cord that drapes about her neck. “Good morning, Professor Dumbledore,” she greets him politely. “Good morning, Professor Snape.”

“Good morning, Miss Lovegood,” Dumbledore answers. Yet, it is apparent who she wishes to speak to, as she turns purposefully towards Snape.

“May I ask a question, Professor?” He always appreciates this courtesy; he is sure that if he ever chose to decline, she would nod and leave him to his privacy. Of course, he does not decline.

“If you must.”

“I’m learning to make the Drought of Peace, but I’d like to change the formula.” She frowns pointedly. “I don’t like using hellebore, you see. It has bad, bad energy, and I don’t think it belongs in a Drought of Peace. I’ve experimented with herbaria instead, but it’s not acidic enough. I’ve asked Professor Slughorn, but he’s no help.”

“If I may observe, Miss Lovegood,” Snape says with a hint of a sneer, the closest he will ever come to teasing, “the Drought of Peace does not seem like something that you are in particular need of.”

“It’s for my father,” she says, and despite the fact that she is no longer speaking about a bothersome ingredient, her usual smile does not return to her face. “He’s very anxious right now, but potion-making frightens him.”

This gives Snape pause. It is perhaps the most somber that he has ever seen her, and he meets her eyes for only a moment before looking away again. He suddenly realizes that he is privy to quite a few more personal details than he was prepared to be. Luna Lovegood, contrary to his previous remark, looks genuinely worried, and it hits him suddenly that the girl is asking for his help in a much more personal matter than usual. He is hesitant to speak in front of Dumbledore, and so he begins slowly.

“Some German potioneers had a similar thought some years ago,” he says. He can practically feel the rise of Dumbledore’s eyebrows, but he continues, undaunted. “Hellebore is, admittedly, quite unstable as a chemical substance. Though they did not study the Drought of Peace in particular, the potioneers were able to pinpoint and assess several of the finer elements found within the root in particular. It is possible that their analysis of those components may be of use to you in finding an alternative. I believe I have a translation of their paper,” here he pauses to clear his throat, “somewhere. I suppose I could allow you to look it over if I happen to come across it.” He narrows his eyes in an attempt to show Dumbledore that he is unhappy at being inconvenienced in such a
way. “However, it is the only translation I have, and I would be very, very displeased to see it lost or damaged.”

“I understand, sir,” she says, giving her head a respectful dip. She does not seem to find his sudden impatience with her at all strange. “That sounds like it would be very helpful to me. I’ll be careful with it.”

“I do hope so.”

Miss Lovegood takes this as a dismissal, and the two professors stand in silence for several long moments as she strides away, radish earrings swinging, her brow furrowed as she is once again plunged deep into thought. It is quiet, and somewhere, the first mourning dove of the season begins to coo.

“You care, don’t you?”

“Oh course not,” Snape lies, and the fact that Dumbledore can see through it has nothing to do with Legilimency. “And even if I did,” he adds bitterly, “in a few month’s time, it’s not even going to matter, now is it?”

“Ah Severus,” the headmaster says, and Snape is unsure whether the gentleness in his voice makes him hate the old wizard more or less than he already does. Dumbledore goes to the window and places his good hand on the sill, his face turned up to the sun as he takes a deep breath of thawing air. He looks back, eyes sparkling. “I think every bit matters.”

Snape settles into his seat in the faculty bleachers and moodily wraps his cloak about him. Sitting through a Quidditch game is the last thing he feels like doing, and he’s only attending in the hope that Mr. Weasley will do something truly stupid, and give him something to feel even dimly self-satisfied about.

He does not immediately notice the hushed commotion going on in the commentator’s box a few seats down, but he turns his head when he hears a familiar voice over the loudspeaker; he cannot deny that there is a small thrill of delight that passes through him. “Hello, ladies and gentlemen! We’re going to have a great game today! The sun is shining, the weather’s warm, and the wrackspurts that were swarming out here yesterday seem to have continued due east with the wind!”

The wind, Snape notices, is blowing to the west, but this only confirms that this is going to be far more enjoyable than anything that any of the Gryffindors could have possibly done.

The game begins, and Snape quickly finds that he is more interested in what’s going on in the commentator’s box than on the field. Miss Lovegood does not know anyone’s names save for Potter and the two Weasleys—she takes to referring to the rest of them using names such as “very large Hufflepuff boy,” “redheaded girl in my Charms class,” and “the Gryffindor with glasses who isn’t Harry.” Minerva corrects her each time with increasing agitation, and over the next half hour her voice becomes shriller and shriller each time she reminds the girl that she must be commenting on the game, and not on what kind of fertilizer Hagrid uses to keep the pitch looking so green. Snape watches them, and like the evening of Slughorn’s party, anyone looking would notice that his face is softer, less troubled than usual.

At last his amusement builds to a tickle in his throat, and Dumbledore is not there and the air feels good on his face and despite his best efforts he is not empty and he laughs. The sensation is unequivocally odd. It is not the cold chuckle that he is used to; he is not laughing at anyone’s
expense. This is warm and it bubbles within him, and the thing about true laughter is that it cannot and should not be controlled. He does not stifle it, does not build walls against it. This laugh is unapologetically audible, its timbre rich and deep from his chest, and it is not even a question that it feels sincerely good.

“What is so funny, Severus?” Minerva hisses, whipping her head in his direction, though she pauses and looks startled when she sees the genuine smile on his face. Miss Lovegood notices him then, and she puts her hand over the microphone before leaning across Minerva and over the edge of the box.

“How am I doing, Professor?” she asks in a loud whisper.

“Splendidly, Miss Lovegood.”

Minerva looks between them, clearly bewildered, and she opens her mouth to voice her confusion when Miss Lovegood blithely interjects, “Oh! Gryffindor scored. I don’t know how many points they have, though.”

“Sixty, Miss Lovegood!”

Snape resettles in his seat and listens, just barely smiling and wholly content. He listens as she tells him about clouds shaped like alpacas and the few renegade wrackspurts that must have settled in Andrew Kirke’s ears and the direct correlation between sunlight exposure and good temperament. By the end, he has even started to play a game with himself, trying to decide which of Miss Lovegood’s observations are utter fantasy, and which might just have some truth to them.

It might be the best day Snape’s had in about twenty years.

…

The flames from Hagrid’s hut turn the sky an ominous auburn, and when Snape pauses at the edge of the Forbidden Forest to take one last look at the castle through the smoke, there are many images that flash through his mind: of the way the waning moon shines blue through the sixth floor windows at midnight; the deep, mahogany wood of the Potions classroom shelves; the perfect emerald of the lawn on the first warm day of Spring… Of a lightning-haired girl, peering down into a cauldron overflowing with lilac smoke.

He tears his eyes away and Apparates with a quiet, mournful pop.

…

Being headmaster is perhaps the worst thing that has ever happened to Snape. No; Dumbledore deciding to put on that cursed ring is the worst thing that’s ever happened to Snape, but this is a close second.

