Strange Bedfellows

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Strange Bedfellows

by DasMervin, MrsHyde (DasMervin)

Summary

“We all need someone we can lean on...” Two unlikely men in an unlikely place find an unlikely friendship in each other. A post-DH, post-OUaTiM crossover AU featuring Severus Snape and Agent Sheldon Jeffrey Sands.

Notes

This is the first major fic that Mrs. Hyde and I ever collaborated on. It was one of those stories where everything came together and our creative juices were flowing just right—this story just came to us, and we managed to churn it out in record time.

We know the fic’s canons rather limit the audience we can get for it—not too many people know Once Upon a Time in Mexico, while the Harry Potter fandom is so massive it’s hard to find anything at all in it, but Hyde and I both agree that this is the finest fic we’ve ever written, so definitely give this a shot even if you don’t know the fandoms.
Disclaimer: *Harry Potter* is the property of JK Rowling, Bloomsbury, Scholastic, and Warner Brothers. *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* is the property of Robert Rodriguez and Columbia Pictures. No copyright infringement is intended, and no profit is being made from this work.
Prologue

The sun hung bright in the afternoon sky, filling the streets with lazy yellow sunshine. Dennis squinted against it as he looked down the cobbled road for a place with some shade.

He’d never been to Mexico before, despite the fact that his mother-in-law had been born here and that his wife had made regular trips to her mother’s home town when she was a girl. Still, after ten years of marriage, he’d managed to pick up on some of the culture, and his Spanish was enough so that he could get by. But that wasn’t saying much, really. He still felt like a fish out of water.

A happy fish, though. It really was a pretty country, despite being accursedly hot. The sky was always blue, and the Spanish architecture gave the place an antiquated feel that he imagined was otherwise lacking from this continent, a feel that he could appreciate, coming from England.

He did wish that he was here on happier circumstances. Over their years together, he’d always enjoyed Annie’s stories of visiting her grandfather, and had wanted to join her one day in going back to her childhood summer stomping ground, but he hadn’t been planning on going until the kids were away at school, and he certainly hadn’t anticipated going to Mexico for the first time in order to divide her grandfather’s estate.

Annie wasn’t taking it well. Neither was her mother. His father-in-law had come to help his wife, so there was no way that Dennis couldn’t do the same for his own. And so, nine-year-old Colin and six-year-old Ellie were duly packed up and brought along for the ride as well.

They, at least, were enjoying themselves immensely. Dennis was of the opinion that Annie was trying to cope with her grief by making sure that the kids had the time of their lives in the place that she had so loved as a child, and Dennis had done his best to help her. It really was a shame they were here, now, like this; he rather thought that he would have enjoyed simply sightseeing here. There was a strange, shabbily quaint charm about the streets of Culiacán that made him feel almost at home, like the narrow streets where his father still delivered the milk, or the old winding cobblestones of Diagon Alley.

And today there was a sort of bittersweet fondness in that association, because today was Colin’s birthday. Not his son’s—his brother’s. He would have been forty-one today.

Would have been, had he not died at sixteen, murdered by Death Eaters.

Dennis always went for a walk on Colin’s birthday. Sometimes it was down the familiar streets where they’d grown up, places where they’d laughed and chased each other, where Colin had told him fantastical stories of dragons and monsters and warriors and had dazzled him with the picture of a real fairy that he’d snapped in the park one day. Or sometimes he went down Diagon Alley and retraced the path he’d followed the day Professor McGonagall had taken them to buy Colin’s school supplies for his first year, when they’d bought the book in Flourish and Blotts that told them it had actually been a pixie that Colin had caught on camera. The same path Colin had taken him on, bursting with pride, two years later when it was time for him to get his supplies for his first year at Hogwarts.

Annie didn’t mark the date, per se, but she knew that he liked to go out on his own when it rolled around. She’d forgotten this year, but he didn’t begrudge her that, particularly since she’d felt so guilty about it and all but shooed him out the door.

But now that he was out, he really didn’t know where to go. He couldn’t make his way back to his
and his brother’s old haunts, because they were half a world away. Instead he was under the empty blue sky in the dusty sunlight of Mexico.

And, incidentally, he was lost.

It was *insanely* hot in this country, he decided, wiping away the trickle of sweat that had run into his eye. He’d never been one for wizard’s robes, being Muggle-born, and at the moment felt quite fortunate not to be draped in layers of wool and velvet. He wasn’t worried about having no idea where he was; he was sure that he could backtrack to the house, or if he was desperate, Apparate there. No, what he really wanted right now was a little shade and something cold to drink.

And if he couldn’t revisit the places where his brother had once been, he supposed he would have to make do in the new locale by having a drink for him.

He made it to the plaza at the end of the thoroughfare and was intensely relieved to find a tiny pavement café called *El Cisne Oro* with outdoor tables under a green awning. He sank into a chair, delighted to discover that a very pleasant breeze blew across the façade of the building, and he fanned himself with his menu until a young waiter came to take his order. He’d developed a taste for sangría since coming here, and he thought Colin would have liked it, so he ordered two, one for each of them, and settled down to enjoy the relative cool.

He idly watched the passers-by, feeling one hundred percent better already with the sweating glass in his hand. This wasn’t the nicest part of town, he supposed, but it was pleasant and personable in its own way. There were lots of children, and not too many tourists.

Oddly enough, the only people he’d heard speak English today didn’t seem like tourists at all.

There was a pair of old men sitting at the table just behind him and to his left, and they were speaking in perfect and unaccented English. Dennis wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but when he’d heard nothing but rapid-fire Spanish for days on end, his ears seemed to be a-quiver for the sound of a familiar word, and now that they heard it, they were determined to listen.

It wasn’t as if it was hard to hear, anyway; the one talking was doing so rather obnoxiously. It didn’t take long to surmise that he was an American; almost all the genuine English speakers here he’d seen were just that.

“Don’t even think about it,” Dennis overheard. “I want dessert, and you are going to buy it for me.”

His companion replied with a sneer. Dennis had to strain to hear him at first; his voice was rough and hoarse, and it almost seemed that he had trouble raising it enough for even the other man to hear.

“Explain to me why, exactly, I should do anything of the kind?” the second one asked, and Dennis was rather pleased to realize that underneath his gravelly tones, his accent was pleasantly and surprisingly familiar—Manchester, where he grew up.

“Because it’s my birthday, an event so monumental in the history of the world that not even a completely brain-dead Brit like yourself could fail to be aware of it. And that in itself is a damn good reason—because do you remember your last birthday?” the American asked.

“Vividly.”

“Well, then—unless you want a repeat, you’re going to buy me dessert for *my* birthday—savvy?”

Dennis snorted quietly into his—Colin’s—glass. The second one growled something he couldn’t make out, but not long after the same waiter who’d taken Dennis’s order was at their table, carefully
repeating back a ridiculously long and complicated (and probably expensive) order from the American.

Dennis stared into the bottom of his glass, swirling around the last remnants of Colin’s drink; a group of children on bicycles careened by, bells whirring and playing cards in the spokes rattling. Colin had taught him to ride his bike.

A pair of Asian tourists were snapping pictures of the quaint little café, as well as the little adobe jewellery shop and the boutique selling soaps and lotions on either side. It was unfortunate, really, that their pictures wouldn’t be able to move, like the ones Colin had brought home after his first year at Hogwarts.

The two old men were snarling at each other over the mountain of confectionery between them. “Tell me, Andrews,” the second one rasped, “how is it that any one man can lay claim to abysmal stupidity the depths of which the rest of the world cannot even hope to fathom?”

Dennis froze.

He stared down at his cauldron; there was no way the almost purple potion could be mistaken for the pale blue it was supposed to be. And more ominously, it looked as though the spatter of the stuff that he’d sloshed onto his bench by accident was eating the varnish.

A shadow fell over him, and he cringed.

“Tell me, Creevey,” came the silken voice over his head, and he looked up into a pair of spitefully glittering black eyes, “how is it that, despite your brother having claimed such a vast helping of your family’s abysmal stupidity for himself, you still manage to achieve depths of idiocy of which he can only dream?”

Dennis sat stock still, his brain a jumble. What…? Had that…? Snape?!

He jerked around in his seat, unable to help himself, trying his best to be subtle, knowing he wasn’t managing it, and frankly past caring.

There—one of the old men, the one with the long scar on his cheek and more or less facing him—his thin face was framed with long, greasy hair liberally streaked with white, his mouth was drawn thin and tight, his brow was furrowed into an expression that would have withered a manticore—

And then he opened his mouth. “Fuck you.”

Dennis blinked. Oh. The American.

He turned his interest to the other one. He was facing mostly away; Dennis couldn’t see much of his face, only his jaw and one cheek, both liberally covered with a bristling beard of the same iron grey as the close-cropped hair on his head.

Dennis thought he saw the American look at him; he quickly went back to his drink, fiddling nervously with his straw. Get a grip, Creevey, he told himself. You’re sitting here getting maudlin in your cups and you’ve managed to convince yourself that your dead Potions professor is sitting next to you in a café in Mexico.

The thought calmed him a little, but…that tone. He’d never heard anyone else manage that perfect blend of burning spite and cool contempt but Snape.
He made no excuses for himself now; he was eavesdropping. And listening only further convinced him that no, it couldn’t be Snape—Snape would never sit outside loudly sniping like an old fishwife. And the old boy was talking about what were apparently his grandchildren, which was simply outrageous as far as Snape was concerned.

But every time Dennis had decided that he was mistaken, the old man would sneer at his companion, and then it simply had to be Snape.

Dennis nursed the dregs of his drink for another twenty minutes before the tell-tale scrape of chairs behind him told him that the two of them were getting up.

He flicked his eyes over, much more surreptitiously this time. The American felt around on the back of his chair before coming back with a heavy cane, which he leaned on a bit as he stood. The other rummaged in his wallet, apparently coughing up as ordered. He tugged a little on his buttoned collar, and then moved to leave. His companion followed closely, cutting across Dennis’s field of vision and hiding the other from view, but not before affording Dennis a glimpse of the man’s profile—and a look at that large, hooked, and unmistakable nose.

Dennis waited just long enough for them to be out of earshot before throwing some money on the table and following them down the street.

Dennis ground his teeth as he tried to remember the directions the man at the café had given him.

His attempt at tracking the two old men had been a shockingly impressive failure. He’d thought he’d been doing all right, at first; he’d stayed behind them, near enough to overhear them continuing their constant stream of sarcasm and insults, the American stumping slowly along behind Sn—the other one, leaning heavily on his cane. Sn—the Englishman didn’t seem much inclined to offer his friend any sort of consideration, as his long stride (and Dennis wagered that he would sweep over the pavement if he had been wearing robes) was more than his lame companion seemed to be able to manage. It had been a hard job for Dennis to maintain a discreet distance between himself and the American without losing sight of the other one.

It had been with a measure of relief that Dennis had finally heard the American holler for the other one—Greene, he called him—to wait. Greene had stopped and turned to wait with a scowl; he was too far away for Dennis to see his face properly, but that rigid posture, the arms crossed in impatience, annoyance radiating from him in waves…it had to be!

The American caught up to him, and they resumed their walk, much more slowly now. The one he was following took slow, even steps, his friend limping painfully along behind him, his gait even more uneven than before. Dennis hurried a little to catch up with them, straining to hear their now quiet conversation.

And then, without warning, the American picked up his cane, grabbed the other by the arm, and the two of them ducked down the nearest alley quick as a wink before Dennis knew what had happened.

He stopped, dumbfounded for a moment, and then jogged up to the alley—and nothing. They were gone.

He scrambled uselessly around, trying to figure out where on earth they could have gone. A quick spell showed that no magic could be detected, and he was definitely alone, they weren’t just hiding somewhere—they were simply gone.

Dennis had eventually been forced to admit defeat at the hands to two crotchety old men…but no,
there was no way he could stand to leave it at that—it would drive him absolutely mad if he never managed to just see that man, close up, to reassure himself that he wasn’t Snape. Everything he knew told him that it simply couldn’t be…but he just couldn’t let it go.

As a last ditch effort, he managed to find his way back to the café and ask the waiter if he had any idea who those men were. Rather to his surprise, the waiter had.

“Oh, sí, señor. Señor Andrews and Don Greene.”

Apparently they lived not far from the plaza, and had for quite some time; both were mostly reclusive and notorious eccentrics, but well known and largely respected in the local community. Both had been here as long as the young waiter could remember. Greene, as it happened, was a local peddler of various medicines and herbal remedies that evinced sometimes miraculous results—just like magic, the waiter said.

That did nothing for Dennis’s attempts to assure himself that it wasn’t Snape.

And so he’d asked directions from the young fellow and set about finding his way to where they lived.

He really had no idea what he was going to say. He was going to knock on the door, this Greene fellow was going to answer it, and he would be a Muggle and a total stranger, and Dennis would leave feeling like an idiot.

But he walked on anyway.

It was late in the afternoon before he finally found Calle del Sombras. It was a narrow, crooked street, lined with sagging and dilapidated houses, bunched together like jurors, their eyeless windows regarding him accusingly. No children played in these dusty alleyways, and a mangy stray dog was his only companion in the silent street.

He stopped in front of Number 13. It looked no different than its neighbours, aged and run down, but this one had a light on, seen through the wavy, murky glass behind the little iron brackets crammed full of potted plants. Dennis approached the door; the light outside was on as well, and dangling from a bracket next to it were those ubiquitous strings of dried peppers and garlic—only these were accompanied by a string of small bundles of what he recognized to be dried rosemary, tansy, and dittany. Medicinal herbs.

He reached upward, hesitated only a moment, and then he knocked.

Silence. He nervously scratched his calf with his toe, and heard the sounds of a distant catfight.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when the door was suddenly yanked open, and he found himself face-to-face with the American.

“What?” he demanded.

“Er—” Dennis found himself at a loss for words momentarily, but the impatient look on the man’s face snapped him back. “Excuse me, sir, but I’m looking for someone—”

He stopped; the man’s face had gone cold and closed. “Someone you know?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

“Well, no—not exactly—” Dennis rubbed the back of his head with his hand. “Look, I know this is ridiculous, but I saw you having lunch earlier with a—a Mr. Greene, I think it was—”
“Are you the little turd that was following us?”

Dennis’s jaw hung loose for a moment before he recovered. “Now, look, sir, I wasn’t following you, I just wanted to see Mr. Greene—”

The American—Andrews, he guessed, snorted. “Well, did you think that maybe he isn’t interested in seeing you?”

Dennis clenched his jaw. “Excuse me, sir—I want to speak with Mr. Greene, please,” he said firmly.

“Well, why don’t you want in one hand and take a dump in the other and see which one fills up faster, kiddo?” he said, and began to swing the door shut.

Dennis reached out and grabbed it; it smacked against his hand with a thwap. The old bugger was stronger than he looked. “Now, sir, I don’t mean to be rude,” he said firmly, “but I really need to see Mr. Greene—I swear I’ve seen him before and I need to talk to him.”

Andrews was frozen and on point, his arm braced against the door, his face expressionless behind his sunglasses. “Seen him before, have you?” he asked. “You an old friend, or something?”

Dennis held his ground. “Sort of—look, I’m really sorry to be bothering you like this, and I know it’s crazy, but…but I swear he’s an old teacher of mine. Back when I was at boarding school in England.”

“Well, you’re wrong, so fuck off,” Andrews said lightly, flipping his wrist in dismissal.

Dennis straightened his shoulders. “Fine, then. I’m really sorry to do this, sir, but—” and he pulled out his wand with a little flick.

Andrews seemed to cock his head, an odd motion, almost like a hound catching a scent, and then Dennis yelped in shock when Andrews shot out his arm with the speed of a striking snake and seized his wand-hand in a vice-like grip. It was all he could do not to cry out when his wand was unceremoniously jerked from his fingers and Andrews began to squeeze, to squeeze right there on the meat between his fingers and thumb, and oh, dammit, it hurt!

“Don’t you ever think about pulling your little magic wand on me again, mate—understand?” he said, his voice hard but coolly amused as Dennis writhed.

His shock let him see past the pain in his hand for a moment. “You—you’re a wizard?”

Andrews grinned but didn’t answer. “Now, I told you once that Greene isn’t receiving visitors today, but it didn’t seem to penetrate. How about now?” he asked, and he squeezed even tighter.

“Dammit, no!” he said, furious and hurting and now sure more than ever that it was Snape. “I have to know—I think he’s my old Potions professor!”

And then there was a sudden growling curse behind the door, and Andrews let up, thank God, and as Dennis bent over to snatch up his wand from where Andrews had dropped it and he rubbed his throbbing hand, a voice like sandpaper snarled from the doorway. “Foolishly Gryffindor as ever, I see, Creevey, and never one to admit defeat even in the face of odds that any normal idiot would never take.”

He looked up, his mouth hanging open, and he stared.

His grey hair was short, his cheeks and chin entirely covered by his rough beard. There were spidery
scars tracing the edges of his jaw that disappeared under his neatly buttoned collar. Lines seamed the
tanned skin around his eyes, and his voice was low and rough and when he spoke it was the sound
of grinding stones.

And it was Snape.

Dennis gaped like a landed fish before stuttering, “Sir—I—it is you—Professor Snape!”

“Well, fuck.” Dennis heard Andrews’s voice a second before that same surprisingly strong hand flew
out again, biffing him in the jaw with the knuckles before groping down to his neck and closing
tightly around his collar. “Get in here.”

Dennis was nearly jerked off his feet as he was yanked forcefully over the threshold and all but
thrown into the room, and almost into Snape. Stumbling, he reeled backwards, staring up at his old
Potions professor as he loomed over him, his black eyes glittering with fury.

The years had not reduced his menace.

“You—sir—you’re alive!”

“Your observational prowess never ceases to amaze, Creevey,” Snape growled, stalking across the
room, his long stride the same as Dennis remembered despite his Muggle clothing.

He jumped a little at the sharp sound of Andrews closing the door forcefully behind them all. He
flicked his glance over to him; Andrews’s expression was one of petulant annoyance, but Dennis
was too dazed to think much of it.

He’d told himself that it was a trick of his imagination, and despite all of his misgivings, despite the
niggling doubts, he hadn’t, he thought, really believed that it was Snape, that he was here. He’d been
dead for over twenty years and yet…here he was, alive and well—and obviously royally brassed off.
Dennis looked at him, and Snape glared back. “Sit down!” he barked.

“Yes sir!” Dennis yelped automatically and was already in the nearest armchair before he’d realized
what had just happened. He blinked, shocked, but had no time to consider the matter; a metallic click
sounded behind him a second before the cold barrel of a gun pressed hard against the side of his
head.

Dennis froze. Moving nothing but his wide eyes, he looked over to find Andrews leaning down next
to him, his finger on the trigger, his free hand resting on the chair back behind him. “And now, son,”
he said amiably, “we’re going to have a little chat.”

“Put that away,” Snape snapped.

“No,” said Andrews.

“Don’t be an idiot!”

Andrews sneered at him. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blow his brains out,” he said,
talking to Snape but looking at Dennis, grinning like a shark, his eyes obscured by his glasses.

“Because someone will come looking for him, imbecile—and I want to know who sent him,” Snape
said coldly, moving to stand in front of Dennis’s chair with his arms crossed, looking down at him
with an inscrutable expression.

Andrews held the gun to his head for a moment more; Dennis felt his entire body relax when he
withdrawn it, tucking it neatly away behind him. “Fine—we’ll do this your way—which is always a mistake.”

“Oh, yes, since your methods have in the past yielded such stellar results,” Snape rasped nastily. “Sit down, Sands—when I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.”

Andrews—or Sands, or whoever he was—pulled a mocking face at Snape but moved to perch in the chair across the room. Dennis pulled his wand back out, watching him warily for a moment. Sands made Dennis nervous; he never seemed to be looking right at him, but with those glasses, you never knew if he was or not, and the amusement he had seemed to derive from threatening him…Dennis just felt better with his wand.

But now that he was armed again, Andrews rather lost his interest, and he turned back to Snape.

He had no idea where to begin. “Sir—”

“Well, Creevey?” Snape grated. “Who sent you—or are we going to have to resort to Sands’s methods after all?”

“I—what?” he asked, bewildered. “No one sent me—I’m here with my wife, she has family here—I was just taking a walk and I—I saw you.”

Snape looked at him a moment more, those black eyes boring into him as if reading the fine print on the back of his skull, before snorting in disgust. “Perfect. Simply perfect. Twenty years of avoiding all wizard kind, taking every precaution not to be found, creating a new identity on the other side of an ocean, and I’m caught out by a useless halfwit who just blundered into it.” He threw up his hands and stalked to the other side of the room, where he opened a cabinet, poured himself a liberal shot of whisky, and downed it in one gulp.

Sands smirked. “Should you be flattered, or are you just a halfwit too, then?”

“Given the company I keep, the latter seems to be most likely.”

Dennis finally managed to find his tongue, but all the words just came out in a rush. “Sir, you—you’re alive!” He went on over the snort from Sands and the withering look that Snape gave him. “Sir, you—you’re a hero! Everyone thinks you’re dead—the whole wizarding world knows about—all that time you—you were with us!”

Snape’s expression was growing blacker by the moment, particularly when Dennis stumbled over saying, “Harry told everyone about—everything—that you were—all that time you—you were with us!”

“You think this is anything new to me, Creevey?” he rumbled irritatedly, pouring another drink.

Dennis gaped at him. “But—but—sir! You—everyone—they all think you’re dead! How did you—why—what are you hiding from us for? They gave you the Order of Merlin, they—they put your portrait up in the Headmaster’s office! You’re in all the textbooks—all the history books as instrumental to Voldemort’s fall! Harry Potter named his son after you!”

Snape, who had just taken a furious drink, choked and sprayed it across the wall before whirling around, his face livid. “What?!” he demanded, his voice a study in appalled outrage.

“He did!” said Dennis stoutly. “Says you were one of the bravest men he’s ever known and he named his younger son Albus Severus.”
Snape just stared at him, aghast, until Sands, who had been quiet up to now, suddenly broke the silence with a roar of laughter.

“Albus Severus Potter!” he hooted. “Talk about the Trifectum of Suck!” He was sprawled back in his chair, guffawing loudly. “Oh, did that kid ever get pantsed in school!”

“Shut it, Sands!” Snape snarled.

Sands’s head popped up. “Why don’t we introduce him to Chiclet’s kids? Maybe Albus Severus Potter and Little Sheldon Jeffrey could talk—they could bond over having the worst names in existence!” And he dissolved into laughter once again.

Snape was quivering with indignation, and he threw Dennis a look of utter loathing, as if blaming him for whatever Sands was going on about.

Dennis himself was absolutely confused. He had no idea what they were talking about, and couldn’t for the life of him understand why Snape was hiding out in some miserable hovel down in Mexico with a madman when all of Wizarding Britain was singing his praises as a hero of the Second Voldemort War. Why, if he reappeared, he’d be greeted with honours, received by all the finest families, inundated with gold, have the pick of any position he wanted—what was he doing here?

“Sir,” Dennis blurted. “What are you doing here?” Snape turned and looked at him, making Dennis feel if he were nothing but a dense schoolboy who’d melted his cauldron again, but he met his eyes. “Why are you hiding out in Mexico?” he asked. “You—you’d be welcomed back with open arms. What is there for you here? Why don’t you come home?”

Snape tilted his head and raised his eyebrow.
The Place of Snakes

Chapter Summary

A battle-torn but alive Severus Snape takes a world tour and makes an unpleasant discovery.

Sweet Merlin, how he hated this god-forsaken hellhole.

He scowled horribly at the little girl in front him. She quailed beneath his glare, but she stood her ground, and when he had given her the little bottle she all but threw her money at him and turned tail and fled.

Impudent brat.

He smoothed out the notes; useless things, really. He’d become so accustomed to the cool heft of real, Wizarding money that he’d almost lost his appreciation for the satisfying crinkle of a fiver in his hand. Almost—not entirely. He could still appreciate the good, solid British pound. Pesos, on the other hand, were God’s most useless currency. Utterly worthless—just like everything else in Mexico.

He pulled off his wide-brimmed hat in order to mop at the sweat beading on his forehead. It was a crime against nature to be this humid in February, he thought furiously, raking a hand through his short hair before pulling his hat firmly back down on his head.

Wouldn’t do to be recognized by the wrong people, after all.

He scowled down at the basket sitting on the ground beside him. Just look at him. Slouching against the wall, buried in a wide hat and dark glasses like the vilest drunk in town, hawking potions in disguise to Muggles for a pittance, and generally just rotting away.

He, Severus Snape—a street peddler in Mexico.

He might have found the situation deliriously funny if it didn’t enrage him so—it certainly would have been the biggest laugh he’d had in years if it had happened to someone else. If nothing else, he could vividly imagine the humour some of his former acquaintances would have found in it. Potions Master of the school. Death Eater. Member of the Order of the Phoenix. Headmaster of Hogwarts. The Right Hand of the Dark Lord.

Oh, yes—both sides of that old equation would split their sides laughing if they could see him now. But they wouldn’t—because they all thought he was dead.

He’d thought he was dead—and there had been times during these past two years (and no few before that) that he’d wished he had been. It was just one more cruel joke in the long series of cruel jokes that was his life.

All he’d known was agony—he’d clawed wildly at the blackness surrounding him, fighting for every breath that seared down his throat like a red-hot poker, the blood in his veins boiling, and he couldn’t breathe, and he couldn’t even scream—
And then, eyes, above him. Not green, not that clear, wonderful green—but blue. Bright, piercing blue, and even in his madness he would know them, and oh, yes, this would be hell, atoning for every crime he’d ever committed, starting with Dumbledore and working back to her—

“Be still, boy,” a rough voice barked, “or I’ll muck this up even worse!”

The pain in his throat was unbearable, and then everything went black.

When he came to it was dark out, but a fire was crackling merrily somewhere in the room. He blinked, and then with a sort of puzzled blankness, thought, I’m alive? And then with elated astonishment, I’m alive!

And then he remembered, and it was with dawning horror that he realized, I’m alive?!

He tried to sit up and immediately regretted it. And things got even worse when he gave an involuntary grunt of pain and was rewarded with a lance of fire arcing its way down his throat, and he gasped, and it was torture.

And then strong hands were on his shoulders, pushing him back down onto the bed. “Easy, boy—don’t be moving so. I’m not much of a Healer at my best, and I weren’t at my best when I found you, so it isn’t much of a patch job. You move too much and you’ll rip it all open again.”

He looked up, and found himself staring into those same penetrating eyes behind half-moon spectacles—in the grey and grizzled face of Aberforth Dumbledore.

He grimaced, jerking his head to the side in an effort to banish the memory. A crunching of gravel caused him to look up, and swaying in front of him was one of his more regular customers—a big one for his hangover cure, was old Rodriguez. Snape was always vaguely surprised to find that he would waste liquor money on something so mundane as a hangover. But he didn’t complain, and handed over the phial without comment, waiving away the man’s mumbled thanks.

There had been so much he’d wanted to know upon waking up that night—how in God’s name had he survived, for one thing. More importantly, where was the Dark Lord? Where was Potter? What in the hell was going on?

But he hadn’t been able to ask—he hadn’t been able to speak at all.

But Aberforth had seemed to know what he wanted anyway. “I followed them damn kids,” he said. “Potter and his friends. They was in the thick of things, fighting—doing a right good job of it, too. And doing a right good job of trying to get themselves killed,” he said dryly. “But I saw them—they went running to that old whacking tree and went down under it. Well, I knew where that led, and Albus had wanted me to watch out for them—the miserable old wanker—so I did. Went back to Hogsmeade and up to that old shack.”

He looked at Snape then, really looked at him, and for a moment he seemed to see right through him in a way that even Dumbledore—Albus—had never managed. “Never sat right with me, that business last year,” he said at last. “Albus wasn’t the type to go out so quiet—liked his big showy exits, he did. And it seemed to me that maybe he’d staged his biggest exit yet.”

Snape had just stared at him; even if he’d had his voice, he wouldn’t have been able to speak.

Then Aberforth shrugged, slouching back into his chair, just the grizzled old barman at the Hog’s Head again. “So when I peeked in and saw you, saw you with them kids, and them having to leave you there for dead lest Voldemort find ‘em, I sneaked in and bundled you out. I wanted to know—from you—what happened.”
Snape tried to speak; all that emerged with a croaking whisper, accompanied by a draught of fire. Aberforth held up his hand. “Relax, boy—there’s no need. Not now. I heard from the next best source—Harry Potter. We all did.”

Snape blinked. Aberforth went on, his expression changing to one of something very like pride, maybe tinged with awe. “Don’t know how he did it—and I wasn’t there for all of it, seeing how I was tending to you. But I got back in time for the end of it all.

“They said Potter was dead. Voldemort spouted some rot about him trying to get away, which no one believed, but he said he was dead, and he brought back his body.”

It took Snape a moment to realize that his throat was complaining not because of his wounds, but because he was holding his breath.

“But he weren’t,” said Aberforth, his eyes gleaming. “They were all fighting in the Great Hall—all of ‘em going down but Voldemort, and then there was Potter.” And Aberforth turned, looking back from whatever horizon he was contemplating and regarding Snape with something very like compassion—and maybe pity. “And he told us about you.”

Snape felt his face prickling with horrified mortification. When Potter had appeared over him in the Shrieking Shack, filthy and bedraggled and covered with cuts and bruises, his only thought had been to find a way—any way—to give him Albus’s last message. And he’d needed to find a way to make Potter believe it, and so he’d done his best to give him all the memories he’d needed, but by that point, he could feel the blackness creeping in on the edges of his vision, could feel his life bleeding out on the floor, and with it his lucidity.

Potter had looked at him, and even as he had tried to remember what Albus had told him, all he could see were his eyes—her eyes—and he had been beset with memories of her eyes, of her laugh, of her smile, of her, and—

And from the look of Aberforth’s face, there could be no doubt that he knew. That everyone knew.

_Bloody-buggering hell._

“What?” he barked at the tourist who had just approached him, the horrible grating sound of his voice stopping the man in his tracks, who with an outraged glare stuck his nose in the air and went over to the jewellery seller’s blanket across from him instead.

Oh, well—he doubted that the man had been interested in his wares, anyway. He didn’t do much trade with tourists looking for souvenirs. And he didn’t blame them, looking as he did. No doubt they thought he sold bona fide snake oil.

The irony of that epithet was not lost on him.

Snape sighed and slouched back into his shrinking bar of shade. Eighty degrees in February. It was obscene.

He’d wanted to leave England as soon as possible. Sooner. Aberforth had very nearly had to tie him down to keep him from haring off and getting out of the country that very night. Aberforth had tried to convince him to stay, actually—his work was done, he said, and he could rest now.

He hadn’t been able to speak yet, but he felt the look that he’d given Aberforth had been quite eloquent in conveying his feelings on _that_. There would be no rest for him—not with everyone and his krupp wanting to verify Potter’s story. And there would be a trial—not even the word of the Great Harry Potter would be enough to prevent that, not for him. And then he’d have to see the brat,
because of course Saint Potter would come to his rescue, and he’d probably feel that Snape owed him something now, and then he would cling to him like he’d hung on Black and Lupin as some twisted link to his past, and he’d not have it. He never wanted to see that useless, arrogant little twit again. Ever.

And so Aberforth had relented—enough, at least, to let him go. There had been some stipulations about when, though, seeing how he was in no fit state to go anywhere. Aberforth hadn’t been lying—he’d done a dismal job on healing him. Apparently he’d just stabilized him at first, more than anything, putting him in a stasis spell of sorts, roughly closing his wounds and stopping his bleeding. Then he’d had to leave, to go back to help the combatants. But when Aberforth had come skidding into the Great Hall, the battle had already almost ended, and once the Dark Lord had been dispatched, he’d come back.

Aberforth had been working on him for three days before he woke up, mostly using hackneyed, back alley spells and an array of black market potions. The end result was not pretty. He supposed even the most skilled of Healers would have a hard job healing someone who’d had his throat ripped out by a great bloody snake. And Aberforth was patently no Healer.

It wasn’t the scars that bothered him the most. Although they were hideous, there was no doubt about that, turning his neck into a knotted mass of scar tissue, the rends and tears of Nagini’s teeth still visible in some places, others merely unrecognizable, twisted masses where the flesh had been cobbled together by an unskilled hand.

No, what really bothered him was his voice. Or rather, the lack thereof.

It had taken him weeks to be able so speak again; for a time he’d been worried that his voice was gone forever, torn out and swallowed by that wretched reptile. But he’d forced himself to try, to keep trying, despite the pain that roared down his gullet as he forced his larynx into motion, to speak.

He’d held out a vain hope for several months that it would improve. But after nearly a year he’d given up; the voice that had terrified children, intimidated adults, purred insults and derision with such ease, the voice that she had liked—

Well, it was gone. And in its place he was left with a harsh, guttural mockery of human speech.

He sounded like a troll with tonsillitis. And that was on a good day. The roughness of his tones were only exacerbated by the fact that his crushed and lacerated windpipe hadn’t been pieced back together with much finesse either; the air fairly whistled down his throat at first, and even now there were times he couldn’t seem to draw deep breaths with ease. And if he talked too loudly or too much, it was painful, and his windpipe just wanted to close up all together.

Oh, yes, life was just wonderful—thank you so very much, Aberforth, for saving him for this.

The moment he’d been able to stand up and stir a cauldron, he’d demanded (well, written down) ingredients of his own. He didn’t trust the concoctions that Aberforth had come by for a moment, and once Snape was brewing his own remedies in addition to managing his own healing charms, his recovery had sped up considerably. He’d been able to ease his breathing and lessen the pain of speech, and even to soften the lines of his scars.

And if nothing else, it was something to do.

For so long, all he could do was yearn toward that unidentified end to it all, when everything was finished, when he was no longer beholden to Voldemort, to Dumbledore, to Potter—not to anyone. When he could just be.
Well, there he was. Hidden away, quite literally dead to the world, and finally left alone.

He was going out of his mind.

With nothing to engage him, without his potions, without teaching, without meddlesome brats to discipline and Death Eaters to dupe, there was nothing to occupy his thoughts. For over sixteen years he’d made it from day to day by throwing himself into his work, whatever that work may have been, in order to keep himself from dwelling on his past, on his own folly, on all that he had lost.

And now that work was done.

So after two months of hiding out in the Hog’s Head—in that same room where he’d first spied on Dumbledore and Trelawney, and if that wasn’t just a malicious piece of irony—he’d finally told Aberforth that he was leaving. By that point the old man had accepted that he wasn’t going to stay, and so he’d nodded resignedly and helped him put his affairs in order.

There wasn’t much at Hogwarts he cared about; the place had been where he worked, not where he lived. Spinner’s End was another matter; there was quite a lot there that had given him a wrench to lose—to say nothing of leaving the place itself, and all that it had meant to him. But there was simply no way he could get to it, not with all of his belongings seized as part of his estate (and he had a horrible, sinking feeling that it would be Potter who would come into it, the little bastard—he had no right!).

In the end he made off with nothing but his life’s savings. Perhaps it was a result of his working-class upbringing, but since leaving school he had squirrelled away every piece of gold he had got his hands on, and thankfully Gringotts didn’t ask questions. Aberforth had helped him withdraw all funds to his name, his budget to leave this miserable island.

It was a pittance, but it was all he had.

He didn’t even leave with the clothes on his back—much too conspicuous. He’d transfigured them into Muggle attire, complete with long coat, dark glasses, and a hat. He had taken no chances on being spotted.

None at all, in fact. Because of the bandages on his neck, he hadn’t been able to shave properly for the months he spent in Aberforth’s care, and just before he was leaving, he’d been shocked to look in the mirror and realize that his face was all but hidden behind a bristling black beard.

It made him look distressingly like his father, really. Neither one of them, it seemed, could grow a decent beard if their lives (or their anonymity) depended on it.

But the black bristles were certainly enough for him to hide behind.

He’d examined his recent growth, and had been appalled to realize that there were bits of grey coming in. A quick hand through his hair had revealed strands of silver shot through it as well.

Snape snorted (which was a mistake, because it still hurt); after what he’d been through this past year alone, it was a miracle that he wasn’t completely white-headed. And then a thought occurred to him. He reached for his wand, gripped it for a moment, and then went to work.

A few well-placed charms here, a spot of transfiguration there, and all the hair on his face and head had faded to a leaden grey.

Not bad, he thought.
Who was he trying to fool? It was awful. But it suited his purposes. He raked a hand through his hair, examining his handiwork, and then paused.

He took up his wand again, and before he could think better of it, went to work with slicing charms.

Snape clearly had no experience when it came to hairstyling (as James Potter had always been so kind to point out—and it was a mark of his unmitigated arrogance that anyone with his hair had the gall to mock anyone else’s); when he was finished, he looked like the first year Hufflepuffs had been going at him with Pomona’s pruning shears. But it was short, and he did his best to even out the edges, and when he looked at the overall effect in the mirror, he was pleased to see that for a moment, even he had trouble recognizing himself.

It would do.

And so it was with a short grey hair, a beard and a buttoned collar, a suitcase full of moth-eaten Muggle clothes that weren’t his, and a bag that held every penny and Knut that he had to his name that he bid goodbye to Aberforth.

Thankfully, the old man hadn’t made a last-ditch effort to persuade him to stay. He’d just looked him over once, and then given him a heavy pouch fat with clinking metal. When Snape had looked at him quizzically and opened it, he’d found it filled with Galleons.

“No—it’s me what should be thanking you,” Aberforth said, and he stuck out his hand.

Snape looked at him sharply, but nodded and tucked away the pouch. Aberforth was still for a moment, and then spoke. “Well, I suppose I won’t be seeing you again, boy. But I’ll see to it that no one else comes looking for you, if I can.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Snape rasped in return. “And thank you.”

“Some of my bequest from Albus,” he’d shrugged when Snape looked up, his brow furrowed. “S’not charity or nothin’, boy—way I see it, the old bugger ran you through the wringer and left you with nothin’ to show for it.” He gestured to the sack. “Thought he owes you that much at least.”

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Snape looked at him, looked at the old man with his steely blue eyes, looked down at the proffered handshake, and he took it.

And then with a curt nod, he’d crept out the back entrance into the alleyway, cast a battery of anti-tracking charms, and Apparated away.

Two months of solitary confinement had at least given him plenty of time to weigh his options. They were distressingly few. Ultimately, he just decided to run. To escape to the Continent and cover as much ground as he possibly could, just to throw any potential pursuit off his trail.

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And so it was that he took a hovercraft across the Channel and a bus to Paris; a few weeks later, he hopped a train down to Marseille and booked passage on a boat to Athens, where he’d stayed for another two weeks, and then he flew on to Rome, where he’d lost himself for nearly three months, then he’d taken the train to Bern in time to catch a quick flight to Berlin, where he’d stayed for two days, and from there he took a train to Bruges.

It was all ridiculously easy.

Too easy, he sometimes worried. A tiny bit of magic could fool both the turnstiles and the railway employees, forge his papers or make his questioners forget to ask about them. And while it was impossible to Conjure real gold, he had no trouble transfiguring paper into bank notes, so money
was, amazingly enough, not a problem.