It is not that he is surprised, so much as he is completely exasperated. Protecting Gryffindor’s sword is proving to be a trickier chess match than he anticipated, and the true sword has not even left its hiding place behind Dumbledore’s portrait yet. He looks over at the three students in front of him: Mr. Longbottom, Miss Weasley, and—of course—Miss Lovegood.

Mr. Longbottom looks angry enough to spit, and if anyone had told Snape seven years ago that the plump, bumbling Gryffindor would one day tower over him, looking sharp, imposing, and every inch the leader of a rebellion, he would have laughed himself to death. By comparison, Snape is rapidly losing weight that he didn’t think it was possible to lose, and if he was gaunt and spindly to begin with, he now looks fit to crack over Mr. Longbottom’s knee—or Miss Weasley’s, at this point. The redhead looks ready to rip the limbs from his body, and he reminds himself that he needs to start
eating again whether he wants to or not. There is only so much that a billowing cloak can hide.

And then there is Miss Lovegood. She is looking neither pleased nor upset, though Snape is not sure why this is the case. Surely his betrayal would have hurt her the most, and she has every right to be the angriest of all three. Yet, he is not sure if she is simply too cheerful to understand the gravity of her situation, or she is too stubbornly moral to care. He suspects, at the very least, that Miss Lovegood simply does not know how to hate.

It is not as though Snape actually thinks any of this, of course. Nowadays his thoughts cross his mind like stones over still water; he rarely thinks in full phrases or strong images, which are too loud and easily-read to be considered safe. Opinions and feelings pass in vague concepts and tempers, whispers through radio static, and this mental fog keeps his secrets and his true intentions obscured. It is not until he is alone that he allows his thoughts to exist fully-formed, and he uses the time to create scenarios and contingency plans so that nothing will catch him unprepared. He cannot say that he has a plan for everything, but he has certainly planned for some fairly horrific situations. This is more or less one of them.

Amycus Carrow is giving some lecture about the might of the Dark Lord and you brats are powerless to stop him and just wait 'til you see what we're gonna do and Snape accepts the three confiscated wands from Alecto before giving a sharp, “Are you finished, Amycus? Believe it or not, I’d like to get a word in sometime this evening.”

“Whatever you’re planning to do to us, we’re not scared,” Mr. Longbottom sneers.

“I do not doubt that. Though I think you would refrain from any troublemaking if you knew what was best for you.” He turns slightly. “Amycus, please fetch Hagrid.”

“What do you need that stupid oaf for?” the ragged wizard spits. Snape frowns.

“I do not believe I asked for your input, Amycus. Go down to that flea-infested shack that he calls a house, and bring him back here.” He narrows his eyes when the Death Eater does not immediately turn to leave. “Do not make me wait.”

Snape watches him leave in a huff, and then turns towards the tall windows overlooking the grounds. His cloak settles in a swirl about his feet, and he stands perfectly straight with his hands folded neatly behind his back. The hope is that he looks intimidating, or at least arrogant.

“So you’re just going to make us stand here?” Miss Weasley says with a disparaging snort. “No lecture from you? I’d figure you’d have something to say after all this time holed up in here.”

“I’d rather watch the sun set,” Snape says, with a nonchalance that is dimly reminiscent of his predecessor. The tone is one that the old wizard always took on when asked a question he did not feel like answering. “I never would have guessed the view from the headmaster’s office would be so spectacular.”

“But Snape—”

“Quiet, Alecto. I am thinking.”

Snape looks out over the lawn, the lake. It is fortunate that the three were not able to take the sword, but it is less fortunate that it was Amycus who caught them, rather than himself. That would have been a great deal cleaner, but Snape supposes that nothing is clean anymore.

The calculation for the current scenario works as such: In the event that any students—Rebellion leaders or otherwise—do something particularly rambunctious, he will send them with Hagrid into
the Forbidden Forest to supposedly collect ingredients for a potion meant for the Dark Lord’s stores. This works on the Carrow’s end, because they are not familiar enough with the school to know that the Forbidden Forest is a great deal less threatening than its name implies, and it works on the end of the students, who will be so outraged at having to gather supplies to support the Dark Lord that they will not think about how lenient a sentence it is. Although the Forest has been quite a bit more active, neither the Carrows nor the students in question are aware of the fact that Snape has been in communication with Firenze, who has fled to the friendlier centaur clans. For the same reason that the Forest edge has been carefully guarded against the press of acromantula and ghouls, the three students and Hagrid will be well-protected. The plan, while not foolproof—nothing is clean, after all—is designed to sound as cruel as possible while posing the least risk.

This is, of course, not what Snape is thinking, so much as a single trace of knowledge that passes over his consciousness. He watches the sun set over the western mountains, the light shining grapefruit pink, then dusty purple, then a deep, smoldering cerulean. Contrary to what he has told Alecto, he is not thinking anything. He is empty, after all.

Snape rises from his meditation when he hears the door open, and he turns slowly to see Hagrid lumber into the room, Amycus at his heels, wand out. He stops, glares at Amycus in a way that makes the wizard recoil slightly, and then sets his fists on his hips. The half-giant is clearly livid.

“What’re you planning on doin’ to these kids, Snape?”

“I am not planning on doing anything to them,” he answers, his expression blank. “However, since they seem so intent on making my life difficult, it seems logical that I should force them to help me instead.” He looks between the four of them, but even in this state, he cannot linger on Miss Lovegood’s face for too long. “Now. The Dark Lord has requested that I send him another batch of Veritaserum, but I find my stock of bog myrtle to be rather low… You will go out into the Forbidden Forest and find at least six ounces of it and bring it back to me by dawn.” He goes to his desk and picks up a book that he begins to finger through. “It grows in the form of a short shrub, with teardrop leaves—”

“I know what it looks like, Professor,” Miss Lovegood interrupts him, and though he spins on his heel to glare at her, she looks no more frightened of him than she was that first day in potions class. He tosses the book back on his desk where it lands with a loud slap.

“Fine,” he says, sounding irritated. “Then I won’t bother to show you. I hope you can manage without it.” He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out an old, fraying handkerchief. “You can collect the sprigs in this.”

“I’ve got one.” Miss Lovegood still has her little pink purse belted around her waist, and he sees the tops of five vials just briefly before she pulls out a large handkerchief not unlike his own. She holds it up.

“Take an extra,” he says, thrusting it at her, though he berates himself for not putting a little more venom into the command.

He doesn’t have time to contemplate Miss Lovegood’s behavior at the moment, as he needs to focus on an on-the-spot calculation. He is not particularly inclined to send them into the Forest with Hagrid’s pink umbrella as their only defense, but neither does he want to so readily offer them protection while the Carrow siblings are watching him so closely. He glances at Hagrid and brushes his mind with a brief touch of Legilimency before choosing to speak.