But it was all done so quickly, jet setting across Europe and arriving in new countries in a matter of
days, lingering in random places (and a few not so random, a few places that he’d always wanted to
see) just to make his trail colder, that by the time he reached Belgium, he was simply worn out, and
so there he stopped his running—at least for a time.

There were worse places to end up, he’d thought. It was quiet, and not such a tourist trap as Rome or
Paris. The city was large enough to house a decent-sized wizarding community, but small enough for
him to hide in it. And, if he was honest with himself, the medieval architecture of the town appealed
to him—he supposed he’d been at Hogwarts too long.

That was, no doubt, part of the reason he hated the pigsty that he now inhabited so very much. Snape
glared pointlessly up into the sky; the sun was hanging over him like a great baleful eye. His scanty
stripe of shade on the east side of the plaza was no longer covering him, so with a few choice
muttered obscenities, he lurched to his feet and moved across the square, his daily trek to his
afternoon spot where he could eat his sandwich and watch the crowds and perhaps make a few sales.
Halfway across the plaza, as he passed by an old woman who sold tamales to the passers-by, he was
nearly run down by a miserable brat barrelling by on a bicycle. These Mexican urchins were always
barrelling down the streets as though shot from a cannon, and heaven help anyone who got in their
paths, the filthy apes. But Snape hated that little monster in particular; he was always riding up and
down his street on that confounded contraption, ringing his maddening little bell at unholy hours.

He settled down on the bench in front of the cantina—those coming in for afternoon drinks that
turned into afternoon binges were a ready market for his preventative potions of all kinds—and
fervently wished that he was somewhere else.

In the end, he wound up spending almost five months in Belgium under the assumed name Jack
Hawkins. They spoke enough English there that he got by, dealing particularly with the tourists.
He’d camped out in a dismal little flat in the seedier part of town (oh, my, he’d better be careful, lest
he get homesick) and eventually managed to find a job in a small bookshop that primarily catered to
the tourists. He was sure that he was hired because, in his months of travel, he’d deliberately (if
reluctantly) dropped his painstakingly cultivated Received Pronunciation and slipped back into his
native Manchester as part of his cover. The owner thought that Snape gave the place character.

Snape thought the idiot woman should be put out of his misery, and he would have been more than
happy to do it.

He had been extremely hesitant to involve himself in any way in the local magical community. In the
dark of night and heavily cloaked and covered, he’d sneaked into the main Wizarding thoroughfare
just long enough to stock up on Potions supplies. It put a heavy dent in his real funds, but it was
worth it; he brewed up a stock of Polyjuice, and from then on, disguised as various Muggles he’d
pass in the street and from whom he would surreptitiously Summon a hair or two, he could safely
traverse magical society without fear of being caught out.

He’d never suspected that it was the Muggle end of things that he should be worried about.

It was a sunny April morning that he boarded the ferry; he occasionally liked to take the boat down
the canal to work. It was a relaxing trip, and in amongst the picture-snapping tourists and bored
commuters, he was just another anonymous traveller. Snape rather liked the feeling. It was cool that
day, so he was in his customary long coat, with his hat pulled low and dark glasses perched on his
nose. The sun was bright on the water, and he listened to snippets of conversation around him; he’d
been picking up the Dutch of the locals.
He sighed, pausing in his contemplation of the morning light rippling in the boat’s wake to scowl at some tourist’s little spawn who dared to come too close and sending him packing, and then looked up, across the boat toward the other side of the canal.

And straight into the face of Minerva McGonagall.

And then she looked away, her gaze passing over him as it would any other stranger.

It took him a moment to realize that he was not about to be caught out. It took a moment longer for his heart to lurch back to life again.

Snape got up as soon as he could without looking like he was running and hid on the opposite end of the boat, getting off at the next stop and ducking into an alley to Apparate home.

He cursed himself; he’d been avoiding any Wizarding establishments of late because Belgium was in the playoffs for the Quidditch World Cup this year. He knew that there would be an influx of wizards from all over, and he’d thought surely he’d be safe if he stuck with the Muggles.

(Apparently not. He tried to calm himself with the almost certain knowledge than she hadn’t recognized him, that he’d been just another Muggle to her, but the encounter had left him severely rattled. You’re getting complacent, Jack, he’d sneered at himself. And surely you didn’t think that the Continent would be far enough away to hide you from your old acquaintances.

It all likelihood, Antarctica was probably too close. Particularly if Potter took it into his head to find him.

And the tiny seed of unsurety that perhaps Minerva had recognized him and was even now speeding home to tell Potter about it prompted him to do the only sensible thing he could think of in that circumstance.

He fled.

He packed up his belongings—the new clothes he’d bought, the bit of money he’d earned, his enchanted valise with his Potions kit—gave his employer his two-minutes notice and a scathing (and extremely satisfying) assessment of her personality that left her gaping like a fish, and took the next flight into Cairo.

He had no intention of staying anywhere near Europe—anywhere even connected to Europe. And so, unless he wanted to take up with the penguins, that really only left him one option.

He flew to Casablanca, and from there booked a trans-Atlantic flight to Mexico City.

Snape had only briefly toyed with the idea of America; he’d never been there, but from what he’d read about it, its magical world was so firmly intertwined with its Muggle bureaucracy that there was simply no way he could hide. He’d need papers and IDs and numbers and licenses, and they kept such firm tabs on magical use that he’d be found out the moment he tried to light a candle.

But south of the border, now, that had possibilities. Certainly it was close enough to America that at least some people would speak proper English, and civilized enough to be able to avoid outright highway robbery, but definitely not the kind of place where the government would have to have its
sticky fingers in all aspects of his affairs. Generally populous and with the amenities to which he’d grown accustomed, but poor enough that he could live on a minimal income.

In short, it seemed like an ideal place to hide.

The only downside was that he hated it.

He’d hated it from the moment that he’d stepped out of the airport, his meagre luggage clutched in his hands. He’d hated the glaring sunshine, hated the thick, tropical air, hated the rapid speech of the locals and the obnoxious laughter of the American tourists, hated the miserable adobe and tiled facades, hated the food, hated the feel—everything about it screamed “New World,” and he despised it.

But he had nowhere else to go.

Shade or no shade, it was always hotter here in the afternoons. Dammit. It added the smell of baking sweat to his natural charms as yet another customer repellent, Snape thought sourly, and on principle glared at the little girl behind the cart full of flowers who sat a few yards away.

Well—at least his smell didn’t deter Hernandez. The man was ostensibly some sort of law enforcement, but Snape was well aware he was in the pocket of the local drug lords. Hernandez claimed that he’d picked up the slug in his leg and the accompanying painful limp in the line of duty. Snape supposed that was true enough, as he was well-paid to do various, clandestine “odd-jobs” with some of the more violent affiliates of the cartel, jobs that often carried with them a high rate of employee attrition.

And ultimately, what did Snape care if the money that found its way into his hands for a salve for Hernandez’s leg came from a corrupt government or the cartel that ran it behind the scenes?

Snape had spent the better part of a month in the capital, learning his way around this pathetic excuse for a country, adopting the name Samuel Greene (there was no way that he would pass for a Mexican, so he didn’t even try to take a more local-sounding name). There was something of a centralized magical network here, but that was only the case in the largest of cities on this side of the pond, apparently. Everywhere else he would simply have to learn to recognize the signs of the local magical establishments that were sprinkled in among the Muggle businesses.

Savages.

There was, fortunately, a little shop on Calle del Magos in Mexico City where he had been able to buy a book on local wizarding culture to help him get around, should he want to join civilized society for a change. But honestly, his desire to do so was quite low since his scare in Belgium, and the few times he frequented the magical part of town, it was in disguise and only for quick forays in order to stock up on magical necessities (for his Potions kit in particular).

Eventually, he came to the unwelcome conclusion that despite his desire to stay in the larger cities with real magical enclaves and larger English-speaking populations, doing so was probably counter to his desire not to be found, so he decided to find a relatively out-of-the-way place where he could settle down again, at least for the time being. He was tired of running.

He’d always rather fancied the sea, ever since his one and only trip there with—as a child. And the Pacific was supposed to be warm and beautiful—and peace was something he’d been denied in his life. And so he looked to the west—not too close to the sea, mind you, as beaches were attractive prospects to tourists, but somewhere where it wasn’t too far. And not too far south—the closer he was to the US, the better were his chances of finding English speakers.
He started migrating west and north, hopping from town to town to find a place that was quiet where he could hide in peace. He visited Aztec temples and Spanish fortresses, and churches and plazas and museums, trying (and failing) to find a place that made him feel at home. There was little rhyme or reason to his movements, and looking back he couldn’t really say how or why he’d ended up in Sinaloa. If nothing else, it did fit his bill: smallish, quiet, not overwhelmed by tourists, enough English speakers that he could find someone to direct him around town, and the biggest city wasn’t too big. And so one day when he found himself in Culiacán and realized that what’d he’d planned to be a short overnight stay in the town had turned into a two-week stretch, he simply decided not to run any more.

Culiacán. The Place of Snakes.

The name of the town could mean many different things—The Place of Turning Roads, or The Place of the God Coltzin—but that one lodged firmly in his mind. Snape still wasn’t quite sure if it was an omen for good or ill. He’d not believed in omens as a younger man, but after having his life destroyed by half a prophecy, he’d come to lend them a bit more credence. But honestly, what better place for a Slytherin on the run to hide then in a nest of snakes run by a drug cartel?

Due to his judicious spending on his little jaunt around the continent, he still had plenty of money to settle in somewhere and to support himself. First things first—he’d needed to establish a base for himself, somewhere he could skulk in the background and not be found. Once again, he’d deliberately sought out one of the worst, most run-down neighbourhoods that he could manage. One, Calle el Sombras, was almost entirely deserted, the street empty and dusty, and most of the tightly-packed little houses boarded up and abandoned.

Perfect.

He’d chosen a collection of the most dilapidated and forlorn little houses on the street and set his eye on one right in the middle of the sorry lot. Tracking down the owner had been something of a chore, particularly among the insular, closed-mouthed, and largely non-English speaking locals, but he’d not cultivated Legilimency just to let it lie idle. He’d eventually found out who owned it, tracked him down, and “persuaded” the wretched man to sell it to him at a reasonable price, one that he could easily recoup should he be forced to fly once again. And so he’d moved into the stuccoed little building crammed onto the street between its neighbours like three aged sardines in a rusting can.

Two up, two down. Just like home.

It wasn’t funny.

What it was was a disaster. The place hadn’t been lived in for years, and best he could tell, the previous inhabitants had been a pack of wild dogs. There were no magical pests, thank goodness, but the positively enormous rats more than made up in size and boldness what they lacked in magic. It had been a battlefield in there for two days before he’d achieved victory over the vermin.

Once Snape was finally alone in his new abode, he’d done what he could to fix the place up inside. There was a little kitchen and a sitting room downstairs, as well as a cramped little WC and bath, and upstairs were two bedrooms. It wasn’t difficult to make it habitable inside with a bit of magic, particularly since he was well-used to living in squalor. Furniture and other supplies that he’d scrounged from various refuse heaps had been cleaned and repaired with a few expert spells. Magic scavored the pipes and the fixtures and floors and tile, as well as restoring the plumbing and re-rigging the frayed wiring. A little elbow grease parcelled out with his magic had sped the cleaning along, and in only a few weeks he’d managed to turn the hovel into something resembling a house.

Inside, at least. He’d left the outside as it was, as unappealing and derelict and apparently deserted as
possible, and helped it along with a healthy dose of Muggle-repelling charms. He repaired all the glass in the windows, but left the boards across the outsides and covered the insides with dark curtains. The wrought-iron cages for flowerpots that hung on the windows remained empty and rusting, and the broken glass shade on the light outside the door was not replaced. If the very appearance of the place wasn’t enough to put people off, his wards and charms would speed them along, causing any passing Muggles to become distracted or suddenly remember urgent errands that required their attention elsewhere.

He valued his privacy, after all.

He’d been so (relatively) pleased with his handiwork and exhausted by the effort he’d put into it that it had taken him a few days after settling in to realize that he had hidden himself so well that he now had no idea what to do with himself. His Spanish was nonexistent—while there were enough English-speaking Muggles here for him to find a bathroom, there certainly weren’t enough for him to get a decent job among them, and what little Wizarding community there was in this town was limited to the back rooms of some dirty little shops that also serviced Muggles and were on the other side of town.

Quite simply, there was nothing for him to do in this miserable Mexican toilet.

The sun was sinking low behind the nearby buildings, throwing long stripes of shadow across the cobblestones of the plaza, shade that he would have welcomed but a few hours earlier, but now just irritated him. Snape generally stayed all weekend in the plaza, as those were the best times to catch tourists and drinkers with his little cache of remedies. But Sunday was his early day, as once everyone was clean and sobered up for church, his business slowed to a trickle, and he usually headed home before nightfall. He supposed he would wait a little longer, just to see if any among those shuffling in and out of the cantina were still lucid enough to take what he would have to offer, and then he would retreat back to his domicile, taking his goods with him.

Snape had been nearly a month into his stint in Culiacán, brewing a fresh stock of Polyjuice for his forays into the few Wizarding areas, brooding over the fact that he’d been chased here in the first place, and generally going out of his mind with boredom (and no little frustration at his own uselessness), when he’d suddenly realized that he was his own commodity in this shrivelled little prune of a town.

The magical government here was just as decentralized and beset with corruption as the Muggles’, if not worse, and it was obviously much smaller and even less organized. And that was because there were so few wizards here—he was one of a very small group of people here with his particular talents.

So why not exploit them?

On his travels Snape had seen various shops selling “holistic medicines” and herbal cures and other such tripe—it was all the rage among Muggles these days. So why not sell them something that really did work?

He’d thought it a brilliant idea for all of two seconds before abandoning it. Who on earth would buy anything from a grizzled, hook-nosed derelict busking on a street corner?

One who didn’t have a choice, he answered himself. One in whom he’d planted a suggestion to do so. Along with the suggestion that he spread the word.

And that was exactly what he did. He spent nearly a week brewing a vast array medicinal potions—nothing fancy, just mild painkillers, hangover cures, stomach remedies, and the like—some magical
but others merely common sense. All would be completely untraceable to even a proper magical
government, much less this barbaric farce that managed magic in Mexico, as they were potions and
not actual spells. Armed with a basket of his wares, dressed carefully in concealing yet nondescript
clothes, he’d made his way down to the plaza, staked out a place to sit, and had lain in wait for his
prey.

Snape reasoned that he wasn’t being excessively unethical—he was only “telling” people to buy
something that would ultimately help them. Like stopping a group of carousers headed into the bar
and leaving them with lighter pockets and vials of potent hangover-prevention draughts. Or
persuading a woman with a screaming child that it was in her best interest to buy something for her
obvious headache and its obvious colic. Or spotting a tourist with an aching stomach, having been
stupid enough to eat the food from La Serpentia Negra, and relieving him of his agonies for a small
fee.

He was doing them a favour, when one got right down to it.

Although his customers didn’t always see it that way, not at first. Business was slow those first few
months. The people here were quite polite to the tourists, as they were a source of income, but
clannish and snobby towards outsiders who moved in on a more long-term basis. Not only that, he
was well aware that he intimidated people—it was a skill that he’d spent years perfecting.
Unfortunately, it worked against him here, in that few people wanted to approach such an off-putting
figure, and subsequently few got near enough for the required probing eye contact. But a few did;
mostly tourists in the beginning, which only helped in the short term, but gradually, he began to reel
in some of the locals. Not the most stellar specimens of Culiacán society, granted—old Rodriguez
had been one of his first—but still, faces familiar to the townsfolk began to be seen buying his
merchandise.

Ever so slowly, the people of the area seemed to accept that he wasn’t going to go away—and
subsequently to realize that perhaps his wares weren’t the garden-variety quack remedies. They still
made fun of him behind his back, he knew, of everything from his clothes to his accent, calling him
Viejo Don Greene, the purported honorific uttered in only the most disparaging tones. He’d been
called worse by better (and by worse), and he frankly didn’t care. Especially not when being out in
public and enduring their pathetic jibes meant a steadily increasing flow of their cash into his hands,
and just for doing what he did best. Not to mention that sitting in the plaza day after day had helped
him immensely to improve his Spanish. He’d been shocked by how much he enjoyed himself when,
after hearing a group of gormless little hooligans nearby making fun of his nose, saying that all he
needed to was a hairy wart to look the part of a witch (how original), he’d turned to them and
growled in near-perfect Spanish that they’d best run home to their mothers, lest he crack open their
empty little skulls and use the pulp for his potions.

They’d paled delightfully and scattered. He hadn’t enjoyed himself that much since his days as
Potions Master.

By the time Snape’s 40th birthday had rolled around, he had a steady and regular business, to the
point that once or twice he’d even overheard some of the locals recommending him to visitors. And
by the time he’d been here for a year, a one or two people had actually approached him with
requests, asking him for specific remedies other than those in his usual arsenal, like for acne or
cramps. And he always provided.

Don Greene, it seemed, had arrived.

And if all went well, here he would stay.

Snape carefully began to pack away the few potions that he sat out on the bench next to him as
advertisements, tucking them away in the magically enlarged and neatly segmented interior of his basket. The plaza was slowly emptying; the jewellery maker had rolled up her blanket, the girl with the flowers had wheeled her cart away, and the café and the cantina had only a few stragglers for customers.

He was looking forward to heading out himself, to being comfortably tucked away in his refuge, in the dark and cool of his workspace, away from prying eyes and glaring sunlight. He generally spent his weeks contentedly alone in his lair, brewing fresh stocks, reverting back to his old habits and experimenting with his existing recipes, or tending to his garden and preparing ingredients.

He’d discovered, rather to his pleasure, that he was able to purchase a wide variety of non-magical plants and herbs, dried or fresh, that he needed for his work; the grocer’s were surprisingly well-stocked for such a miserable place. However, that windfall was mitigated by the fact that the market for obscure or magical ingredients was woefully lacking.

Anti-tracking charms notwithstanding, Snape was still not about to use any sort of post, magic or Muggle, to order what he needed. He grew rapidly tired of the more and more frequent trips to the magical shops under the guise of Polyjuice. He’d eventually decided that this simply wasn’t an option, if for no other reason than that the constant use of that potion was rapidly eating his disposable funds. It wasn’t long before he came to the conclusion that if he wanted something done right, he had best do it himself. He’d made an arrangement with one of the local shops (in disguise, of course) to order and ship the animal-derived substances that he needed in exchange for his brewing expertise in providing rather complicated and difficult potions for the proprietor to sell, but opted to work with his own plants.

He’d been quite good at Herbology in school, managing both an OWL and a NEWT in the subject. Really, he’d been good with plants even before school, in an odd sort of way, tending to the herbs that his mother grew in their kitchen window, the only bit of green on the sooty streets of his home, or helping to plant the campanulas in the boxes over at—

At any rate, he saw no reason why he couldn’t grow his own plants.

The smaller of the two bedrooms in his house originally held his workbench when he moved in. He shifted things around so that his bed was in that one, leaving the larger one mostly empty, only one corner taken up by his workspace. He spent the rest of the week doing a little remodelling around the grounds: magically expanding the larger room to twice its original dimensions, erecting a wall to delineate his workspace from the rest, and then converting the rest of the room into a modest little greenhouse of sorts. Salvaged (or stolen) clay pots and troughs filled with earth were ample planters. Old scraps of wood were transfigured and cobbled together into stakes or small trellises for the climbers, and well-placed charms helped to keep the more active creepers confined to their own territories.

The difficult part had been working on the roof. Transfiguration and charms only went so far; he’d actually had to blast out part of the roof and fill it in with glass panes that he’d pieced together from bits of broken windows liberated from other houses along the street, and reinforced with a lattice made from strips of iron that had once been those same houses’ window boxes. Charms kept the room warm, moist, and filled with the bright Mexican sunshine.

Eventually, he’d managed to create a small but adequate atrium upstairs. On the converse side of things, the little root cellar under the house had needed very little work to make it suitable for dark adapted plants and fungi; it was little more than a hole in the ground as it was. The dirt floors had been easily excavated and sculpted into something resembling small terraces for planting, and charms and pans of water kept it cool and damp.
He’d risked a long-distance Apparition back to Mexico City the following week and spent three days stocking up on seeds, spores, sprouts, and seedlings. Most were purchased on Calle del Magos, but a few of the more exotic plants he’d acquired on the black market. If those wretched Weasley twins could come by venomous tentacula seeds right under the nose of their dragon of a mother, then he should certainly have no trouble finding the same in secret in an alley in Mexico.

With a month of construction, travel, and honest work with his hands, he’d created for himself quite a useful little garden. It had taken the better part of a year for all of the plants to establish themselves to the point of supporting a regular harvest and being useful for potions, but by then his need for visiting the magical side of the city had dropped drastically, which was precisely what he wanted. Rather than spend his weeks darting in and out of back rooms of shops all across the state, he could now stay at home and work.

The streets were quiet as Snape made his way back to his solitary domain, everyone going home to supper and to begin their weeks at work. That was usually the case here; the town had a lazy, sleepy quality to it that he had grudgingly begun to appreciate in recent months. His appreciation, he wryly reflected, was likely due to the fact that a mere three months ago, the entire city had simply exploded.

He’d been sleeping late that day; it was the second of November. He couldn’t remember a year that had gone by in the past twenty years that he hadn’t drunk himself into oblivion on the night of the thirty-first of October. It had been necessary to drag himself out of bed and go back to work the following morning when he was a teacher, but that time was over, and the last year he had wallowed in bed all the following day, drunk some more, and slept through most of November the second, and he fully intended to do it again.

Unfortunately, that year he’d been quite literally blasted out of bed by screaming and the cracking sound of gunfire—and lots of it. He’d flown to the window in time to see explosions blooming red in the centre of town, and he’d hastily tossed back one of his own hangover cures, thrown on some clothes, and Disillusioned himself before flying out the door to find out what the devil was going on.

It was complete bedlam. Snape wasn’t a stupid man (he often suspected that his generally prevailing cleverness was likely why his relatively few moments of stupidity were truly monumental in scale); he knew from long experience that if one intended to live in a snake pit, one must keep an ear to the ground at all times. He knew a good deal more about the underworkings of this cesspool of a town than many would give him credit for. Sitting quietly on his bench in the square, he’d overheard a great deal from passers-by—rumours on the wind about civil unrest, muttered political manoeuvring conducted in back alleys, whispers about a bold move in the works regarding the crime lords of Culiacán.

He certainly didn’t expect it to be this epic in scope. And somehow, he suspected that the cartel hadn’t either.

Ultimately, he didn’t gather much information that first day—the place was a war zone. And it wasn’t just the cartel and the government doing battle either, oh no—the whole town had risen up. He’d later learned that the current reigning crime syndicate had attempted to stage a coup over the entire country—and shockingly, it had fallen through. The people of Culiacán had revolted against their would-be oppressors and driven them out. All the people—as he’d raced unseen through the streets, he’d seen the local barflies chucking scavenged grenades, old Rodriguez blasting away with some sort of artillery, and—good God, was that the old woman who sold tamales in the square standing out there brandishing a gun? Had the entire city gone mad?

He’d run back to his home, in a veritable froth of fury—dammit, he’d stopped running! He had made a place for himself! He didn’t want to have to pack up and start again!
He’d been so furious that he had already packed up his few meagre belongings and was on the verge of undoing his months of hard work by demolishing the interior of his house before he realized that everything had gone quiet once again. He’d put his hectic packing on hold (he refused to admit that it was any sort of attachment to his domicile that gave him pause) to creep out and survey the situation.

Snape soon discovered, to his own sour amusement, that the locals had won against the more powerful force of the cartel, the lowly townspeople fighting against their oppressors in the name of their beloved leader.

He hated this place.

And yet, he was here. He had a place to live, he had a job (such as it was); it wasn’t that he didn’t want to leave (dammit), but he simply didn’t want to have to run again. Living in a place where revolt and rebellion were the order of the day was simply not conducive to his quest for anonymity—but to his surprise (and sneaking relief) the mayhem had settled down with amazing speed. He’d planned on waiting it out, just long enough to be able to leave without being molested, but just like when he first arrived here, his wait stretched out longer and longer until he was forced to admit that he wasn’t leaving. To admit that he wasn’t just hiding here, but that he lived here.

The streets grew steadily poorer and less inviting as Snape neared his home. Neat and well-kept homes with all the local colour gave way to progressively more run-down neighbourhoods; cheerily lighted windows were replaced by yells and fighting dogs.

His street was still almost entirely deserted (thank God), his house the only one inhabited, although it didn’t look it from the outside.

Snape turned down Calle del Sombras at last, almost home—and was very nearly run down again by that same little wastrel on his bicycle, cheerily ringing that damned bell.

If he did it again, he was going to transfigure his testicles into grapes, the consequences be damned.

Brats, thankless customers, and peddling on the street aside, he thought as he neared his house, things could certainly be worse. He could still be marking homework and maintaining order over empty-headed students day in and day out. The Dark Lord could still be alive. Dumbledore could still be pulling his strings like a puppeteer working a recalcitrant marionette. Potter could still be dogging his every step.

Yes, he grudgingly conceded, there were much worse fates than the one that he had made for himself here, in his little bubble of solitude down Mexico way.

Snape looked down the street towards his house, Number 13, and stopped dead.

He should have known things were too good to last.

There was a light on in the house next door.
Chapter Summary

A battle-torn but alive Agent Sands covers his ass and also makes an unpleasant discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Agent Sands—or, rather, by this point, former Agent Sands—was in a state of high pissivity. His kid had just left, still babbling rapidly in Spanish even as he was going out the door, telling him that he’d be back in the morning, bright and early, and that he’d put everything away in its proper place, and he’d put the aspirin on the coffee table in front of him. Sands was already considering taking two now, because his legs were aching, his arm was somewhat stiff, and his eyes—

Sands drew in a sharp breath through his nose. His goddamn motherfucking eyes.

They were his grandfather’s eyes—or so he’d been told, anyway. He’d never actually met his grandfather—his namesake, no less—because the man had died a year before Sands had graced the world with his illustrious presence. He’d seen pictures, of course, but pictures could never quite capture the reality, and they’d left his grandfather’s eyes flat and dull, not bright and wet as they’d have been in life. His mother had often told him how handsome they made him look, but he hadn’t needed her to tell him that—he’d always known he was dead sexy. He knew girls had mooned over them, anyway; he’d more than once overheard whispered and giggled conversations about Jeff’s just dreamy eyes, and had laughed himself silly when he’d heard the wide array of adjectives they’d used to describe them. He’d not really cared about their color or shape or really what they’d looked like at all—what he’d liked was using them. He’d liked being able to look straight through someone until they dropped their gaze. He’d enjoyed being able to unsettle his enemies—and his allies. He’d liked being able to stare down any and all that crossed his path. He’d liked his eyes.

And now they were gone. Dark brown had turned to dark red and then oozed down his face in hot little rivulets that dried into veins of rust, only to be washed away by Nuñez after Chiclet had helped him drag his sorry carcass out of the street and into his “office.”

Sands was still struggling to get used to the damming thought that seemed to echo in the dark space between his ears every morning when he woke up: I am blind. He despised how that sounded. I am blind…it sounded so weak, so helpless, so terribly defeated. He hated that blindness—his personal blindness—was nothing like what he’d heard he would be like. He’d heard of dark brown, vast expanses of black, strange lights—but in all of those descriptions of blindness, there was at least something there. Here was simply nothing. And though he’d rather be diddled with a broom handle than admit it, that endless, all-encompassing nothing scared him shitless every time he woke up in the morning. It only lasted a few seconds, but that deep, sickening fear made him feel even weaker than actually being blind did.

But he hated being blind more than thinking about it. Getting used to the layout of the house had been a real PITA. His shins were still bruised from where he barked them on the coffee table, his hand had a cut across the palm from grabbing a knife by the blade by mistake, and he still spilled his
drinks more often than not. Putting things away in their exact spot was a very trying chore (particularly since he’d never really had to clean up after himself in his life), he still had to ask that damned kid where certain things were, and he knew he looked like Death chewin’ on a cracker even if he couldn’t see it. He’d nearly fallen on his keister twice already trying to get out of the shower—something he did as little as possible because he hated the way the water felt when it pooled in his empty sockets.

Yes. The empty sockets. He hated them most of all. And while he wasn’t exactly fond of what he imagined he now looked like, those two empty holes that were never uncovered except when he occasionally bathed, the way they looked or even the way they felt wasn’t why he hated them—he hated them because they were a fucking signature. Oh yes—he knew who’d suggested this. Barillo was sick, and not only had he most assuredly passed that charming attribute in spades to his precious, pretty little daughter, but the little chip had actually managed to outdo the old block. This had her name written all over it (well, whatever her name was—Susana Ajedrez had been a fake for all he knew). Her gift to dearest Daddy. Her revenge for putting up with him for a full year and a half. Her little victory dance for being the one who had finally pulled the wool over the eyes of Agent Sands.

And did she ever.

He realized he had no idea what time it was—and knew that he really wouldn’t ever know again, not really. He was still getting used to that, too. What he thought he was having the most trouble getting used to was falling asleep—he wondered if he would ever just fall asleep in his chair again, because falling asleep with no eyes was fricking weird, and sometimes hard to do when he couldn’t stop thinking about a particular thought or problem. No eyelids to close, and good golly Miss Molly, but he hated that, too—no, it wasn’t enough that they’d put his eyes out, no, they’d had to take his fucking eyelids, too, so there was absolutely no possible way to hide his blindness without sunglasses or a blindfold. The ingrained urge to blink made those holes itch something fierce, but he still didn’t like putting his fingers inside of them and didn’t think he ever would, so he’d just sit and try not to think about it, which, of course, was impossible and would only make it get worse until he felt like he was about to go out of his mind.

Jesus Christ, this sucked.

He absently rubbed his right leg—it tended to hurt more than the left. Nuñez (God rest his soul) had told him that the bullet had hit the bone, and that he’d spent a good twenty minutes rooting around in there as he tried to dig it out of his leg. “Tried” being the key word—because that bullet was still in there and making itself known. Loudly. Before Nuñez had managed to get it, Sands’s femoral had decided to go a gusher and had effectively ended the search. The old chode had decided to cut his losses (Sands being in no position to give his opinion) and had just stitched him back up with the slug still inside. He was looking forward to his next opportunity to walk through an airport metal detector with a sort of grim amusement—that was going to be fun.

He wanted his aspirin (a problem, because he didn’t want to get up). His right leg hurt, and his left leg wasn’t much better. Nuñez’s somewhat less than professional job of patching him up had merely been the final step in a series of extremely off-pissing events that had effectively ensured that, later in life, he was going to be hobbling wherever he went. Then he’d have to start walking with a cane. But he’d be damned if it was going to be a white one.

He scratched at the still-tender place on his thigh. It hurt, dammit. It hurt more now that it had when he’d been shot. Or if it hadn’t, at least he didn’t really remember it. Truth be told, he didn’t really remember too much of that day—nothing in sequence anyway, and no memory that didn’t either seem like it had cheesecloth over it or was being viewed as a series of random clips from a Pink Floyd video. He’d been well and truly out of it from the moment that whore had plopped her smug
little ass down in front of him.

First he’d been ramped up on whatever Guevara had pumped him full of to get him unconscious and down into that basement—that had made him feel damn trippy, his head lolling on his neck and his body floaty and numb. But it hadn’t been nearly enough to dull the pain of that drill. God, that had been agony—perhaps the worst he’d ever felt in his life, and he suspected it was in no small part because of the horrible awareness of what was happening to him. He’d almost passed out, but then that bitch had sidled up to him, all friendly-like, and he remembered the way she’d purred in his ear, saying it’d be such a crime for him not to be able to enjoy the Day of the Dead, and there had been the tiny sting of another needle in his neck, and the pain had faded, diminished into a dull but very steady throbbing and leaving him feeling as though his head was wrapped in cotton. She’d doped him up, worked him over with a power tool, and then shot him full of painkillers before shoving him out on the streets, his eyes and his control completely gone.

He’d known then that he was going to kill her. He was going to find a way. He didn’t care what happened to him, didn’t care how many people he’d have to waste to get to her, but he was going to kill her.

They’d had a man on the street, waiting to kill him where he stood after they’d thrown him out, and he knew it—a CIA agent shot in the streets in the middle of a coup that he’d been assigned to prevent would not have drawn any real suspicion—perhaps just a cursory inquiry at best, and then a neat little stamp on his now-defunct file back in the States. But for the boy—he’d heard that goddamned bell, its tinny tinkle echoing cheerfully through the streets, and never before had there been a more beautiful sound. And then there he was, a warm, solid little presence for him to hang on to (and goddammit if it didn’t chap his caboose something awful that he’d needed such a thing, but somehow when it was his kid, he could deal with it), someone to lead him to where he needed to be.

And he’d done as he asked. He better have, for that wad of cash he’d given him. Although looking back, Sands really didn’t know why he’d gone where he had. Really the only thought in his head was that he had to get that fucking bitch, he had to get to Barillo’s darling little chess-playing flower, and when he did he was going to show her one last rollickin’ good time.

And he had.

And as much as he hated to admit it, to even think about it, after he heard her fall dead on the pavement, his mission over, his task complete, he’d been just about ready to throw in the towel.

He never quit, goddammit—he was Agent Sheldon Jeffrey Sands, and when he walked the streets, kings and queens stepped aside.

But that kid didn’t. That kid came back.

He still really had no idea why that kid stayed with him, even after he’d been given the money. He could’ve taken it and run, he supposed (and he probably would have had to shoot the little crotch-dropping if he had) but he didn’t—he stuck around after having a gun to his head and walking him straight into the middle of an urban warzone, and then he had come back to find him as he lay in the streets, eyes gone, shot three times, and the drugs very slowly starting to fade from his system.

Came back—that stupid kid always came back. And not just on the Day of the Dead, either—the little punk had spent the entire time with Sands as he’d slowly recuperated at Nuñez’s, popping in and out, reporting any and all suspicious activity and keeping a wary eye (goddammit) on Nuñez—Sands knew that, if he got wind of the CIA looking for him (oh, and they would be—there was only so much they could forgive, and he’d dicked around with them too many times already), Nuñez would gladly turn on him for a nice case of American bills. The little snitch.
Well, it didn’t matter anymore. He took care of Nuñez. He should probably take care of that stupid kid, too—he didn’t want anyone knowing where he was—but the truth was that he wouldn’t be anywhere if he didn’t have his kid.

He’d spent three far-too-long months in Nuñez’s odious company. Back-alley doctors were never a pleasant prospect, and that old troll had been a shining example of why it was in one’s best interest to avoid his breed. The place was drippy and damp and smelled like a meat-packing plant that specialized in pickled pigs’ feet marinated in tequila, and Sands could hear the rats in the walls. Nuñez actually smelled worse than his charming little abode, and Sands did all that he could to avoid him, despite their close quarters. He spent those early days riding high on a battery of Nuñez’s black market drugs that he kept stashed in various hiding places.

He hadn’t liked that one bit, and once he’d gotten his bearings and was sober enough to talk, he told him to get that shit away from him. Nuñez had protested that the only alternative was pain, but Sands told him to cram it where the sun don’t shine and leave him alone.

The old fart hadn’t been lying. The first few nights without painkillers had been torture. But there was a remarkable clarity inside his pain, a sharpness of thought that he’d been missing since the Day of the Dead. It was then, as he’d lain awake, biting his hand in the night to keep silent, that he’d begun to map out his next move.

He spent his days willing himself to heal, forcing himself to relearn how to walk in the dank little hole that was both Nuñez’s back room and Sands’s prison, a task made all the more difficult by the fact that he couldn’t see to do it. He’d ended up learning every inch of that room with his hands and his feet and his ears and his nose; the musty walls, the mildewed ceiling, the cracked plaster, the low spot in the floor halfway across from the door, the low-hanging light fixture, the crates in the corner, the drip of the faucet, the scuttle of little rodent feet—all his constant companions in his own personal shroud of night. Chiclet cleared a path in the clutter, and day after day he spent walking the perimeter. Three steps to the cot, seven steps to the window, four steps to the sink, and six to the door. Over and over again. Around he goes, where he stops, nobody knows (oh, but he knew—double zero, Sands. House takes all).

Three months later he’d been able to walk with reasonable speed, run for short bursts, and with his sunglasses on no one could tell that anything was amiss. Now that he was back up on his feet, it was time for him to go under.

He’d ignored Nuñez’s protests, ignored the way his legs had hurt, almost as if he could feel that bullet grinding into his femur, and had most of all ignored the prickling of the holes in his head when he pulled the trigger. After dispatching that particular loose end with a well-placed bullet in the back of the head, he’d limped outside, pulling the hat Chiclet had bought him lower, itching absently at the rather pathetic scruff of a beard he’d somehow managed to acquire over those three months, and had waited patiently on the corner for that kid to come wheeling up in what he knew would be his red and black Studebaker—what a pisser that he’d had to ditch it afterwards. He’d liked that car—the low thrum of the motor had always appealed to him. A CIA agent in his natural habitat, and all.

And while he waited, the kid had come.

Yeah…she hadn’t counted on that kid. Neither had he, really. That kid was damned useful.

He followed orders, did what he was told, and hardly ever questioned anything—just what he looked for in a stooge (he’d obviously been lax in his screening procedure when he’d picked up Cucuy). The kid was excellent at running around on those little legs of his, and had been going all over the city as Sands’s errand boy for the past three months. Almost anything he’d needed, Chiclet had run off and fetched, from another pack of cigarettes to a house.
Yes, it had been Chiclet who’d scouted out this particular hole-in-the-wall and eventually bought it for him. He told the kid that he’d needed a place to hide. It had to be cheap, out of the way, inconspicuous, isolated, and most importantly, the kind of place that one Agent Sands wouldn’t be caught dead in. The little rug monkey had found the perfect place with an unerring speed that unnerved Sands, truth be told—he didn’t like anyone reading his mind like that. He’d dug up some dump on an all but deserted street in the north end of town, with the added consideration that it wasn’t too far from where he lived and went to school, so that he could come help Sands whenever he needed to. His assumption that he would be sticking with him had so rattled Sands that he’d okayed the arrangement before realizing that his assent was in and of itself a tacit admission that he wanted the kid there.

And he was there—he was always there. He’d drop by in the mornings on his way to school, and once it let out he’d be back with Sands until he went home to sleep. The kid ferreted out the owner of the rattrap he’d found for Sands, played real estate agent by dashing back the offers and counter offers between Sands and whoever was selling (which just made him mad again—if he hadn’t been laid up, his gun would have negotiated for him), withdrawn Sands’s money from one of his dummy accounts to pay for it, shuttled the forms back and forth, and even went so far as to help Sands sign the fucking things, his small, chubby-fingered hand gripping Sands’s own and placing the tip of the pen on the dotted line. He hadn’t liked it, but what else could he do?

And that evening, after he’d shot Nuñez and finally up and left that place on his own two feet, he discovered Chiclet had yet again done what had been ordered to do—he’d learned to drive. Sands had sat in the passenger seat, something he hadn’t done for a very long time, while little tiny Chiclet, sitting on the phonebook in the driver’s seat, had thrown the car into gear and driven him quickly to his new locale (quicker than he was comfortable with, truth be told—who taught that little shit to drive, anyway? Evel Kinevel?!)—a rotting, miserable little hovel that would serve him well. It was everything he’d asked: isolated, alone, nothing he would have ever stayed in before—and still was close enough to where Chiclet lived so that the kid could come pedaling over to run errands and collect his payment for services. Chiclet had even moved him in (along with the armchair that he’d liberated from Nuñez’s place), telling him that he’d had two of his kid brothers help him clean the place first and move in some furniture that he’d bought on the side.

That kid. He’d called him Chicle Boy—or “little shit” when he was pissed off—for three weeks until he’d finally realized that he didn’t even know the kid’s name. He’d finally gotten around to asking, and he’d received the bright and cheerful answer of Jesús Santiago. After sending some choice curses up to God and his oh-so-subtle sense of irony, he’d continued to call him Chicle Boy (later shortened to just “Chiclet,” because he hated Spanish and spoke it as little as possible), because there was no way in hell that he was going to call that kid Jesus.

And so it had been for three weeks, him spending most of his time sitting in his newly acquired armchair, wanting very much to drink a whole lot of something very strong but knowing better than to do so while he was taking any kind of painkillers (particularly not whatever street drugs to which he’d helped himself from Nuñez’s pharmacy), his brand new kid fussing over him and being a generally helpful nuisance, with absolutely nothing better to do than sit and stew and brood over how he’d gotten here in the first place.

It wasn’t funny. He’d always been able to find some kind of humor in any situation, even when the bitch had been gloating over him in that basement, but this one had eluded him. This wasn’t fucking funny. Three months ago, where had he been? He’d been screwing an exceptionally sexy woman who also happened to be exceptionally useful, and then he’d been just about to screw Mexico itself, right up the old leather cheerio, and come out of it smelling like a rose—and incidentally be twenty-million pesos richer. Sure, it wasn’t the American dollar, but what with the exchange rate what it was, it would’ve come pretty close to two million cool ones—not something he was averse to. Oh,
the trouble he could have gotten up to with that…but what did it matter, anyway? It was gone now, seized by the still very much alive El Presidente (that slippery son of a bitch) or rotting away in the hands of the lucky turds who’d managed to find it in all the confusion.

He resisted the urge to rub his eyes (what eyes, Sands?) for the fifty-bazillionth time. He truly hated thinking about what he didn’t have—be it eyes, money, or a good stiff drink. The money itself wasn’t really even an issue—it wasn’t as if he actually needed it. He had twelve separate accounts under twelve separate names spread throughout two separate countries, each earning interest, each having regular deposits made, from either the government, dear old Dad, or his own on-the-job acquisitions, and each started in American currency (all made just in case something like this happened—dear God, he hadn’t actually thought he’d ever need them). He was currently tapping the Mark Andrews account, one of his bigger ones, and that was the name that he was using while he was hiding out. He’d already made withdrawals from all of them (or rather, sent Chiclet to do it), and now had the cash stored all over the house.

When you came right down to it, by the standards of this crapper of a country, he was loaded. So he’d not been depending on those two million pesos for anything—he’d just wanted it. Wanted it very badly. The CIA didn’t pay him anything close to what he felt he earned, when he and he alone (well, he and his cell phone) stood between America and their mortal enemy Mexico. He’d figured they owed it to him.

Well, he knew they didn’t feel they owed him a bucket of warm spit, especially so after this fiasco. That was why he was still here, rotting away in this shithole. It didn’t take a brain-surgeon to realize that there was no way he could leave Culiacán, and it wasn’t just because he couldn’t walk. It was because the high and mighty CIA were looking for him, and he knew it—but, if he knew them (and he did), they would have assumed that he’d cut and run. And he would have that first day, if he had been able to fucking see to do it. But in the face of his obvious disadvantage (it was not a fucking handicap, goddammit), as he had lain up in the wee hours of the morning in the waking nightmare of his healing wounds, he realized that staying here was his best option.

Blind or not, he still knew this town like the back of his hand, knew the people, and knew how to get things done. And the CIA would never suspect him to stay in the city, hiding in plain sight at the very location of his own monumental screwing-over. And the same went for what remained of the cartel, and probably every other enemy he’d managed to make for himself in his years of service (and brother, were there a lot of those). But it wouldn’t matter—there were only two people that even knew he was still alive at all, still alive and unable to leave. One was Chiclet. The other was Ramirez—and Ramirez wouldn’t squeal. If the higher-ups found out the extent of his involvement, the FBI and CIA would come down on him like a ton of bricks, no matter if he’d taken out Barillo.

His thoughts were interrupted by a sharp pang in his right thigh. He hissed, hating that—the feel of that slug always gave him the gruesome image of a steam-powered metal mole with grinding gears for teeth, something out of a bad fifties drive-in movie, burrowing deeper and deeper into his flesh and bone. The little SOB just liked to remind him that it was there, lodged happily and probably permanently in his leg. That wasn’t funny, either.

Finally giving in, he slowly and painfully leaned forward, easing himself to the edge of his chair and pawing gingerly around on the tabletop. His fingers came in contact with a little rattling bottle; he brushed his thumb across the lid, feeling the three notches Chiclet had made in it with his penknife, and knowing it was his aspirin (just where Chiclet had said it would be). Twisting the cap off, he dry-swallowed two before setting the bottle back down and easing back into the sunken well of his chair again, rubbing absently at the fresh, nasty scar he could feel even through his jeans.

Scars—he’d had some scars already, before this particular snafu. He’d been attacked by a drunk with
a knife on one mission down in Columbia, he’d been shot a few times, and Ramona had liked to bite
(although to be fair, he’d paid her back with interest for those teeth marks). These, though, were not
going to be pretty. After all of his previous scuffles, he’d gone straight to a doctor—a competent one.
But this time...he’d been wound up and wired on drugs, feeling the pain but not feeling it,
adrenaline, panic, and complete loss of any idea where he was and where he was going keeping him
up and on his feet and undoubtedly making things worse. His wounds had been ripped open further
by his restless movement, the one in his left leg particularly nasty and bleeding all over the place,
since that bullet had left both an entrance and exit wound—but, compared to the others, it was at
least a clean wound. His arm had been a mess afterwards, too, and Nuñez had once again gone
prospecting like a deranged proctologist, but that bullet he’d managed to extract—after making a
terrific mess of things, of course. At least it wasn’t as bad as his leg. So, back alley surgery, several
infections (probably caused by the fact that Nuñez had used tequila for a disinfectant), and a relapse
later, he knew he was going to have some very ugly marks on him.

He didn’t want to think about the most obvious of those marks. Not right now—he wasn’t in the
mood. They were itchy enough.

Sands was wallowing in his chair and his misery and considering jacking off (just to reassure himself
that some things still worked—and anyway, he hadn’t since before the Day of the Dead) when he
heard that familiar little jingle again.

He furrowed his brows. What was Chiclet doing back? It was usually eight or nine o’clock or so
when he left—it was late.

Sands heard the keys rattling in the lock, and then Chiclet burst through the door, shutting it quickly
behind him and locking it again as he did.

“What’d you forget, kid?” Sands asked absently, his light voice belying the wariness that had popped
into his head at the sound of the kid’s quick breathing and hurried movements.

“The light—I left it on—but there’s something—something else I have to tell you, Señor,” he said,
and Sands followed the kid’s voice across the room as he came to stand beside him, as he always
did. Sands didn’t like the way Chiclet sounded—he sounded just like he had the day he’d told him
that Nuñez had started asking him not-so-oblique questions as to who Sands was and why he hiding.

“Well, sit down and spill it,” he said, already more alert than he had been, and more aware of the
weight of the gun tucked in the waistband of his pants.

“Señor, it’s—it’s the house next door. You—you have a neighbor.”

Sands hated it when he couldn’t think of anything to say immediately. And he hated it even more
when, after such an embarrassing silence, the only thing he could think of to say was an outraged,
“What?!”

He could all but feel Chiclet nodding apologetically. “Sí, Señor. And I know who he is, too.” Chiclet
paused, and Sands knew he was worrying at his fat little lower lip.

“Well, don’t sit there staring at me, who the fuck is it? And why the hell didn’t you know he was
there in the first place?!” he demanded accusingly. “I told you to find me with no one around!”
Goddammit, was it just utterly impossible to find competent help these days?!

“I didn’t know! The place next door looked just like all the rest—I thought it was empty like all the
other houses on the street!” The little shit sounded very sorry—as well he should be. “But—but
Señor,” he said hesitantly after a moment, “nobody knows where Don Greene lives, so—”
“Oh, Don Greene, is it? Well, kid, I’m afraid you’re mistaken about that, because I sure as hell know where Don Greene lives—he lives right in my goddamned lap!” Sands dearly wanted to pace—he hated sitting still when he was angry or agitated; it made him feel impotent. But his right leg was stubbornly refusing to cooperate, so he settled for drumming his fingers heavily on the arms of his chair (which wasn’t much of a settle, in his opinion). “Okay, okay—tell me who this guy is. Who he is and what he does.”

“He sells things in town.”

“Like what?”

“Little bottles of medicines and things—I think he makes them himself.”

“Oh, beautiful—I live next door to a witch doctor.”

“He comes every weekend—he sits in the square and waits for people to come to him.” Chiclet’s voice began to brighten as he warmed to the topic. “We bought something from him once for my mamá—”

“How long has he been here?” Sands asked, cutting the kid off—he wasn’t interested in hearing about the old crank’s snake oil.

“I’m not sure—I know he’s been in town at least a year before I met you. Most of the people around here know about him, even if nobody really talks to him or knows where he lives,” Chiclet said, and Sands could hear him fussing with the hem of his shirt like he always did when he was getting nervous—Chiclet hated giving Sands bad news.

“The whole town knows him…every weekend, been here for months…” Sands said softly to himself, tilting his head back and smiling humorlessly. His eye sockets itched more than ever. “So not only is he a witch doctor, but he’s also not someone that I cannot properly dispose of at the moment, because if I did, the town would notice. How utterly delightful.” He flopped his head back in the chair, face angled up towards the ceiling. “How well do people know him? Doesn’t anybody talk to this guy? What do they say about him and whatever crap it is he sells?”

“They kind of make fun of him—his Spanish isn’t all that good; he speaks English, but doesn’t talk like an American. I think people are kind of afraid of him, really—he’s very scary,” Chiclet said. “He doesn’t like people, I don’t think.”

“Well, then he and I should get along fine,” Sands growled. He snapped his head back so he was facing Chiclet again. “What’s he look like?”

Chiclet hesitated again before replying. “Taller than you. He has gray hair, and a beard. He always wears lots of heavy clothes and hats and sunglasses, so I don’t really know what he looks like. He just looks mean at people a lot.”

“Oooo, scary,” Sands sneered. “Shit.” He rubbed his temples, willing the aspirin to work faster, which didn’t happen. “Anything else?”

“Sí.” Sands hated the reluctant way that the kid said that, and he “looked” hard at Chiclet.

“Well?”

“Uh…I think he knows you’re here.”

If the day had been bad before, it had been nothing compared to this. “Well!” Sands said, voice
falsely cheery. “This situation is just dandy, isn’t it? So fucking peachy!” His hands gripped the arms of his chair until they creaked beneath his fingers. He twitched his head towards Chiclet as he heard him move, heard the sound of crinkling plastic; the kid was getting him a cigarette. “Don’t you try and give me a pacifier, you little shit!” he snarled. And after a moment, he said, “Gimme that,” and Chiclet set the cigarette into his open palm. As he jammed it irritably between his teeth (after feeling both ends to make sure he didn’t get a mouthful of tobacco), he heard that damned kid flick the lighter open. He grudgingly leaned forward and let him light it, sucking hard and letting smoke fill his lungs and nicotine seep into his system.

That goddamn kid knew him too goddamn well, and he goddamn hated it.

“He saw me leaving the house. And…with the light on…I’m sorry, Señor,” he said miserably.

If he hadn’t had the cigarette clamped in his mouth, Sands was sure he would’ve told him exactly what he could do with his simpering little apology. Instead, he said nothing, his cigarette dangling from his lips, sunglasses staring emptily out into space.

“You say nobody knows where he lives, hmm?” he said mostly to himself.

“Sí—not that I know of. He just shows up in the plaza in the mornings and leaves in the evenings,” Chiclet answered, sounding relieved that Sands was not angry with him—at least, not outwardly. “I think that if anyone did know where he lived, he’d probably get egged or something—most of the kids around here don’t like him.”

“Well, that’s a little bit better—if nobody knows where Greene lives, that means nobody knows where I live, either, right?” He knew Chiclet was nodding. “So let’s hope that stays that way, shall we?” He took another drag, tapping the ash on what he thought was his floor. He pursed his lips when he heard the sound of Chiclet setting the ashtray back on the coffee table. “I’ve told you not to do that,” he said sharply.

“Sí, Señor.” He glared pointlessly at the little shit—that answer told him he’d be doing it again. They “stared” at each other for a few moments more before Sands leaned forward a little.

“Tell me—how much does this ‘Don Greene’ character scare you?” he asked, rolling the cigarette between his fingers.

“Not so much anymore,” Chiclet answered matter-of-factly.

Sands raised an eyebrow. “Meaning he did before?”

“Sí—he is very nasty. But now I work for you—he’s not so bad.”

Christ, he could not believe this kid. “Thank you,” he said flatly, digging around in his pocket and pulling out his comfortingly fat money clip. “Here,” he said, throwing a couple of tens at him (and he knew they were tens, because the kid had helped him organize his stash by denomination). “Down payment. You watch him as best you can, and make sure he can’t tell what you’re doing. Try and look in his window—no, don’t try that, just follow him around and watch him.” He considered Chiclet for a moment, who’d already picked the bills up off the floor, before tossing one more at him. “Now fuck off.”

“Sí, Señor! I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you do that,” he muttered, grimacing when Chiclet plucked the finished cigarette from his fingers, hearing the crunch of the paper and ash and unfinished tobacco in the ashtray. “And stop doing that!” he hollered at what he knew to be Chiclet’s retreating back, hearing him turn off the
light by the window as he did.

“Sí, Señor!” he called brightly, and Sands flipped him off. The door snapped shut, and then the knob rattled as Chiclet made sure it was locked. A few moments later, the tinny jingling of the bell on his bike sounded as he rode off, leaving Sands by himself for the night.

By himself—except for his neighbor.

Sands was not ignoring Chiclet—not really. He knew the general idea of what the kid was talking about—mostly what the family had been buying with the new funds he’d been bringing in since getting his new “job.” No, Sands just wasn’t listening, and there was a difference between not listening and ignoring. The only time he’d deliberately tuned out his babble was when Chiclet had started talking about how his little brothers and sisters kind of missed him, and he had mentioned that they’d asked him to spend a little more time at home instead of going off to wherever it was he went to work. Sands had no desire to hear about that, because it was out of the question. Chiclet was needed here, dammit.

He shifted uncomfortably, brushing his long (and getting longer), greasy hair out of his face and pushing his sunglasses a little farther up on the bridge of his nose while his ass continued to fall asleep from sitting on the front step for so long. At least Chiclet had the alternative to get up and walk around for a bit when he got tired of sitting—no, no, not him, though, because his leg had decided to act up again today—complaining so fiercely this morning he’d woken up out of a sound sleep with his teeth clamped on his lip until he tasted blood—so standing really wasn’t something he could do right now. Especially since he was saving his energy for when his neighbor came back from town.

It was Friday evening. Friday was one of the days that Greene spent down at the plaza. It was around nine o’clock—he should be due back from the office any minute now. And when he did, Sands would be waiting for him.

If this had been the good old days, Sands would have just marched next door and shot the old geezer. That was the way things should have been, back when he was King Turd of this particular Shit Mountain. But everything had been easy for King Turd—the same could not be said for a blind fugitive whose safety depended staying hidden and not being noticed. So the only option for said fugitive upon discovering that he was not alone in his hidey-hole was to take the long way around, starting with finding out who the hell he was sharing space with.

Greene had proved to be quite the elusive quarry, which pissed Sands off to no end. Chiclet had managed to get only a little spying done for him that week, as Greene had only left the house once more before his regular weekend excursions—that Wednesday, and it hadn’t been for anything interesting.

“He went shopping for groceries,” Chiclet had told him.

“And just what did he buy?” Sands had asked in return, not really caring but wanting some information to show for his trouble. Chiclet had rattled off a list of mundane and boring items, all entirely normal except for the rather large assortment of both fresh and dried herbs and spices (what the hell was this guy, a quack or a chef?).

Sands had set out with every intention of finding out exactly who or what Greene was that week. For two days, he’d spent hours on end pressed up against the adjoining wall of his house, just listening. The first floor hadn’t been very exciting at all—just normal noises, and all strangely muffled (no wonder he hadn’t realized he was there before): Greene walking around, Greene making breakfast,
Greene occasionally listening to a very quiet radio. Then he’d go upstairs, and Sands would follow him. The second floor was a little more interesting. He guessed that was where Greene did his voodoo, because he usually heard some not-so-normal noises from there. Bubbling, chopping, banging around—it sounded like a busy kitchen. He heard other noises that he couldn’t quite place, too—rattling, rustling, strange soughing sighs, and sometimes a weird, strange rasp like something slithering along the plaster, but through the wall, he couldn’t place it. So, after a few days of listening, he’d come to a rather unpleasant conclusion—barring some vague guesswork, he really wasn’t sure what Greene did in his house all day.

He didn’t like that at all. He remembered all too well what had happened when he’d made some kind of plan without knowing enough—he remembered it every single morning when he woke up and every minute of the entire day until he managed to go back to sleep. All he knew at this point was that Greene was pissing him off by his very existence—to say nothing of his uncanny ability to thwart Sands’s attempts to figure him out.

At least Chiclet had been moderately successful in combing the plaza, absolutely brimming with general information when he returned from asking about Greene from the bastard’s best customers. Turns out opinions varied—some made fun of him, others said he was intimidating, and at least one semi-respected him. However, one opinion did not vary—everyone who’d was in a position to know said his brews always worked, no matter what they’d been made for. And Greene did make quite the variety—he mostly seemed to cure stomach ailments, headaches, aches and pains, hangovers, and those sort of garden-variety ills, but Chiclet had found one or two people who said he cured PMS, sore throats, and acne as well.

The other particularly interesting tidbit of information Chiclet got was from an American who regularly came to Sinaloa on business and seemed to favor Greene’s medicines as well. The native English speaker had been able to peg Greene’s accent where his little Mexican could not—Greene was apparently British.

Great. A European. He hated Europeans—they never bathed. That was why he’d requested to be stationed in Mexico in the first place.

And while it certainly didn’t make the situation any better, it did make it a little stranger. People who moved down here from outside the country, particularly from that far away, came here for either family or real business—what on earth was a Limey doing in Mexico, holed up in a nasty little building that probably needed to be condemned and selling snake oil out on the streets of Culiacán?

Sands left the house for the first time since he’d moved in to find out. It was Wednesday; Greene had been out getting his groceries, Chiclet on his tail, and so Sands had hobbled outside, limping more than he’d liked. Feeling his way down the street, hand on the side of the row of houses, he’d made his way towards Greene’s door, thinking of how he had a good mind to trash the place when he got in, of how he still had no idea why Chiclet hadn’t noticed somebody might be living in the house next door, and of how he couldn’t hide properly if someone knew where he was. Although at least the big boys who would be after him were gone. Barillo—at least that bastard had met his maker, and he hoped that Guevara had gone down with him (Ramirez, you’d better have done as ordered). If that was the case, the cartel would be in shambles and likely not worrying themselves with looking for some MIA spook like himself. Even if he had killed the heiress apparent.

He still wished he could’ve seen Ajedrez’s face when he’d shot her—that was the sight that he’d regretted missing most of all since that day—but oh, that smile had felt so good, his first smile of that day, and he felt that same one creeping slowly across his face as he remembered the way he’d shot her, right in the stomach, then heard her fall in front of him, on her knees in the dirt at his feet, where she belonged—
And then he’d realized that he’d forgotten about Don Greene and had walked right past the guy’s house.

Turning carefully around and shaking himself a little, he’d made his way back towards Greene’s, feeling the markings Chiclet had put beside each doorway to make sure that he didn’t lose his way should he decide to leave the house. He was two past Greene’s place. What the hell.

So he’d started back, and in front of the first house he’d tripped on something lying in the road, and that had pissed him off. He hated tripping, because it made him look blind, made him feel blind, and Jesus Christ on a pogostick, he hated being blind and he especially hated looking it, because the words “look blind” were so fucking twisted in their own special way. And even if he couldn’t see it, everyone else could, and that was unacceptable. However, tripping had made his leg hurt again, so he stumped across the room and twisted the cap off of his bottle of aspirin and taken two, irritated by that because he’d gone almost a whole day already without taking one and now here he was, sucking at the bottle again—

…his bottle of aspirin…?

That’s when he’d finally realized that he was back in his own house.

*What the* fuck?

He’d fallen back into his chair, feeling like he’d totally lost his mind and hating it. He’d briefly contemplated going back and trying again, but he didn’t know how long Greene would be out, and having *that* happen to him twice was far too unsettling (and his thigh was burning). So he’d tried to take a nap instead, letting the pills work their magic. He stopped hurting (a little, anyway), but he hadn’t slept. He’d just sat there.

That was when Chiclet had come back and had told him all that he’d found out, which brought him back to where he was—which was a good thing, because Chiclet suddenly spoke, and when he did it was something that snapped him right out of his reverie. “Señor—it’s him.”

Sands was immediately alert and on point. “You sure?” he asked quietly.

“Sí—I think he sees us, but I can’t tell.”

“Right.” Sands heaved himself to his feet, leaning mostly on his left leg. “Get inside.”

Chiclet obeyed, and once the door had closed behind him, Sands folded his arms, leaned on the doorframe, listening, and waited for the sound of Greene’s footsteps to reach him.

Chapter End Notes

Homage to Jim Henson and George Thorogood.
Ah. March. The end of winter. Spring in the air.

In Mexico, he’d found that their idea of spring meant thick heat, thicker humidity, and endless swarms of insects.

Snape scowled at the cloud of gnats that he could see dancing like dust motes in the sickly yellow glow of the streetlight as he carefully detoured around them, staying in the shadows. He would have to start casting insect repelling charms on himself before he came to town; he hated the waxy feel they left on his skin. But better than having to smear jewelweed juice over an itching carpet of insect bites, he supposed.

Nine o’clock at night, and it was still ridiculously hot in this miserable country. He supposed it would soon be time to shed his long coat and switch to lighter clothes, lest he dissolve in a puddle of his own sweat. He despised going about in just his shirt and trousers; he felt naked, and not in the least because he was so used to proper wizard’s robes, but more importantly, because it was one less layer between him and the line of sight of some unwelcome visitor who might recognize him.

It was Friday night; the town was in full swing. The past few weeks this month, he’d taken to strolling about at later hours on Fridays, going outside of his tiny domain of the plaza, just a little. It wouldn’t hurt his business to pick up a few customers who didn’t necessarily frequent the square on a regular basis. Expanding his market base, or some such rot. Not having to wait for customers to come near enough to him to plant a suggestion or two, but rather actively going to them had made his sales pick up remarkably. He might actually have to start brewing a larger cauldron of his general panacea if business continued this way (his hangover cure was growing so popular that he’d already had to increase production three months ago).

Snape always had such mixed feelings about good business. One the one hand, business was business, just as money was money, and to get the latter, he needed the former. And in both cases, the more the better.

On the other hand, the mere thought of his current occupation as a lowly street vendor was, even after the better part of two years, still utterly humiliating.

There was a great deal of yelling and raucous laughter spilling out of the local dance hall to his right; the building was lit from within as if afire, and he could just see the waving arms and bobbing heads of those packed shoulder-to-shoulder on the dance floor. He crossed to the other side of the street and glowered at the throng of revellers as he passed.

Useless imbeciles.

He took the next turn down a side street off the main thoroughfare, reaching into his pocket for a peppermint humbug. Well, one of the obnoxious, red-and-white spiralled disks that passed for a humbug on this barbaric continent, anyway. He’d gotten into the habit of eating peppermints during
his hellish (and unwanted) stint as Headmaster. He’d been disgusted with himself when he realized it—he wondered if perhaps the Defence position wasn’t the only office that was cursed. But the truth was that the little striped sweets had given him something to bite other than his own tongue when he was forced to juggle the opposing demands of the job, helping him keep his mouth shut against all the scathing insults he’d wanted to deliver to those inbred lumps of flesh masquerading as staff, or stoppering the furious tirades he’d ached to rain down upon those empty-headed students who so insisted at working cross-purposes to him and on trying their best to get themselves killed.

Now the sweets were an unnecessary expense, but he hadn’t been able to break himself of the habit. He excused the weakness with the argument that after what he’d been put through, he was entitled to be a little irrational now and again. Not to mention that the cool of the peppermint was really quite soothing to his throat in this dusty clime.

He arrived at the next intersection and turned to the right, which took him into a somewhat less wholesome part of town. Snape had found that he did much better business near the local bars—the local dives, to be exact. He was not about to set foot inside one of those pigsties, but it was never a bad prospect to scout out the more disreputable drinking establishments in the area and hover near the back exit in the alley. More than once he’d had a tangle of brawlers or a vomiting patron dumped right at his feet, and, well, who was he to pass up such an ideal opportunity?

They’d thank him in the morning, anyway, when they awoke with a painful sprain atop their raging hangover, either of which would be easily wiped away by the contents of the little bottle that’d they’d remember getting from him the night before.

He peered into his basket; he’d nearly exhausted his supply of hangover remedy, and his brew for general pains wasn’t far behind. It had been a slow night for his stomach tonic, but he’d sold a small pot of burn salve—a bit of a rarity, that, and he charged a pretty penny for it (relatively speaking)—so all in all he’d done fairly well this evening.

So well, in fact, that he felt he deserved a reward in the form of getting away from these lowlifes and back to the sanctuary of his house.

Snape went home the long way, which took him down busier streets, as concession to going in a bit earlier than usual, and along the way managed to relieve himself of his last vial of hangover potion (and without using Legilimency), which he felt made up for it.

He detoured through his usual square, in case there was a lingering customer there (which there wasn’t) and to make sure that he was seen—it wouldn’t do to lose his reputation. He was there every day of every weekend, rain or shine, and he must be always be seen, so that people would know where they could find him.

And so that they wouldn’t take it upon themselves to come looking for him.

Snape passed through the square, brightly lit and full of people enjoying their payday, and turned down the street that would lead him home.

He gave a small sigh of relief as the bustle and noise of the city on Friday night began to slip away behind him, as he walked away from the laughter and light of the business district and into the dark, quiet, and secluded little spot where he lived, alone and apart from all that mess.

Well—not quite so alone anymore, he suddenly remembered, and he scowled at a stray cat that crossed his path like smoke. Last Sunday he had received an unpleasant shock upon coming home—someone else had apparently moved in on his street.
He’d stood stock still in the street, for a moment not quite able to comprehend what he was seeing. There was a light on. On his street. For a moment he’d been sure that it was his house, that he’d left it on (which he never did, and he wouldn’t have been able to see it if he had, as his curtains were charmed to keep the light in), because no one else lived here. No one else was wanted to live here.

But no, it hadn’t been his house. It was a different house. Someone else’s house.

It was the house right bloody next door, is what it was.

He’d cursed, rather more loudly than he’d intended, and then dashed most ignominiously down the nearest alley across the street, where he could see but not be seen, in case he had been heard. When he heard no sound of anyone coming to investigate, he looked surreptitiously around the corner of the alleyway and out at the house next door. The light was on, but the drapes were drawn. He didn’t see anyone moving inside, and so with a barely suppressed snarl he’d rushed to his door and let himself in as quietly as possible.

_Dammit!_

Why in God’s name did someone have to move in _here_?!

He’d thrown his basket down on the couch and was pacing aimlessly through the living room when he’d heard it.

That damned bell.

That damned _boy_.

He raced to his window and peered out just in time to see the brat on the bicycle come skidding to a stop in front of Number 15, drop the bike on the pavement, and let himself in.

That sorry little _bastard_.

Throwing any dignity he may have had left to the wind, he pressed his ear to the wall adjoining the house next door, and was appalled to hear voices. Two voices—it wasn’t just that boy. There was someone else.

He didn’t dare risk casting _Homenum revelio_—the cool tingling it left in its wake would not go unnoticed, even on a Muggle, and that was the last thing he wanted. So all he could do was wait and listen.

The cheap Mexican construction was only _selectively_ shoddy, he’d been annoyed to discover. There were no problems with a leaky roof, shorted wiring, or walls so thin that the rhythmic pounding of the neighbours’ headboard would keep you awake night after night in your hotel—but they couldn’t manage to make them thin enough for him to actually hear was what going on over there, now could they?

The boy had remained in the house for only a short while before Snape heard him thump out the door and speed away, his bell ringing with a sound like ball-bearings rattling around inside of his skull. The house was dark and he didn’t hear anything else through the wall, but he didn’t see anyone else leave that night, either.

The boy had shown up again the next day, bright and early, and from the window upstairs Snape saw him go inside. Again, he didn’t stay long, but Snape heard voices again, and when the brat left, he left alone.
The only conclusion he could come to was that someone was living over there.

Despite the fact that he felt utterly ridiculous, he spent the next few days periodically pressing his ear to the wall in hopes of catching some clue as to who or what had made its nest so near his house. If nothing else, it took his mind off of his own outrage over the fact that he’d never seen or noticed anyone move in in the first place. He had no idea how long the faceless squatter had been intruding on his territory, or what he may now know about Snape’s own habits. That kind of carelessness would land him in chains before the Wizengamot—or worse, face to face with Potter.

To his mounting irritation, he heard very little from his new neighbour—no talking, no radio, no telly. If he strained, Snape sometimes thought he could hear someone muttering to himself, occasionally the sound of running water, and once or twice there was a thump followed by a curse, but other than that, his new companion was strangely silent.

The brat on the bicycle, however, was not. Snape began to mark his appearances, and found that they were distressingly regular. He would arrive at seven in the morning every day and stay for half an hour or so—until he needed to go to school, Snape supposed. Then he would reappear around three thirty or four every afternoon, and would stay until late in the evening. And every time he came or went, it was with that infuriating bell whirring away.

He often seemed to have parcels balanced in the little basket on his handlebars, which he was apparently dropping off when he came. And Snape listened closely when he went in or out of the door, and every time he heard him cheerfully bid hello or goodbye to “Señor.”

Well. Whoever he was, he at least seemed to live alone, and his only visitor was his errand boy. That was something, he guessed. The last thing he needed was a family like a small army, comprised of vacant fathers, shrill mothers, and hordes of screaming children (as so many Mexican families were) dropping practically on his front step.

He’d brooded over the invasion all night, and the next day had come to the unpleasant conclusion that until he had more information, there was very little he could do but wait it out. The Muggle-repelling charms would keep the interloper away from his house—along with anyone else who decided to drop by.

So he went about his routine the next day, preparing ingredients, tending his plants, and brewing his potions—the only variance being his occasional eavesdropping on the quiet house next door.

When Wednesday rolled around, he found himself at an impasse. It was his usual day to go out and restock on herbs for his brews, and he did need to pick up a few things for himself…but he didn’t want to go out. Whoever it was next door might see him.

He’d dithered for a moment, before sneering at himself in disgust. Was he going to be made a prisoner in his own home by some Muggle?!

_ I think not._

So he’d determinedly donned his long coat, dark glasses, and wide hat, tucked his money clip in his inside pocket (charmed against filthy Mexican pickpockets—just let them try to rob him. He was no idiot tourist!), and strode out of the door.

It had actually been something of a relief to get out, just to get away from the current of tension that had been thrumming through his body since the unpleasant discovery that he was sharing his street (although his relief in and of itself infuriated him—how dare someone violate the peaceful sanctity of his home to the point that he wanted to leave it?!). He’d lingered a bit longer than usual on his
errands to prolong the relatively pleasant outing, making an extra stop or two in order to get the best herbs he could for what he was willing to pay.

Another, unlooked-for positive to this trip occurred when he ran into that spawn with the bell as he was heading into town. Shockingly, the little urchin didn’t nearly run him down in the street for a change. That wasn’t to say that the mere sight of the boy wasn’t enough to blight his afternoon (because it was obvious that part of his current situation was somehow his fault), but perhaps it made him feel the slightest bit less antagonistic towards the little worm.

At least, until he saw the boy again.

Snape had nearly managed to put his trouble on the home front out of his mind (mostly) as he browsed through the bundles of rosemary, when he spotted the boy again. This time he was without his bicycle, standing in among the produce and scrutinizing the wilting lettuce with rather more seriousness than Snape thought it warranted, particularly for a boy of his age.

Scowling, Snape had left, taking his trade elsewhere in order to get away from the empty-headed little buffoon. He went to a small stall the next street over that he’d found had a surprisingly wide selection of the herbs that were foreign to this area, and he could usually dicker with the owner to the point that it was worth his while to stop there.

He had just turned away from the seller, tucking his purchase in the crook of his arm, when a flurry of movement across the street caught his eye, and he looked up just in time to see that same boy—now with his bicycle—duck into an alley across the street.

What on earth?

His brow furrowed in suspicion, he stalked down the road to the butcher’s for some meat for his dinner. As the butcher measured out a minuscule portion of yesterday’s chicken and a tiny sliver of fatty bacon, Snape made a great show of inspecting the thick cuts of steak that were far beyond his budget, but all the while watched the large window to the street out of the corner of his eye—and he saw the boy wander casually by, pushing his bicycle and perusing the shop windows with an air of studied indifference.

…was he following him?

Snape left the shop, growing steadily angrier as he went, and took a deliberately rapid and roundabout way to the bakery—and not two minutes after he arrived, the boy appeared as well.

He was.

That little bastard was spying on him.

He’d been so completely and utterly outraged that he’d very nearly cursed the little runt into a bloody pulp on the spot.

He managed to calm himself down while picking over the slightly stale bread on the discount table. His first instinct was to lose him—to show the little tosser just who he was dealing with, and let him know that he was far out of his league in the spying game.

But as he counted his change, he came to the unpleasant realization that the boy wasn’t merely spying on him for his own amusement. He was not interesting enough to merit watching from the local fauna, he knew that, even if the brat had worked out where he lived.

And not this brat in particular, this brat who stepped and fetched for and worried over and doted on
whoever it was next door, oh no—this particular boy never seemed to do anything just for himself. Which led to only one conclusion.

His neighbor was spying on him.

Whoever was next door knew he was there and had sent his whelp out to follow him.

Snape maintained a façade of calm ignorance and went about his business—rather more business than he needed in the end, despite the fact that the lustre was gone from his day. Out of spite he led the brat a merry chase throughout the grocery district, walking rapidly wherever he went and frequenting more stops than he might have normally done and taking malevolent satisfaction in seeing that the nasty little cur was getting winded, but he eventually just finished up and went home, all the while pretending not to notice his little Mexican shadow.

And when he was safely hidden back in his house, he watched the street from behind his charmed curtains, watched as the little warthog came pedalling up the street and let himself into Number 15 as usual. And then Snape heard him begin to talk, and heard the sound of his mysterious companion answering.

Fuck.

He hadn’t left the house again until today. He’d spent the rest of the week closeted up in his workroom, not even the usual soothing routine of his work lifting his black mood. He spent one very frustrating afternoon spicing up his wards with a clever little one-way silencing spell, so that while he could still hear anything that might be going on over there, that miserable wet end next door would hear nothing from him.

He eventually rationalized that this wasn’t really anything new; he’d had neighbours before, in the places he’d lived since his flight from England. The cheap, shabby hotels that he’d frequented on the continent were always populated by a vast array of lowlifes and scum, and they had done him no harm. And while he was in Belgium, he’d had the ill-fortune to live right next to a mad old woman with about seven hundred and eighty-five cats and who had insisted upon calling him “Jackie-boy,” and yet he had survived. He simply kept to himself, and his neighbours tended to return the favour.

In fact, if he was honest with himself, a neighbour might actually help his cover; a man no one ever saw living alone on an empty street might generate some suspicion.

But why did someone have to move in right in his bloody lap?

He turned down onto his street, nearly back to his house; what little good cheer he’d managed to scrape up in his relief to be going home after a long day had thoroughly evaporated. He was so well and truly wrapped up in his own private dark cloud of brooding anger that he almost didn’t notice the light on.

Not a light in a window this time, but a light on outside—one of the dingy little jar lights that jutted out from the flat faces of the buildings like grimy glass fists to illuminate the tiny front porches that projected out onto the street.

The porch light on his house didn’t work.

His steps slowed, but he didn’t stop, and as he walked he looked down the street with narrowed eyes. There were no other lights on in any windows on the street. The ever-present bicycle was leaning haphazardly against the ubiquitous rusty iron handrail that hung from the front of the house (and that was strictly for appearances, as far as Snape could tell—the front steps on these houses
were so low that you would have to be blind to trip on them, and even if you did, the rails were all so loose that they’d no more stop your fall than a spider’s web), but its rider was nowhere in sight.

But there was someone standing there. Just there, hidden in the shadows of the doorway of Number 15. Just standing.

Snape kept walking, his steps even and deliberate, but he curled the fingers of his right hand, tensing his forearm against the comfortable weight of his wand hidden in his sleeve.

He was no fool—no one wanted to live here. It was filthy, run down, infested with rats, and in a decidedly unsavoury part of town. No one wanted to be anywhere near here—except perhaps someone who was avoiding other people. Someone with something to hide. Someone like him—or perhaps someone like his new neighbour. Someone who would take active steps to preserve his own secrecy and solitude, such as spying on anyone who lived nearby.

Someone who was a potential threat—not just to Snape’s anonymity, but to his life.

He deliberately didn’t look directly at the intruder as he walked by, but he carefully peered out of the corner of his eye at the dark figure to his right as he passed Number 15.

A man was tucked inside the doorway, just outside of the harsh circle of yellow light cast by the bulb above his head. Snape could just see the tips of his black boots poking out onto the step, and the glow of the tiny orange spark of the cigarette dangling loosely in his lips. He didn’t move, and so Snape kept walking.

“Buenas noches.”

The voice was soft, even, although Snape thought he heard the tiniest hint of mockery behind it. People occasionally spoke to him on the street, and he would answer brusquely without stopping, and so he did the same here, simply replying with a dismissive, “Y tú,” and continuing on his way.

“Or would you prefer something along the lines of ‘Good evening’?”

Snape stiffened and stopped. This time there was no doubt as to the sardonic good humour behind the words. Slowly, he turned on his heel and faced the man. The American man, as it were. “As it’s nothing of the kind, I don’t particularly care which language you use,” he said, his voice terse and his back tense.