“I will be keeping your wands,” he begins, though he has no intention of continuing—as Snape has anticipated, Hagrid interjects angrily.
“You can’t do that!” he barks. “You can’t send them in there all defenseless. It’s too dangerous. The Forest’s been crawling with beasts since you people came in.”

Snape is calm, is empty, and so he does not take offense to Hagrid’s use of “you people.” Instead, he pauses with the appearance that he is thinking, and he glances over at Miss Lovegood. She meets his eyes steadfastly, and something inside him—something quite separate from his logic and strategies—tells him that somehow she knows. The thought disturbs him and he brushes it aside quickly. Regardless of what Miss Lovegood does or does not know, he senses that at least she will not cause him any trouble.

He reaches into his cloak and pulls out the Ravenclaw’s wand before holding it out to her. “The Dark Lord has commanded that we will have no serious injuries at this school, and I suppose that extends to even you three. Since you seem to be the most knowledgeable, Miss Lovegood, I trust you will see to it that his wishes are upheld. It is in your best interest, after all.”

He dismisses them, and the four file out of the room leaving the two Carrows cackling between themselves. “They’re going to be wandering around all night,” Alecto giggles.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Snape barks, and the two scurry for the door, leaving the office quiet. He sits behind the desk and summons the fixings for a pot of tea; there is steam rising from the spout when Snape turns to Dumbledore in his portrait and adds, “I’d offer you some, if you could drink it.” The old headmaster frowns, and the little jab, however petty, makes him feel a little better.

It is barely a few hours before there is a knock at the door. “Enter,” he calls. Miss Lovegood steps inside and approaches the desk, looking no worse for the wear than when she left. “That took you no time at all,” he says coldly. “I hope for your sake that you have harvested it properly.” She hands over the handkerchief-wrapped parcel, and sure enough, he unwraps it to see a little more than six ounces of unblemished bog myrtle stalks.

“There’s a big patch of it in the same grove as the mugwort, Professor.” She says this with just a hint of a sad smile, and with a tone more appropriate for a gentle reproach: “Silly Professor,” she seems to say. “You knew that.”

He looks up at her, startled, though it does not show on his face. Their eyes meet again, and in that moment Snape knows that he has made the same miscalculation that he did six years previous. Miss Lovegood is not stupid or recklessly fearless. It is not even that she is incapable of feeling hatred. Despite the fact that he is empty, that there is no light of emotion or even humanity in his eyes, Miss Lovegood looks at him and he is certain that she knows.

“Well then,” he snaps. “I suppose this time you and your friends were fortunate.”

“Yes. We were very lucky.” She gestures at Mr. Longbottom’s and Miss Weasley’s wands, which he has laid out on the desk. “Can I take those back?” He nods, and she stows them safely in her cloak before looking up at him again. “I’ll try not to get into any more trouble.”

“See that you don’t.”

“Oh.” She lets out another hum and reaches back into her cloak before pulling out a second parcel, this one with her own purple-trimmed handkerchief wrapped around it. “This is for you also.” He wordlessly accepts it and she turns to leave with a swish of lightning-colored hair. “Good night, Professor.”
He watches the door close behind her before he unwraps it; it is bursting with fresh mugwort leaves. He looks over at Dumbledore’s portrait, and it is rare that he has seen the old headmaster looking so surprised. “What are we going to do with that girl?” Dumbledore asks, readjusting his spectacles.

Snape does not answer, but the girl’s affectionate farewell, “Good night, Professor,” stirs something within him. He knows that it feels something akin to sorrow, to a biting loneliness, to the kind of hollowness that accompanies a shattering loss. He does not know that he will never hear Luna Lovegood’s lilting voice again.

…

It is the first evening of the new term. Snape knows that something terrible is about to happen when he hears the commotion on the steps outside the office, but he is not expecting to see the door open to reveal a disheveled Minerva McGonagall, who blows the door completely open with a swift kick of her heeled boot. The heavy wood crashes against the bookcase behind it with a deafening slam. “This is it!” she howls. “This is the last straw!”

The Carrows are close behind her, both looking a little bruised, but their shouting drowns out whatever else Minerva is saying, and Snape can’t make heads or tails of what exactly everyone is so upset about. The more seconds that pass like this, the more anxious he becomes, until at last he raises his voice above the din. “All of you! Shut up, and tell me what happened!” He meets Minerva’s eyes. “Tell me what happened.”

She does not respond immediately, but when she finally speaks, it is with a mocking sneer. “Don’t you know? I thought you knew everything that happened in your school.”

The words are barely from her mouth when he snaps his head in Alecto’s direction. “Talk.”

“A team of our people ambushed the Express as it was traveling through the mountain pass. There was some…resistance, but we took one of the students into custody.”

Snape looks at her blankly for a moment. This is not one of the scenarios that he had planned for. “They…?” He corrects himself. “We stole a student off the train?”

“The first years are inconsolable!” Minerva shrieks.

“We arrested her, technically.”

Snape pauses, looks to Minerva as he processes what she has just said, and then back to Alecto. “In front of everyone?” he asks slowly.

“I don’t—”

“Alecto!” The witch flinches as his voice rises to a shout. “Did the other students see?!”

“Well they would’ve had to have been blind to not see a couple of Death Eaters dragging a kid out by her hair, so yes, I would say that the other students saw!”

“Who authorized this?” Snape yells, eyes ablaze and darting between the two Carrows. “Who authorized this?!”

“Hell if we know!” snaps Amycus. “It’s not like we knew about it!”

“Then how did you find out?! Who did you speak to?!”
“Dolohov came off the train! Dolohov and Greyback.”

“You put Greyback on a train with children?!”

“Oi, I’m not the one who made that decision!”

“Idiots! Here we are, trying to suppress a rebellion, and now we’ve got a school full of frightened, angry teenagers. That’s going to make this much easier. Idiots.” He sighs and puts his hand to his forehead. “Minerva, would you see to the first years?”

“Why don’t you have one of your lapdogs do it?”

“Alecto,” he says, without missing a beat, “go see what you can do about comforting the younger students.”

“I’m not going to go play nanny—”

“Do as I say, Alecto!”

The witch turns in a huff and storms out, and Snape begins to collect himself as he watches her leave. He takes a few deep breaths. “Well, I don’t suppose there’s anything we can do now but try and deal with the mess.” He turns to his desk and begins shuffling around for a clean sheet of parchment. “Amicus, do I even want to know who they took?” he asks, sounding bored despite the fact that his mind is racing. The Registry has been coming up with all sorts of names as of late, and he has been consistently afraid of one of the half-blood students being snatched.

“Severus.” Snape had not been expecting Minerva to answer. Time seems to slow, the seconds wrapping themselves around each syllable of his name. He sets down the parchment he is holding. He does not turn around, but he looks up at the portrait of Armando Dippet in front of him. He knows what it means nowadays when someone uses his given name, especially with such gentleness. He is still not prepared when she speaks. “They took Luna Lovegood.”

Snape does not move. He does not speak. Only Dippet sees the way his eyes widen, the split second of pain before he squeezes them shut and wills himself silent. He wills himself empty. “Come to think of it,” he says, the lie coming quickly to him, “I suppose I have heard talk about taking her for some time now. It is an unwise move, in my opinion, but I do not question the Dark Lord’s wishes.” It takes every ounce of control Snape possesses to keep his voice from shaking.

He hears soft footsteps, and he turns with a blank expression to see the Transfiguration professor approach him slowly, stopping just within arm’s reach. He is aware that this is the closest he has physically been to any of his old colleagues since Dumbledore’s death, and he instinctually wants to push her away. He does not want her to see the way his face has grown even more gaunt and ashen, the deep lines that have formed along his mouth and brow, the grey that has overtaken his temples prematurely for a wizard of only thirty-eight. He does not want her to sense the aura of despair that is surely radiating off of him despite his best efforts.

“Severus,” Minerva says, her voice gentle, hesitant, almost motherly. “I thought… I thought you liked Miss Lovegood.” She is testing to see if there is anything left of the old professor—anything human—still inside him. It is possible that she suspects the act and so he must play his part better than ever, even now when it seems almost too much to bear. It feels like every vein in his body is vibrating and the blood in his brain is red-hot.

But his exterior is calm, his posture almost lazy. The corner of his mouth curls into a cool, greasy smirk and he gives an arrogant little shrug. “Dumbledore thought so too.”
He does not even feel Minerva’s hand as it connects with his cheek. Amycus is on her in an instant, and filth begins to pour from her mouth, the likes of which he did not know she was capable of using. “Get out. I have a very angry letter to write.”

“Monster!” she screams at him, “You monster! How dare you!”

The door slams behind them and he hears Amycus let out a nasty hex, followed by the sound of a body slumping against the door, then silence. Snape knows that he cannot go out to help her. He cannot help anybody. There is a low, distant scraping of stone as the gargoyle at the bottom of the stairs moves to let them out and then sidesteps back into place.

It is eerily silent in the office, save for the tick tick of the single clock. Snape’s knuckles are ghost-white as they grasp the edge of the desk, and he tries to hold himself up as his head begins to pound and the room teeters in his vision. It feels like someone is strangling him.

Dumbledore’s voice comes from his portrait, and Snape knows he has only been pretending to sleep. “Severus?” he calls. “Severus, are you alright?”

It is the absurdity of the question that sets him off.

He lets down the barriers, and it is like a bursting dam. With an anguished scream he takes the closest object, a crystalline inkwell, and hurls it across the office; it misses the carpet and smashes satisfyingly on the floor, sending black splatters across the bottom of the door.

There is a plump, floral armchair that is one of the few relics of Dumbledore’s tenor; Snape’s wand is suddenly in his hand and there is a blinding flash of red light as he lashes out at it. There is an earsplitting crack of shattering wood, and with each slash of his arm more splinters and bits of stuffing explode out from it in a destructive spray.

“You are empty,” he tries to tell himself, but he is not empty. He is distraught, hysterical, on the brink of madness—he is a vicious, wounded thing and he is hurting. For all the nebulous feelings and all the uncertainty that Miss Lovegood has caused him over the years, he knows this much is true. This hurt sidles up to the greatest pain he holds and takes up residence with it, enthroning itself in the deepest, most bitter recesses of his soul. It should not be this way, he thinks; Luna Lovegood is just one more life that he could not protect, but he knows that this is lie. She is more than just another life, and he wonders if learning to care, if seeing through her eyes or allowing himself to laugh was a mistake. It feels, at least, like a terrible, terrible mistake.

He should not care about Miss Lovegood, and he should not care about Minerva or Hagrid or this school or the thestrals, and he should not care about Charity Burbage or Emmeline Vance or Mad-Eye or even Dumbledore but he does. He cares more than he ever thought he’d admit to himself, and in this moment he wishes he was dead, so at least then it would not take so much effort to be empty. He wishes he was dead, so that he would not have to care.

The chair is nothing more than a pile of rags and slivers of wood, but its destruction will not bring Luna Lovegood back. It will not bring Lily Evans back. It will not bring any of them back.

Snape slumps down the front of the desk and the first coherent thought that crosses his mind is, “She must have been so afraid.” He puts his face in his hands and lets out a single, heartbroken sob, feeling older than his predecessor ever was. He sits there, crumpled, for a long time.

“You should have picked a different man for this job,” he says at last, his voice weak.

“No,” says Dumbledore. “This is your burden to bear. But we must move forward. Go down to
dinner, Severus.”

Snape knows that Dumbledore is right. He takes the Calming Draught from his kit and downs it before casting a calming charm on his palm and pressing it against his cheeks, his forehead. He breathes deeply and tries to collect the pieces again. As Dumbledore has reminded him, he must do this soon, to avoid raising suspicion that he is anything but an empty, monstrous husk. “I am empty, I am empty,” he tells himself, and he cannot even envision the mechanical heart of the clocktower or the echoing cistern, unless he too envisions a pair of broken pink glasses.

At last he rises. He waves his wand over the remnants of the chair and the ink stain on the office floor, leaving no trace of them. His breathing has evened. He goes down to dinner, straight-faced, and pretends to eat. He refuses to look at the Ravenclaw table and notes that Minerva is not present, though both Carrows are. He feels nothing. There is no alternative.

…

Snape goes to Malfoy Manor only once while Miss Lovegood is being held there. He marches through the dark-marbled hallways quickly and with purpose; he fears that if he stops for too long or strains to listen, he might just hear the echo of quiet, fearful weeping.

…

The office door slams open, and Snape looks up from the pile of documents that the Registry has just sent him. “There is a bell, you know,” the headmaster snaps, but Alecto does not even seem to notice his admonishment.

“You won’t believe what just happened!”

“What is it this time?” He can feel the pangs of panic begin to well up in his stomach.

“Yaxley just stuck his head in the Floo and told me—there was a break-in at Malfoy Manor! Potter was there! We had him. We had all three of them!”

Snape’s brow furrows by only a fraction as he takes in this information. The panic recedes. “But judging from your use of had, I take it that we no longer have him.”

“Bellatrix let them escape!”

The headmaster pauses again. “I see,” he says slowly, his brain making a dozen calculations at once. “I can honestly say that I am very grateful to not be Bellatrix Lestrange at the moment. Does the Dark Lord know of this development?”

“Oh, he knows. And he’s not happy.”

“How did we catch him in the first place? Where were they?”

“They were in the Forest of Dean and one of them broke the Taboo. I would’ve summoned the Dark Lord immediately, but apparently there was something about him being in disguise? Yaxley wasn’t quite sure about that part.”

Suddenly, an intrusive flash of Snape’s last visit to the Manor snaps into his mind, and he pauses to check himself before he speaks. “I don’t suppose Potter managed to abduct any of our prisoners?”