The figure in the doorway nodded in concession, saying, “Fair enough,” and then stepped forward into the light, where Snape could see him.

He was young, with long dark hair slicked back from his rather feminine but otherwise unremarkable face. He was wearing all black, from the leather boots on his feet to the sunglasses perched firmly on his nose despite the near total darkness of the street.

“So,” he said, gripping one elbow with his right hand, the left holding his cigarette daintily between two gloved fingers. “I understand we’re neighbours.”

“Quite,” said Snape, his voice clipped.

“I’m Mark,” he said, not offering his hand. “And you’re Greene.”

“Mark what?” Snape asked pointedly, not liking the ambiguity of that name, and liking that the man knew his own pseudonym even less.
“Andrews,” came the answer after a moment, and then he smiled frostily.


“I have to say,” Andrews remarked casually as he blew a rill of smoke through his pointed nose, “that if one must have a neighbour, you seem to be ideal. Three weeks and not a peep out of you.” He smiled coolly. “I like that.”

A faint ripple of alarm began tapping out an arpeggio along his spine. Three weeks? Three bloody weeks, and he hadn’t noticed? What kind of idiot was he? “The same could be said of you,” Snape replied stiffly.

Andrews smiled disarmingly. “Well, do unto others and all that stuff. I don’t exactly work regular hours, and I certainly like to keep it quiet.” He gestured about with his cigarette, trailing a narrow wreath of smoke around his face, and when he next spoke, his voice was low and insinuating. “That’s part of the charm of this place, don’t you think?”

Snape didn’t say anything, just stared stonily at the man in front of him.

Andrews took one last, long drag on his fag before flicking the butt effortlessly away. “What about yourself?” He was bright and cheerful again. “I must admit I was intrigued to find someone from your side of the pond cloistered away in this hole in the road.” His friendly smile went hard, knowing. “In my experience most Englishmen tend to avoid Mexico.” Then his smile was pleasant again. “Too hot.”

“I came here for my health,” Snape said icily. A little shake of his arm, and his wand slid down near the cuff of his shirt, and with just a flick of his wrist it would be out in his hand.

“Well, then, I’d say you must have found that in spades,” Andrews said, settling casually back against the doorframe, feeling about with the side of his foot for the edge of the step but never looking away from Snape, “given that health is your stock in trade these days.” The corner of his rather pouty lips curled. “You’ve developed a bit of a reputation in town, you know—you’re a regular back-alley pharmacy.”

“I should think that anyone plying a trade must have a reputation in order to stay in business,” Snape countered, his jaw tight.

Andrews bounced his eyebrows in a sort of facial shrug. “I’d have thought your particular business a risky venture no matter the reputation, but the proof’s in the pudding—you wouldn’t have lasted for nearly two years around here if the market for magic potions wasn’t up.”

Snape went cold.

He’d travelled half the globe, going through eight countries spread across three continents in the past two years, and never—not even once had anyone mentioned the word “magic” to him. Not once.

And now this Andrews fellow did. And he was talking about his potions.

It was probably just coincidence. Andrews was smiling pleasantly, his voice even and conversational. But there was just that hint of mockery colouring his voice and twisting the corners of his lips. Was he insinuating something? Did he have information that Snape didn’t? Was he looking for him?

Did he know?
He couldn’t risk it. He’d spent too long evading detection and staying under the Wizarding radar to be discovered now. There was no way that he was going to let them find him—and he’d be dead before he faced Potter again.

Snape had to find out—to be sure. And so he looked at Andrews, looked right in his face—right in his eyes. He stared at him, stared at those blank sunglasses, stared into them, stared through them—glass and plastic were no barriers to the power of the mind, and Snape’s stare cut through them like smoke as he reached forward, reached out, reached into his eyes to peer into the mind behind them.

And he saw nothing.

Panic like iron bands wrapped tight around his chest, and he fought to maintain his composure. He looked again—and he pushed harder, probed deeper, his fear making him reckless.

And nothing.

Nothing? How the bloody hell could there be nothing?

No Muggle had protection against the mental arts.

“With business like that, I’d guess you’re quite the popular fellow—must be why you live down here. Better to avoid unwanted guests, hmm?” Andrews asked, his voice casual, and he smiled, showing even white teeth.

Snape felt his mind drawing instinctively quiet and closed, and with a twitch his wand was out, clenched in his white-knuckled grip, and he was ready.

But even then Andrews had given no sign that he noticed anything was amiss, that he had felt his mental touch or had seen the movement of Snape’s hand, and he just said, “Well, it’s getting late—and I’m sure you had a busy day.”

“Meaning what?” Snape demanded through clenched teeth. What did he know?

“Not a thing,” said Andrews with a slight shake of his head and a twitch of his lip. “Just that you always cover a bit more ground on Fridays.”

Was he watching him? What was he doing here? What did he want?!

“Anyway, I’m turning in, I think. You’d best do the same—don’t want anybody to see you.” He grinned, baring his teeth like a wolf. “Oh, but I’ll be seeing you. Nine o’clock, just like always.” He paused. “In fact, being neighbours and all, I’ll bet we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.” And then he turned, put out his hand and slid it over the door until he found the knob, and let himself inside, disappearing into the darkened house after dropping one more sly smile over his shoulder.

The door closed with a soft snick, and Snape was left alone. He stood frozen in the street for just a moment more, staring at the darkened windows of Number 15, before he all but ran to his house, letting himself in and slamming the door behind him.

What in the hell was that?

He leaned against the inside of the door, tilting his head back against the knotty wood and trying to think through this rationally.

He’d never seen Andrews (if that was really his name) before in his life. There was no reason for an American of any kind to come looking for him—he’d never been there, and even if it had somehow
got out back in England that he hadn’t died that night, and even if they’d managed to track him down, they wouldn’t send an American to find him—someone from back home would come for him (and it would probably be Potter).

But Snape didn’t even know if Andrews was a wizard or not. He’d certainly not reacted to the wand in his hand, but he didn’t know if that meant he didn’t know what it was or merely was not surprised to see it—or even if he’d spotted it at all, pressed against his leg as he’d held it.

No, what had absolutely knocked him for a loop was the utter absence of anything behind his eyes. It was impossible for a Muggle to learn Occlumency—but it wasn’t Occlumency. If it Andrews had merely been an Occlumens, if Snape had simply felt an obstruction within his mind, he would have actually been more reassured—at least he would have known where he stood.

But he’d never heard of any magic so completely blocking the mind to the point that a Legilimens simply couldn’t sense anything.

It was insane. He’d felt no resistance from Andrews’s sunglasses, nor felt the strange electric pressure of the presence of magic anywhere around the man. He could see him, could hear him, but he simply wasn’t there when he looked in his eyes—

Snape stopped.

Andrews had never taken his eyes off Snape for the duration of their rather one-sided conversation. Not once.

Not even when it would have been both prudent and practical to do so, such as when stepping to avoid falling off his porch.

And he hadn’t reached for the doorknob—he’d felt for it.

Felt around as would a blind man.

But that was ridiculous—blindness couldn’t truly block Legilimency either. As long as there was a path from the eyes to the mind, even if it was no longer travelled, a competent Legilimens could walk it.

But perhaps there wasn’t a path.

Snape began to pace the tiny room, wishing that there was more space for him to do so properly, rather than just the few steps back and forth. He’d once met a one-eyed wizard on one of his forays for information. He remembered the way that he’d probed the man’s mind—he only really looked into his one eye—but when he’d first started to sift through his memories, Snape remembered the queer, listing feel of using both his own eyes, as if only making the connection on one side, before he’d shifted his gaze entirely to the right. The left side, where gaped a dark, hollow socket, had been cut off and dead—as if looking into nothing.

Just like Andrews.

Snape began walking faster, missing the familiar weight of his robes behind him. It was possible. It was possible that there was a perfectly logical explanation for what he had just witnessed—and it was possible that Andrews had not been sent for him. It was possible that Andrews didn’t have the faintest idea who he was. It was possible that he didn’t have to leave.

Maybe there was no magic to Andrews—maybe he simply had no eyes with which Snape could make contact. Maybe Andrews was just a Muggle and was hiding himself—there were certainly
more than enough ways to make enemies in Mexico—and perhaps he wanted to know who he was sharing space with just as Snape did. Maybe no one was after him at all. Maybe he could stay.

There was a chance…but was it one he was willing to take?

Snape stopped in the middle of the room and looked around. It was a small, cramped, miserable little house that he lived in. The walls were musty and the floorboards creaked beneath his feet. The water ran red with rust when you first turned on the taps, and they dripped all night no matter how tightly you turned them off. The lights tended to flicker and gutter. The roof leaked into his bedroom when it rained if he didn’t continually cast water-repelling charms, and even after all this time he still couldn’t track down the source. Spiders used the drains like their own miniature Floo Network, and rats still managed to find their way inside to gnaw the legs of his furniture. The walls were bare, the furniture shabby, and poverty was writ large upon everything.

But it was his. He lived here.

And he didn’t want to leave.

He hated this place. He hated the country, hated the town, hated the weather, hated the people, and hated this house. But the fact remained that he was here. And like it or not, he realized that in the nearly two years since he’d moved here, he had inadvertently made the best of it, and now there was really nowhere else he particularly wanted to go, if for no other reason than that he had finally stopped running. Here he was his own man, in his own home, and he was making his own choices.

And so he chose to stay.

Andrews hadn’t been lying. Over the next few weeks, Snape had indeed seen a lot of him.

He saw him every bloody day he went out.

The day following their little tête-à-tête in the darkened street—a Saturday—he’d left the house for the plaza at nine o’clock as he always did, and there was Andrews, having a cigarette on his front step again. He hailed Snape cheerfully enough, but his expression was calculating. Snape only grunted a reply, and slowed his pace to linger in front of him as long as he could without looking odd, just to watch him, but he’d seen nothing incriminating, so he’d gone on his way.

He’d been in a foul temper all day, which was not helped by his slow business (and vice versa, in all likelihood). He’d gone home early in disgust—only to find Andrews sitting nonchalantly on his porch again. He called to him again, almost playfully this time, asking how business was, and Snape had just ground his teeth and refused to answer, slamming his door behind him without a word.

And the next day Andrews had been waiting for him again, this time accompanied by that boy, who’d rather tentatively waved hello before deflating under the glare Snape gave him. But Andrews hadn’t wilted, hadn’t given any response to Snape’s obvious ill will; he just smiled his shark’s smile and sat in studied silence as Snape went by.

Just as he’d silently and smirkingly watched Snape go inside when he’d come home that evening.

And for four bloody weeks, it was the same thing over and over again. Every time Snape would go out, to the square on weekends or for groceries on Wednesdays, Andrews was there, sitting and smiling and watching.

This weekend had been the first time there had been any real change in this bizarre little dance routine of theirs. When he came home last night, Andrews had been sitting outside as usual—only
this time he was idly cleaning a gun.

Snape had eyed it warily as he approached; he could easily defend himself, should it come to that, but in doing so he would have to tip his hand regarding magic for sure.

However, despite making a rather obvious show of cleaning it, Andrews didn’t use it, just smiled as usual and bid him good evening.

But he had also had to feel around for the oiled rag on the step next to him, rather than look for it.

Andrews wasn’t the only one who had been watching his neighbour over the past month. Snape had been watching too, and he could see—and as such, was all the more convinced that Andrews couldn’t.

It was just little things that stuck out in Snape’s mind—the way Andrews would grope rather vaguely for something that was right by his side, or the way the boy on the bicycle (he thought he’d heard Andrews call him “Chiclet” once or twice, but that was ludicrous) tended to take his hand despite being much too old for such things, or the funny way that Andrews would tilt his head as if listening when Snape would pass, or the way that there were never lights on in Number 15, even when Snape knew Andrews was home. And just the previous weekend, when he’d left the house and refused to answer the now regular snide greeting from his unwanted neighbour, Andrews had mockingly asked him why he didn’t brew a potion for the frog in his throat (the bastard), and Snape had both tested his theory and vented his outrage by flashing him a two-fingered salute—and Andrews’s jovial expression never changed.

It might have been a coincidence. It might have been that his desperation to prove that Andrews was blind was making him see things that weren’t there.

It might also have been his fear of discovery that had made Andrews’s innocent words sound insinuating.

But blind, magic, or none of the above, there was still the possibility that he was facing a genuine threat.

And so Snape had remained on point for the past month, watching and waiting and ready to flee at a moment’s notice, should it come to that. But so far it hadn’t; it had been business as usual, and so here he sat, on his bench on early on Sunday morning, waiting for the hungover hypocrites to come to him so that they could be sober for Mass.

He glowered at a pack of young hoodlums who went screaming by on their bicycles. Andrews’s little spawn may have stopped barrelling down his street as of late, but that pack of ill-mannered baboons that seemed to regard the plaza as their own personal arena more than made up for him, whooping and hollering and showing off, tearing through the square as if on fire, and heaven help anyone who got in their way.

“¿Qué pasa, ese?” called a rough voice from his left, and he looked over to find Rodriguez slouching in his direction, squinting and bleary-eyed in the bright sunlight.

Snape smirked. “The usual, I presume?”

Rodriguez nodded, holding out a fistful of peso notes. Snape traded them for a shot of his hangover cure, and Rodriguez tossed it back without hesitation. Snape nodded politely to his thanks, and Rodriguez, looking considerably more chipper, jerked his head in reply and shambled off without waiting for his change.
A sudden shout and a flurry of dust followed by a clamour of voices and a rising howl of pain drew his attention from tucking the bills in his hidden pocket. He looked out across the plaza and saw that one of those little hooligans on the bicycles seemed to have taken a spill.

*Good*, he thought nastily. *Perhaps that will teach those hellions a lesson.*

He looked away again, letting his eyes travel idly over the heads of the bustling crowd. It was busy today; the throngs of harebrained American students were staring to recede, thank God, but on the other hand, Easter was approaching—Holy Week started on Monday—and the people here always made an event of the holiday. It had never been nearly this much of an ordeal back home when he was a boy. In the years before he’d gone off to school, the Friday before Easter (if there was money to spare and his parents thought about it) he’d sometimes been allowed to run down to the bakery for a hot cross bun, but that was the extent of the fuss and fanfare that went on at his house. He was dragged to church on Easter Sunday, of course, all scrubbed raw and wearing clean clothes that were usually too small and always wretchedly uncomfortable. There were chocolate eggs for the children after services—he’d learned to wolf his down as quickly as possible before it was stolen from him—and the church itself had always been decorated, with green garlands of ivy and always the bunches of white, star-like—*lilies*—

“Excuse me—Don Greene, sir?”

Snape congratulated himself on not jumping out of his skin, and then turned and delivered his fiercest scowl to whoever had the unmitigated gall to sneak up on him. “What?” he growled.

The grubby little boy standing before him shrank under his gaze, but then seemed to rally his courage and squared his shoulders. “Sir, we need—could you help us, please?”

Snape blinked, a bit surprised, and then he furrowed his brow. “What the devil do you want, boy?” he demanded.

“It—it’s Manuel, señor,” he said haltingly, scuffing his shoes on the stones beneath his feet. “He—he fell, and—please, sir—he’s hurt.”

Snape stared at him, marvelling at his audacity, before rising to his feet so that he towered over the boy as he glared down at him. The brat looked to be on the verge of fleeing in terror in the face of his wrath, and Snape found himself forcibly and unwillingly reminded of all the times some useless First Year went looking for a teacher to right whatever idiocy he or his friends had gotten themselves into and had the ill-fortune to encounter him first. “I should think that your little friend is only reaping what he has sown, young man,” he said icily. “Perhaps he should remember this the next time that you and your monstrous little friends decide to indulge in these arrogant displays of your lacklustre cycling talent.” With a final glare at the insolent little toad, he stalked off in the direction of the cluster of boys standing sentinel around their fallen comrade.

They parted like the Red Sea as Snape neared; he sneered at their scared faces before looking down at the boy on the ground.

He was holding his ankle, which through his clutching fingers Snape could already see was beginning to swell. There were tear tracks on his face, wet little lines wiped clean of the dust covering his round cheeks, but he was clearly making a heroic effort to save what little face he had left among his companions by holding back his snuffling sobs.

“Well?” Snape demanded coldly.

“My ankle, sir,” he sniffed.
“I can see that!” he snapped. “Just desserts for someone acting as foolishly and carelessly as yourself. What, exactly, do you expect me to say about it?”

The one who had fetched him seemed to steel himself, and then stepped forward and spoke up. “He—he’s my little brother, sir,” he said. “We just—we were teaching him to jump—I’m supposed to be looking out for him.”

“And I can see that you are doing such a fine job,” Snape said, his lip curling.

The boy looked away, biting his lip in shame, and then looked pleadingly up at him and said in a rush, “Please, sir—don’t—don’t you have something for him?” Then, “Come on, guys,” he said to his friends. “Pony up.” And then the lot of them suddenly began to rummage in their pockets, pulling out grimy handfuls of rubbish that undoubtedly were their most prized treasures in all the world, bits and pieces of metal and glass and string the likes of which had once lined Snape’s own pockets a lifetime ago on Spinner’s End.

It was only when he found himself confronted with a circle of open palms in which rested a myriad of assorted and abused coinage that he realized what they were doing. “We’ll pay, sir,” said the ringleader stoutly.

Snape blinked, and then rubbed the bridge of his nose in exasperation before dropping down to one knee. Manuel, as the boy had called him, looked hugely relieved and let go of his ankle so that Snape could see it.

It was swelling, yes, but it was neither broken nor even sprained, merely twisted, and he would be walking on it in no time if the whinging little twerp would just get up and tough it out, instead of sitting here being mollycoddled by his brother. But undoubtedly the little idiot was convinced that it would have to be amputated unless someone did something, and so with a grunt of irritation he opened his basket and pulled out a strip of gauze and told the brat to take off his shoe.

Snape dripped a little pokeweed root juice on it to take care of the swelling, added a dash of one of his own painkillers, and bound up the ankle with all speed. He then pushed the boy’s battered sandal back on his foot before standing and roughly hoisting the little boy to his feet by one arm. “Now, remember this the next time you are seized with the urge to behave like a pack of wild hyenas,” he said firmly.

The boy nodded, wide-eyed, and then gingerly put his weight on his ankle.

Snape found himself the recipient of an amazed smile. “It’s fixed!” the boy said in delighted wonder. “Of course it is!” he barked. “Do you think I am some sort of fraud?”

The smile slid off his face as quickly as it had appeared, and boy shook his head furiously, taking a startled step backwards (and on his injured foot, no less). “No, sir! Th—thank you, sir,” he added quickly, almost as an afterthought.

Snape snorted in disgust, and turned to leave, only to find himself confronted with the older brother, holding out the collected handful of donated change—likely not even enough for a soda machine. Snape sneered down at him. “I don’t want your money, idiot,” he informed him brusquely. “All I want is a little peace and quiet, and to be able to go about my business without fear of being run down by a bunch of young ruffians on bicycles,” he said, giving the lot of them a pointed glare.

The boy blinked, looked chagrined for a moment, and then, rather to Snape’s consternation, smiled a little. “Yes, sir—and thank you, sir.”
Snape didn’t deign to respond, just snorted contemptuously in the boy’s direction before making his way back to his bench. *Tiresome little monsters,* he thought in annoyance, settling back down in his seat. He crossed his arms and slouched, glaring at nothing. As his eyes travelled restlessly around the plaza, he caught the eye of the girl who sold flowers, who seemed to be watching him. He glowered back at her; she flushed and quickly looked away, having been caught staring.

The pack of boys seemed to have regrouped and were apparently off to greener pastures. They passed by his bench as they left en masse, looking at him uncertainly, and he scowled at them. He didn’t notice until after they had gone by that as they went, the lot of them were pushing their bicycles.

He gave a soft harrumph under his breath. High time the little buggers learned some respect.

The sun was setting; the few wisps of clouds above were stained a soft pink, and lights began to wink on in the buildings around him as he walked home. Snape was looking forward to getting home; some idiot had tripped and spilled tequila all over him this afternoon, and he stank like a distillery. He thought he had shown remarkable restraint in not hexing the cretin with hives in uncomfortable places.

He had indulged in letting the clumsy oaf know just what he thought of both the man’s intelligence and his mother’s choice in bed partners, though.

His basket was pleasantly light on his arm, and a fat bundle of peso notes was a comforting weight where it pressed against his side. Business had slumped in the past few weeks—Snape had been all too ready to lay the blame at Andrews’s feet. But this weekend things had picked up, and even better than they had been since before that wretch had made his presence known. He’d even filled a special order today; some featherheaded little tart had been all in a tizzy over a spot on her nose yesterday, and he had charged her only a little extra for the acne-curative he’d given her today. She had been only too glad to pay it. Well—a fool and his money. Or her money, as it were.

He turned down *Calle del Sombras* and readied himself. Time for his nightly bout with Andrews.

Only Andrews wasn’t there. Snape stopped in front of Number 15 in surprise. The windows were dark, as usual, but the porch light was off too. The bicycle was there—the boy was around here somewhere—but Snape could hear no voices from inside, and there was no trace of Andrews.

He didn’t dare hope that this farce of theirs was over; quite the opposite, really—Andrews’s sudden absence was decidedly suspicious. Doubly on his guard now, he peered up and down the street and down the nearby alleyways, but all he saw was a mangy black cat rooting around in the dustbin.

He slowly made his way to his own house, his eyes scanning all around him as he moved, and unlocked the door.

The telltale smell of tobacco smoke gave him away; Snape’s wand was in his hand, raised and ready, even before he flicked on the light and saw his unwelcome guest.

“Why, fancy meeting you here,” Andrews said.
Back in the Saddle

Chapter Summary

Sands makes some renovations and a phone call.

“I know you’re there, my little darling…you shook me all night long, baby…and, you nasty little blood-sucking bitch…”

Sands lashed his hand out and smacked it hard against his arm, and then he paused; the tinny, maddening drone did not start up again. He smirked in triumph.

“Tell your friends about me,” he said, wiping his hand on the arm of his chair, smearing the broken and sticky remains of the mosquito on the rough fabric. Sands could not stand mosquitoes—he hated them more than flies. Flies he could handle; he’d dealt with rotting corpses, the remains of what had once been a contact or a cartel member, not to mention spending three months in Nuñez’s house. Mosquitoes, though…somehow, the high-pitched whine had always driven straight through his ears and into his brain like a goddamn fucking drill, and it was even worse now that—well, it was just worse.

He stretched his arms over his head, yawning, before heaving himself up out of his chair. Chiclet would be here soon; that meant he actually needed to get dressed again—demolition was not on the list of Good Things to Do While Butt-Naked, no matter what the temperature. Absently scratching his crotch, he picked his careful way to the stairs, hand outstretched and feeling for the doorframe. He slowly climbed the creaking stairs, fingers trailing against the wall, mentally counting every step as he always did. Eleven, twelve, thirteen—he turned, and his hand found the door to what was technically his bedroom. Only technically, in that he tended to fall asleep wherever he could these days—that, and he hadn’t been comfortable sleeping upstairs ever since he’d heard what he’d been hearing. Or, rather, what he hadn’t been hearing.

Pawing around on the bed, he found his discarded boxers and undershirt, pulling them on less carefully than usual (and almost missing that the shorts were on backwards), rather lost in thought. When he’d first become aware of Greene, he’d listened to the wall he shared with him—and he’d heard things. He hadn’t really been sure what those things were, but he’d heard them nonetheless. But a few days later, those noises had quite abruptly stopped. Just stopped. He’d gone about his ritual of listening, ear and palms pressed flat to the wall, but they simply weren’t there anymore. No more of those strange raspings, no more bubbling, no more nothing from the upstairs room.

He irritably slammed shut the first drawer he’d pulled open. “Third,” he muttered angrily, pulling the right one open and hauling out a shirt before ramming the drawer shut and sliding his fingers down to the next one, pulling out a pair of jeans—and God help Chiclet if they weren’t all black.

Sands did not like that sudden, absolute silence one bit—because it had started not long after Greene had realized he was there. It meant that Greene was up to no good in that room, and now was taking steps to keep him from finding out. And while Sands liked secrets as much as the next man, he didn’t like that they were being kept against him. He had quite liked the idea that Greene had some nasty (and preferably illegal) little secret up there—that meant blackmail—but it did him no good if he couldn’t figure out what it was.
Especially so since Greene hadn’t responded appropriately to string of threats but that once, the rotten little redcoat. That first night after he’d decided to feel Greene out had been what Sands had considered a decided victory—he’d heard the demanding suspicion in Greene’s voice, that nervous little quaver that he’d grown to love over the years. He’d ratted him. He knew he had. And it had surprised him, to find out how little it took to rattle Greene, as well as relieved him. Greene was clearly hiding something, that much was obvious. The only question was what.

And if that was the response that he’d gotten from only pushing a little, he’d opted to take a gamble and push with all of what little he did have. He’d put all of his eggs in one basket and promptly dumped the whole load on Greene’s head—and for a time, had been confident that Greene didn’t take kindly to egg yolk and would surely up and leave.

That clearly hadn’t happened. The pisswah.

No, rather than getting scared and making himself scarce, Greene had continued to go about his business, only growing progressively more and more silent each time Sands had been waiting for him, and Sands had been forced to reach the conclusion that, by the end of this week, Greene was completely ignoring him, save once when Chiclet had told him Greene had had the gall to outright give him the messed-up British version of the finger. That had irritated him more than ever—because that meant Greene wasn’t scared at all. Ill-tempered and rude, to be sure, but not scared.

So his bluff had not worked. Sands was doing little but annoy Greene, just like that goddamned mosquito had annoyed him last night. That simply would not do—and so, since he didn’t have any insinuating hints left to drop, maybe it was time to take the direct approach. Hence the reason he’d decided to up the ante a little tonight and corner Greene so they could talk all nice and proper—mano a mano, so to speak. It was time for a little breaking and entering.

He swore under his breath as he pulled his shirt off again—it was inside out. He had a good mind to whack Chiclet upside the head for that. He specifically told that little shit to make sure all of his shirts were folded properly with tags that were easily accessible. Pulling it back on, he pushed his shades back up on the bridge of his nose before tucking the shirt in and zipping his jeans. Unfortunately, he couldn’t find his boots and spent the next five minutes crawling around on his hands and knees looking for them and telling the world at large in no uncertain terms exactly what he thought about this situation.

“Bad day,” he grumbled, tugging them on once he found them (and why they were shoved under his bed was beyond him—he was sure there was some way for him to blame Chiclet for that too). Well, hopefully after his meeting with Old Don Greene, the day would be a little bit brighter—that is, if Chiclet would ever get back with that sledge hammer.

Sands had briefly considered just picking the lock on Greene’s front door and entering the usual way—he’d been picking locks ever since he was thirteen, sneaking into his oldest sister’s room, a Playboy filched from his father’s drawer tucked under his shirt, so he could get his hands on that tube of lube Teresa thought she was so risqué for buying. However, he’d not even been near Greene’s front door ever since he’d found himself disoriented and unable to concentrate after passing by it—twice. He didn’t like that shit at all. So, rather than risk that again, no matter how it had happened, he’d decided another method of entry was prudent. Not to mention that it was always better to do the unpredictable—kept the enemy off-balance. Besides, it would serve a dual purpose to him—he was going to go tunneling. A guy like him could always use a viable escape route on the off chance that someone might discover where he was.

Trooping back downstairs, he took a detour over to his liquor cabinet for an invigorating draught of tequila before plopping back down in his favorite chair, irritated that, even after all this time, climbing
up and down those stairs made his legs hurt. Settling in more comfortably, he began the tired and monotonous ritual of massaging those two knots in his thighs that always twisted tighter when he went upstairs, so used to this that he didn’t even need to think about it anymore. That meant he could use the time to think about something else—like his neighbor.

Their first meeting had revealed absolutely nothing. Old Don Greene, everyone called him, with his gray hair and ratty clothes. Sands had tried not to form preconceived notions when gearing up for a fight, but even then he’d been a bit surprised. The man he’d thought was going to be a crotchety but querulous old fart had turned out to be a cagey, nasty son of a bitch with a chip on his shoulder. His voice had been low and rough, but querulous it was not—rather every rasped word had been cold and firm. He had to smoke forty packs a day to sound like that (and speaking of cigarettes, why wasn’t Chiclet back yet? He was out and always craved one when he was plotting).

Rather disquieting sharpness aside, Greene was also turning out to be a lot more stubborn than Sands had anticipated. Which made no sense at all—he’d rattled him so badly on the first meeting, and then suddenly, he was fine? Even when he’d gone out on a bit of a limb and making sure that Greene saw that he was in fact armed and dangerous, the prick hadn’t reacted at all. So, since the old buttmunch was apparently too thickheaded to pick up on his subtle hints, Sands would just have to spell things out for him. Sands was going to personally see to it that Greene would have no trouble getting his message after tonight.

Sands was going to get into his house and actively tell the little teawop to just bundle himself and his bag of tricks straight back to Jolly Old England.

He rolled his plan through his head. He’d wanted a back door from the moment he’d moved in. He didn’t like having only one exit—and given his unfortunate little accident, he didn’t think that climbing out a window was a viable option. So he’d picked the back wall upstairs as an ideal location for an escape route, as it not only had absolutely no pipes obstructing anything, but it would also give him a little more time to cut and run should someone find him. Then he’d go back downstairs, find that spot that had no pipes in the way that he’d managed to locate yesterday (he and Chiclet had played “Flush the Toilet and Listen to the Pipes Rattle” all of the previous day), and bust through yet another section of wall into the house behind the one next door. And then it’d be Greene’s turn. He was intent upon getting in through the back—the houses were all built the same, so if he was right, he’d find himself tumbling through the wall and right into Greene’s bathroom—admittedly not a place he had any pressing desire to visit. He knew about British hygiene—they were downright barbaric. Never showered, never shaved, and because of the price of water, never flushed the goddamned toilet.

He still couldn’t believe his rotten luck that of all people in this wide world, a dirty European would wind up being his neighbor.

Sands drummed his fingers on the side of his chair, hating the thick, oppressive silence that pressed in on him from all sides. He’d not been comfortable enough with his situation to risk having anything that made noise, like a radio or a television, or even a phone line—somebody might hear it and know he lived there. That, and he didn’t want to be caught off guard. That heavy silence meant that if anyone tried to break it, he’d know, and he’d be ready for them. But still, he hated that silence, the silence interrupted only by the occasional whispery scuttle of a rat in the walls or the leaky pipes or whenever the unending quiet drove him to make some noise to keep himself from going completely insane. No matter how much he appreciated the quiet as a preemptive burglar alarm, the fact remained that he could not stand it when it was quiet. Quiet meant he wasn’t doing anything. Quiet meant he was left alone with nothing but his thoughts, and his thoughts invariably led down memory lane, and that particular beat he wasn’t too keen on walking.
Fortunately, Chiclet, as always, chose that moment to show up.

He heard that welcome ringing of Chiclet’s bicycle bell, a sound that, to his indignation, never failed to raise his flagging spirits, followed by the clatter of the key sliding home and turning in the lock on his front door. He snapped his head up at the sound, facing where he knew Chiclet would be.

“Hola, Señor!” Chiclet said brightly, shutting the door again. Sands heard the rustle and crinkling of a paper bag—he could never figure out if the kid was just naturally loud, or if he made all that racket just for him (and if that was the case, he was going to beat him until he couldn’t grow any more). “I got what you asked—tequila, cigarettes, a crowbar, and a hammer. I got the biggest hammer I could find.”

“Perfect,” Sands said. “Put the booze and cigs away and then get my gloves,” he continued, pulling himself up out of his chair and rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

“Sí, Señor!” He heard the kid fiddling with his liquor cabinet, followed the snapping sound of the carton of cigarettes being opened. Chiclet detoured by where Sands was standing to slap a fresh pack in Sands’s hand, leaning the hammer and crowbar against the side of his chair, before heading back into the kitchen and putting the carton away. Sands tucked the cigarettes into his pocket, before hoisting the hammer in his hands, feeling the solid heft of the grainy handle in his grip. Chiclet had indeed found a bigass sledgehammer—and how he’d managed to tote it here on his bicycle was beyond Sands. And that crowbar was no slouch, either—he ran his hands along it, feeling the huge claw, the weight of the smooth metal. It’d do nicely for what he had planned—and anyway, it wasn’t like he was trying to break down a brick wall. Mexican housing was about as solid as balsa wood.

He twitched his head towards the sound of Chiclet coming towards him again. “Here are your gloves,” he said, and Sands exchanged them for the hammer and crowbar. Sure to feel which one was the right hand glove, he slid them both on, flexing his fingers a little.

“Kay. Up we go, kid,” Sands said, moving towards the stairs; he heard Chiclet troop up behind him, dutifully following him to the bedroom on the left. Sands paused, briefly contemplating the far wall before once again pressing his ear against it—and he ground his teeth when he heard that typical nothing that was always there these days. It bugged him.

Well, it wouldn’t be bugging him for much longer.

Pushing away, he slid his hands along to the corner and to the adjacent wall, tapping it carefully, listening for dull sound of weak points and imperfections in the plaster, before squaring himself before his chosen stretch of wall.

“All right, gimme that hammer—and you’re positive Greene isn’t here?” he asked again, turning and looking to Chiclet.

“Sí, Señor. I passed him on my way over.”

He gripped the handle. “And you’re positive nobody lives in the next row?”

“Sí. I checked them all when I was running the water for you.”

“Perfect,” Sands said shortly, and then swung the hammer forward through his wall with all the force he could muster. Chiclet gave a little squeak of surprise, but Sands ignored it—he continued to take advantage of the lousy Mexican construction, breaking an ever-widening hole right through the lathe and into the house on the other side. He was quite pleased to find that he’d been right—no pipes got in his way back here. He stopped for just a moment to run his hands along the edges of the hole,
making the new entryway as neat as he possibly could and just the right size for him to get through, but still small enough that the hole could be concealed by that old rotting bureau that was the only inhabitant of this room. As he went, he began to slow, take thing a little easier, feeling the shape of the hole as he worked; the initial breakthrough had been violent, but he didn’t go at it nearly as rough now. It wouldn’t do to make his upstairs look like some kind of war zone, after all.

He paused before nearly sneezing his sunglasses right off—goddamned dust. “H—here,” he coughed, holding the hammer out vaguely in the direction Chiclet. “Take over—just make the hole big enough for me to get through.”

“Sí, Señor,” Chiclet said, and Sands stumbled through the pile of debris he’d worked up in the process. “But, um…why are we doing this?” the kid asked before going straight to work.

“Escape route. I’ve been meaning to make one of these,” he replied, leaning back against the wall and rubbing his arm (which, fuck it all, had begun to throb even before he’d put the hammer down). “And stop being so crazy with that thing!” he ordered, waving his arm around. “I can tell you’re making a mess of that—this is my house, for Christ’s sake!” He waved the rising cloud of dust away from his face. “I admire enthusiasm and all, but I said to make a hole with the hammer, not take down the whole wall,” he added. Then he heard Chiclet slow down and start being more careful, coughing quietly as he did.

It became clear after a few minutes that Chiclet wasn’t going to manage nearly as well as Sands would, as he was small and that hammer was friggin’ huge—probably bigger than the kid himself. “Here—gimme that,” Sands said, beckoning for the hammer. He felt the handle laid across his hands, and he gripped it and took back the weight before saying, “Go get me some aspirin. Don’t bother with water.”

“Sí, Señor!” Sands listened Chiclet’s little footsteps recede down the stairs before sliding his hand all along the hole, feeling the edges. Well, whaddyaknow, the kid proved him wrong—he’d had done a pretty impressive job for his first time in the barrel, despite weighing only a little more than the damn hammer did. Sands knelt down and sat on the floor after shoving all of the debris out of the way, into the other house, and switched over to the crowbar and started working on the bottom edge. He did not want to try and escape through his new backdoor and find himself face-down on the floor because his ankles had caught on some little bit of wall he’d missed. He tore out chunks of plaster, tugging his shirt up over his nose and mouth as he did to avoid breathing the dust.

Chiclet didn’t take long—in less than a minute he was pattering back up the stairs, and Sands tugged his shirt down long enough to swallow the aspirin before pulling it back over his nose and going back to work.

He heard the kid settle down on his knees next to him, sweeping debris out of the way. “I wish you’d told me we would be breaking through the wall—I would have picked up some trash bags, too,” Chiclet commented.

“I think I’ve got some downstairs—should, anyway, if you bought them before like you said you did,” Sands grunted between jerks of the bar. “Don’t think they’re industrial strength, but they’ll do for the majority of this stuff,” he added, tugging at a particularly stubborn section of plaster while Chiclet promptly jumped to his feet and went back down the stairs to look for the trash bags. Good kid.

By the time Chiclet returned, Sands had gotten back to his feet and was feeling all of the edges, fairly satisfied with the work. The hole was a good two feet wide and some three or four feet high. He heard Chiclet clattering behind him and assumed the kid had also gotten a broom and a dustpan, which he had insisted upon buying when he’d moved in (who did that little shit think he was,
anyway—his kid or his mother?). He pawed at the opening; he’d still have to duck to get out, but there were no pesky ankle-high remnants that would trip him up should he need to high-tail it out of there. It was just pretty damn near perfect, it what it was. He’d have Chiclet do any touch-ups, if he ever felt that fussy about it (which he didn’t).

“How much do you have to sweep up?” Sands asked, looking down at Chiclet, who was down on the floor cleaning.

“I already got most of the big chunks in the trash—it’s all of the dust that’s gonna take a while,” he replied, the plastic trash bag rustling.

“Right—leave it. Come on, take me through the next house. You said it looked exactly the same as mine?”

“Sí, Señor. So did the next one—I’m pretty sure all of the houses are built the same on this block, just like where my family lives.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sands said, waving his hand absently. “Come on, let’s go.” He picked up the crowbar and sledgehammer and then ducked down through his newly made escape route, toeing carefully through the new room as Chiclet came scrambling through behind him. Sands felt the kid take the crowbar before grasping his hand tightly.

“Careful—they left a bed in the middle of the room,” Chiclet said, tugging him towards the door.

“How frightfully inconsiderate of them,” Sands remarked, letting Chiclet lead him downstairs. Sands felt the crunch of unidentifiable debris and the soft grind of a layer of dust beneath his feet. “Take me to the living room—to the wall on the left, between this one and the house next door,” he directed. Chiclet didn’t reply, but pulled him obediently to the appropriate side of the room, detouring around the old furniture. Sands dropped the hammer and repeated the same ritual he’d performed upstairs in his own home—tapping and listening to the walls before finally locating a spot that was in such crappy shape that it actually gave a little when he pressed against it. He bent down and picked up the hammer again, pushing his sunglasses up on his nose.

“Here we go again,” Sands said, hauling back the hammer like Paul Bunyan and slamming it right through the wall. He didn’t bother with being careful about it this time—he didn’t need to be neat and tidy now. It wasn’t his house, after all, so he pulled back and swung it again, feeling little pieces of debris raining down onto his head. He’d have to remember to ask Chiclet to help him with that later, because somehow he suspected that he’d have a little trouble being intimidating with little pieces of plaster and wood in his hair.

“Señor—why are you making another hole?”

Sands paused for a moment, regarding Chiclet over his shoulder. “Because we ain’t done yet, that’s why. After this one, we go make another one—this one into Greene’s house.” Sands smashed harder against the wall, ignoring the sharp pain in his arm. “Because, you see, I’m gonna have a little chat with Greene. We’re gonna talk, and hopefully, he’s gonna leave after we have said talk.”

“Why do you want Don Greene to leave? He doesn’t do anything to anybody. Nobody even knows he’s here,” Chiclet countered, shuffling his feet a little.

Sands snorted, chucking the hammer aside to rip at the wall with his hands. “Because I wanna be left alone, thank you very much. I don’t want a neighbor, I don’t need a neighbor. And since I can’t kill my neighbor at the moment,” Sands huffed, tearing off large chunks of plaster and cracking strips of lath, “I’m gonna persuade him to go.”
Chiclet scuffed his shoe on the dirty floor behind him. “But, Señor...I think Don Greene just wants to be left alone, too.”

Sands paused, half turning to face Chiclet for a moment. “Then that means we ain’t compatible, doesn’t it? This is my beat. You said he’s only been here two years? Well, I’ve been here for seven. I got here first,” he said tartly before going back to the wall, picking up the hammer and going to town. He heard Chiclet kicking the debris out of the way as he smashed the plaster repeatedly, careful to make sure he didn’t accidentally stove the kid’s head in as he did. To give his arm a rest, he put the hammer back down again and started pulling pieces away with the crowbar; this particular place was in terrible disrepair, and it took him a very short time to make a sizable hole that he could easily crawl through.

“Lead the way, kid,” Sands said, picking up the hammer again and waiting for Chiclet to get the crowbar, which he did. Yet again, he felt his hand grasped by Chiclet’s little fingers before being tugged through the new hole, almost catching his foot but managing to keep his balance. “To the bathroom.”

Chiclet obediently led him past the staircase and into the adjacent room. The layout was the same as his own house again, with the bathtub up against the wall he needed to burst through, and the previous owners had not made the same concessions as were the case in his own bathroom—there was no tile. That would ease things up a bit. He rather hoped Greene had tile, though—it’d make a fantastic mess on the other side. He didn’t even need the crowbar this time around—he was about to bring down the house.

He swung the hammer with feverish intensity, feeling the wall split and crack beneath the force of his blows, hearing the creaking protests of the lath give way to the tinkling crash of shattering tile (score!) as he pounded his way inside.

After he was done, he dropped the hammer and the crowbar in the bathtub, panting, before poking his head through the hole. He was immediately assailed by a breath of blessedly cool air—which was odd, because he hadn’t heard any signs of the old coot having air conditioning. He still didn’t, he realized, as he cocked his head and listened to the ringing silence of his neighbor’s house, and so he pulled his head back in, frowning. “Do what I paid you for, Chiclet,” Sands said softly, pulling the kid into the tub beside him and pushing him up by the hole into Greene’s house. “Tell me what you see.”

Chiclet was silent for a moment as he peered into the next room. “It’s just the bathroom, Señor. It looks like yours. The door’s open—the living room looks mostly like yours, too.”

“Copy-cat.” Sands shoved the kid out of the way and clambered through the hole, slipping and landing with a loud curse on his derriere in the tub full of broken lath and plaster chunks and shattered tile. Growling under his breath, he hove himself to his feet and hauled a rather reluctant Chiclet in after him (and if that little shit was laughing at him, so help him God that kid was going to be wearing his own teeth for a necklace) “Living room,” Sands said tersely, and Chiclet took his hand and led him inside. They walked into the next room, and Chiclet started up his cataloguing immediately.

“There are a few books on some shelves on the opposite wall—they look like encyclopedias. There’s a coffee table in the middle, and a chair on the right and a little couch on the left. He has some little end tables with lamps and a cabinet. It’s pretty empty,” Chiclet said, and Sands could hear him looking around as they paused in the doorway.

Sands pulled his hand from Chiclet’s. “Go upstairs—investigate. I’ll look around here by myself for a bit,” he said, slowly moving forward and locating the first table with his outstretched hands and
running his fingers over the lamp sitting on it.

“Sí, Señor!” Chiclet went dashing up the stairs, leaving Sands alone to feel his way around the room. Carefully using his hands to see the room, he ran his hands over the surface of a low cabinet, trailed his fingers along the back of an armchair, absently dusting debris out of his hair as he did, and wishing he could see what color the fabric was, what kind of wood the tables were, and to blink at the sudden brightness of turning on a lamp.

He hated being blind.

Sands cocked his head—Chiclet was coming back downstairs. But he wasn’t just walking—he was almost running down the stairs.

“The left side is his bedroom. I couldn’t get into the room on the right. The door was locked,” he said, and he sounded more uncomfortable than Sands had ever heard him, and that sent up all sorts of red flags. “I couldn’t get in. And I don’t think we should go in.”

Sands regarded him warily. “And why is that?”

“I…I heard things in it, and it—it just feels—bad,” Chiclet finished lamely, scuffing his shoes. Sands sneered at him on general principle.

“Stay here. I’ll check it out,” he said, flexing his fingers a little—he wanted to hear this for himself. If Chiclet was hearing things now…well, that would mean there was something definitely up, because he hadn’t heard anything through his own wall before they’d come over.

He let Chiclet lead him to the staircase before he made the journey up himself. Sliding his fingers along the wall, he took that familiar path to what would ordinarily be his own bedroom on the right—however, he didn’t try the doorknob. Chiclet said it was locked, after all.

He pressed his ear against the door—and there it was. Very faint, but those same weird rustlings were there again. He heard things too—and things was the only way to describe it. And he did feel it—that strange sense of discomfort and foreboding that told him he should get away from this door, and as quickly as possible.

Sands’s gut had only failed him once in his entire lifetime (and oh, what a spectacular failure it had been). So he wasn’t about to start ignoring that instinct because of that one time. Greene clearly had something in here that he wanted protected, if he kept it locked at all times. And as much as Sands wanted to know exactly what it was, he wasn’t going to tempt fate—there was something moving in there, and if it was dangerous…well, he wasn’t willing to do it.

“Did you go in?” Chiclet asked worriedly as he made his way back down the stairs.

“Nope,” Sands replied succinctly. “See anything else?” he asked immediately.

“No, Señor—like I said, it mostly just looks a lot like your house. Just a few more things, dishes and stuff in the kitchen, coasters on the tables, things like that. He’s just been living here longer than you have”

“That’s dandy. Find me a chair, preferably one that faces the door.” Chiclet’s fingers grasped his gloved ones and led him through the room, and then he heard him pat the back of a chair. Sands settled into it; it was a large armchair, but decidedly shabby, as Sands sank about a foot down into it, and the worn and threadbare upholstery was rough beneath his fingers.

“What’s in the cabinet across the way, there?” Sands asked, toeing about and finding the table so he
could kick his feet up on it.

He heard Chiclet patter over and open it up. “Some glasses and a few bottles of whiskey.”

“What is it? What’s the label say?”

“It’s in English, Señor.”

Sands sighed. “Spell it, then.”

“O-L-D O-G-D-E-N-S…”

“Ogden’s? What the fuck brand is that?” Sands demanded, swiveling enough to look around at Chiclet.


“Oh, and it gets even better. Old Ogden’s Firewhiskey. What is that, Aztec jungle-juice, aged in the keg?” he sneered. “Ogden’s…gimme that,” he barked, holding his hand out. Chiclet dutifully set a bottle into his waiting palm—it was still pretty full, so it was either new or Greene was somewhat of a weenie and didn’t drink it much. He slid his fingers over the neck and to the cork—not a screwcap. Interesting. And the shape was funny, the bottle curved, the glass wavy and bubbled, the label rough and curling at the edges, and the whole thing clearly not something that was mass-produced. Sands uncorked the bottle with a satisfactory pop and sniffed the contents lightly—only to jerk back in surprise at the sudden sensation of having his nose hairs singed. Damn. He contemplated the bottle in his hand for a moment with increased respect, before tipping it back.

Holy shit!

Only years of liquor drinking, including sampling some of the strongest brews the planet had to offer, kept him from spewing the stuff all over the room. He managed to get it down, swallowing hard, and then he immediately started coughing wildly, almost dropping the bottle as he hacked and choked and Chiclet started pounding him uselessly on the back. Firewhiskey? Old Ogden was not kidding—hot, burning sensations ran all the way down his gullet and into his stomach, as if he’d swallowed molten lava that was now settling down in his stomach, solidifying into a glowing hot stone in his gut. Leaning back in the chair, wheezing, he gripped the neck of the bottle a little tighter.

“Goddamn. That shit is good,” he rasped.

“Señor…are you all right?” Chiclet asked tentatively.

“I’m fine,” he snapped, his menace rather undermined by his hoarseness. He corked the bottle firmly and held it out to Chiclet. “Here. Take this back next door when you leave.”

“But, Señor—” Chiclet began to protest, but Sands silenced him with an eyeless glare. “Sí, Señor,” he sighed.

“Don’t you take that tone of voice with me, little man—I won’t put up with it. What time is it?” Sands grumbled, thumping his chest a little and coughing.

“About five,” he replied.

Sands got up and moved to the front door, hearing Chiclet’s light little footsteps following him. He grabbed the doorknob, and then jerked away in surprise, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Tentatively, he put a hand out and grabbed the knob again.
It tingled. There was no better way to describe it. It just…tingled.

“Señor?” asked Chiclet hesitantly.

Sands ground his teeth, swiftly unlocked the door, and then swung it open, and he and Chiclet both leaned out.

And then they both jumped back—because for a split second, the very air around them seemed to warp and twist, to push back against them, until suddenly, with an almost audible pop, the weird electric frisson was gone.

“What in the ever-loving fuck was that?” Sands demanded loudly, forgetting where he was.

“I—I don’t know, Señor,” said Chiclet breathlessly, and goddammit if the little shit didn’t sound scared for the first time since Sands had known him.

Sands stuck a wary hand out, groping through the air and out the door—but whatever that had been, it was gone. Shaking himself, he pretended nothing had happened and asked Chiclet if he saw anybody on the street. The kid was understandably leery about approaching the door again, but after shuffling forward and not feeling anything else out of the ordinary, he stoutly peeked outside and reported that the street was just as deserted as usual. Sands closed the door; the knob was cool and flat and just metal against his palm.

“All right, then,” Sands said after a moment, more than ready to put that bizarre happening out of his mind. “Then come dust me off and let’s go through the rest of the house—I want you to be out of here well before Greene comes back home.”

Sands had no way of knowing what time it was; Chiclet had left him at around six o’clock that night, after the two of them had gone over every inch of the old codger’s house (with the noted and glaring exception of the bedroom on the right). They’d thumbed through his clothes, checked under his mattress, opened all of his cabinets—looked anywhere and everywhere he might be hiding something. After finding nothing out of the ordinary (goddammit), Sands had sent Chiclet home (out the front door instead of the hole, and nothing untoward happened this time) and told him to be back bright and early the next morning, in case he needed him to run a few “errands” after his meeting with Greene.

And so Sands had been sitting, just sitting, waiting in the armchair in the middle of the room and smoking cigarette after cigarette, deliberately ashing on the floor and stubbing out the butts wherever he thought they would do the most damage.

Sands guessed it had to be at least eight before he heard it: a step on the stoop and the rattle of a key in the lock. He took great care to appear relaxed, although his hand was tense and ready to reach for his gun. The door swung open, and Sands heard a flurry of movement, followed by the snap of a light switch.

“Why, fancy meeting you here,” he remarked.

“How the bloody hell did you get in here?!”

“The back door,” Sands said idly, jerking his head toward the rear. He could feel Greene’s fury radiating off of him. Good.

“I don’t have a back door,” Greene rasped icily.
“Yeah, I know,” Sands smiled. He took another drag on his cigarette. “So tell me—how was business tonight?”

“How did you get in here, dammit?” Greene demanded.

“Powers,” he said. “I have ‘em.”

“Well, then, use your ‘powers’ to get out of here!”

“Oh, but I just got here. And I’m not ready to leave yet,” Sands replied, smiling.

“Then shall I make you?” Greene snarled.

Sands’s eyebrows lifted a little. “I wouldn’t advise it. Besides, there’s no need for violence. This is just a friendly visit.” He smiled again. “We are neighbors, after all.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want to discuss your future plans.”

Sands left the very pregnant pause hanging, until Greene finally prompted him with an angry and impatient, “Well?”

He smiled coldly. “Your plans for leaving. You see, I want to live alone. Very alone. And that, obviously, does not involve you.” He tilted his head, listening to the strained silence. “So—I want you gone.”

“Well, that, obviously,” Greene growled, “is not my problem, because I was here first!”

Sands regarded him blankly. “How juvenile,” he said after a moment.

“Oh, yes, how very juvenile of me, not to cave to the temper-tantrum of an over-grown spoiled child!” Greene sneered in reply.

“Well,” Sands said lightly, pursing his lips, “I was rather hoping that we wouldn’t have to resort to any unpleasantness.” He fixed a deliberate stare on Greene. “But sounds to me like you’re deliberately trying to be unpleasant.”

“Given that you have broken into my home, I believe that I have every right to be ‘unpleasant’,“ Greene grated.

“See, that’s the beauty of my arrangement—this won’t be your home anymore, so no unpleasantness,” Sands said, gesturing about himself.

“I think not.”

Sands raised his eyebrows. “No?” he asked softly.

“No.” Sands could hear Greene moving, and he tensed, but he only came a step or two closer. “Now, you listen to me, you sorry little stone-brained bastard,” Greene spat, and Sands knitted his brows, “I don’t know what this little game is you think you’re playing, but I have endured too much to be intimidated by the likes of you. Moreover, I have spent all together too much time and effort on securing this particular location against unwanted intruders to pick up and leave just because you want me to!”

Sands’s ears had pricked on that last bit. Ho-ho. That was certainly interesting. “Have you, now,” he
“Have I what?” Greene demanded.

“Secured this location, as you say. So, you don’t take house calls?”

“No house calls, no visitors, and certainly no sneak-thieves!”

The gears were whirring between Sands’s ears. “No phone, no pool, no pets,” he mused, and then he looked back up. “Tell me, Don—how far does this security extend?”

There was a pause, and when Greene next spoke, his rasping voice was guarded. “Far enough.”

“Just your house, or maybe the whole street? ‘Cause, you know, I got in,” he pointed out.

“Suffice it to say that you are the first person to intrude on my peace and quiet in two years—and I intend for you to be the last,” Greene growled in his throat.

Sands made his decision in a split second. “How nice,” he said cheerfully. “In that case, we might just be simpatico after all.” He stood up, and he heard Greene tense. “Well, I’ll be going now. Don’t bother to show me the door—I’ll let myself out.”

And he turned, picking his way gingerly across the path he’d paced out before Chiclet had left, careful not to trip on the curling edge of the rug, and went straight back into the bathroom. He could feel Greene’s eyes on his back as he made his exit, but Greene did not follow him. He crawled back through the wall, picking up the crowbar and the sledgehammer as he went. He wandered back through the other hole, nearly tripping again, and then deliberately climbed the stairs, ducking down back into his own home sweet home yet again. He left the sledge hammer and crowbar in the bedroom and slid the old dresser back in front of the hole, just in time so that his ear was near enough to the hole so that he could hear the outraged cursing from Greene as he discovered just what Sands had done to his bathroom.

Smirking, he meandered back downstairs and settled into his favorite chair with a bottle of tequila, pulling out his cigarettes as he did.

He needed to think.

“Lazy, just stay in bed,” Sands sang softly to himself, sprawled out in nothing but his boxers and his blindfold in bed; it was hopefully about six-thirty in the morning, because he’d been laying in bed for a little while, and he’d told Chiclet to set the alarm for six-twenty (there was no way in hell he was getting a talking clock with Braille buttons—no way in fucking hell). He pawed around on his night table, picking up his cigarettes and his lighter. He was hot, and, while he’d slept well enough, he’d nonetheless slept hot, and as a result, he’d awoken to find himself covered in a thin, sticky layer of sweat, much to his irritation. He’d been dirty enough before—now he couldn’t put off that goddamn shower any longer.

He sucked on his cigarette, scratching his chest, already right back to contemplating the events that had transpired last night despite having just woken up. He’d woken himself up thinking about it, actually. All of the things Greene had said had been highly intriguing. Not in the least the fact that he’d completely unafraid and utterly disrespectful as Sands had started in on him. That had been new, and maybe a little interesting. Even Belini, who’d had the gall once or twice to act as though he was the one with the advantage, had always had that tiniest undertone of fear beneath his words. That, and no matter what he’d said about it, he’d always done what he’d been told. It had just sometimes taken a little more money or a few more threats. Greene, on the other hand…not a trace of
fear—and he clearly wasn’t going to do what he’d been told.

He finally heaved himself out of bed after he stubbed out his cigarette, making his way downstairs to the bathroom and grabbing a new pair of boxers as he left. He had to piss like a racehorse—and shower.

He turned on the water; the pipes shuddering violently inside the walls. He knew it would run rusty for a bit (because Chiclet had told him), so he meandered over to the can to drain the lizard. He shucked his old boxers entirely and kicked them over towards the corner—wouldn’t do to slip on them by accident or something stupid like that.

The pipes gave another quake when he flushed, and he went back over to the shower, regarding it balefully. Sucking in a breath, he reached behind him and untied the blindfold, setting it on the sink next to his sunglasses. Immediately, the air smacked into his eye sockets and he involuntarily flinched against it, hating himself for it—it was pathetic and weak and he knew it, but he never could help it. He wanted to cover them with his hands while he showered, but he’d already tried that once—the sensation of his empty sockets against his hand had almost made him throw up. So all he could do was grind his teeth and he step carefully into the shower with his head down.

He poured a liberal amount of shampoo on his head, thinking about Greene as he scrubbed furiously at his long, greasy hair. No, it wasn’t Greene’s fearlessness that had really set the wheels a-turning, oh no—it was what he’d said about his security. *You are the first person to intrude on my peace and quiet in two years—and I intend for you to be the last.* Very, very intriguing. If Greene was, in fact, telling the truth…then perhaps he was someone that Sands could use. Keeping in mind that Sands himself hadn’t even known Greene had lived there. Chiclet had completely missed it, after all. Maybe Greene had a few contacts and enough clout to keep the general populace off of his street, and away from his house—which was right next door. Whatever it was…Chiclet’s comments and what he’d picked up from the people in town had at least semi-confirmed Greene’s boast—no one knew where he lived, and he just wanted to be left alone.

Maybe he could work Greene to his advantage a little more than he’d originally thought.

He hissed irritably—rinsing his hair was always a pain in the ass—and the eyes (*what eyes, Sands?*). There it went—water flowed invariably straight to the lowest point, which happened to be those two empty holes in his head. Cleaning them daily when he’d been holed up with Nunez to prevent a bad infection had been aggravating enough. The water just made them itch. And then the water would overflow, and run in hot little rivulets down his cheeks…

He swung his head forward and shook it wildly, flinging the water out of the empty sockets the instant he’d gotten all of the soap out of his hair. Goddamn, but he hated that. Briefly scrubbing down the rest of himself with a soapy washcloth, he slammed off the water and ran his foot up the side of the tub and stepped out, grabbing his towel as he went. Patting himself dry, he found the clean boxers he’d set on the toilet tank and slipped them on, nearly toppling backwards into the tub as he hopped about on one foot, but managing to right himself before that particular humiliation was realized. He clicked his teeth together briefly before moving to the sink and feeling around for his toothbrush.

Sands rubbed the bristles of his toothbrush with his thumb before slathering them with toothpaste. Wetting the brush with tap water, he started brushing furiously, grimacing a little (because, while he’d long since become immune to Montezuma’s Revenge, he’d never really been too fond of the taste of Mexican water. He wondered if he could brush with tequila?).

He spat into the sink, not really caring if he missed—if he did, Chiclet would clean it up. He sucked down a breath, the mint from his toothpaste chilling his throat and tongue. He shook his head,
running his fingers through his wet hair, enjoying that squeaky clean while it was there (because, living in Mexico, it invariably didn’t last very long).

He walked his fingers along the edge of the sink, locating the curving lightweight plastic he knew to be his black sunglasses. He flipped them open and slipped them on, and then reached forward and touched on the mirror where he guessed his own face would be gazing back, his reflection oblivious that he was blind, only giving him the image he wanted—of a man wearing sunglasses against the harsh sun of Mexico, because you gotta protect your retinas, oh yes, that’s what the optometrist always tells you.

He briefly traced his fingers along the smooth surface, and wished he could see it.

“Fuck it,” he murmured. “I don’t need a mirror to tell me that I look good.”

So he turned and left, ready yet again to seize the day by the balls and twist.

He tramped downstairs, bypassing the tequila this time and going straight to the kitchen. He counted the drawers, grabbing the knob of the top one on the second row over from the fridge and sliding it open. He pawed around in it until he found what he was looking for—the cell phone. The only one he’d managed to save. He backed up until his ass bumped into the back of one of his kitchen chairs, then he scooted it out from under the table and sat down, pulling out his cigarettes as he did. Lighting one up, he sucked thoughtfully on it, blowing the smoke out through his nose.

He contemplated the cell phone, that little black lump of plastic in his hand. Ramirez had tossed it at him that day, and against all odds, he’d caught it. And against even longer odds, he’d managed to save it. And he’d tested it already—the line was not cut.

The thing was very lucky. Very lucky. And now it was time to put that luck to good use.

Sands was going to go absolutely nucking futs with nothing to do. He was right back where he’d been before he’d discovered his neighbor—sitting around, doing nothing. He was not about to start playing solitaire ‘til dawn with a deck of fifty-one. A taste of the old life—sneaking, spying, negotiating, intimidating—no matter how brief and minor it had been—had been enough.

It had been five months. It was time to start moving. There was only one person he still even remotely trusted. He would do.

He snapped the phone open and slowly rubbed his thumb over the number pad, counting the keys and touching the little dot he knew would be on the five, and then deliberately dialed the number of the one contact he knew he could count on—and heaven help that little shit-splatter if he’d changed his number after the coup.

The dull dial tone went silent before settling into that monotonous ringing. Once. Twice. Three times. And then—

“Aló?”

“José! How very nice it is to hear your voice, and believe me, I never thought I’d hear myself say those words. Guess who this is,” Sands grinned.

“I’m not about to play guessing games—just tell me who this is.”

“It’s Sands, José,” Sands said jovially, letting his grin seep into his voice.

“What the—Sands?! You’re shitting me! They said—Sands, you’re supposed to be dead!”
His grin faded a little. “Do I sound dead to you?” he demanded irritably. “I don’t think so.” He drummed his fingers against his knee.

“But—they said you were dead! The cartel—the guys working for Barillo—they said you were screwing the boss’s daughter and that she killed you!”

“Well, you were misinformed,” Sands snapped. “And you are going to stay misinformed, you get me, José? Now. How would you like to make one thousand American dollars…?”
Snape had just poured the hot water in his teacup when he saw the rat.

When he’d first moved in, it had been all too obvious that an entire nest of them had been using this run-down little hovel as a home base. Reclaiming the building for humanity had been an enormous struggle.

One that was still ongoing, apparently. The battle may have been won, but the war was still raging, he’d discovered not long after. He’d done his best to patch any holes and cracks in the walls that he could find, but as time wore on, it became ever more apparent that he simply hadn’t found them all, and the little monsters were continually making their little forays into his territory— territory that he was not the least bit interested in sharing.

His workroom was very thoroughly warded against any intruders, of course, rodent or otherwise. That was more for the sake of the potions and ingredients on his bench, really— there were one or two plants in his greenhouse that were more than capable of taking care of themselves. In fact, after being forced to dispatch a marauding rodent, the hairy little corpse generally wound up as supper for his venomous tentacula. It saved money, if nothing else.

But that certainly didn’t mean that he welcomed the little beasts.

He’d had his back turned to the kitchen proper to tend to his whistling kettle (he was not about to drink anything out of the taps in this country without boiling it first), pouring the hot water over the tea that he was brewing straight in his cup (bagged tea, no less—how the mighty had fallen), when movement in the corner of his eye had caught his attention, and he’d turned to find a positively enormous rat just strolling across his kitchen floor, as bold as you please.

He’d had so many of the nasty little things find their way inside that he’d taken to warding his food against them, but unfortunately, the wards didn’t block the scent of the food, and so they kept being drawn in in hopes of a free meal. One of these days he supposed he’d have to devise a modified charm to take care of that.

But right now, he had to take care of the rat.

Very slowly, so as not to startle the filthy little beggar, he set the still bubbling kettle down on the stovetop and slid his wand out of his pocket. The rat was investigating the leg of his kitchen table. Snape turned ever so slowly so that he faced it, watching as it moved a little away from the table and stood on its hind legs, sniffing the air, undoubtedly looking for the steaming plate of his breakfast sitting above its head.

Snape struck, swinging his arm in a wide and furious arc and growling, “Avada Kedavra!”
And he missed.

He cursed as the rat just scurried out of the path of the spell, catching the movement of Snape’s arm just a moment too soon. The green flash barely missed its bald pink tail as the rat ran for the safety of the living room, the curse hitting the floor where it had been just before, warping and splitting the tile with the crack of breaking ceramic and a sharp whiff of ozone.

“Shit,” he muttered, and raced after his quarry into the living room, just in time to see it disappear under the side of the abused old sofa. Snarling to himself, he Summoned his fork from the table and crept around so that he was facing its hiding place.

Two could play at the old game of cat and mouse—or was it rat and snake? Well, whatever the name, the outcome was the same, and that rat was about to make an abrupt exit from this scene, stage right.

With a careful spell, he sent the fork drifting across the room to land on the floor between the sofa and the kitchen. “Curtain call, rodent,” he murmured softly, and with a whispered word, the fork skittered across the floor and shot under the sofa. Predictably, the rat appeared on the other end, dashing hell-bent for the door. Snape whipped his wand through the air, aiming just ahead of where it ran, and snarled the words that spelled the death of his unwelcome little intruder.

The rat’s speed carried it through a tumble about a foot across the floor before it realized that it was dead, and then friction caught up with it and the corpse fell still with a flat little thump. Snape snorted in satisfaction. Another point for him.

A flick of his wand, and the rat rose in the air and preceded him as he went up the stairs. He opened the door to the workroom and passed through the partition into the greenhouse, and then sent what was left of the little bugger to his final destination. The vines of the venomous tentacula left off their ceaseless exploration of the walls inside their warded space and grasped eagerly at the still warm lump of fur that was dropped into their midst, and in moments the rat was wrapped up so tightly that all Snape could see of it was its limp pink tail protruding from a knot of spiky vines.

He turned away, locking his door and going back downstairs. On his way he Summoned the fork from under the sofa and sent it clattering into the sink, and then retrieved a fresh one for his solitary breakfast that he could now enjoy without any unwanted company. His tea was well and truly steeped now, and it was with a scowl of annoyance that he removed the bag and diluted it with some fresh water.

He really needed to do something; this was getting out of hand. He glowered down at the singed tiles beside the table and did his best to repair them, but that particular curse was of the more permanent variety, and one could never quite put things back the way they were before it struck.

*Never.*

There had to be some hole in the wall he was missing, for them to get in the way they were, drawn by the dry and the cool and the smell of food. His house was becoming a veritable thoroughfare for vermin, all coming in and just making themselves at home.

All sorts of vermin, really.

He scowled down into his teacup as he took it to the table, where he sat down and regarded his tiny egg, single strip of limp bacon, and pathetically thin piece of toast with a sour expression.

That miserable arse-wipe *broke into his house!*
He was still seething over the invasion. He’d come home from the square, and there he was, just one more filthy rat taking up residence in his space. He’d been so outraged (and frightened, admit it—it could have been Potter) that the words of a curse had been on his tongue, and he’d barely restrained himself long enough to demand an explanation.

He hadn’t exactly gotten one, but he’d discovered later that it wasn’t necessary. No, he’d seen the evidence of Andrew’s breaking and entering with his own eyes when he followed him into the bathroom and discovered the gaping hole in the wall.

That bastard.

It had been simple enough to repair, although he wasn’t sure how much more abuse the dilapidated old house could take before even magic couldn’t fix it. No, what had made him so completely furious had been the violation of his privacy. Not to mention his own obvious oversight in his warding that had allowed the man to find his way inside in the first place.

But honestly, what kind of idiot would try to come in through the wall?

Andrews, apparently. And what made it all the more infuriating was that the idiotic idea had worked. Snape hadn’t warded the walls, and his carelessness had cost him.

And then Andrews had just sat there, so smug in his arrogance, so self-assured of his own invulnerability, and blithely ordered Snape out of his own home.

He’d very nearly lost it then. Of all the unmitigated gall. So he’d told Andrews in no uncertain terms how he felt about his casual pronouncement. But just when he thought he’d put paid to the little trog, something he’d said about his security had piqued his interest. And then, to his shock and suspicion, Andrews had suddenly decided that things were just fine as they were, and abruptly left.

Snape liked that even less. In no small part because he still wasn’t entirely sure that Andrews was a Muggle.

But he was sure that he was blind.

That was something, at least; Andrews hadn’t reacted in the slightest when Snape had pulled his wand on him, with neither recognition nor confusion. And when Andrews was so casually handing out his condescending little ultimatum, Snape kept control of his head and dampened his ire long enough to wave an obvious hand in the air in front of his face, and Andrews had done nothing.

But blindness didn’t rule out the idea that he was magic. “Powers,” he’d said—what in the name of Merlin’s left testicle did that mean? Any why was he suddenly so bloody cheerful once Snape had let it slip (dammitall) that he had put up his own security?

Well, he was fairly certain that he had an answer to that, at least in part. Whatever Andrews may have been looking for or wanted with him, it was clear that he very much wanted to be alone. It was a feeling with which Snape could well sympathize—and a feeling that he recognized as that of a man on the run. And that meant possible leverage against the meddlesome Yank.

After he’d left, Snape had done a thorough inspection of his house, to see just what the mangy little cur had been doing since he had broken in. The only bright spot in this morass of violation had been that his workroom was clearly undisturbed. Someone had touched the doorknob, but that was all—no attempts had been made to get inside, magical or otherwise. However, Sands obviously had no consideration for Snape’s possessions; he had broken a plate, knocked over his night table, and left cigarette butts and burn marks all over his tired old rug, in addition to destroying his bathroom wall.
Not to mention that a quick tracing spell had shown that the miserable wanker had been through absolutely everything—his kitchen, his bedroom, his cupboards—even his drinks cabinet. And he’d stolen a bottle of his whisky!

And to top it all off, a diagnostic on the Muggle-repelling charms on the front of his house told him that they’d been breached.

That angered him most of all. He didn’t dare cast anything stronger—a spell of even slightly higher power than the very minor jinx he’d put on the façade was sure to be detectable to anyone who bothered to look, and he wasn’t about to be caught out. But by the very nature of the spells to which he was limited, they were null and void on anyone who passed through them—and it was obvious Andrews had. That meant that his house was now just as accessible to him as any other.

Bugger.

And he’d been making use of it, too—for a week or two after the shock of finding Andrews in his living room, Snape had seen neither hide nor hair of the man—no more snide remarks from his porch, no more threatening insinuations—his windows dark and his door tightly shut. But then, Andrews had suddenly reappeared, and for the past two months, Snape had been seeing more of him than ever.

It had started slow—Andrews would just appear on his own doorstep as Snape was coming home again, just like before, and for a while they’d simply fallen back into the familiar if tense routine of Andrews haranguing him as he went to and from the square on weekends.

But then, one morning, as Snape had been sitting down with his quiet breakfast and cup of tea, he’d nearly been startled out of his chair by a heavy banging on his front door. He’d managed to keep his seat, although he’d spilled tea down the front of his shirt.

He’d whirled around, tense and rigid in his chair, ready for a fight. It was quiet, and then there came that same thumping on the door, a sound that Snape had not heard once since he’d come to live here.

He’d been across the room in a few quick steps and looked out the one-way peephole he’d charmed in the wood, his wand at the ready.

And there was Andrews, bouncing on his heels at his front door.

He’d just stared, unbelieving, and barely pulled his head away from the door in time to avoid being smacked in the eye as Andrews pounded on the door for the third time, and with an inarticulate sound of fury, Snape wrenched open the door. “What?” he snarled.

Andrews regarded him placidly. “May I borrow a cup of sugar?”

Snape stared. “Sugar,” he repeated blankly, completely thrown off.

“Yes. Sugar,” said Andrews patiently. “You know, that grainy white stuff that you English-types put in your tea.” He smiled charmingly, holding up an American measuring cup. “I understand sharing sugar is a neighbourly thing to do.”

Snape just stared, suspicious and admittedly not a little baffled by this latest ploy, until Andrews made a condescending shooping gesture with his slender fingers, and Snape growled under his breath. “Stay here,” he said firmly, snatched the cup from Andrews’s hand, and stumped back into his kitchen, muttering darkly to himself all the way. He didn’t know what Andrews was up to this time, but he was not about to call time on this one. He wanted to play? Fine.
Snape scooped out a rather miserly portion of sugar—he was quite sure that Andrews had more than enough of his own, that this was nothing more than some new game of his, but he was not going to give him the satisfaction of balking at his request—and then went back out into the living room.

Andrews was still standing there—but no longer out on the front porch. No, Snape could see that he had taken one large step inside and was now leaning casually against the doorframe. And one look at his shit-eating grin told Snape that it was entirely deliberate. Unconsciously baring his teeth, Snape roughly thrust the cup in his hands. “Here,” he spat, and without ceremony gripped the smug bastard by the arm and shoved him out of the door.

“Thank you!” Andrews called, his voice laced with mocking good humour, and Snape slammed the door in his grinning face.

And so they had settled into a new routine, and it was one that was even worse than before. Andrews was still always on his porch on Wednesdays and weekends, and now he’d taken to popping over at random times during the week, always asking to borrow something, grinning, needling, and always dropping sly remarks that somehow always seemed to hit far too close to home for comfort. Like just last weekend, Snape had been walking home, and as he’d passed Andrews, who was sitting on his front step, he’d greeted him with that despicable good cheer of his and called him an old snake.

…And just what did he mean by that?

Snape took a bite of his egg and chewed with rather more force than necessary. He was ninety percent sure that he was simply reading too much into Andrews’s mean-spirited but otherwise ignorant jibes. But that niggling doubt was always there, gnawing at his insides.

He supposed it spoke well of his survival instincts, that he had not been lulled into complacency (he’d certainly like to think that, anyway, given that the stupid little man had moved in right under his nose and then broken into his house as if his wards weren’t even there).

Of one thing he was certain, however: Andrews was watching him.

He didn’t know if he had only started watching him just after becoming aware of his presence, merely to keep tabs on the man next door, or if it was with a higher purpose and more long-term goal in mind, but he was definitely still spying on him.

And it wasn’t just the incessant checking up on him as he went to and from the house, oh no. Snape had seen that little brat of his lurking around in the square from time to time—never for very long, but always in view, and he seemed to be marking to whom Snape spoke.

Well, he had just better watch himself—that nasty little cur was on his list as well. His tracing spell had shown that Andrews wasn’t the only one who’d been rifling through his things. Not to mention that one morning he’d left his house just as the brat was arriving, and he’d waved a tentative hello while Snape was still standing on his front step—where he should not have been able to properly notice him if the Muggle-repelling charm was working as it should have been against him, so clearly he too had been inside and had broken through his wards.

However, after his initial fury at the snivelling little toady had been vented, Snape had slowly begun to realize that perhaps he could use Andrews’s own youthful accomplice against him. With only one exception that Snape was aware of (and even that was doubtful, he simply thought he saw someone who looked vaguely like Andrews talking to someone in the square one morning), Andrews never left his house. He had no visitors of any kind, and he never spoke to anyone.
Except that boy.

Snape rose to take his plate to the sink, his footsteps loud in the stillness of his empty house. As he washed his dishes with a ragged dishcloth, he flicked his eyes over to the small blackboard tacked to the wall where he wrote his grocery list every week. Wednesday outings to the butcher or the greengrocer were annoying necessities. He had to make weekly trips rather than large splurges once a month due to his limited budget, and so that was one more day he was forced to leave the quiet safety of his home and venture out into the dusty heat of this abominable desert where he lived. If it weren’t for that, he wouldn’t have to leave to buy necessities but once a month for ingredients; with his little refrigerator and pantry, both enhanced with various preserving charms, he could hold out here and only leave on weekends.

It was one less day that he’d have to endure Andrews, at any rate.

He knew the brat on the bicycle ran all of Andrews’s errands for him. Snape himself hadn’t hired an errand boy primarily because the charms on his house would render such an arrangement quite pointless. But now there was a ready-made errand boy who knew where his house was and was able to get inside it.

A ready-made errand boy in a perfect position for Snape to do some spying of his own.

The boy had already come and gone on his morning visit by the time Snape had finished his breakfast. However, after his own careful observations, he knew that he would be back—right around 3:30 in the afternoon, just after school. So in the interim he retreated upstairs to his workroom and went about his usual business of minding his potions and tending his plants. The tentacula had been growing fat with its annoyingly frequent meals of rat, so much so that it was becoming quite unmanageable; it really was past time to do some pruning.

However, it took him a good three hours to subdue the wretched thing, and he was definitely the worse off for it. But in the end he wrestled it into submission and managed to get several decent cuts of vines, leaves, and spines, and after a small lunch downstairs, he whiled away the early afternoon slicing, pickling, and otherwise preserving the samples that he’d gathered.

He was for the most part finished when three o’clock rolled around, and so he went downstairs to have a nice cuppa, relax for a moment in the stillness, and plan his next move.

Just after his Muggle clock announced the half-hour, he heard that tinny whirring of the boy’s bell, right on time—letting his sightless employer know of his approach, no doubt. Snape was at the door in an instant and threw it open just as the urchin was slowing down as he neared Number 15, his feet dragging on the ground and throwing up small puffs of dust.

“You, there—boy!” he barked in Spanish.

It was most gratifying to see that, ruined voice notwithstanding, he still carried that cherished note of command—to say nothing of his apparently untarnished ability to intimidate. The boy, his mouth hanging open as if hinged, skidded to such an abrupt halt in front of his door that he very nearly fell on his face on the pavement.

“Sí, señor?” he said tentatively.

“Get off that contraption and come over here and address me properly,” he ordered, and the boy nearly fell again in his haste to comply, dropping the bicycle in the street and coming to stand at attention at the front step. “Tell me,” he continued, once the brat had presented himself appropriately,
“what exactly is your relation to the gentleman next door?”

“No—no relation, sir,” he said. “I just work for him.”

“Indeed. Doing what, exactly?” he asked, looking in his eyes.