Alecto throws up her hands with a sigh of disgust. “All of them! They’re all gone.”
“Even the Lovegood girl?” he asks quietly. He knows this is not a question he should be posing—there is no reason for him to be interested in her—but he cannot help himself. In a sudden break of control, the thought translates from feeling to words almost of its own accord.

“What part of all of them did you not hear?! Yes, even the Lovegood girl! Though the Dark Lord is livid about the goblin in particular. Merlin knows why that is. Oh, but the juicy part,” she continues, though Snape is now only half-listening, “is that they escaped with the help of Lucius’ old house-elf! As if the Malfoys weren’t in enough trouble as it is.”

“Do we know where Potter has gone?”

“If we do, nobody told me about it.”

Snape tries to focus, and his mind mulls over whether or not he should endeavor to find out exactly how much the Dark Lord knows. He can find Potter’s whereabouts with a little sleuthing, but the game changes depending on if or when the Death Eaters can discover him as well…

“Perhaps I should go to offer my services,” he says at last.

“Snape.” He pauses; there is something in Alecto’s tone that he has not heard before, something almost like concern. “I can’t stand you. You know that. But if I were you, I’d wait about a week before you go poking your big nose anywhere near the Dark Lord.”

He takes a long, critical look at her, and when he is certain that her concern is genuine, he gives a solemn nod. “Duly noted.”

The witch shrugs and turns on her heel. “Well, it’s not my problem, so I’m going down to dinner. You should come too. Even Amycus says you’re looking even more like a bag of bones than usual, and that stupid troll doesn’t notice anything.”

“I’ll be along shortly.” The witch shrugs, throwing up her hands to show just how little it actually matters to her, and she swings the door shut as she leaves. It is silent in the office again, but now there is something inherently different about the air. The tension that so often lays heavy over the room has eased, just slightly. Snape, for the first time in many months, breathes a little, just-audible sigh.

He slowly sits in the high-backed headmaster’s chair and he presses his palms against the top of the desk, his eyes closed as he allows his mind to work. There is a great deal to do if he is to track Potter’s movements, and he knows that the whereabouts of the Sword and its copy will be tenuous at best over the next week or so. As for Bellatrix’s mishandling of the situation, he suspects that it may shuffle the dynamics of the Death Eater command somewhat, though he doubts that anyone will make any radical grab for her position. At the very least, it might alleviate the pressure being put on the Malfoy family—after such a long time in the Dark Lord’s bad graces, it is possible that the new freedom might make them even more sympathetic to the side of the Light. On the other hand, it would seem from Alecto’s comment that the Dark Lord is growing frustrated, and this may mean an increase in his offensive that would be strategically unwise, but could also lead to increased casualties for the Order.

Snape catalogues these questions and their possible answers and outcomes, organizing them so that he may collect the information he needs most efficiently. There is work to do, but for the moment, he allows himself to be distracted by a single, overwhelming thought: “Miss Lovegood is safe.”

It was not mere nihilism that had led him to believe that they would kill her; he was sure that as soon as her father inevitably failed to appease them, they would quickly do away with the both of them.
There was little reason for them to keep her because she was just another life, just another thing to be used and thrown away as needed. But Miss Lovegood, Snape knows, is so much more than that.

Perhaps five years ago he might have been unsure of why he is now feeling so moved, but it is clear to him in this moment. It is true that he looms and sneers, and allows his bitterness to eat at him. He has never been equipped to fight this, and never will be. Instead, his only recourse has been to staunchly and ardently preserve life, so that every being saved is a tiny step towards saving himself, and every life lost under his watch is another mark against him.

But in Snape’s mind, Luna Lovegood is a life that he could not bear to see lost, because although he believes that every life is important, her life is important to him. She is important to him, as Lily Evans was—not in the same way, but for the same reasons. She is important to him because for all his darkness and turmoil and the wrong he has done, Snape always finds himself inexorably drawn to goodness, like a desperate moth to a lamp. There is no question about this. It is as innate in him as the shape of his hands or the color of his eyes, or the exact sound that his heart makes as it pounds in his chest.

Even still, Luna Lovegood is worth so much more than the paltry offering of his regard, because the world is already filled with too many noble heroes and haughty villains and bullies who combat their insecurity with pettiness. But there is not quite anyone like Miss Lovegood, who asks the question “how is it magic,” who hears the beauty in a spell from the heart, who sees the bully for what he is and does not hate him for it. Miss Lovegood is special to him, yes, but she is also singularly special.

Of course, this will not protect her, Snape knows. She could certainly still die. Everyone could certainly still die. He could fail in his ultimate mission—Potter could fail in his ultimate mission—and the Dark Lord could yet succeed, rendering every being who exists in the Light wholly forfeit. But at the very least, Miss Lovegood is no longer sitting cold and hungry in a dungeon while she smiles vacantly, in spite of how she is afraid and wondering when they will come for her. Miss Lovegood is, hopefully, someplace safe and warm. She is somewhere, he hopes, where she can rest, until the day that she inevitably rejoins the fight because she is as brave and obstinate as she is clever and numinous and wonderfully strange. That is the best that Snape can wish for her.

He feels relieved, and also sad, and proud, and a million other more nuanced things so mixed together that he knows it is useless to try and name them. It is not in his nature, and perhaps there is more truth, he thinks, in the feeling of them, rather than in the naming. He shakes his head, allowing himself to bask in this feeling for a few moments of precious consolation, before he stows those emotions away and rises to call out to Phineas Nigellus Black’s portrait. He does so with a newfound determination.

Severus Snape does not hear of the lightning-haired girl again, though he thinks of her occasionally and allows himself to hope.

…

It’s finally springtime. In a lot of ways, Harry Potter thinks. It’s a really nice cemetery, all things considered, and as Harry walks between the reawakened trees, budding white, and the smooth, marble gravestones, he cannot help but feel at peace. It’s a strange feeling, considering what he’s here to do. He isn’t even sure what he is here to do exactly, but he’s certain that it isn’t a feel-good sort of outing. He still can’t get the image of Kingsley’s face out of his mind, the rise of his eyebrows up his bald head as he asked him the day before, “So, er, where did we end up putting Snape?”

He’s been wandering for a while now, his emerald eyes darting from one stone to the next, looking for a familiar name. It’s not a name he’ll be particularly happy to see, and so there is a hint of relief mixed with the surprise he feels when he catches sight of something else familiar—a person, rather
Luna Lovegood looks up when he approaches her. She’s sitting barefoot and cross-legged in the grass, barely leaning against a small marble stone engraved with “Severus Snape” and “9 January 1960—2 May 1998.” There are red and blue flowers woven into her hair, and a wreath of what Harry thinks is baby’s breath on the crown her head. She is smiling that same gentle, carefree smile.

“Hello, Harry,” she says wistfully.

He looks down at her, hands jammed awkwardly into his pockets. “No offense Luna,” he starts hesitantly, “but what the hell are you doing here?”