“Anything he needs doing, sir—I help clean, do laundry, get his groceries—”

“Yes,” Snape said, pulling his gaze away. “That last point is what interests me. As I am sure you are aware—” he fixed the little mongrel with a hard glare, and was pleased to see him flush, “—I make fairly regular trips for necessities myself. I am interested in hiring you in the same capacity.” He eyed the boy. “What is your name?”

“Chiclet,” he answered.

Well—just because he wasn’t hearing things didn’t make it any less ridiculous. “Your name, idiot, not what that twit next door calls you!” he snapped.

“Jesús Santiago, señor.”

Sweet Circe, but how he hated this place.

“Very well, Mister Santiago” he said dryly, “I am willing to pay you fifty pesos—and the cost of the groceries, of course—for you to come by and collect my list every Wednesday morning when you come to visit Andrews, and return in the afternoon with what I have asked for. Is this acceptable?”

The boy stared at him for a moment, and then cut his eyes over to Number 15. “Maybe I…maybe I should ask first…” he said hesitantly.

“Andrews is not your father,” he sneered. “He has no right to dictate your actions—now, yes or no, boy?”

“I—all right, I guess, señor.”

Snape’s lip quirked in satisfaction. “Very well then. I will expect you next Wednesday morning.” And with a curt nod, he retreated back inside and shut the door—but peered surreptitiously out the window and watched the boy stand out on the porch for a moment, and then slowly collect his spilled bicycle and wheel it next door, leaning it on the old railing and going inside.

Well. That had certainly been informative. The brat didn’t know as much as Snape had hoped, but he definitely knew more than he’d been expecting. Andrews was definitely blind—in the extreme—and it had happened only recently, and through apparently violent means. That certainly lent credence to the notion that he was hiding, perhaps from whoever had done the deed—a notion further reinforced by the fact that he’d chosen his house specifically for its isolation (it seemed Snape’s Muggle-repelling charms were working too well on that day). He had also received some additional wounds at the same time he lost his eyes, and they still pained him (Snape filed that away for future reference). Andrews also apparently threw money around as if it was his last day on earth, and was very fond of making mysterious phone calls.

And for whatever bizarre reason, he trusted the Santiago boy implicitly.

Snape smirked. Andrews was not going to be happy when he found out that he had to share.

Snape looked at the blazing sun burning low on the horizon, and over at the clock in the tiny, out-of-
place turret atop the bead shop to his right. It was nearly eight (but still accursedly hot, of course), so he sighed and turned his back on the pack of drunken carousers to whom he had just sold several vials of hangover cure and wearily made his way back to his bench, fishing a peppermint out of his pocket.

He’d come to loathe weekends with all the fervour he’d once reserved for weekdays and classes back at Hogwarts. Being thrust outside, mixing in among the mindless local Muggles day after day—it was utterly unbearable. Added to it that he was out here waiting on the scum…it was enough to drive one mad.

Halfway to his bench, he was all but run down by some loud-mouthed cretin who was walking while looking the other direction, forgoing paying attention to his surroundings in favour of ranting pointlessly at the hapless girl who sold flowers by the café.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, you great clod?” Snape snapped. The man looked away from the relieved flower girl, obviously taken aback, and then his unshaven face began to twist in anger, but Snape swept contemptuously past him before he could open that gaping maw in his face again and went over to sit down at his bench.

It was then that he realized that the antagonistic knob had followed him.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, shithead?!” he roared in his face.

Snape looked down his nose at him, despite being seated (and he refused to rise). “I was watching, imbecile,” he said frostily. “But being observant can only go so far when one is faced with a stampeding bull with his head firmly embedded in his own posterior.”

The blundering oaf blinked stupidly for a moment, obviously working very hard to decipher what Snape had just said, but he eventually realized that he had been insulted and bared his teeth in a snarl. “Say that again, fucker, and I’ll tear your arms off!” he bellowed.

“I doubt it,” Snape said uninterestedly. “Somehow I suspect that even such a primitive course of action would require a mental effort greater than your capacity. Now, run along, halfwit—you’re blocking my view.”

He took a step closer, and Snape tensed, but he didn’t uncross his arms and continued to regard the man with a mix of disdain and boredom. “That’s it, asshole—get up!” The hulking brute was flexing fists the size of hams. “I’m gonna break you in half, you little pussy—nobody talks to me like that!”

Snape narrowed his eyes and uncrossed his arms; a small jerk of his wrist, and his wand was at the ready, and he braced himself to stand.

And then, without warning, a shadow darted up behind the man, a split second before the butt of a gun came down hard and fast across the back of the belligerent’s head. Snape jumped in surprise and barely managed to snatch his basket out of the way of the fool to avoid having it crushed under his falling weight. His face hit hard against the back of the bench, the bridge of his nose catching the edge of the wood with a sickening crunch; Snape knew his nose was well and truly broken.

The great lump howled in agony, writhing against the bench, and then heaved himself to his feet, clutching at his gushing nose as blood spurted between his fingers and looking wildly and furiously around for his attacker from squinting, streaming eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Andrews said mildly. “I didn’t see you there.”

The lumbering ogre may have had no idea what he was up against as far as Snape himself was
concerned, but he got the message of the coolly gleaming piece in Andrews’s hand well enough. Grimacing, making noises between growls and whimpers, mumbling threats of vengeance and half-arsed excuses, he shuffled off, throwing frightened but malevolent glances over his shoulder.

Andrews grinned at his retreating back before turning to look down at Snape. “Hi-diddly-ho, neighbour,” he said, tucking the gun in his belt.

Snape stared at him. “What is that on your face?” he demanded, appalled.

Andrews bunched up his upper lip, waggling the positively atrocious false moustache that was bristling from it. “My ’stache, of course,” he said, as if stating the obvious.

“You look ridiculous,” Snape informed him.

Andrews brushed off his remark, cocking his stupid, stupid hat to one side. “Hardly; it’s excellent for hiding behind.” He smirked. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

_Dammit._

Snape ground his teeth but said nothing, hoping Andrews would go away if he ignored him.

No such luck.

“It’s eight o’clock. Do you know where your dinner is?” Andrews asked very seriously. “Because I do. So get your fanny off that bench—it’s feeding time.”

“I beg your pardon?” Snape asked, despite his earlier resolution not to speak to him any more.

Andrews handed the ubiquitous Santiago the valise he was carrying and pulled out a money clip positively bursting with American currency, waging it under Snape’s nose; he jerked back, irritated, as Andrews went on with patronizing patience. “Dinner. Food. Eating. You do eat, don’t you? Or is all that bacon and those eggs in your fridge just for show?”

“Yes, I eat, idiot, but what the devil does that have to do with your dinner?” Snape snarled.

Andrews looked vaguely affronted. “You have terrible manners.” He gripped the boy by the shoulder and gestured towards Snape. “Chiclet, steal his basket so he’ll have to come to dinner with us.”

_Oh, yes—just try and lay a finger on my basket, and see what it gets you_, Snape thought nastily, just before Andrews’s words penetrated. “I am not eating with you!” he snapped.

“Of course you are,” said Andrews dismissively. “We need to have a little chat. All friendly-like, of course,” he added with a pointed look.

“What?” Snape asked warily.

“Oh, just neighbourly things. And if you’re getting a free meal out of it, why should you care?” he asked, and without waiting for an answer he gave Santiago a small push, and the boy began leading him in the direction of the café across the square.

Snape sat on his bench, quivering. He would not go in there. He would not. He had no desire to spend any more time in Andrews’s company that was strictly necessary.

What in the hell did he mean by “hiding” behind a moustache, anyway?
He glanced at Andrews, who was standing outside the café. He paused just before entering and turned, and for a moment he seemed to look right at Snape.

And he smirked.

*Dammit.*

With a snarl of frustration, Snape got up and followed them.

By the time he made it across the square and went inside, yanking off his sunglasses and waiting a moment for his eyes to adjust to the candlelit dimness after spending all day out in the harsh sunlight, Andrews was already waiting for him at a tiny table just inside, sitting so that Snape was forced to take a chair with his back to the door.

He hated that.

But he sat down anyway, scowling, with his basket next to him on the floor, his hat still on and his arms crossed. Andrews’s expression of smugness was not to be tolerated, but since he couldn’t see the absolutely withering glare that was being bestowed up on him, Snape turned his attentions to the man’s bell-ringing catamite, who wilted beneath his eyes most satisfactorily.

A young waitress was at their side immediately, and to Snape’s annoyance looked vaguely askance at him before asking for their order.

“*Puerco pibil* with tequila and lime for me, *flautas* for the kid, and whatever the derelict wants,” said Andrews.

Snape didn’t deign to comment, only picked up his menu and glanced through it. It was the same horrible, peppery Mexican slop that was everywhere else in this country, and so he simply ordered a quesadilla and hoped that it wasn’t too spicy (which he was sure it would be).

When the waitress had gone, her shapely calves swishing beneath the floral print of her skirt, she left just the three of them sitting there, all nice and cosy. Snape and Andrews regarded each other in silence, while the boy picked at a gouge in the table and tried to look inconspicuous.

The silence between them was deafening, even with the normal clatter of the café all around them. Snape was well aware that Andrews was waiting for him to break and demand to know what this was all about, but he had no intention of playing his little game. He’d learned long ago that one did not survive a contest of wills with impatience. And so he waited.

Andrews was good, he had to grudgingly give him that much. The casual motions of his right hand as he touched the table were so delicate and subtle that had Snape not known the truth already, he would never have pegged them as the movements of a blind man feeling for the layout of his surroundings. He skated over the silver, lightly danced his fingers ‘round the table’s edge, and traced patterns around the bottle of hot sauce and the insipid little vase sitting in the middle of the table, looking bored all the while and keeping his left hand quite still, clutching a knife.

They spoke not a word, merely steeped in the tension surrounding them; young Santiago was squirming in his seat by the time the waitress came out of the kitchen with their orders.

The boy fell to his supper with a vengeance, undoubtedly to have something to occupy himself with, rather than simply endure the admittedly oppressive atmosphere.

Andrews was busily dressing and eating his dinner as well, a revolting-looking mass that looked very like something that might result from overuse of one of those Weasleys’ illness-inducing sweets.
Snape regarded his own food with a jaundiced eye; there was at least respectable amount of cheese oozing from between the thick layers of cornmeal dough, but he also spotted a great deal more salsa inside it than he was comfortable with, so he braced himself for the inevitable burning mouth and set to eating.

Fire in his gullet notwithstanding (a condition that he’d come to despise with even greater rancour since his second near-miss in the Shrieking Shack) he was quite pleased when Andrews finally seemed to realize that Snape was not going to accommodate him, and looked up from his disgusting meal and abruptly spoke. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you to ask before you play with someone else’s toys?” he asked.

Snape raised an eyebrow, and then flicked his eyes over to the Santiago boy. He was sunk so low in his seat that he was almost on eye-level with the table top, and Snape knew immediately what this was about. He smirked; he’d expected reprisals for encroaching on Andrews’s territory, but not this soon. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you how to share?” he countered dryly.

“No,” Andrews said petulantly and immediately, his eyebrows bouncing upwards and his mouth twisting into a pout. “And that’s my kid, so I’ll thank you to keep your mitts off.”

Snape glanced again at the young man in question; he was doing his level best to disappear under the table. Snape sneered at him before turning back to Andrews. “And what exactly is your claim to ownership? The boy has admitted that you’re no relation of his.”

“I never said he was my son—I said he was my kid. I bought and paid for him.”

Snape snorted. “Well, I am sorry to inform you that you are no longer the sole shareholder.”

“Have you ever heard of a hostile takeover?” Andrews asked calmly.

“Oh, yes,” answered Snape. “I believe that is when a rival company assumes power because the original is going belly-up.”

“Yes—and the loser oftentimes has to relocate to a new country.”

“Or simply leave the business.”

They glared at each other in silence, but then Andrews was suddenly all smiles again, the very picture of benevolent equanimity. “Fortunately for you, I am a generous soul,” he said magnanimously. He pulled a cigarette from his right shirt pocket and leaned over for a light from the boy, who snapped to attention and produced a lighter, which he flicked alight for his “owner.” Andrews inhaled deeply before blowing a blue cloud of smoke in Snape’s direction. “I believe we can negotiate a merger.”

Snape stiffened a little, but said nothing, not liking the sudden change of tack. He rather sourly went back to his dinner, as did Andrews after setting his cigarette in the ashtray. Silence fell again, although it was slightly less tense than before.

Snape was almost finished with his dinner when the relative peace of the sleepy little café was shattered by a gunshot.

He nearly flew out of his seat; patrons shrieked in surprise and fear. Snape jerked around in his chair, his wand at the ready under the table.

Beneath a hail of plaster raining down from the ceiling stood a ragged, wild-eyed young man holding a gun aloft. “Nobody move!” he bellowed, his eyes jumping over the crowd, before lighting on a
family with two little girls sitting at a table near him. He darted to the side and seized the younger one, dragging her out of her chair as she screamed in fear, hoisting her to his chest with one arm and putting the gun to her temple.

“Empty the cash register!” he roared at a nearby waiter over the wails of the mother. “Everyone, gimme your wallets! Move, or I blow her brains out!”

The girl shrieked in terror, and her mother began crying out to the Madre de Dios, begging for him to let her go. “Shut up, you stupid bitch!” he screeched at her, and she fell into muffled sobs. “And stop crying!” he screamed at the girl, shaking her like a rag doll.

The patrons of the café began to shuffle about, reaching for purses and wallets. The manager of the place was quickly putting the money from the register into a paper bag.

“Come on, move!” the gunman was snarling. “Put the wallets in the bag!”

The manager was moving through the crowd as if trick-or-treating, collecting wallets from all his customers, followed closely by their assailant.

Snape turned slightly in his seat, watching his progress. His wand was comfortably heavy in his hand, and he gripped it tightly, waiting for him to come near them.

Meanwhile, Andrews hadn’t moved, and was simply sitting and eating as if nothing was happening. Snape flicked an irritated glance at him, but went back to watching the gunman, who was getting closer.

And then the manager was at their table, his face pale, holding out the sack. Standing just behind him was the man with the gun, his arm locked tight around the little girl’s neck and shoulders as she held herself up by his forearm, her back against his chest and her sandaled feet dangling, her breath coming in whistling gasps but otherwise quiet.

“Your wallets, faggots—get ‘em out, or the bitch gets it!”

But before Snape could speak, Andrews looked up from his plate, his expression mildly put out, and said, “Do you mind? I’m eating.”

Snape cursed inwardly; trust Andrews to antagonize the man when he was in no position to do so—and after his initial surprise, the man had pushed his way close to the table to confront him, and now the idiot Santiago boy was between Snape and a clear shot.

“Don’t fuck with me!” he shrilled, sweating and obviously in a hurry to be gone, pulling the gun from the girl’s head and pointing it at Andrews. The girl’s mother began to raise a ruckus again, crying for Andrews to just do as he asked and not to let him hurt her baby.

Andrews turned and regarded the man with a polite sort of detachment. “You have exactly ten seconds to get that gun out of my face, else there will be some serious unpleasantness going down, and you will be at the centre of it.”

“Gimme your wallet, fucker, or I’ll blow your head off!” the man—barely more than a boy, really—yelled; his fury was largely stemming from his fear of being apprehended, Snape could tell. The girl in his arms was shaking with terror as she gripped his arm, but she was silent as ordered, her eyes wide and round and wet.

“One,” said Andrews.
“I’d advise you to drop this charade, young man,” Snape informed the gunman, his voice calm but his body tense, hoping that he would move so that he could discreetly hex him from under the table.

“Two,” said Andrews.

The man jerked his gun around, pressing it painfully to the girl’s temple, the cords on his neck standing out. “Gimme the money!”


And then he moved, lightning quick, and pulled out a gun from under the table—in his third hand?!

And he shot him.

Snape jumped out of his seat with a curse; the girl’s shoulder exploded in a spray of blood and bone as the bullet passed through her to lodge in her captor’s chest. She screamed, screamed and screamed, and her parents were screaming, and the café was in an uproar, and the two flew backwards and fell to the ground, the man’s body twitching with horrible gurgling sounds as his life bled out from the hole in his chest, and the girl writhing on the ground.

Andrews tucked his gun away in his belt, detached the false arm that was dangling unnaturally from his shoulder, and resumed eating his dinner.

The girl’s parents descended, ineffectual and useless, pressing vainly on her mangled shoulder in a pointless effort to stem the blood, wailing futile entreaties to God and the general public, and her sister was howling in the background, and everyone around them was in an uproar.

*Dammit!*

Snape sat rigid in his chair, fuming. Now he was a party to manslaughter, to say nothing of reckless endangerment and potentially assault on that little girl, and now no doubt the police would get involved, and they would want to know his name, and where he had come from, and then it would get back to the Ministry, and they would find him, and they would send Potter—

Snape looked down at the girl, at her broken and bleeding body; her eyes were terrified and tortured, but he could still see that they were large and clear and almond-shaped, and for a moment, they met his own.

“Out of the way!” he roared, shoving his way into the knot of people around her and kneeling at her side. She shrieked like a fire bell when he picked her up; he’d tried to avoid jostling her more than necessary, but there was little time for finesse.

Her mother was crying and wailing and clinging, her dress billowing like a sail and her meaty arms flapping as she scrambled against him, and Snape shook her off. “Dammit, woman, let me go so I can heal her!” he snarled. “You—boy!” he snapped to the Santiago brat, who jumped to attention.

“Bring my basket!”

The girl’s father was fighting to get to her, his ashen face noticeably lacking in sanity at the moment, and Snape pinned him with a glare. “If you want your daughter to regain use of her arm, let me work!” he hissed at the man, and before he could answer, he swept the screaming girl towards the back of the restaurant, Santiago scuttling along behind him.

He kicked open the door in the back of the café and found himself in a darkened linen and supply cupboard with a low cabinet and work surface to one side. “You there—clear this off!” he ordered, and Santiago did so, showing remarkable presence of mind by flicking on the light, setting the basket
on the ground, and simply sweeping the counter clear with his arm. “Out!” he demanded, and the
boy obeyed, and Snape set the girl down on the cabinet and then slammed the door in the faces of
the crowd boiling in after him, locking the door with a charm and silencing the racket outside of her
screaming parents beating on the door.

Then he turned back to the girl and with a wave of his wand put her to sleep. Her cries and
convulsions stopped and she went limp.

Working quickly, he sliced open the front of her little sundress and cursed Andrews with some of the
more vile epithets he could think of when he got a look at the damage. Her shoulder was a red ruin, a
pulp of ground meat and pulverized bone. No doubt Andrews was compensating for what he lacked
below the belt with that veritable cannon he was carrying around. Gritting his teeth, he went to work.

Under his the tip of his wand, the shards of bone began to re-knit, the torn muscle to come together
as a whole, the tattered skin to close.

Snape wished Aberforth had had half his skill when going to work on him.

It was messy, but nothing vital had been hit, and it took less time than he’d anticipated to patch her
up. He mended her shattered shoulder blade and collarbone, reset the tendons and muscles, but
stopped short of completely healing the damage—he’d have to explain a little too much if she made
such a sudden and complete recovery—and left a gaping but shallow slash in the flesh of her
shoulder.

He plunged his hand into the deep, hidden pocket of his coat and pulled out a vial of blood
replenishing potion. He was never without that little gem, not after his unfortunate encounter with
that blasted snake—he learned from his mistakes. He tipped her limp head back and with a flick of
his wand, forced it down her throat, and then topped it off with an analgesic potion from his basket.

Snape paused briefly to wipe the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, sighed, and then turned to the
stacks of linens on the shelves behind him. A small rag daubed with some barberry paste and a little
dittany made a neat bandage for the mere “graze” wound that marred the top of her whole and
otherwise unblemished shoulder, and a torn tablecloth would suffice for a sling. He covered the
wound, binding it tightly to stem any residual bleeding. He then pulled her blood-stained dress back
on her, cinching up the slashes he’d made in it, and tied the sling over her shoulder while she was
still asleep, to spare her any pain, and then he pulled her into a sitting position and woke her with a
spell.

Her eyes flew open, panicked and frightened, but before she could make a sound he looked deep,
deep into them, and she was silent, and he hunted out the memories of terror and pain, of the helpless
fear and the press of the gun to her head. While he didn’t remove them, he muted them, softened
them around the edges, so that when she thought back on them, she wouldn’t quite remember what
had happened. She would not remember the white-hot agony of the bullet, nor would any grasping
madmen haunt her dreams.

Most importantly, she would not remember her miraculous recovery.

And then he blinked, and so did she, and she stared up at him, dazed and disoriented. “Well, young
lady, I’d call that quite enough adventuring for one day,” he said briskly, and helped her down from
the counter. Well, he tried, anyway—the minute he gripped her waist to pull her down, she
reflexively threw her good arm around his neck with surprising strength; she buried her face in his
chest and trembled against him, snuffling. He stiffened under the embrace. “Let go of me this
instant,” he ordered severely. “Your parents are outside.” And he set her down and propelled her
towards the door.
His wand was securely back up his sleeve and his basket heavy on his arm. He wordlessly opened the door and ended the silencing spell and swept out of the cupboard. They were greeted by the girl’s hysterical parents; their frantic shrieks sent the mostly calm girl back into panicked tears of her own, and he bit back a curse as he was roughly bunted aside by her mother in order for her to snatch the little girl up in her fleshy arms.

If nothing else, the furore gave him the opportunity to blanket the group with a tiny non-verbal memory charm. It wasn’t enough to remove their memories of the incident, but would blur them just enough that no one would be the wiser as to his rather extensive magic use.

Then he grabbed the father by the arm and pulled him to face him; he, at least, seemed to have regained a little control of himself. “She was grazed, not hit,” he said brusquely, reinforcing his statement with a whisper of Legilimency. “The blood was mostly his, not hers.” He handed him a handful of vials of painkillers and a jar of salve; he took them blankly. “Put this on the wound to avoid scarring,” he said, indicating the latter, “and these draughts can be taken once a day if she experiences any pain. She should avoid any strenuous activity with that arm for a week.” And then he extricated himself from the knot of people and stormed back towards his table.

Well, that was what he intended to do, but he didn’t make it; he was waylaid from behind by the girl’s hysterical and weeping mother. “Oh, thank you!” she cried, and threw herself at him; he stumbled under her weight, appalled, and tried futilely to shake her off. “You saved her!”

“I did nothing of the kind—it wasn’t serious—release me at once!” he ground through clenched teeth.

He finally managed to extricate himself, but his hand was seized in a vice-like grasp by her father, who was nearly crying with relief himself. “Thank you so much, Señor Greene,” he said, wringing his fingers earnestly.

Snape grimaced and tried to get his hand back. The little girl was clinging to her father, held up by his left arm, her face buried in the crook of his neck. The father finally let go and held her tight, and said, “You need to thank Señor Greene, Esperanza.”

“She does not—” he started, but he was ignored as the father jiggled the girl in his arms. She looked up; she was no more than nine, and although her cheeks were still streaked with tears, her clothes torn and bloodied, and her eyes red and puffy, she managed a watery smile.

“Thank you, Don Greene,” she quavered.

He grunted uncomfortably, having nothing to say, and just nodded stiffly to them before staging a hasty exit.

His discomfort was quickly supplanted by fresh outrage when he looked over to their table. Andrews was still sitting there, placid as you please, eating his dinner.

Snape was standing beside him in three quick strides, seized his arm in an iron grip, and hauled him to his feet. “Who the hell do you think you are?” he demanded, shaking him viciously. “You could have killed her!”

Andrews looked exasperated. “Yes, but I didn’t—I just nicked her. You said so yourself.”

Snape seethed with impotent fury, unable to set him straight as to his gross error without revealing too much—not to mention that he was rather disquietingly certain that Andrews wouldn’t have cared either way. “But the fact remains that you did kill that man—did you even give the slightest thought
“Of course I did. I could either sit there and have my wallet taken, or kill him and keep it. The latter was a win-win situation,” he said.

“We’re leaving!” Snape spat, jerking Andrews by the arm.

His expression went into that childish pout again. “I’m not finished,” he groused.

“Yes, you are!” Snape hissed, and dragged him toward the door, detouring around the dish washer who was coming out from the kitchen with a mop and bucket.

Andrews sighed dramatically, his eyebrows crawling across his forehead in a manner that Snape just knew would have gone with an exaggerated eye-roll had Andrews been capable of doing so. Snape well remembered that look from his students; he hadn’t tolerated it from them, and he certainly wasn’t going to take it from this nonce.

“Chiclet—get the tab, would you?” Andrews called, tossing his money clip to the boy, and then he allowed himself to be hauled outside.

Snape all but threw him out the door of the café. “Do you realize that you’ve just involved us both in a murder?” he demanded. “That we’re going to be questioned?”

Andrews just snorted and took out a cigarette. “Relax, will you?” he said. “People take care of themselves around here. Look.” And he pointed inside the café.

Snape followed his finger; two waiters were dragging the body out through the back, the dish washer trailing behind them with the now red-stained mop to clear the mess. “That doesn’t give you leave to draw attention of the local police!” Snape growled, and he turned to leave, the rest of the night a loss, in no small part because he didn’t want to be caught here.

But he paused mid-turn and looked back; Andrews was giving him a speculative look that he didn’t like one bit. “Chiclet!” Andrews called after a moment, and the boy in question came scuttling out of the café. He was clutching Andrews’s valise, and as he handed him back his money clip, he looked sideways at Snape for just a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he looked back at Andrews as the man put his hand on his shoulder. “Come on—let’s escort the lady home.” Andrews’s lip curled. “He’s having the vapours.”

“Shut it, you useless tit!” Snape growled, and whirled around, taking off down the street at a rapid clip. He refused to look at them, but he could hear Andrews and the boy trailing along behind him.

They caught up with him nearly halfway back to their street; Snape glanced at him, still furious. Andrews, on the other hand, looked supremely unruffled, sucking calmly on another cigarette, and Snape hated him for it. “Wipe that smug look off your face!” he snapped at him, his indulgent smirk grating on his nerves past the point of tolerance. “I’m going to have to pay for your carelessness!”

“Pshaw. I am never careless.”

Snape snorted. “I find that hard to believe,” he sneered.

He was most gratified to see Andrews twitch ever so slightly, but he gave no other sign that his jibe had affected him.

They didn’t speak the rest of the way home, Snape fuming, Andrews simply quiet. But as they were walking down Calle del Sombras, very nearly home, Andrews reached out and grabbed his arm.
Snape stopped, jerking his arm out of his grasp, and glared at him. Andrews was smiling slightly, and Snape didn’t like it. “Two years in Mexico, and you still don’t know how things work,” Andrews said, almost head-shakingly.

“What are you talking about?” Snape demanded.

“Dead men are the order of the day in Culiacán,” Andrews said. “No one will think twice about it.” He looked musing for a moment, and then said, “If you think about it, I actually did that café a favour—and so they’ll respond in kind and take care of things. They were already cleaning up when he left.” His expression went shrewd. “No one will come looking for you.”

Snape stiffened, and Andrews smirked. “Except me, of course.” Then he turned and unlocked his door. “Come on—what you need is some nerve medicine,” he said, and tried to pull Snape inside Number 15. Snape refused to be led in; Andrews paused, looked back at him, and gave him another one of those infuriating, mildly amused looks before heading inside, his boy trotting obediently behind him.

They left the door hanging open; Snape stood just outside, dithering, trying to peer inside without moving, but eventually gave it up as a bad job and resignedly (if angrily) went inside.

He scanned the room, cataloguing everything. The house was even more Spartan than his own, if not quite so shabby, but the layout remarkably similar—no wonder Andrews had been able to so easily move about in his house.

He already had several nasty ideas to make things more difficult for him.

The boy had wandered into the kitchen and pulled a bottle of pop from the refrigerator; he then made himself comfortable on one of the wooden chairs in the kitchen, swinging his feet idly against the tiled floor and watching the two of them in the living room. Snape glowered at the little twerp, but this time he didn’t flinch away—he just regarded him steadily.

Grimacing and frustrated, Snape swung back around; Andrews had opened a cabinet over against the left wall and was pouring himself a glass of that revolting Mexican liquor that seemed to be the only thing anyone drank around here. He put the first bottle away and reached in for another. “Here—you really need to try this new stuff I have—it’s right up your alley,” he said. “I found it in this dive I went to a few weeks ago—a total rattrap, believe me—but I dug around and turned up a few unexpected treasures while I was there.” And he turned and thrust a glass into Snape’s hand—as he casually corked the bottle of Firewhisky.

Snape’s fingers tightened around the glass until his knuckles were white; he wanted nothing more than to throw the contents right in Andrews’s arrogant, smirking face.

But Andrews was grinning at him, and Snape knew that he was just aching to get a rise out of him. And so he bit his tongue and was silent.

Andrews waggled his eyebrows at him and raised his glass. “Cheers.”

Chapter End Notes

Homage to *The Simpsons.*
Sands stood by the bathroom door, his head tilted to one side, tapping gently against the cracked plaster of the wall that he shared with his neighbor. Trying to find a clear space straight through, unblocked by cabinets or furniture, was getting old in a hurry—but he had a good reason to do it, and he wasn’t one to shirk his duty. It wasn’t as fun this time, because he wasn’t breaking in, but it was pleasant enough to one-up Greene on the small scale as well.

“There we go,” he said softly, tapping a hollow thunk against the wall that told him he was clear of Greene’s kitchen cabinets. He raised the hand drill that he’d sent Chiclet out for last week, setting the spiraled tip against the crumbling plaster, seating it right in a deep crack for camouflage, and then began to turn it, listening to the grinding rasp as it shaved and bit through the decaying wall. It didn’t take him long to get to the other side, all resistance abruptly evaporating as he finally burst through. Tugging the bit of the drill (goddammit) out of the wall, he blew briefly through the hole that it left behind; he heard bits of dust and plaster rain down through the other side as his breath whistled ever so slightly through his new spy hole. He put his ear to the wall, listening carefully—he could hear Greene’s faucet leaking, dripping steadily into the empty sink.

Perfect.

Sands had woken up early this hot and sticky morning, filled with that vague sense of purpose he’d become accustomed to on Wednesday mornings. He’d been halfway through pulling on a pair of jeans, one leg on and the other one empty and flopping beside it, when he’d suddenly remembered that no, he didn’t have to go sit outside and wait for Greene to go run his errands this morning. Greene didn’t go out on Wednesdays anymore. And so neither did he.

Shit.

He hated being thwarted when he was in his stride; however, the restlessness that filled him as a result of having nothing to do had quickly been diverted into a new project—he’d finally drilled those holes in the wall that he’d been meaning to do for several days but just hadn’t gotten around to yet.

Pushing away from the wall, he clattered out into the living room and meandered back to his chair. He didn’t like the way sound was so muffled through the wall, to the point that it had taken him weeks to even realize that there was someone next door at all. That absence of sound left him completely in the dark (goddammit)—he wanted to be able to hear things. As such, he’d decided that a spy hole into next door was prudent—two spy holes, as it turned out. One would give him “access” to Greene’s kitchen, while the other would allow him to hear whatever he was doing in the living room.

He’d originally planned on drilling a hole upstairs, to finally find out what in the hell was in that
mysterious right bedroom. In retrospect, he should have known that anything pertaining to the Bat Cave up there wouldn’t be that easy. It had started simply enough; he’d tapped on the wall until he’d found an unobstructed place and set to boring his way through. He’d gotten about halfway through the wall when the drill had just stopped.

Sands had paused, and tried to reset the bit and start again—nothing. He’d straightened a little, and then gripped the drill and rapped it smartly against whatever was blocking him. The tip had made a strange, echoing boom as it rammed against something immovable. It hadn’t sounded or felt quite like metal, but that was the closest comparison Sands had been able to make to the hollow thump of whatever was on the other side of that wall. Frustrated and annoyed, he’d pressed his ear to the hole he made. He had still heard nothing—like before, none of those strange noises that he had heard on those first few days of listening, but there had been…something. He felt more than heard it—a low, vibrant hum emanating from the hole in the wall. It almost sounded like an electric fence, but deeper—more like the reverberant thrum of a sub station. That imagery alone was enough to make him think twice about sticking a finger in there.

And so, after a few more minutes of perplexed and angry poking and listening, Sands had yet again been forced to give up on trying to find out what Greene did up there all day.

But that didn’t mean he had to give up all together. Hence his two defiant holes in the walls downstairs. He may still be out of the loop with regards to Greene’s secret hideout, but now he at least had a pair of ears downstairs, to match his newly acquired pair of eyes that now went in once a week.

Just the thought of that, however, still made him scowl slightly.

His first thought, when Chiclet had come slinking in and informed him that Don Greene had waylaid him in the street and bullied him into fetching his groceries once a week, was that he was going to get up, go next door, and pump about fifty slugs into Greene’s scrawny little “arse” for daring to lay a finger on his property. His next impulse had been to knock Chiclet’s brains loose for even thinking of accepting the offer in the first place. However, once he’d tamped down his initial rage over Greene’s presumption and Chiclet’s stupidity, rationality had come flooding back and he stepped back to consider the situation at large.

Chiclet was his eyes. They saw what he could no longer see. And now said eyes were going to caper and prance on their little Mexican legs right into Greene’s living room at least once a week.

How delightful.

Well, maybe “delightful” was too strong a word—just “nice” would do. That’s because it was one thing to let Greene borrow Chiclet (which he wouldn’t), but it was quite another for the old tranny to just steal him like that, the dirty thief. That, and because he still wasn’t entirely sure why Greene would do such a thing, and he didn’t like it. He had his theories, of course, but they were just theories.

First and foremost was that Greene was trying to spy on him.

Well, just let him try. He’d already given Chiclet strict orders to say only “good morning” or “good afternoon,” and sometimes not even that when around Greene. And God help the little shit if he didn’t do as he was told. If that stupid kid slipped even one bit of information on him to old Donny-boy, he’d make him wish he’d never been born.

Settling deep into his chair, lighting up a cigarette, he mulled over where he stood with his neighbor. Greene was upstairs right now—he was always upstairs on Wednesdays now that he didn’t have to
go out for groceries any more (the rotten old bastard). Sands pursed his lips a little. Greene was quite the puzzle. The usual repertoire of threats and cajolery, which had rarely failed him in the past, had all but bounced off the old bunghole. So it really hadn’t surprised him all that much that, when he’d cornered him to lay down the law when it came to his kid, Greene had just sneered and refused to be intimidated.

But that was okay, really—by that point Sands had decided that he was going let Greene and Chiclet go about their respective business and to play the hand as it stood. Hence the reason he instructed Chiclet to watch everything, to make note of anything odd or off or unusual that the old fogy did, and then Sands would listen very carefully to anything Chiclet had to report after he came back from Greene’s place, even if so far, the only thing he’d had to say was, “Same as before.” Even though there had been nothing exciting happening yet, the very monotony and lack of variation told Sands plenty—Greene was a creature of habit. The old booger liked his routine and never changed anything (well, except for his furniture, as it happened. Chiclet reported after the first day that he’d moved all his furniture around from what it had been when they broke in—what an asshole).

Old Don Greene and his boring routine—that’d make a good Dr. Seuss title, now that he thought about it. That he so liked to maintain the status quo had put a decidedly amusing tilt on their little set-to last month, that was for sure. Their little dinner and sparring session had turned into a minor shootout, which, funnily enough, caused Greene to go into such a tizzy Sands had been positive he was about to burst a blood vessel. The cops—*chuh*, he acted like he’d only been in the country for two weeks, rather than two years.

Sands smirked. That, or he acted like a man who was on the run from the law.

After the little bit of a dust-up, Greene’s initial fury had been out of concern for the kid stupid enough to allow herself to be grabbed by a young punk with delusions of grandeur. However, Greene had immediately shifted into a rant about the dangers of unwanted attention and the possibility of police involvement, and which revealed more to Sands than he suspected Greene had intended—in particular that he was afraid of the cops. That did set Sands’s mind at ease regarding one unpleasant possibility as to what his neighbor did in his spare time—Greene was in no way involved with the cartels. People who worked for the local drug lords were in no way afraid of cops, nor did they concern themselves with petty criminals or minor murders. Fugitives, on the other hand—people who didn’t want to be found—they did have a serious problem with both of the above.

So Viejo Don Greene wasn’t just an eccentric old hermit—he was hiding. From everyone.

And whatever he was doing, he was certainly a wily old goat—Sands had to give him that. Sands had brought him inside for the first time after that little fiasco, inviting him into his home for a drink—or rather, several drinks, in hopes of pouring enough liquor on top of the scare in the cafe to loosen up that sharp tongue of his and get him to spill a few more of his closely-guarded beans. However, Greene had either not been in any mood to play, or was more clever than Sands gave him credit, because he had clammed up when they got home, and after the first drink had stormed out of Sands’s house and back next door, leaving Sands to get piss drunk by himself (which was no fun at all).

So Greene would not be plied with whiskey. He’d have to get his information another way—unfortunately, his options seemed to be dwindling. So far as he could tell, the only time Greene let anything slip was when he was panicked. However, the old prick was almost entirely unflappable, and Sands couldn’t shoot someone every time he wanted to rattle him. Greene couldn’t be intimidated, he didn’t seem to be afraid of anything except being found, and Sands couldn’t even rat him out to get rid of him (or at the very least blackmail him) because he didn’t want to be found either, and (*goddamnit*) they lived right next to each other. Besides, he didn’t know who wanted Greene in the first place; given that he was English, he was probably hiding from somebody from all
the way over across the Atlantic. He didn’t even know what Greene was wanted for.

Ultimately, he was actually considering putting his neighbor on the back burner. If he didn’t want to be found, that meant that he wasn’t going to draw any attention to himself by squealing on Sands, either.

Stalemate.

_Goddammit._

Sands stretched his arms over his head, curling his toes; the twinge in his thighs was almost nonexistent. That raised his spirits a little bit, as it had already a particularly trying morning—whenever Greene was upstairs, the hot and stifling silence was positively oppressive. He’d have to remind Greene to fix his sink—that constant *drip drip drip* would drive him insane if he didn’t.

He rose from his chair, deciding that maybe he’d just go up to his room and lie down for a bit longer—Chiclet hadn’t even arrived this morning yet, so he knew it was before seven. It was quiet up there, and Greene probably wouldn’t be down for a while. He climbed the stairs, taking that usual right turn into his room and flopped down on the bed once he reached it. He felt around on the night table for his blindfold (he had two—one down in the bathroom, and one up here), pulling off his sunglasses and replacing them with the strip of what Chiclet had told him was black cloth as quickly as possible, hating the way the open air pressed against his eye sockets.

He would _never_ be comfortable with that. Ever.

Sands didn’t bother wriggling under the sheets—it was as per usual hotter than hell, even this early in the morning, so there was really no point. He hated sleeping on his back, but sleeping on his stomach wasn’t an option—it still felt too funny to sleep the way he preferred, with his face smashed against his pillow (or a pair of tits, if they were convenient), because the blindfold would invariably press inward, and he hated that more than sleeping on his back.