“Oh, well, I just wanted to come see him. I would have come earlier, but there were some estate things I had to help Kingsley sort out.” She invitingly pats the ground beside her. “Sit with us.”

Harry nervously adjusts his glasses before he settles down on the ground across from Luna, facing her, and facing Snape’s name. The grass has an odd, acidic smell to it, and he knows it has been grown with magic.

“Estate things?” he begins. “For…?” He gestures at the stone.

“Yes. Professor Snape’s will, in particular. He said that if I was, ah, what was the phrasing he used? If I was present, then I could take what I wanted and give the rest to the school. He didn’t have much money, but he did leave what he had to me for ‘research purposes.’ I’m going to spend some time with my father first, but after that I’m going to do that Sweden trip.” She pauses, touching a hand to her chin. “I think that’s what he meant.”

Harry blinks. “Snape left you all his stuff?”

“Well, he knew I could use it. He had a lot of really interesting books, and some rare ones, and I know they’re going to be very helpful to me.” She stops to think again, for longer this time, and she begins fiddling with the red and blue flowers before she speaks again. “I’m sad that I couldn’t be at the funeral.”

“Was anybody?”

“No. Kingsley arranged it right after the battle. As soon as we knew he was… Gone. I think they buried him the next day.”

“That was pretty quick.”

“Kingsley said it had to be. He said that it had to be done quickly and in secret, because people might still be angry.”

Harry is fairly sure that Kingsley had a much more eloquent and political way of saying this, but he understands nonetheless. He shrugs. “Well, people are angry.”

Luna begins picking the flowers from her hair, dropping them one by one onto the grave. “I wish they wouldn’t be,” she says quietly.

“Well I—” Harry opens his mouth and realizes that this is the crux of his uncertainty. He realizes that he is angry and not sure if he should be. The feeling of being caught between the two has been weighing more on him than he would have ever expected, and he wants to be certain about being either one or the other. In typical Gryffindor fashion, he wants a straight answer, and when he begins to speak, it is with the hope that Luna can begin to help him find this. “Well I’m kind of angry.
Snape did a lot of bad stuff. He did a lot for the Death Eaters when he was a kid. He tricked everybody. He stood by while the Carrows hurt people. He… He murdered someone we cared about.”

“We know it wasn’t like that—that he didn’t want to.”

“But still, he treated everyone really badly. Neville used to come back to the common room crying because of him all the time, and he was awful to Hermione when she was just trying to learn. He was always after me and trying to make my life harder when everything was already hard.” Harry lets out a little sigh. “He tried to make me feel bad about stuff when I already had enough stuff to feel bad about.”

“Still, he fought for the Light as hard as he could.”

“Luna, what I’m trying to say is that he was such an asshole!” The words seem to come from Harry’s mouth of their own accord, but he is only half-sorry. He scratches at the back of his neck. “I mean, he was. Snape was awful, and he enjoyed it. Sure, he didn’t want to kill Dumbledore, but it’s kind of funny how none of us even questioned it. We were shocked, yeah, but nobody thought it was below him to do it. He was that bad.”

“Do you hate him?”

“Well yeah!” Harry says, throwing up his hands. “He was the worst.”

“Then why are you here, Harry? Because if you were planning to do something bad,” here she pats the base of the headstone, “I’m not going to let you.”

“I—” Harry meets Luna’s eyes, and she gives him a very particular look, not unlike the over-the-spectacles glance that Dumbledore would always give: semi-smiling and wholly knowing. He suddenly has an odd feeling that she knows exactly why he’s here, even though he hasn’t quite figured it out himself. “I’m not going to do anything bad,” he says quietly, looking shamefully back down into the grass.

“I didn’t think you would.”

“But didn’t you hate him, even a little?” he presses. “When he was headmaster, and you were running the Resistance with Neville and Ginny?”

“Of course not. I mean, I—” She pauses, and a thoughtful frown comes over her face. “It was different for me. I knew.”

“You…?” Harry looks up, his eyebrows raised above the top of his glasses. “Snape was probably one of the best Occlumens alive—Dumbledore’s whole plan depended on the fact that he was stronger than Voldemort—and you’re telling me you just knew?”

“It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t about Occlumency or anybody’s strategy, or…” She trails off, and there seems to be something keeping her from continuing. She takes a moment to ponder whatever is troubling her, and then gives a little sigh. Her spectrespecs have been lying on the grass beside her, and she picks them up before beginning to turn them thoughtfully over in her fingers. At last she shrugs. “I guess I don’t know how.”

Harry has an odd feeling that she knows exactly how, but he also senses that she isn’t keeping it from him out of maliciousness. She isn’t hiding something, so much as keeping something private, or holding the answer sacred to herself. As strange as it is for Harry to think about, this is, perhaps, a secret that Luna and Snape have kept with each other.
“I’m not trying to defend the bad things he did,” Luna says with a slow sigh. “You have every right to be angry, Harry. You of all people. He had so much bitterness in him, and he took so much of it out on you, even though it wasn’t your fault. He knew how much pressure you were under and how much you were suffering and it didn’t matter to him. And you’re right, I do think that he really enjoyed being cruel some of the time. He only—”

“Luna, wait.” The young woman pauses, looking startled. Harry’s tone is somber, and when he meets her eyes, there is something pleading about them. An uncomfortable ache has been twisting at his insides, and as Luna has been speaking, Harry has come to realize that these words are not the ones he wants to hear from her.

Harry understands why he is here. Down in the waters of the pensieve, he saw more than just Snape’s memories—he saw the pain and the mistakes of a human being, who lived and loved and wept and was deeply vulnerable despite the walls he had built. But Harry cannot find it in himself to reconcile this human man with the greasy dungeon bat he knows. What Harry needs, he realizes, is proof that this man who loved and fought for the Light really existed, and that his vision in the pensieve was not just the desperate dream of someone searching for goodness in the face of death.

He does not need to hear again the list of the Potion Master’s misdeeds, but he does need to hear, for the first time, the story of a man who left his earthly belongings to one of his students, to a girl who felt the need to journey to his grave for a final goodbye.

What Harry needs is someone to fight for Snape.

“Why don’t you hate him?” he begins. “Even before what happened to Dumbledore. I gave Voldemort a second chance and I think… I think I’m here to do the same thing with Snape but it’s harder. I need some reason why I shouldn’t be angry. I… I need someone to tell me he was human.”

“You shouldn’t change your feelings based on what I think, Harry. You have to find that in yourself, and—”

“Luna, please. Help me.”

She pauses, her brow furrowed in thoughtfulness, and she turns to look out over the cemetery grounds. There’s a young couple bringing a pot of geraniums to a grave a half dozen rows down, and the man pulls a cloth from his pocket as he kneels to wipe the stone clean. In the distance, a groundskeeper is trimming the top of a long row of hedges, and an old man looks down at a gravestone with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his blue jacket.

Harry notices suddenly that on a thick branch of the tree nearest to them, there are three sleek crows perched side by side. They make no sound, but the one on the right begins to preen as he stares at them.

“Okay,” Luna says at last. Harry looks back at her, and the smile on her face is tinged with sadness. “You know that there were a lot of people at school who didn’t like me. I’m…a little different, and people don’t like that. Professor Snape didn’t like that either, at first, but that changed. He used to let me use the potions room in the evenings, so I could have a safe place to study and do experiments if I wanted. I didn’t really have any friends back then, so whenever I was sad or lonely I could go there. He would let me use ingredients from his storecloset, and whenever I had questions—about anything, not just potions—he would always do his best to answer them, or help me find an answer, even if it sounded silly. He would teach me spells and potions if I asked him to, and he was always helpful and patient. He would ask me about my projects, to see how they were going or if I needed help, and even though everyone else thought I was mad, I think he was the first one who actually took me seriously. When everyone else laughed at me for being different, Professor Snape was the
one who said, ‘That’s okay, you can come be different here.’”

Harry takes this in for a moment. “I didn’t know that,” he murmurs.

“He looked out for me, too. I don’t think he thought that I noticed, but I always did. It was just little things, but he would stand up for me when people were being mean. And I know I acted like those sorts of things didn’t bother me, but of course they did. How could they not? Nobody likes being told that they’re mad, or stupid, or that the things they like are stupid. And even though Professor Snape thought I was very strange…” Luna smiles widely. “He made me feel like that was a good thing. He made me feel like I was clever and the work I was doing was special.”

“Why do you think that was?” Harry asks. “Why do you think he was so nice to you?”

Luna begins picking the flowers from her hair again. “Well, to start, I was nice to him first.” She lets out a little laugh. “He didn’t like that very much. But I think, once he got used to it…” Her eyes are thick with memories, and she spends a few moments like this, smiling, before her expression changes again. Something sad comes over her. “I hope I was as important to him as he was to me. I think he needed someone to be nice to him, to treat him like a person, and I think half the time he was mean because he didn’t feel like he was. I think he was just trying to feel important, because he didn’t think that he mattered.”

“But being nice to you… Made him feel important.”

“Maybe. I think that maybe he needed someone to care about who didn’t make him feel guilty. He cared about you because he had to—because he felt like it was the only way to make up for the bad things he’d done. But I like to think that if he did care about me after all, at least it was because he wanted to. I like to think that I made him feel good about himself. I really hope I did. I tried.”

This thought hangs in the air for several long moments. Luna keeps the spectrespecs clutched in one hand, and she resumes picking the flowers from her hair with the other. There is a purposefulness about this motion that piques Harry’s interest. “What are those?” he asks.

Luna gives a sad smile and sets down her glasses. “Cypress,” she says, holding out a red flower, “to comfort those who have left us.” She holds out a blue flower in the other hand. “Bluebell, to comfort those left behind. I thought about bringing zinnias.”

“What do those mean?”

“Missing a lost friend,” she says gently.

“Do you really think he was your friend?”

Luna pauses. “I think I was his friend. I think I was the closest thing to a friend he really had. It was different for me, though. He was a mentor, and I looked up to him in a lot of ways, but I definitely still saw him as my teacher.” She looks up at the three crows and tilts her head inquisitively. “I don’t know. Maybe he was my friend.” She shrugs. “I don’t think it matters what the name for it was. What’s important is that I felt it, and I know exactly what it means in my heart.”

“That’s…” Harry’s mouth presses into a perplexed line. “That’s kinda deep, Luna.”

“Well, that’s the thing, Harry. People think that I don’t pay attention, that I’m too busy chasing nargles to see what’s happening around me. But that couldn’t be further from the truth. The truth is that I see…so much. I see how people… People are lonely, Harry, and they hurt. So many people hurt so much, and they forget that they’re people. They forget about what being magic means, and sometimes they need to be reminded. They need to be reminded that they’re still people, and that
they aren’t made out of hurt. People are made out of beauty and magic and light.”

Harry winces. “You think Snape was made out of beauty and light?”

“Of course. Did you ever see him cast a healing charm?” She lets out a happy hum. “Or, should I say, did you ever hear him?”

The image of Draco Malfoy’s blood spreading over the bathroom tiles flashes in his mind. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “What…? What did you think about it?”

“It was one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever heard. It was a song. But it didn’t have any words. It was just intention, just the feelings that were inside of him. And although I’d asked him to teach me spells before, I didn’t ask him about that one. It was…too personal. That song didn’t just come from him—it was him.”

Harry thinks back to the Forest of Dean, to a radiant, ethereal doe and the aura of comfort and sadness and genuine warmth that it gave off. His brow furrows. “His patronus was like that, I think.”

“It was a doe, wasn’t it?” Luna makes a sound of interest. “I asked him what it was once, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“Okay,” Harry says slowly, trying to put together the pieces in his mind. “So if Snape was so full of light, then why was he so terrible? Why wasn’t he just a nicer person?”

“I don’t think he could.” She thinks about this, and then corrects herself, “No. I don’t think he knew how. Hurting is easy, and…healing is so much harder. Not everyone can do it, and definitely not alone. I do think he did the best he could, though. I think he tried to be good, in his own way. Because even though he was cruel, he still tried to help when it mattered. He tried to heal whatever he could. Isn’t that right?”

Harry begrudgingly recalls all the times that Snape came through for him—confronting Quirrell, tending to him in the Shrieking Shack, calling the Order to the Department of Mysteries, delivering the Sword of Gryffindor, and a half dozen other good deeds that only ever made Harry hate him more. He thinks of his dark form bending attentively over Draco Malfoy, over Dumbledore, over Katie Bell. “Yeah, I guess,” he says at last.

It’s quiet, and a sweet-smelling breeze washes over them. Harry can tell that Luna has retreated deep into her own thoughts; she holds one of the cypress blossoms in her palm a bit longer, looking at it critically before taking the spectrespecs from her lap and setting them on her nose. She scrutinizes the red petals for a few moments, and then replaces the glasses on her head with a little sound of approval; this flower is diligently placed on top of the stone, rather than on the grass in front of it. The next bluebell receives the same treatment, but when she moves to examine it through the purple lenses, something appears to displease her.

Harry watches as an almost tangible darkness settles over her, and after a moment, she unhappily thrusts the blossom away from her. She takes the glasses from her nose, more slowly this time, and folds them up before holding them tightly in her fist.

“It’s so strange to me that you were actually there,” she says somberly.

“When…?” Harry is startled by the question, and he averts his eyes towards Snape’s name carved into the stone. “Yeah. I was there.”

“Kingsley and I had to go to his house. It was so dark, and… And everything was organized and in boxes. All I could think of was how long it must have taken him to go through everything he had,
and how he must have been thinking about dying the whole time he was working. He knew. He knew he was going to die.”