He had no idea how long he lay there, but he knew he didn’t sleep—or maybe he did. He really had no idea. All he knew was that after lying in bed for who knew how long, he was suddenly snapped out of his stupor by a whiff of something from downstairs. Sands sat up, tilting his nose in the air.

_Bacon._ Someone was cooking bacon. The smell was faint, but it was there.

_Furrowing_ his brows, he got up out of bed and, as Chiclet would be over soon, decided to just get dressed while he was at it. He tugged on his shirt and pants, donned his sunglasses, found his boots by the doorway where he’d left them last night, and then went back downstairs, swinging out to stand by his bathroom door, just where he’d drilled the hole that led into Greene’s kitchen.

_Sands leaned down and stuck his nose by it, inhaling deeply. Yes, that was clearly bacon. Toast, too. And eggs. Greene was cooking breakfast._

_Sands ground his teeth when his stomach gave an involuntary rumble and stomped out into the living room in irritation._

He was halfway to his chair when he paused, pursing his lips and drumming his fingers against his flat stomach. _Well, why not?_ he thought to himself. He was hungry, and after a nose full of that rich, bacony smell, he wasn’t in the mood for his usual helping of cereal with about five heaping spoonfuls of white sugar (even though it was that much sweeter these days, because more often than not, it was Greene’s sugar).

_Sands didn’t have any bacon of his own, and if he sent Chiclet out for it, he’d have to wait all day for_
him to get back and then to cook it for him. Actually, Sands wasn’t even sure if Chiclet knew how to cook a decent breakfast, even if he was getting to be pretty good at whipping up his dinner—except for pibil; he still couldn’t get that right to save his little Mexican life (in fact, if it was much worse, he’d have to shoot him).

Sands was hungry, dammit. And he was going to eat. Besides—it would give him the opportunity to get over next door and figure out the new layout of Greene’s furniture. And the chance to soak up some of the nice coolness over there—he was about to melt into a puddle over here, what a world, what a world.

He walked to the kitchen, opening the drawers and pawing through them for something he could use; it didn’t take him long to find exactly what he needed. He’d picked locks with various items, but nothing worked quite like paperclips, and he knew there had to be one hidden amongst all the useless clutter that Chiclet had put in here, collected in the dark of night from his old place. And sure enough, there were a couple of nice big ones clipping together two fat stacks of paper (he’d have to ask Chiclet what they were). Turning on his heel, listened briefly to his living room spy hole, making sure Greene was still bustling about in the kitchen, and then marched out the door.

Shutting his door behind him, his keys safely in his pocket, he trailed his fingers along the wall. He couldn’t help the satisfied smirk that crossed his face when he made it to Greene’s door; it had happened nearly six months ago, but he was still bent out of shape over that first time he’d tried to break in but just didn’t.

But now he could. Take that, Don Greene. Grunting slightly as he went to his knees, he felt for the lock, and then bent the paperclips into the proper shape and went to work.

He jammed the first in the lock, his ear nearly against the door so he could hear when it slid home, and then he put in the second, fiddling and pushing to get it seated, and finally, the lock gave that little click that told him he was home free. Smiling to himself, he pocketed his little tools and quietly opened the door and stepped inside, shutting it gently behind him. Then he walked carefully across the room, hoping that Greene hadn’t decided to do something dramatic with his furniture. He found his way across the room relatively without incident, only barking his shins once against the low-slung coffee table before reaching the edge of the rug that told him he was nearly to the kitchen.

“Good morning, neighbor!” he called loudly and brightly. He heard a grating curse and then Greene’s quick, angry footsteps on the kitchen tile.

“How the bloody hell do you keep getting in here?!” Greene roared (well, he tried—Sands didn’t think his barking rasp quite qualified as a full-blown roar. Not enough volume).

He smiled at Greene’s outrage. “Through the mail slot,” he said sweetly.

“You get out of here this instant, Andrews!” Greene snarled furiously.

Sands just kept on smiling in return. “But I haven’t eaten yet.”

He wished he could see Greene’s face—it was undoubtedly twisted into that look of blank, comical outrage that he’d seen quite a bit in his lifetime.

“I’m not feeding you,” Greene said flatly.

Sands waggled a disapproving finger at him. “That’s not very polite, Greene. You owe me,” he replied tartly.

“I owe you nothing. Get out of my house.”
“If you’ll recall,” Sands said, moving slowly into the room, remembering that three steps in he’d hit the table—and there it was. “I took you out on what I considered to be a pretty exciting date last month. You know—kiss kiss, bang bang? And if you will also recall, I bought that dinner. So…” Sands played his hands across the table until he found where Greene had set out silverware for himself, and then pulled out a chair and sat down in his seat, folding his hands on the table and smiling amiably. “…you owe me breakfast. So I stay, and you feed me. Don’t be such a skinflint; there was enough to spare in your fridge last time I was here.”

If Greene kept grinding his teeth like that, he was going to be gumming his food to death within a year. Sands just sat quietly, keeping his face arranged in a pleasant expression as he heard Greene begin moving around the kitchen, audibly fuming.

Sands cocked his head, and heard a brittle cracking sound, and then the sizzle of egg in a pan. “I like them scrambled,” he told him.

Silence, then a drawer was yanked open, slammed shut, and he heard the sound of a fork scraping furiously in the bottom of a pan. Sands smirked, and leaned back in his chair. He might get this character trained to his purposes after all.

Mmm. It was smelling good. Mexican breakfast sucked it hard, he’d discovered not long after he’d been stationed here—some meals simply weren’t meant to involve jalapeños. How nice that old Don Greene was sticking to his own personal stereotype by having a more traditional English spread in the mornings. Sure from the clatter by the stove that Greene was busy, Sands reached around the tabletop and found salt, pepper, and a cool jar; a surreptitious sniff of the contents told him that it was strawberry jam. He’d have to tell Chiclet to buy raspberry next time Greene sent him out for groceries.

Another sizzle, loud and crackling this time, told him that the bacon was on, and then there was a rustle of plastic followed by the quick zip and soft ticking of the toaster. He started drumming out a rhythm on the table’s edge, using the toaster as his metronome, following the sound of Greene’s footsteps as he paced through the kitchen and inhaling the scents of his breakfast.

…it smelled funny in here. Sands’s fingers stilled, and he twisted in his seat, putting his nose in the air. He hadn’t noticed at first, what with the smell of bacon, and the last time he was over here, he was more preoccupied with his search and the later conversation with the lady of the house. But now…he sniffed the air as quietly as he could.

It didn’t smell like old people, that dry, moth-ball and medication mustiness—this was something different. Something…herbal, for lack of a better word. It smelled like potting soil and fresh plants, but beneath it all there was some kind of pungent, steamy smell, like sunscreen or vinegar or essential oils or something. Not like the thick, chemical stink of a meth lab, that was for sure, but it was too sharp and medicinal for grass or poppies or anything like that.

What the hell did he do over here?

Sands was jostled from his contemplation by approaching footsteps. He sent his train of thought to the depot for the moment until he could inventory it at a later date and smiled up at Greene. He heard him push the contents of the table to one side, and then a plate was slammed down in front of him. “There,” he spat. “Eat it and get out.”

He tsked. “You’ll never make employee of the month with an attitude like that,” he said pleasantly, inwardly grinning at how easy it was to piss this guy off. He shook out Greene’s napkin—cloth, funnily enough—picked up his silverware, and with the air of orienting his fork, felt about on the plate with the tines.
Here was a small pile of scrambled eggs—they felt like pretty good ones, too. Point for Greene. The bacon, on the other hand, felt limp and fatty, and there was only one slice. Minus two points. There was the toast—also only one piece, but it was sliced diagonally like a real man should eat it, at least—that broke even. He rated this breakfast fair, with special dispensation for being a real breakfast, and not some sugary or spicy Mexican crap. He speared a fluffy chunk of egg, sniffed it for a moment, and took a bite.

Not bad, he thought, listening to Greene retreating back to the counter; Sands heard the sound of cutlery clattering on crockery, and deduced that Greene was wolfing his breakfast standing, rather than sit down with him, and the corner of his mouth curled upwards.

He set down his knife and fork and picked up a slice of toast. No butter—how gauche—but the bread was crisp and hot, toasted just right, and Sands guessed it would be a warm, pocked brown. He reached forward and—even if, Greene moved the jam, the bastard, where the hell was it—

“It’s to your right.”

Sands froze.

He knew.

That sorry son of a bitch.

Sands sat still for a moment, and then facetiously said, “Thank you,” and picked up the jar.

Goddammit—it took most people longer to cotton on to that—and some people never did at all. He jammed his knife into the jar with more force than necessary, and then slopped far more jam than he needed on his toast, just so Greene would have to buy more sooner, and Sands would get raspberry when he came over here next time.

The shine had rather worn off this visit, and quicker than he’d planned. Shit.

“Don’t you have anything to drink in this place?” he demanded.

“And what would Her Majesty prefer?” Greene asked dryly.

“Well, a real man drinks coffee with his breakfast,” he replied, “so that’s clearly not on your menu. I suppose you favor tea?”

“Yes,” Greene said, but made no move from where he stood.

“Well, then, tea it is, Jeeves—chop, chop.”

Greene snorted roughly, and then opened a cabinet, and Sands heard soft rustlings, the clunk of a cup, and the tinkle of pouring water. Sands ate his bacon—floppy and with hardly any meat, as he’d suspected—and shortly after Greene crossed to the table again and set down a cup with exaggerated care. “Your tea, Mr. Wooster,” he sneered.

“If you put sugar in this, you’re fired,” Sands answered, and he picked up the cup and took a sip. No sugar, thank God, but it was still tea—weak and brown and watery. He liked coffee with his breakfast—thick and rich and dark, and as black as his heart and as bitter as his life.

That joke wasn’t quite so funny anymore.

Grimacing, he shoveled in the rest of his eggs, polished off the last of his toast, and tossed back the
rest of the tea. “That sucked,” he announced as he stood. “As such, your debt is not paid—I’ll be back at a later date for a real breakfast.”

“You will not,” Greene growled. “You will stay out of both my house and my affairs.”

Sands smiled, this tides of particular skirmish beginning to tilt back in his favor. “Ah, but my dear Jeeves—we’re neighbors now, after all, and su casa es mi casa.”

“I never extended that consideration—now get out of here!”

“That may be—but I took that consideration. And as long as you’re here, I’ll be here too.” And without waiting for a reply, he moved across the living room toward the door. He heard Greene’s furious footsteps coming up behind him, but he reached the door first and went out, and as Sands heard it slam behind him, he couldn’t help but chuckle. He trailed his fingers along the wall, making his way back to his own home. Unlocking the door, he let himself back into his own house, his belly pleasantly full and his morning looking up. After he shut the door, he moved over to his west wall and pressed his ear to his new little window into Greene’s kitchen—and smirked. Greene was talking to himself.

“…make yourself at home, acting as if I’m your personal servant,” he was muttering furiously to himself. “Why don’t you just wait around for that little slave of yours and have him do it for you—just one more favor to add to his no doubt colorful job description—disgusting little nonce—” He moved away, and Sands couldn’t hear any more.

Sands pushed away from the wall, vaguely offended. He knew what that meant—he spoke British. The bastard. He flipped off the old queer through the wall before moving back over to sit in his chair, taking a detour for a hit from his liquor cabinet—tequila, Breakfast of Champions. Now his day could really begin.

_Time to call José, I think._

José Hernandez was always somebody Sands could count on. He was a crooked cop who was still just straight enough to know the definition of the word “loyalty.” Anyone who kept him paid up was guaranteed an ally.

And Sands most assuredly kept him paid up. That’s how he always worked with his contacts—tit for tat, just the way he liked it. With Belini, it had been intimidation—he kept up his end of the bargain, and Sands didn’t kill him. That was undoubtedly why he was so reliable while working for a relative pittance—it was easy to squeeze a coward. In fact, he’d found that there was only one other type that was easier to work with—those with something to hide. That was how it had been with James Pauling, the American who worked with the cartels down here—insuring his cooperation had practically free. All it had taken on Sands’s part was a quick blowjob the bathroom, and James had been his. After that, he’d only needed to drop the occasional reminder of what should happen if he decided to inform his wife or the cartel of the state of affairs (that, and keep him cooperative by bending jolly old James over the nearest piece of furniture whenever he asked for it), and the information rolled right in.

José, on the other hand—all he needed was a little greasing and he’d be as talkative as you pleased. José was just your classic rat.

Unfortunately, José was also early, the rotten little peckerwood, already seated and had already ordered, probably those grody albóndigas he was so fond of (and he would undoubtedly expect Sands to foot his bill). His presence at the table meant Sands would have to forgo his usual method
of maintaining the upper hand, so he surreptitiously gave Chiclet his gun and ordered him to hold it on José at all times. He knew Chiclet wouldn’t shoot him even if told to (the pussy), but if it came to that, he could shoot José himself. And anyway, Sands just felt better with a gun on his contacts, no matter the situation.

“Morning, Andrews,” José drawled deliberately as Sands settled down into the chair directly across from him, and Chiclet sat down next to him, quiet and still, and he’d better just have the gun out. “Where’d you get the kid?” José asked, sounding vaguely amused.

Sands grimaced. “Never you mind where I got it,” he said sharply. “In any case, it’s eating with us. Don’t worry—he doesn’t speak English, and even if he did, he wouldn’t tell. More importantly, did you order my pibil?” Sands asked, feeling Chiclet shift next to him.

“I did,” José said.

“Did you get the information I requested?”

José smiled. “Always straight to the point with you,” he chuckled to Sands’s tight smile. “Yes, I got it. I poked around and found all there was to find out about the Day of the Dead last year, just as you asked—and no little of it is pretty interesting.”

“Oh, is it, now?” Sands said back, drumming his fingers against the table, and frowning as he heard someone making a ruckus behind him in the street.

“It is. But, as you surely know, I only take payment up front,” José replied smoothly. “So, you want my juicy gossip, you give me my five grand.”

“I don’t pay you for juicy gossip, José,” Sands retorted, pausing to toss a charming smile at the waitress who set his plate in front of him with his tequila and lime. He leaned forward once she was gone, drawing a circle around his plate with one finger. “I pay you for facts. Do you have them? Because if you don’t, you don’t get the cash, and you pick up this check.”

José chuckled again, but Sands did not, partly because he was serious now, but mostly because he was getting more and more irritated by the steadily rising racket behind him, what sounded like a man and what he guessed to be the guy’s young son. From what he’d gleaned from the sounds of the slurred and drunken fight so far, dearest Daddy didn’t want to calm down and go home with Son.

It was very annoying.

“Relax, Andrews,” José said amiably. “They’re as solid as I could manage. So—payment?”

Sands regarded him shrewdly for a moment. José was always reliable, which wasn’t too surprising, given that he had access to all the official channels of information, not just hearsay—he certainly had Belini topped in that regard. So Sands forked over the paper bag without comment. He heard it crinkle as José checked the contents, and then heard the other man tuck it away in his vest. There was a sound of a flicking lighter then a long inhale, before José said, “Thanks.”

But José’s thanks were drowned out by that aggravating drunk screaming out a huge barrage of obscenities, accompanied by the snuffling son shifting over to full-out braying sobs. Sands shook his head a little, irritated. Spilling domestics into public places—right next to him, no less—was bad form all around. “Chiclet, do you know those guys?” he asked in Spanish.

“Sí—they live on my street.” Chiclet’s voice dropped to a furtive whisper. “He does this all the time. He drinks a lot.”
Well, he could at least have the decency to keep it down when he’s in public,” Sands grumbled irritably, stirring up his rice. “Anyway, José—about the—”

He growled when that stupid fucker started shouting again, his words slurred by booze, and he heard a dull smack, which meant that he’d hit someone—probably that idiot kid that was trying to get him to be quiet. His slap, of course, had the opposite effect, and now the stupid kid was bawling.

This was the absolute limit.

“Hold whatever thoughts may have been rattling around in your otherwise empty head, José,” Sands said, covertly taking the gun from Chiclet’s sweaty hand without José seeing, making as if he’d just pulled it, and then scooting backwards from the table. “I need to find the remote and turn down the TV.” And he got up, remembering the exact steps he’d taken when Chiclet had led him to his table, trailing a hand just a bit away from his body to make sure nothing got in his way. He made his way off of the veranda and towards the hullabaloo of his drunken friend over there. He wasn’t quite as sure of himself without Chiclet, so his footsteps were erratic, not as confident as he would like, but at least they were frequent, and definitely purposeful—and Sands knew exactly where he was. He gauged the distance just right when he reached out to tap his little buddy on the shoulder.

“Excuse me,” he said pleasantly, and he heard a sudden rush of air—and he ducked, vaguely amused that this idiot had the gall (and the blatant stupidity) to try and hit him. Well, if he wanted to be like that, then Sands would play along. So he swung his gun hard, right at the idiot’s face, and he didn’t. A satisfying crack rang through the air, and Sands felt the crunch of teeth (former teeth, that is) and flecks of blood spattering against his glove. Creepo went down with a heavy grunt, landing in what Sands knew would be a tangled heap at his feet—right where he belonged.

Sands stared down at the lump, half-smiling. “Would you mind toning it down?” he asked amiably.

“You son of a bitch!” The man’s voice was thick, stupid, and somewhat mushy from what Sands suspected to be a split lip and cracked teeth, and he heard him getting up, moving around, lurching stupidly forward to swipe at Sands’s knees. He easily sidestepped the clumsy swing, and Creepo fell back on his face with a wet smack. Sands took advantage of his position and planted the heel of one booted foot—along with most of his weight—on Creepo’s lower back, right in the kidneys. He howled in pain, struggling mightily, but drunkards were so much easier to subdue than those fully aware of their surroundings. Sands heard Chiclet scamper by, going over to the crying kid behind him and getting him out of the way—good boy. Always knew when Sands would need him.

“I’ll ask again—would you mind toning it down? We’re having trouble hearing ourselves think, you know, what with you having your little discussion with your son. It’s really quite inconsiderate to the patrons of this establishment.” Sands felt him trying to get up again, and he ground in his heel. “Actually, I’m sure everyone over at the café would actually be pretty damned happy if you’d stop that. ‘Cause, you know, it’s really just a vicious cycle.” He lifted his foot, feeling him roll over, and aimed a swift kick at what he knew would be an ample beer gut. He was not mistaken, and his foot sank in nearly to the ankle, and the bastard bellowed in pain and curled up in a ball. “You start hollering at the top of your lungs—and you’ve got an impressive set of lungs, I’ll grant you that—and then you start smacking around that kid of yours, and he starts wailing too—and he takes after you in the volume department…” Sands shook his head. “It’s just plain rude.”

Sands heard the bitch start trying to get up, random curses and threats still coming out of his mouth, and he sighed. “Jesus, being polite doesn’t get you anywhere these days,” he said to the air, and he hunkered down, flicking the safety off of his gun and aiming directly at where he knew the fucker’s moving mouth would be. “You aren’t drunk enough to not know what this is, right?” he said softly.
The inebriated babbling finally slowed, so Sands smiled. “Leave the domestic at home, hmm? You’re putting me off my lunch.”

He heard Chiclet nearby, speaking quietly in rapid Spanish to the sniveling kid, telling him things would be okay; Sands just snapped the safety back on and jammed the gun back down his pants, scuffing his boots in the general direction of the café. His kid got the message—a quick goodbye and he was loudly clomping his way back to the café, Sands following his footsteps back to their table. He heard the kid deliberately bump Sands’s chair, the legs scraping against the wooden floor, and Sands finally settled back into his seat, hearing Chiclet plop down next to him.

“I never took you for a charity worker,” José remarked, and Sands raised an eyebrow. “You do realize the whole café is staring at us now.”

Sands smiled thinly. “It won’t last,” he replied, sliding his fingers along the table until he found his tequila. “He was pissing them off just as much as he was pissing me off.”

“So you weren’t playing white knight, riding to the kid’s rescue?” José asked, his voice half teasing, half curious, as he tapped his plate with his fork.

“I don’t give rat’s dick about the kid; they were both pissing me off,” Sands informed him, huffing irritably through his nose. “What I do care about is what you said you knew about the President’s escape from the coup. I have already paid you, José, and yet you have yet to fulfill your end of the bargain.”

“Relax, amigo—I’ve got it for you. I did like you asked—asked for specs about what happened aside from the rioting in the streets and all. Mostly just from the rumor mill, and most of it obviously made up, but this one is so ridiculous that I think it has to be at least partially true.” Sands was still eating, feigning his usual relative indifference to what his contacts had to say, but he leaned forward to listen. “Nobody was left alive in the President’s edificio, so no witnesses there, you know,” said José. “But on the outside? There’s plenty of talk going around, and the rumor is he was saved by two mariachis.”

Sands nearly dropped his fork as an electric jolt went up his spine. He froze. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what I said,” José chuckled. “But that’s not even the really incredible part. Some of the witnesses were claiming that they fought with guitar cases—flame throwers, bombs, missiles, gatling guns—you name it, they had it, and all in their guitar cases. Total bullshit, but there you have it. I doubt they were mariachis, but they were definitely some kind of rogue element, and they were very clever—left almost no witnesses behind, and nobody knows who they were. I’d say they were hired for the job, myself—they were too good.”

Sands wasn’t hungry anymore. He set his fork down, almost unable to process what he was being told.

“Anyway, that’s all I really know with regards to that end of things—two hired assassins saved el presidente, and killed Marquez while they were at it. But nobody knows where that money went—you know, those twenty million that were meant to pay off Marquez.”

Sands forced a very brittle smile, feeling sick he was getting so furious. “Guaranteed, it went to those two lucky fuckers. Who else would even have known that it was there? I’d bet my bottom dollar that they snatched it up.”

José snorted. “You know, you’re probably right. What I wouldn’t give for ten million pesos.”
Sands did not smile. “What I wouldn’t give for twenty.”

Sands let himself be led home, not paying any attention to his surroundings, Chiclet grasping his hand gently as they walked. Thank God for that little shit—he was, for the first time, not actually sure he’d have been able to make it home on his own. His mind was not on the walk. His mind was not even in this town. His mind was many miles away—specifically, wherever those two fucking mariachis were.

“That’s not all I heard,” he’d said slyly. “I heard you were there too. There are some very interesting stories about a pistolero loco right in the center of town.”

José had filled him in on a few more points before they’d called it quits (he could tell from the slowly faltering sound of his voice that Sands’s sudden quiet was making him nervous). As far as information pertaining to him personally, it seemed everybody thought that CIA Agent Sands was dead—including the CIA. They’d already pulled out of the area, which was quite nice for him. They wouldn’t be looking for an MIA, presumed dead man. Sands knew how they worked. They’d tell his family they were doing everything possible to find him, but they’d most likely just put a big red stamp on his file and put it away in some dark place, and then probably celebrate—they’d never liked him, because he was just too damned good. And that was fine by him, because he’d never liked them, either.

And he hated those two mariachis.
He had almost wished that he’d been talking to Belini by the end of that conversation—and that thought really hadn’t helped his mood; he was already crabby enough that he’d had to kill the sorry son of a bitch in the first place. Belini would’ve been one more reliable ally, and would actually have been most helpful, given this new development—there were some places that cops just couldn’t go—but Belini could have. But there was no use angling over that. He had more pressing matters.

The *mariachis*…Belini’s asinine story of the legend of *El Mariachi* had taught him not to underestimate or disbelieve what he’d been told just because it was a bit over the top, because El had proven himself to be very, very good (although not good enough, considering his team had cut and run and left him to die). And while he didn’t necessarily believe that the guitar cases themselves were weapons, he did very much believe the rest of it.

Those goddamn mariachis…those fuckers let El die, didn’t kill the president—no, they *saved* him, even—and then they snatched up the twenty million pesos that was rightfully *his*. They didn’t even do what they had been *told* to do. Let the president die, kill Marquez. Were those instructions too difficult to understand? And he’d assumed “keep the inside man alive” had been implicit, but apparently not. El had very shitty friends and teammates.

He jolted, nearly running right into Chiclet’s back before he realized that they’d stopped—they were home. Chiclet must have taken the short way. He heard the key rattling in the lock, and then they were inside, Chiclet lightly pushing him in the direction of his armchair. He all but collapsed into it, leaning his head back and staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

“Do—do you want me to stay, Señor?”

Sands didn’t raise his head. “No. Go home, kid.”

He could almost hear Chiclet deflate. “Sí, Señor,” he said after a moment. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said quietly, turning and leaving, locking the door behind him as he did.

*Those pig-fucking mariachis.*

They’d made off with his money, those two. They made off rich, happy, smug, and *whole*. They didn’t have to endure what he’d gone through—getting nothing but grief and agony for all his work, living for three months in a veritable septic tank and now bring stuck in this Mexican hellhole for God knew how long, and having wake up every goddamned morning *missing* something, waking up every morning and pawing around like a fucking *invalid* when he couldn’t find things, crawling around on the ground like a *dog* looking for boots, hiding like a coward to avoid being caught by the CIA or what was left of the cartel, enduring nightmare after nightmare after nightmare of that shrill, silver instrument, that goddamn *drill* getting closer and closer until he woke up screaming—

Sands drew in a shuddering breath, leaning forward in his chair and holding his head in his hands.

Those thieving, traitorous bastards got away scot-free and left Sands holding the stick.

He didn’t sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

Homage to P.G. Wodehouse and *The Wizard of Oz*. 
Best Laid Plans

Chapter Summary

Snape and Sands toast the ladies.

Snape snapped awake.

He could hardly remember a day that he didn’t suddenly find himself wide awake in bed before sunup. He had all but forgotten the happy carefree weekends at school when he’d sleep ’til ten, or those long, lazy summer days of his childhood where he could slowly rise up from the depths of sleep with a languid sort of indolence, just to enjoy the drowsy pleasure of burrowing back down in bed, deeper into the duvet, and shutting out the world for another hour or so. Just one more piece of his childhood that he’d foolishly lost somewhere in those turbulent days of his adolescence, one more thing that he could never replace.

No—he’d been awakening promptly at five-thirty every morning for over the past twenty years. And today was no exception. Although he would soon wish that it was.

He blinked up at his pebbly ceiling. He’d covered it shortly after he’d moved in with some cheap white paint that he’d casually lifted from a construction site across town, but between his rather indifferent brush strokes and the poor quality of the paint itself, the dingy brown water stains that he’d been trying to conceal were gradually seeping back into view.

He shifted slightly, wiggling out a wrinkle in his tatty sheets where they’d bunched up in the small of his back, vaguely uncomfortable and not entirely sure why, until he flicked his still-bleary gaze over to the cheap calendar that was tacked to the wall by his bed. The parade of pious Mexican saints stared down at him month by month in silent, sorrowful disapproval as he ticked off the days that marched endlessly on, reeling out the long, purposeless stay in this dreary little town that was to be every day of the rest of his life. It was with a sinking feeling in his stomach that his eyes crawled over the yellowing page to light on that last day of the month.

It was October the thirty-first, two-thousand and one.

Halloween.

Snape closed his eyes, but there was no more respite of blissful unconsciousness against the sharp, painful twisting of his stomach.

Oh, God…

A tide of memories rose up, threatening to overwhelm him, and he forced his eyes back open and jerked himself into a sitting position, anything to bring him back to the present, if only for a moment.

He looked blankly around his room, the tiny little space in which he’d been sleeping for over two years. There was barely enough room for his narrow bed, the small chest of drawers that held his paltry assortment of third-hand clothes, and the narrow folding desk where he kept his meagre accounts. He’d never really looked at it until now, it seemed, never realized until this moment that the whole room was furnished and arranged in an unconscious imitation of the room he’d lived in nearly
all his life back in Manchester, his room back home in Spinner’s End, his haven against the foul Muggle boys who chased him and spat on him and ground his face in the dirt until he’d screamed, the room where he’d retreat when his parents would row, the room he’d only ever really opened to one other person—

He abruptly swung his legs out of bed, hanging his head low over his knees for a moment before heaving himself to his feet.

He threw on his clothes, not particularly caring what he wore, and not bothering to flatten the cock’s comb that was his hair, which was standing in a ridge from the way he’d slept last night, and walked blindly down the stairs and into the dingy little bathroom.

He didn’t bother with brushing his teeth, but he paused in front of the sink on his way out after relieving himself and just stared in the mirror—something he consciously avoided, but at this very moment, he couldn’t seem to help it.

A stranger stared out at him. Even after three years, he barely recognized his own reflection.

The years had not been kind to him, and he knew it. His beard and hair, bleached to a uniform dull grey by both magic and sunlight, only made it worse. Lines seamed his face, cutting into the corners of his mouth and his eyes. After two years in Mexico, what little skin he exposed daily to the hot hand of the sun was taking on that brown, leathery look of the old gaffers who sat out and played draughts on their front porches until the sky turned purple and the crickets sang and the failing light and chill air drove them inside.

It was the face of an old man.

His eyes were still bleary and bloodshot from sleep, and they stared hollowly back at him from the depths of the glass.

October the thirty-first. Halloween.

He yanked on the tap and splashed water on his face, scrubbing fiercely at his eyes, then groping for the towel and rubbing his face dry. Then he threw it on the edge of the basin and walked out. He didn’t look at the mirror again.

He stopped just outside the bathroom, standing bleakly by the foot of the stairs, his eyes roving over the room without seeing anything, before padding aimlessly into the kitchen. He blinked at the tiny room; he kept it spotless, a relic from living in the squalor of his childhood home, he supposed. Dad never did the dishes—that was woman’s work, he’d said—but more often than not Mum couldn’t be roused to do them either. He’d never thought anything of it—wasn’t that how everyone lived?—until that first time that he’d been led up to Bobbin Street, and he’d been invited into the clean and welcoming kitchen of Number 7 and they’d eaten fresh biscuits, and how they’d laughed—

He sank down into the nearest chair and leaned his face into his shaking hands.

October the thirty-first. Two thousand and one.

Nineteen eighty-one.

Twenty years. Twenty fucking years.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until it was uncomfortable, not-watching the bizarre patterns that spiralled out into that minute infinity behind his lids, listening to the steady drip of his tap into the sink, the plinking droplets a gong-note in the stillness of the house.
In the sixteen years he’d spent as an unwilling member of the staff of Hogwarts, he’d come to regard the students as a particularly unwanted burden on Halloween. Surrounded by joking, laughing idiots who dared to be happy on that day had been a slap in the face of everything that it stood for—everything it meant to him. Add that to the fact that on Halloween he wanted nothing more than to cloister himself away and nurse his own bottomless well of misery—little wonder that the students ceased to be merely tiresome and became well nigh unbearable. Even docking points and assigning detentions had lost their shine, no matter how much he kept at it.

But after his abrupt flight from England, when he finally had that day to himself, all to himself, just like he’d always thought he wanted, he was appalled to realize that he missed the students, missed their brainless chatter, their obnoxious laughter, their irresponsible behaviour, their ill-mannered ways—because they were something to keep him occupied. Something that for a time, however brief, could divert him from the rising tide of memories and remorse that overwhelmed him every year. Left by himself, with nothing but his thoughts and a bottle for comfort, time span out in an endless skein of sorrow that wove in and out of the hours of the day as they dragged slowly by.

Just like today.

Except not, he found, as he was suddenly jolted out of his reverie by the rapidly approaching whirr of a bell, followed by the clatter of a dilapidated old bicycle being dropped on his doorstep and a sharp rap at the door.

“Oh, dammit, it was Wednesday.”

He looked up; he’d already made his list, at least. There it was, clipped neatly to his little blackboard and ready for the Santiago brat. With a growl of pointless frustration, he rose to his feet and snatched it up as he heard another knock, this one more insistent. He jerked his head furiously around, willing a bolt of lightning to reduce the little wassock to powder, and stormed to the door, yanking it open just as the dirty little beast was raising his hand to knock again.

“Do you have nothing better to do than to beat incessantly on my door?” he barked furiously down at the gaping boy on his step.

Santiago’s raised hand seemed to wilt, dropping limply back down to his side. “I—it’s Wednesday, sir,” he began hesitantly.

“Oh, how wonderful it is to know that your years of paid education have paid off at last,” he sneered. “I’ll come to the door when I am good and ready, you dimwitted dogsbody, and not before, so I will thank you not to keep hammering on it, else I will be forced to crack your empty skull against it and put you out of both our miseries!” He thrust his grocery list into the boy’s hands and slammed the door in his stunned, puffy little face.

He whirled around and glowered pointlessly at the refuse pile in which he lived, dearly wishing he had something handy to throw—preferably something that would break with a terrific smash and racket—but there was nothing. All the glass or crockery in this house were all so old and cracked as it was that he didn’t think they could take much more abuse before even a *Reparo* couldn’t save them.

So all he could do was go into the kitchen and, for lack of anything else to do to keep himself busy, he made his breakfast.

Normally on Halloween, he would just drink his breakfast—and lunch, and tea, and supper—but now he couldn’t, not with that useless little scum coming back in the afternoon. He couldn’t let the boy see him like that. He would talk, and that was the last thing Snape needed here.
Snape normally found himself soothed by the pleasant monotony of his morning routine; going through the same comforting motions day after day gave him a feeling of being settled, stable, of finally having a place to hang his hat, and not to be at the beck and call of one capricious master or another. But this morning he found it afforded him no comfort; his morning schedule was so familiar to him by this point that he could do it without thinking. The empty mindlessness of going through the motions of making breakfast wasn’t enough to keep his mind occupied in the here and now, instead leaving his brain to wander far away from the miserable dust and heat of Mexico, and back to the creaky swings on the old playground or the sun-dappled shade of the riverbank.

Crack the egg. The white hissed and popped, turning opaque in the pan. Slice the bread. It slipped neatly into the black slit in the top of the battered old toaster, which won its daily battle with age, mustering up the energy for at least one more tour of duty. The filaments sparked to tired life, glowing hot and red when he depressed the squeaking switch.

The egg came up easily from its bath of margarine and grease and landed precisely on one side of his plate. The bacon took its place in the pan, sizzling and crackling angrily. The bread, toasted a warm golden brown, popped tiredly out of the toaster, and the thin scraping of butter melted into it immediately. Then the bacon was done, and he flipped it out of the pan and onto his plate. The kettle was whistling; the water flowed out with a cloud of steam when he tipped it over his cup, wetting the tea bag and turning first a pale gold, then slowly darkening.

Put the plate and cup on the table, then shake out a napkin and set out a knife and fork, get out the jam and the salt and the pepper, and then have breakfast.

He sat, and for some interminable time just stared down at his plate.

He had no appetite.

Snape picked up his battered fork, but just pushed the egg ‘round his plate, the rubbery white flopping and folding beneath the tines, the pinkish, staring eye of the yolk breaking and releasing a tide of thick yellow fluid that bled across his plate, seeping into his already damp toast and running over his bacon.

He’d left the bag in his cup, and now it had steeped far too long for his liking, the tea almost black.

The tap dripped in the sink, with a dull and endless plonk plonk plonk. The old ice box rattled and wheezed occasionally. The kettle was still huffing steam. A dog barked somewhere outside.

The silence rang inside the house.

He stood up abruptly, taking his plate with him and dumping the uneaten contents in the bin. Then he set the plate in the sink and turned on the water, staring blankly at it as the runny yellow yolk was washed away by the stream of slowly heating water.

He poured a little soap on his dishcloth and gave his plate a perfunctory scrub, but then just turned off the tap, leaving the plate in the sink and dropping the cloth on top of it with a soft, wet flump.

He leaned against the work surface, his fingers on the tile, the heels of his hands cantilevered over the floor. He shut his eyes, and breathed slowly through his nose.

Then he heard the scratching, gnawing sounds. His back went rigid.

Dammit, not another rat!

Snape whirled around, his eyes roving over the floor; he didn’t see it—but he could hear it, rooting
around somewhere behind the cabinets on the far left. He’d been over that corner of the kitchen again and again, almost to the point of crawling ‘round on his hands and knees and canvassing it with a fine-toothed comb, and yet for the life of him he still couldn’t find how they were getting in.

He stormed over to the corner and delivered a swift kick to the side of the cabinet; the sound stopped for a moment, but then the filthy little beggar just started right back up again.

Snarling to himself, he went back to roughly washing his plate and the skillet and the silver, wiping them dry and slamming back into their homes in his bare cupboards and empty drawers. When he finished, he turned around—and he saw it.

Sweet Merlin, that had to be the biggest rodent he’d ever seen.

Brown and hairy, it was trundling across the floor with supreme indifference to the master of the house, its pink tail undulating behind it like a great segmented worm.

Snape’s lip curled. He pulled his wand from his pocket and waited, just waited for the loathsome creature to venture away from his cabinets, so he could blast the thing to kingdom come without splintering the woodwork in the process. He would show it what happened to anyone who dared cross him!

But it wouldn’t move; it just kept snuffling along the baseboard, as if it knew where the safe zone was and was staying inside it, just to mock him, the little bastard.

Until suddenly it froze, and then bolted.

Snape cursed when the thing suddenly dashed for the living room, and he was forced to chase it, but as he went, he was overtaken.

By a cat.

Snape stopped in his tracks, fury surging in his chest. What next, an elephant? he fumed, and he strode angrily into the living room after the invaders.

The cat was one of the mangy, scrawny animals that populated the rubbish-strewn alleyways of this detestable neighbourhood, and had apparently taken it upon itself to simply follow its quarry right inside his house as if it owned the place.

This was unacceptable. This was his house, not the M6, not an arena, and certainly not a bloody cafeteria!

Well, he would just have to dispatch both of them.

Although the drama unfolding on his living room floor was certainly promising to be interesting. The cat had chased down the rat, following it under the coffee table, around the armchair, nearly knocking over the floor lamp, and had finally cornered it beside the sideboard.

Before Snape had a chance to move, to get in a clear shot at at least one of the combatants, the cat pounced.

It was a direct hit, but by God if that rat wasn’t very nearly bigger than the cat—and said rat plainly had no plans to surrender without a struggle.

Snape had never seen a cat and rat fight before. But that rat had no intentions of becoming a meal for anything, and it was biting and scratching and squeaking with everything it had. The two of them
had become little more than a whirling ball of fur and claws and tails and teeth, hissing and squealing and sending tufts of hair and gobbets of blood flying all over his tired old rug.

The cat—barely more than a kitten, really—was being slung all over the floor by the furious rears and jerks of its prey, but it held on for dear life, dangling from the rat’s neck by its jaws as it was pummelled and slammed about like a mangy black piñata. But the rat was beginning to slow; Snape could see that a goodly amount of the blood spatters dotting the floorboards were coming from its neck; its very gyrations in trying to free itself only rending and tearing the flesh of its throat beyond repair.

...dammit.

The cat suddenly let go; the rat, sensing that the fight had taken a turn for the worse, at least for itself, attempted to cut its losses and retreat, lurching drunkenly toward the kitchen, leaving a trail of red dots trailing behind it, but the cat, scratched and torn and no little bloodied itself, gave a mighty leap and landed on its back; its claws went into its back and it closed its jaws on the back of the rat’s neck.

With a dull crunch and a heavy whump, the rat went limp.