There is a deep pang of discomfort that wells up in Harry’s chest, and he is taking a sudden interest in the exact shape of his knuckles when he mutters, “Not like that, he didn’t.”

Luna lets out a soft whimper, and he looks up, startled to see her mouth twisted into a pained frown. “He— He must have been so scared,” she chokes out.

Harry has seen Luna cry before, the day they buried Dobby outside of Shell Cottage, but those were quiet, elegant tears, shed with an expression of dignity. Now, Luna brings her knees up to her nose, the pink glasses clutched against her chest and her eyes squeezed tightly shut. A deep, ugly sob wells up out of her mouth, and despite how Luna is always smiling, always cheerful, Harry realizes suddenly that he is watching a little part of Luna Lovegood’s heart break.

“Hey,” Harry murmurs, moving closer to her. He reaches out and wraps his arms around her, one hand gently passing over the back of her trembling shoulder. “He’s not worth crying about,” he almost says, before stopping himself. Clearly he is worth crying about, at least to Luna, and it is this outpouring of emotion, more than anything she has said so far, that finally begins to elevate Snape in his regard.

"Do you think at least he knew?" she asks, the words nearly incomprehensible as she weeps. “In the end? Do you think he knew that we were both going to be alright?”

"You know, I've been thinking about this a lot and..." Harry swallows, his mouth suddenly dry. His mind replays the image of Snape’s face, contorted in agony as his veins emptied and Nagini’s venom began to eat at him—of his black eyes, brimming with tears and unfathomable despair in the moment before the light left them. "Well, sure he did."

“Don’t lie to me.”

“No. I guess he didn’t.” Harry scrambles to think of something encouraging to say. His eyes scan the horizon as though it will tell him exactly which words he needs to use. “You know,” he says brightly, suddenly feeling inspired, “Dumbledore once told me that death is just the next great adventure.”

“Oh, I know that.” She sounds almost insulted, and there is a viciousness about her tone that he did not think she was even capable of expressing. “For Merlin’s sake, Harry.”

“I’m just trying to help.”

“I don’t understand. Hermione told me what happened. She told me what happened to him and… And he didn’t even fight back, did he? He was so sure he was going to die, it was like he didn’t even think he deserved to live. Why didn’t he fight back?!”

“Maybe he was tired,” Harry offers.

“I was just hoping that the war would end and he could just be himself and make potions and stop being so sad, but he knew that he’d never have that. He knew that he’d die horribly and he knew that everyone would be angry and no one would care about him. I tried to help and it didn’t even matter in the end.”

“Luna.” Harry interrupts her for the second time; he draws back and takes her shoulders in his hands, forcing her to look him in the eye. “He knew that you cared about him, right?”
“But what if he didn’t?”

“Well that’s silly. Of course he did. You practically said it yourself. You were his…friend. Or something. And Snape might have been sort of confused, but he wasn’t stupid. Snape was a lot of things, but stupid definitely wasn’t one of them. I’m really sure he knew, and I’m not lying about that.” He lets that sentiment hang for another minute or so while Luna’s weeping slowly subsides into a series of little hiccups. “And I wouldn’t worry about him too much,” Harry adds. “I mean, now he knows we’re okay, don’t you think?”

Luna looks up at him suddenly, eyes wide like she hadn’t yet thought of this. “Yes,” she says, and Harry is glad to see the corner of her mouth pull upward into a faint smile. She lets out a weak breath of laughter and shakes her head. “Yes. You’re right, Harry. I think that’s exactly what I needed to hear.” Harry feels good about this, since that’s not usually one of his strong points.

“I really do think he knew.”

Luna looks back down at her glasses and nods. “No, you’re right. He did. I’m very certain of it.” She takes a moment, resting her head back against the stone, and she watches the crows above them for a minute before looking back at him. “Do you want to hear a story?”

“Sure.”

“One day Andrea Perenelle stole my spectrespecs, and Professor Snape brought them back to me. You can ask Ginny—she was there. He accidentally told me that they were broken when he found them, and that he had taken the time to fix them for me. But the curious thing was…” She laughs. “I asked him if he had tried them on and he told me very firmly that he hadn’t. But I know he was lying.”

Harry can’t help but let out a low chuckle; he is too entertained by the image of Snape, looking annoyed and disoriented with his arms crossed in front of him, the curtains of his greasy hair pushed back behind the pink, flamboyant plastic wings. “That must have looked hilarious.”

“That’s what he said. I told him that looking silly doesn’t matter, but if he really did put them on, and I know that he did… Then that means that he already knew that. It means that he knew a lot more than he ever would have admitted, even to me. It means that he could probably see and feel things like I do.” She looks down at the glasses in question. One finger affectionately traces the edge of the left frame, then the right, before travelling down the length of one temple and back. “I think he thought that these were one of a kind. He was so careful with them, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I had loads of them at home. But I guess that makes them pretty special after all.”

Harry opens his mouth, closes it as he reconsiders his words, and then furrows his brow as he finally speaks. “I guess I’m glad to know that he did some good for someone. You know, beyond the spying and all of that. I’m glad that he was actually…a part of your life, and that he made it better.”

“He did. I learned so much from him—more than just potions and spells. I learned that people are so complicated, and that there’s so much we can learn from each other, even the people who we think might be bad or might not matter. I learned that sometimes there aren’t really words for what you want to say, and that’s alright, because feelings are complicated too. Magic works the same way a lot of the time. It isn’t always about waving your wand the right way or using the right incantation. Magic is around us, and in us, and it’s what makes us alive whether we’re wizards or Muggles or whatever else. And I think…” There is a pause as she glances down at the stone beside her, and then, after a few long, thoughtful moments, the smile on her face becomes incandescent. She lifts her gaze again and their eyes lock, emerald green and grey like a storm in the springtime. "No. I know that most importantly, more than anything else, I learned that for as complicated as we are, we must do
two simple things. We must love ardently and always hope. Professor Snape did that, even if it
wasn’t as gracefully as most people. Even if he didn’t know he was doing it. Even if he didn’t think
that he could.”

“But…” Harry thinks about this. “But it still counted.”

“Yes. Every bit of it counted.”

As if this settles the matter, the young woman rises and brushes herself off as she stuffs her feet back
into her discarded trainers. She makes a few arrangements on the grave, pauses, reorganizes it, and
then gives a nod of satisfaction. Another breeze washes over them as she reaches down to place her
hand on the the top of the stone, and she leaves it there for several seconds before whispering,
“Goodbye, Professor. Thank you.” There is a flurry of flapping wings above them; they both look
upwards to where the three crows have startled from their perch. They circle once, then a second
time before flying off eastward.

“That’s time to go,” she says, reaching out for Harry’s hand. He takes it, and she weaves her fingers
between his as they turn and walk away.

Left behind on the grave amongst the scattered petals is a pair of bubblegum pink glasses, swaddled
in a wreath of baby’s breath.

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