Snape looked dourly down at the mess on his floor, and the stiff and growling cat still tenaciously gripping the neck of its meal. “This house is not big enough for the two of us,” he informed it, twisting his wand in his fingers.

The cat glared fiercely up at him from behind the wad of fur in its mouth. Snape took a step forward, and the cat had the nerve to growl at him, that funny, humming whine that cats gave when they were angry, before it started dragging the rat away.

Snape scowled at it, raised his wand—and then stopped.

A cat around the place might keep the rats out. Not that he wanted to adopt the little mongrel, but if it had found the way in, it might leave enough of its scent around to ward off the vermin. That idea had appeal, at least.

He hesitated a moment more, and then put his wand away. “This does not mean that you are moving in,” he said fiercely to the retreating feline as it dragged off the twitching corpse. He followed it into the kitchen, where the cat was backing up into the corner of the kitchen, making its way towards the back of the cabinet.

There was a fresh hole chewed in the side by rat teeth; Snape had closed it up countless times before, and every time the rats always just ate their way in again. There had to be another hole somewhere in the wall back behind them, but damned if he could find it.

Still growling through its hairy mouthful, the cat backed through the hole, tugging its burden with it. The body nearly got stuck, jammed crookedly into the small hole, but with a mighty jerk, the cat managed to pull it through.

Snape snorted and left the cat to it. He followed the smeary trail of rat blood and clumps of hair that it had left, scouring them away with his wand, before going back into the kitchen to finish clearing his table, to put the jam away, and to pour out the now cold tea (after one compulsory but unenthusiastic swallow of the stuff) and wash his cup.

He was, he reflected as he set his cup neatly away beside its single companion, pleased that he hadn’t eaten anything. Apparently that wretched animal had decided that the dark safety of his cabinetry
was as good a place as any for its own breakfast, and was now treating Snape to a series of revolting crunching noises.

He hated this place.

The day passed in a surreal sort of haze. He’d never spent a Halloween like this in recent memory, still fully sober but without something to keep him busy. Back at Hogwarts, it was one or the other: dealing with the cretinous vermin that were the students if it was a weekday, or locking himself in his quarters with a bottle and not coming out for the entire day if it was a weekend. But then, Halloween had not been the only day he’d found himself pickling his liver alone in his quarters, drunkenly wallowing in his own misery—Dumbledore seemed to feel it his duty to keep reminding Snape of his mistakes, time and time again, as if he were a recalcitrant, half-trained dog, kicking him again and again with the knowledge of where his choices had led him, just to keep him in line, lest he bite.

As if he’d needed the manipulative old bastard’s endless not-so-subtle hints and cool reproaches to keep from forgetting. Having to look into the green-eyed face of James Potter’s filthy little spawn day after day was reminder enough.

And he hadn’t even needed that—even alone, as he was now, he would never—could never forget what he’d done for as long as he lived.

Snape didn’t have many clear recollections of the Halloweens before that one; as a small child, they were just the same as any other day, as his parents never bothered with it, and all the other children knew to stay away from that part of town, even when playing pranks. At school the holiday was only marked by a feast, but no other consideration was afforded the date.

In fact, the earliest Halloween he could properly remember was the one twenty years ago to date.

It had dawned like any other—like this one even. He’d awakened with that increasingly familiar sensation of barely suppressed panic—was she safe?!

She was, he had assured himself, as he had every morning since trading his own life for hers—but he wasn’t. His first waking moments were filled only with thoughts of her, but hot on their heels were fears for himself. Surely the Dark Lord wouldn’t be fooled for long. He would find out—he always found out—and then that would be the end of Severus Snape.

But it was worth it, he told himself, to keep her safe.

And it had been. Nothing was too much for her; there was no price too great to pay for that most stunning of his own follies in setting his Master on the one thing he never wanted touched by what he’d embraced.

And so he’d kept on, day after day, looking the Dark Lord in the eye and lying to him, all for her. Because Dumbledore would keep her safe.

But he hadn’t.

Yes, he remembered that Halloween—at least, up to the point that the Dark Lord had disappeared, and the rumours began to fly, and he heard that—no, it couldn’t be, she was safe, he’d seen to it, she was safe—

And then Dumbledore had summoned him, and he’d been there in an instant, and how he’d begged him to say that it wasn’t true, but it was.
Dumbledore had failed. *He* had failed. And she’d paid the price.

He didn’t remember much after that—what little of that night he did recall was thin, stretched around the edges. How much of that was due to the fact that he’d given those memories away three years ago, and how much was just because his mind had simply shut down in the face of his overwhelming grief and remorse, he didn’t know.

He didn’t want to live like this, in endless self-inflicted torment.

But if he forgot, he would forget everything, and losing the pain of his memories would mean losing the joy as well, giving back the regrets of his foolishness along with the scraps of happiness of bygone days.

And those memories, be they sad or merry, were all he had of her now—so he remembered.

He’d been remembering all day, wandering around his house in a vacant daze. He’d labelled the hangover potion that he had brewed and bottled yesterday, he’d dusted and tidied, he’d added a handful of bills to all his assorted hiding places for his cash throughout the room, he’d done his laundry (magically, and carefully up in his workroom, where he did all but the most minor spells), and he’d even taken a shower, and a long one, even though he’d already bathed once this week—and he’d rearranged the furniture in his bedroom, scrambling it around so that it no longer was a mirror image of his old bedroom back home.

Just for something—*anything*—to do.

That useless little imbecile had finally come back that afternoon to deliver his groceries. He knocked once—and didn’t knock again, Snape was viciously pleased to hear, and when he jerked open the door and glowered down at the impertinent wastrel, he’d cringed most satisfactorily.

Snape had taken his weekly rations, thrown the brat’s money back at him, and slammed the door without a word.

While putting away his groceries (dammit, what on earth was he going to do with two jars of jam? And he didn’t even like raspberry!), he realized that he hadn’t eaten all day, and so when his cupboard and icebox were restocked, he made himself a cold cheese and pickle sandwich and forced it down. Then he’d had to clean up after himself, and remake his bed, since his sheets were finished airing by then, and put away his folded clothes.

By the time he had finally finished up every task that he’d started that day, the sun was dipping low behind the nearby buildings, the light growing dusky and dim, and he was tired, and now he was just going to put on a record, sit down, and wash away his woes with a bottle of Old Ogden’s.

He knelt down in front of the small cabinet behind his sofa and opened the doors. His eyes flicked briefly up to the battered old record player that he’d scavenged from a pawnshop on the other side of town. It had been broken when he’d found it, and so he’d haggled and intimidated the owner down to a reasonable price, and once he’d got it home, a few spells had restored it to a passable facsimile of working condition.

He’d made it a habit of scouring second hand shops in all the years since he’d left home in an attempt to recover his old record collection, an admittedly fine selection of albums that was now undoubtedly in Potter’s hands—along with every thing else he’d ever owned.

The brainless little bastard—he wouldn’t know real music if it bit him on the arse. Snape’s near thirty years worth of records was probably sold off for a pittance—if not just tossed in the rubbish heap—
all scattered to the winds, even the 45 single of “Mamma Mia” that wasn’t even his and he’d never really liked but he kept anyway, the one that had been left at his house by accident, but never reclaimed after fifth year because she didn’t—

And now Potter had them all, all his albums, all his clothes, all his books, all his potions, all his notes, all his old letters, all his pictures—everything.

Everything of her that he had left—gone.

He flicked glumly through the meagre selection that stood silently in their shabby sleeves in the bottom shelf of the cabinet. The records he had now were very nearly on their last legs, particularly when compared to his old ones back home, these having been scrounged from derelict little shops across three continents and were more often than not in deplorable condition that he’d had to restore with spellwork, rather than the neat and carefully stored records that he’d kept under layers of protective and preserving enchantments.

Still, one did what one could with the resources available—he’d learned that at least, growing up as he did. He thumbed through the albums—mostly just the more famous releases, as he was having trouble recovering his rarer favourites. Tommy, Led Zeppelin IV, A Night at the Opera, Dark Side of the Moon—after a moment’s hesitation, he pulled out that last one. The grooved black disk slid easily from its sleeve, and he lightly blew off the dust before setting it on the turntable, Side One, and flicking on the machine.

The lights on the front glowed red, and the record began to turn on the spindle when he lifted the arm and set the needle on the edge with the usual loud scratching, before it settled into the familiar opening bars of “Speak to Me.”

He set the album sleeve atop the cabinet and turned his attention to the upper shelf, where several bottles of Old Ogden’s sat gleaming dustily back at him. He stood, reaching inside, his fingers closing over the slender neck of a bottle and the round bottom of a tumbler. He closed up the cabinet, carrying his cargo back with him to the sofa.

A flick of his wand and the cork came shooting out of the bottle. He grasped it by the middle, the glass cool and smooth and the paper label flaking beneath his fingers, and he poured a stream of honey-gold liquid into the glass; it roiled up around the sides, tiny bubbles caught on the bottom bouncing up to the surface to sparkle enticingly in the last few rays of the setting sun.

He set the bottle aside, corking it carefully so as not to lose a single drop of the precious oblivion within. He picked up the glass and stared into it, turning it this way and that, watching the way it caught the dying light filtering in from outside.

“Cheers,” he murmured.

Lily…

He took a drink.

Snape had learned to drink from his mother. His father was never really one for the bottle. Oh, he’d go out now and again with his mates from the mill and while away the occasional hours down at Footage and Firkin’s, celebrating his birthday with a pint or three, or spending an evening carousing happily when Manchester United had a winning streak. But those occasions were relatively rare, in no small part because alcohol didn’t come cheap; more often than not he would simply slouch home from work late at night, eat whatever supper was left on the table, and then go up to bed.
Toby Snape hadn’t been a tall man, but he’d been a powerfully-built one (and one who never quite seemed to know what to make of the scrawny, bookish boy sprung from his loins), his arms and shoulders broad from years of back-breaking labour at the mill, and he could hold his liquor with the best of them. He came back from those barroom excursions boisterous and jovial and full of laughter. He’d usually top off his evening with one last bottle that he’d brought home with him (and he would often as not give young Severus a drink, which he took willingly, despite not liking the way the bitter stuff burned in his throat and made him want to sneeze, because then Dad would laugh and clap him on the back and Severus would feel like a man), before going merrily upstairs and falling into a rather sodden sleep, snoring fit to rattle the rafters, and waking up his usual bad-tempered self the next morning.

His mother, on the other hand…she didn’t just have a drink—she drank. Gin was her poison of choice (and subsequently a drink he’d shied away from all his life, lest he fall into its somnolent embrace the way she did). Mum didn’t drink it all down at once, oh no—she could nurse a single bottle all day, stretching it out across the long hours of the afternoon and into a drowsy night, her eyes starting sightlessly across the room, her mouth slack as she slumped across the sofa, wrapped up in her own private, numb little juniper cocoon.

At least, until Dad came home and caught her at it, and they started going at each other again.

And so it was that Snape toasted his mother’s memory as well with his slow, steady sips into the night as the record played. He’d only just finished his first glass when “The Great Gig in the Sky” ended and the arm lifted and gently ratcheted back into its cradle. He got up to flip the record over, and then sat down and poured himself another.

And so it went; drinking one glass for each side of each record, as he slowly worked his way through his pathetic little collection of nostalgia, his head lolling back in his chair, his eyes half-shut as he stared into nothing, listening to the music, and remembering.

It was no surprise, then, that he leapt a mile and dropped his drink on the floor when he heard the sudden crack of a gunshot and the crash of broken glass.

Snape flew to his feet, tottering only a little, his wand out and ready. His wards had kept him from being shot, but his window was destroyed, slivers of glass scattered all on the floor beneath it.

He blinked at it for a moment, wondering what in the name of Nimue was going on out there, his confused and whisky-befuddled head clearing enough for him to first feel a few twinges of alarm, and then to begin to get well and truly angry.

But those tiny stirrings of anger were nothing compared to the sudden explosion of wrath when he heard the slurred voice outside. “Where are you, you bastards?! I heard you!”

Andrews.

That stupid fucking Yank!

This was it. This was absolutely it.

He hated this place—he hated the people, he hated the weather, he hated the food, he hated the language—but most of all he fucking hated Andrews!

With a snarl of inarticulate rage, he was across the room in three livid strides, savagely yanking open the door. He didn’t care anymore—he didn’t care if someone was looking for him, he didn’t care if he gave himself away, he didn’t even care if he was arrested for using magic on a Muggle—he was
going to make that smug, smirking little wankstain wish he’d never been born!

He stepped out into the street—and almost tripped.

Over Andrews.

Snape stared. There was his neighbour, sprawled out on the pavement, a gun in his hand, his hair in disarray, wearing nothing but his boxer shorts and a T-shirt.

He blinked, his anger largely pushed aside by bafflement. “What in God’s name are you doing?” he demanded.

“I heard something.”

Andrews was clearly drunk, his normally clipped words slushy, his head waving as he lifted it and then let it fall back down on the street.

Snape’s fury surged upwards again. “You heard nothing, idiot—unless maybe it was one of the three marbles rattling around between your ears—now get off my front porch! You could have shot me!”

Andrews pushed himself up on his hands and knees and swung his head wide, tilting it back to look up at him.

Snape sucked in a breath and took an involuntary step back.

Andrews had no eyes.

Snape knew that—it was writ large in the Santiago boy’s mind when he’d first looked, and Andrews’s complete imperviousness to Legilimency had confirmed it.

But to see it—to see the blank, gaping holes in his face normally hidden behind dark glasses—was still a shock.

Despite said shock, at the moment Snape had no sympathy. Given Andrews’s penchant for sticking his pointed weasel’s nose where it didn’t belong, he more than likely deserved whatever he got.

“Get up, Andrews,” Snape said tightly, “and get back inside.”

“Fuck you,” Andrews slurred, and put one hand on his knee, as if to brace himself to stand, but when he tried he just stumbled and barely caught himself from falling face-first on the ground again.

Andrews sat still for a moment, and then his slim hand, fluttering like a startled white moth, flew upward and flapped around his face. “My glasses,” he said. “Where are they?” He dropped to his hands and knees. “I can’t find them!” He started forward, crawling aimlessly—blindly—forward, grubbing around in the dirt and grit of the road.

Snape had never seen anything so pathetic in his life.

He turned his eyes away, in no small part just to look at something other than the sorry sight of his neighbour on the ground in front of him, and saw his sunglasses. They had snapped in two, and were lying broken on the pavement—in the opposite direction from where Andrews was scrabbling.

With a heavy grunt of irritation, he stalked over and picked up the glasses; a wordless Reparo and they were as good as new. “Here,” he said roughly, thrusting them down in front of Andrews’s seeking hands.
They were snatched up in the proverbial blink of an eye, and Andrews crammed them back on his face. Then he rocked back on his heels, the gun still clenched in his hand, and looked stupidly around the street, considering the situation for a moment before dropping back to his hands and knees and starting to crawl painfully across the ground towards his door.

Snape ground his teeth in annoyance and then reached over and grabbed the stupid sod by the arm and hauled him to his feet.

Andrews started. “Get your hands off me!” he yelled, flailing wildly, to the point that Snape gave in to his instinctual uncharitable impulse and obligingly dropped the little ingrate. Andrews landed with a dull thud on the ground, and Snape stood impassively over him.

“Now do you want help?” he asked dryly.

“Get bent, asswipe,” Andrews said. “No one I don’t know touches me.”

“If you cannot remember the man who lives next door to you and who you have spent nearly the last nine months tormenting, you must be intoxicated beyond even your usual stupidity—quite an achievement, given that your intelligence has never been all that acute to begin with,” Snape informed him.

Andrews’s lip curled as he looked up at him from the pavement. “I’m smarter than you, chickendick—smart enough to know that I don’t know you.” He pushed himself back up to his knees. “Greene,” he sneered. “How phoney can you get?”

A cold finger of unease prodded Snape in the chest, but he remained expressionless. “Mark Andrews, perhaps?” he asked.

Andrews snorted and tried to heave himself to his feet; he did not get far. “Mark Andrews has a bank account and a driver’s licence—which is more than anyone would find on Don Greene, I’d wager—should someone get a mind to go looking, anyway,” he said.

Snape glowered at the little white worm writhing on the ground beneath him, and then resignedly reached down and hove him up off the street again. Andrews came limply this time; Snape got the great lump around the middle and pulled him into a roughly standing position. He braced himself and half-marched, half-dragged the drunken louse across the way to Number 15. Andrews managed to stay upright until the last moment; he tripped on the step leading up to his open door, and it was with a strangled curse that Snape only just avoided going down in a heap with him. As it was, they wound up propped against the doorframe, Snape sandwiched between the house and its occupant, the edge of the doorjamb poking painfully into Snape’s back, and Andrews leaning heavily against his chest. “So, yeah,” said Andrews softly, making no attempt to move, his tequila-redolent breath puffing hotly in Snape’s face. “I don’t know you.” A bitter grimace twisted his face. “I don’t even fucking know what you look like.”

Two blundering hands swung wildly up, and Snape flinched in surprise when one smacked into his cheek, the other against his neck, and Andrews began feeling and groping around at his face. He was so surprised that he only had the sense to pull away when Andrews’s fingers began flirting with his still-buttoned collar, running along the edge of his tattered neck.

“Don’t touch me!” Snape snarled, jerking his face away from the hand that was prodding at his nose and all but throwing Andrews into his house.

Andrews didn’t catch himself; he almost brained himself on the coffee table. He missed by inches, though; with a growl of fury, Snape slammed the door behind him and crossed the room to pick
Andrews up by the back of his shirt and fling him roughly in a chair.

Andrews flopped about like a landed fish, trying to right himself, while Snape stood over him and glared in angry disapproval. Once Andrews had managed sit up, splayed in the chair, the gun still held tight in his fingers (no doubt the same gun that he’d been holding on him that day in the café—the same gun that he’d shot that little girl with), he just sat there, his head lolling aimlessly.

“Now, you listen to me,” Snape snarled, and Andrews looked up at him, his face blank. “I put up with your moods, your inability to keep your nose out of my business, your obsessive need to listen to yourself talk, and your constant leeching of food from me, but this is where I draw the line. Do you hear me, you filthy little trog?” he demanded. “I have the right to sit in my own home without fear of being shot! I don’t care what you do to yourself over here, but keep it out of my house!”

“Well, aren’t you just Little Miss High-and-Mighty?” Andrews sneered, and he leaned forward and grabbed a still half-full bottle of tequila sitting on the table and took a healthy slug. “Anything else you want, Your Majesty?”

Snape grabbed a fistful of Andrews’s shirt and shook him. “I want to be left alone, you bastard!”

“Oh, well, you can’t always get what you want!” Andrews shot back in his face, and he leaned forward and pushed his fist between them, his fingers clenched around the bottle and took another drink from it. “I wanted twenty million pesos, but did I get it? No,” he spat, his voice laced with frustrated resentment. “They did. And I got this.” He hooked a finger on the bridge of his sunglasses and jerked them down, and Snape found himself staring into the dark, mangled tunnels that were once his eyes.

Then Andrews pushed them back up, and Snape dropped him back in his chair. Andrews took another long pull on his bottle. He was a disaster—clearly a sprinter, not a long-distance drinker like Snape himself. The tequila sloshed as Andrews swung the bottle back down to rest on his thigh, his fingers curling restlessly around the neck. “They got it all, Greene—everything. And I got nothing,” he said. Then he snorted bitterly. “Less than nothing.” He took another drink. “I had a plan—I’d planned it all out, to the very last detail. I set up all the shapes. And then they fucked it up. They didn’t fall.”

“How tragic,” said Snape frostily.

Andrews swung his head slowly around to look at him sightlessly from behind his glasses; Snape could see his own reflection in the lenses. “I lost,” said Andrews, his voice hollow. And then he smiled, cold and slow. “But it wasn’t tragic. It was bad—but not tragic. No—what would have made it tragic is if she’d gotten away with it. But she didn’t. That time, I won.” He tilted his head and looked up at Snape. “I got her,” he murmured softly. “She was mine, and I got her.” His expression was exultant, rapturous. “Lily.”

Snape went rigid, staring down at Andrews with wide eyes.


Snape didn’t move, frozen where he stood. What did he mean? What did he know? “Who?” he demanded.

“Lily—Susana, in Mexican,” Andrews answered amiably. “Susana Ajedrez.” He snorted. “That’s what she said her name was, anyway—fucked if I know what it really was.” He grimaced and took another drink, and Snape relaxed marginally. “Barillo, I guess—unless she was a bastard. She was
certainly a bitch, anyway.”

Snape raised an eyebrow even as the knotted fist clamped on the base of his spine loosened. *Barillo?* As in the recently deposed cartel? That was certainly a far-fetched story—and Andrews was clearly far too drunk to be able to make up something like that from scratch. *Looks like he has enemies in high places.* That certainly explained a few things.

Andrews was picking moodily at the peeling label of his tequila. “Can you believe that *I* went after *her?*” he demanded suddenly. “I thought she was a cop. But she wasn’t—she had me from the fucking get-go. By the tail, by the balls, by the short-and-curly—by the *everything.* By the eyes.”

Snape shifted slightly, his eyes flickering to the side, and after a second or two of indecision he sat down in the armchair across from Andrews. He had a headache and he wanted to go home. But he couldn’t leave, not now.

Andrews was still talking. “She stuck with me for a year and a half. I should have smelled something fishy then—no broad ever stuck around that long. If I didn’t give ‘em the heave-ho myself, they’d run off on their own. Because they don’t know how to *share,*” he groused.

“But no, not her—I stepped out on her all the time, but Ajedrez kept coming back. I’d guessed she thought we were just friends with benefits or something—she was no friend of mine!” he said, suddenly fierce. “She was supposed to be my pawn—but she played me!”

And then he smiled again, almost serenely. “That is, until the end, anyway. At the end she was *mine.*” He took another swallow.

“I do miss seeing things,” Andrews said after a moment of silence. “It’s always the little things, you know? The stupid shit you don’t think about until you miss it. Like squinting against the light when you first turn on a lamp in the dark. Or the watching the veins that pop out on the backs of your hands when you make a fist.” He held up his bottle and swirled the contents. “Or just staring into your glass, watching the way the booze sloshes ‘round the sides.” He stared at the bottle without seeing it, the tequila eddying lazily inside. “But that day,” he said slowly, “that was the only time I ever *regretted* not seeing.”

His face twitched, and Snape could swear that he’d just flicked his eyes over at him, he couldn’t have, because he *had* no eyes. “Because I wanted to look her right in the eyes when I killed her,” Andrews whispered.

Snape forced his fingers to unclench from where they were knotted painfully in the hem of his shirt. Andrews was silent now, still slowly swinging the now nearly empty bottle back and forth, back and forth, following it with his gaze even though he couldn’t see it.

He looked at his neighbour, half-naked and filthy, sprawled in his chair. By the litter of bottles and glasses on the table and the floor, it looked like he’d been at this all day. With a grunt Snape stood up; Andrews didn’t move.

Snape walked to the bathroom; the sudden rise from his seat made his head throb most unpleasantly. He shut the door behind him, warded the door, and closed his eyes, visualising the top of his own stairwell.

And with a loud and painful *crack* he was there. He wobbled a bit, but managed to keep his footing and unlocked his workroom. The thick, medicinal smell of his potions, normally a familiar comfort, now just made him feel vaguely nauseous, and he was glad he hadn’t eaten much that day.
He rummaged in his basket, which was perched neatly on his workbench in its usual place, and came up with a sleeping draught for his neighbour, to see to it that he wasn’t shot in his bed, and one of his own hangover remedies for himself; his head was pounding as if a mountain troll was smashing walnuts inside it. He turned to leave, hesitated, and before he could think better of it, he grabbed one more vial of his hangover remedy before locking the room back up and Apparating back into Andrews’s bathroom.

He let himself back out into the house proper, banishing his charms on the door with a thought; Andrews hadn’t moved, was still staring pointlessly at his tequila. Snape crossed the floor and picked up two of the scattered glasses that were lying around near the table’s legs. Setting them on the table, he poured out the thin yellow mixture that was his hangover cure into both of them, and topped off the second with the smoky purple sleeping draught. Then he reached over and grabbed the tequila bottle; Andrews’s fingers were limp and it came away from his grasp without resistance. Snape poured the finger or two of tequila left in the bottom of the bottle into Andrews’s glass, and then pressed it into his hand. “Finish up,” he said, taking up his own glass. He looked at it, into it, and then lightly tapped the rim against the one clenched in Andrews’s fist. “To the ladies.”

Andrews looked up at him; the corner of his mouth quirked and he raised his glass. “A-fucking-men.” And he tossed it back.

It didn’t take long; with the amount of liquor apparently in his system, it was amazing Andrews was still conscious at all. The potion did the rest, and he slumped limply in his seat, the glass rolling down between his leg and the seat cushion, the gun clattering to the floor, dropped from his boneless fingers. Snape downed his own, the willow bark and feverfew bitter on his tongue, and set the glass down on the table before letting himself out, locking the door behind him.

He tiredly made his way back to his own house and opened the front door. He went inside and shut the door behind him, and found himself in the dark and empty silence of his own tiny domain.

The record had finished, the arm resting neatly in its cradle, the turntable still. The half-empty bottle of whisky was still sitting forlornly on the table, the upended glass on the floor atop a dark stain of his spilled drink on the tired old rug. With a weary sigh and flick of his wand, the stain seeped away into nothing, and he Banished the glass to the kitchen.

Snape picked up the bottle and held it loosely by the neck, swaying it back and forth, back and forth in front of him, swirling the golden liquid inside and following it with his eyes, before picking up the cork and jamming it firmly in the bottle’s mouth. He put it away in the cabinet, and then lifted Black Sabbath from the turntable and slid it back in its sleeve, tucking it away amongst its comrades below.

He was tired. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, and then sighed.

*Goodnight.*

He went upstairs and went to sleep.
“—and that’s when Miguel let it slip that my family was going to have a surprise birthday party for me this evening, so I’ll have to leave early today, but don’t worry, I’ll be staying as long as I can. I told them that you might be doing something for me—that didn’t mean that you had to—but I do appreciate it!—but anyway, they’re going to have the party be at dinner instead of lunch like we’d always done before I started working for you. I feel bad about knowing, but it’s probably for the best, in case you’d asked me to stay late and that would’ve spoiled their whole plans. I would’ve felt really bad about that, and besides—I can at least pretend to be surprised, can’t I? So I’ll probably leave around four, ’cause I think the party’s gonna start at about five. I hope you don’t mind, Señor —”

Sands did mind. He minded a lot. But to respond at all would imply he’d been listening, and he didn’t want Chiclet to get the idea that he cared. He only listened to Chiclet when he was being useful, and at the moment he was most assuredly not.

Today was Chiclet’s birthday. He was fourteen, the little peckerwood. Sands had forgotten that the kid had turned thirteen just a month or two after all that nastiness on the Day of the Dead—God, had that really been over a year ago? Anyway, it had been a bit of a surprise (he hated surprises). For one thing, he’d thought the kid no more than eleven when he’d met him, and he still had that idea, even though he knew better. Oh, well. Late bloomer, that one.

Sands had already thanked him for choosing to be born in December, where it wouldn’t be so frackin’ hot when Sands took him out for said birthday. Not that Sands truly wanted to take Chiclet out and let him have a good time—no, it was the principle of the thing. First thing this morning Chiclet had dropped on him the unpleasant surprise that he’d not be staying as late as he usual, because his family finally had the funds to give him a genuine birthday party, instead of their usual small celebration and one present that tended to consist of a pair of shoes or new clothes. Not to be outdone by some bigass Mexican family that leeched off of their kid, Sands had immediately informed Chiclet that, that being the case, the two of them would spend the day out, seeing it was Saturday and Chiclet wouldn’t be holed up in school learning all manner of useless things. He’d winced at the way Chiclet had been oh-so pleased by that particular announcement, but it was too late now.

They were already well over half through the day, after having eaten at a pretty high-class joint that had served excellent pibil (fortunately for the cook, still not the best), and then they’d left for the ice cream parlor. And now here they sat, with Chiclet babbling at top speed about stuff Sands didn’t care about over a huge bowl of chocolate ice cream with fudge and sprinkles (and how Sands was going to enjoy turning the hyperactive little shit back over to his parents—they were going to have a rip-roaring good time with that). Sands himself had ordered one scoop of mint and another scoop of strawberry on top of that—with whipped cream, of course, and lots of it. He hadn’t had ice cream in
a long while, and this stuff wasn’t half bad. Wasn’t anything like what he could get in the States, of course, but it would have to do. Now if only these wetbacks knew the meaning of cheesecake—then he’d be pretty much in heaven.

Food-wise, that is. Otherwise, he was still in hell, trapped in this hole-in-the-road of Dante-esque proportions, and he was right at the bottom of it.

Well, no—he should be fair with himself. He was crawling his way up now—because he’d well and truly hit the bottom a month and a half ago.

He scowled and stabbed his spoon into his ice cream. What was probably the most off-pissing of the whole debacle last Halloween was that there wasn’t anyone else he could blame it on. He had simply made the spectacularly stupid mistake of drinking all fucking day without even Chiclet to supervise him (goddammit—that kid was not his wet nurse!). He admitted it—it royally chapped his caboose, but he admitted it—it had been a mistake. A big mistake. Because he’d gotten pig-drunk and promptly wound up in the middle of the street. He didn’t know how he’d gotten there or why, but the fact of the matter was that he had, and if Greene hadn’t decided to choose that moment to show up, who knows what would’ve happened to him. But show up he had. Sands still hadn’t decided if Greene was a blessing or a curse (curse), because on the one side, Greene had taken him inside and apparently watched him until he passed out. On the other side, Sands had talked. While he still wasn’t sure what all he’d said, he knew he’d said enough. He’d talked, and he’d said things he most assuredly should not have. The one thing that he clearly remembered amidst all his drunken recriminations and Greene’s less than comforting bedside manner was saying who he’d killed that day—Susana Ajedrez, Barillo’s daughter.

And that was a disaster waiting to happen. Of all the incriminating names he had filed away that he could blab, he’d just had to go ahead and spill that one. If it got back to certain members of the cartel—loyal members, and every cartel had them—he’d be in a world of hurt.

And that old doucherocket Greene fucking knew about it.

“I’m done, Señor,” Chiclet said brightly, jarring him out of his thoughts.

“It’s about time,” Sands said, throwing his napkin on the table and pulling out his cash. “Will ten cover this?”

“Oh, very much so, Señor,” Chiclet said, sounding pleased with Sands’s supposed generosity. He gave the kid a warning look and tossed what he knew would be a ten down before scooting away from the table, snapping his fingers for Chiclet to get in front of him, which he did. He followed the kid out, winding through the tables to the sound of Chiclet’s footsteps, until they were once again standing out in the warm sunshine of the early afternoon.

“Where are we going now?” Chiclet asked, taking Sands’s hand like a little kid to guide him around a parked car (the kid really wasn’t doing anything to disabuse Sands of the notion that he was still eleven).

“Time to buy you something. What do you want?” Sands asked, rooting around for a cigarette.

“Oh, I don’t want anything. Anything I need to buy I buy with the money you give me, and I haven’t really needed anything,” Chiclet replied cheerfully. Sands snorted down at him.

“Jesus Christ, kid—don’t you ever do anything for yourself? And don’t try and tell me that you buy stuff for yourself with what I pay you—you give all that cash to your family and I know it—so come
on, Gary Coleman. We’re buying you a new bike.”

“Oh, no, Señor, those are expensive—” Chiclet began to protest, but Sands silenced him with a look.

“What, and I’m so poor, is that it? That thing you ride around on now is bigger than an elephant. I don’t know how you stay on it—I personally would be embarrassed to be seen on it. So take us somewhere that sells bikes—good bikes, not wholesale aluminum cans,” he said sternly.

“Sí, Señor.”

Sands was quite pleased to hear that note of barely restrained happiness in Chiclet’s voice—sit on that and spin, Santiagos.

Despite his protestations to the contrary, Chiclet had obviously been ogling a new bike—a specific new bike—for quite some time, because he took him straight to a store a few streets over and had one selected in under a minute. “This one, Señor.”

“Gimme the specs,” Sands said, folding his arms and acting as if he was looking it up and down.

“Ten speed, tubeless tires, front and rear handbrakes, aluminum frame, dropdown handlebars, cushioned seat—and its blue and black with silver trim.”

“That’ll do, if you’re that in love with it,” Sands sighed, dragging out his money clip again. “How much is this thing in American money?” he asked the salesman who’d approached while they were checking out the merchandise; Sands could tell that his money clip was being eyed greedily.

“This model runs around a hundred and fifty,” the man said.

Sands raised an eyebrow. “I must have missed the gold plating,” he said pleasantly. “One hundred even, or I take my kid and my business elsewhere.”

“I can knock it down to one thirty, sir, but I do have to turn a profit,” the salesman returned. “It’s a fine piece of equipment—and think of your son, sir.”

“He’s not my son, so I don’t have to think about him. Throw in a lock, chain, basket, and bell on top of that one thirty, you’ve got yourself a deal,” Sands said, thumbing out the twenties even as he hitched up his shirt enough so that the butt of his gun peeked out from his pants.

The salesman took him up on his offer with all speed. Sands really was a shrewd trader, when it came down to it.

Sands immediately regretted buying the thing—Chiclet would not shut up about it. He gushed endlessly about Señor’s generosity, and how fast he could go now, how smooth and silent the chain was, how it wasn’t rusted, like the old one, and how much cooler it looked, this, that, and the other, and dear God, Sands wished he would be quiet.

“Yeah, all of that’s great, kid,” Sands interrupted, breaking up Chiclet’s second monologue about how some little punks he went to school with would be so jealous, “but you use that lock and chain. You let that thing get stolen, and I’ll make you pay for it.”

“Sí, Señor!” Chiclet replied happily, and if Sands could have rolled his eyes, he would have. And then Chiclet was off again, already talking about new things regarding the bike, when all he was really doing was confirming that he’d been coveting that bike for a while now, only he hadn’t said anything—why he never asked for anything or never used all his money for his own ends was beyond Sands.
Sands’s brows furrowed. Any time he found himself thinking of money, it invariably led back to thinking about the *mariachis*. The ones that got away—with his money. His mood had been bad enough—what with his spilling God knew what to Greene while drunk off his ass—but it was thoughts of those two bastards that really set him off. He’d been brooding on them for months—Chiclet’s birthday had in fact that the first time he’d actually been out and about town since José had clued him in to the exaggerated reports of the deaths of the men that he’d hired to do his dirty work for him.

He didn’t want to admit it, but somehow, going out and showing Chiclet a good time cleared up his mind a bit, even now as they were heading back home, with the kid going on at top speed about the bike and how he was going to let his little brothers and sisters ride it at his party this evening, and how his family would thank him as well for buying him such a nice bike. He wished Chiclet would stop talking about his family—he hated being reminded that there were other people in the kid’s life, because he really only had room for one.

“What time is it, Chiclet?” Sands asked, listening to the quiet *tic-tic-tic* of Chiclet’s new bicycle. He heard the kid shift a bit as he checked that huge watch he wore.

“Three forty-five, Señor.”

“Come on—let’s head back to my place. I need to teach you how to cheat at poker.”

“I don’t even know how to play poker, Señor.”

“I’ll teach you that, too. These are important life skills, kiddo. You need to know them—and who else to teach you them but me? We can do tequila shots later.”

The *tic* sound moved, and he followed after it, reaching out a hand to rest on the soft rubber of the handlebar grips, ambling neatly beside Chiclet as he changed directions for home, and they walked the bike together. The walk was always pleasant—Sands hated being cooped up in his house, and now that he knew the CIA wasn’t looking for him and the Barillo cartel had mostly been absorbed, he was much freer to wander about and get some air. As such, though he would never admit it, the walk home was much shorter than he would’ve liked.

Chiclet obediently used the new chain and lock on his bike, chaining it to what Sands knew to be the rusty handrail outside of his house (as if that would be much of a deterrent—you could probably just kick the things right off and steal the railing along with the bike) as Sands unlocked the door to the house.

Sands was highly annoyed when Chiclet firmly turned down the tequila.

“No, thank you, Señor,” he said in that patient but almost scolding tone that he used when he came over on those lousy days when Sands just sat in his chair all day and let the cigarette butts fall onto the floor. “I should be going, anyway—my family—”

“Yeah, yeah, your family.” Sands said crossly. “Well, bug out, then. I’ll just sit here all by myself and drink until I fall asleep.” He didn’t like to bring up his sleeping habits with the kid, because it was a dig at his own pride, as the kid was the only one who knew how bad his nightmares could get, but he made the sacrifice, as mentioning it was a very pointed barb that the little shit was sure to feel. And he did, too—Sands could hear him shifting uncomfortably. But then Chiclet took in a breath as if to speak, but he hesitated, and Sands didn’t like the sound of that. “Señor, I—I know you don’t like him very much, but…well, Don Greene’s medicines are very good,” he said.
Sands felt his fingers tighten on the arm of his chair. “And just what does that have to do with the price of cheesecake at Mindy’s?” he asked evenly.

Chiclet waffled for a moment before answering. “Well, Señor, I asked—I asked around a little, and he…well, he sells things to make you sleep better, and people say that when you take them you don’t dream, and I—I thought that maybe—”

“You thought what?” Sands interrupted, one eyebrow raised, voice low and dangerous. “You thought I might want some? Forget it—I’m not taking jack shit from that quack.”

He heard Chiclet shuffling his feet beside him. “So you—you wouldn’t take it?” he asked tentatively.

“No. I’m not taking it—I’m not taking a damned thing he has to offer,” Sands growled. He was furious—because he knew, he could just tell that the little shit had already bought something from the old SOB, and Greene wasn’t stupid and would know exactly who Chiclet had bought it for. Greene saw him sprawled out on his face in the street, Greene probably heard him screaming when he had particularly bad nightmares…and now this. Christ.

“Go away,” he said irritably.

Chiclet obeyed, giving a subdued, perfunctory goodnight before exiting the house and ringing his new bell on his new bike, pedaling away from Sands and back to his stupid family.

It was probably better that the little shit leave now, anyway, before Sands took it into his head to break his foot off in Chiclet’s ass. Besides—Sands needed to think. So he got up and walked over to his cabinet and pulled out the half-full bottle of tequila near the end, giving a quick jiggle to hear how much was in it before meandering back to his favorite chair, knowing his usual glass would be next to it. Pulling out a cigarette, he poured a liberal shot of booze before lighting up. He let the smoke fill his lungs, letting it slide back out of his mouth in lazy plumes. Think. He had to think.

He had important business to attend to soon. Those two mariachis…nobody screwed him over. Nobody. Not even Barillo’s pretty daughter had gotten away with it, so there was no way in hell those two were going to get off light (like she had). If they honestly thought that they were going to get away with so thoroughly botching the job and going behind his back, letting El get killed, offing Marquez before the President had kicked it, and then snatching up the twenty million pesos that were rightfully his, he, the one who set the whole thing up, setting up each card delicately and deliberately in place—

It was their fault almost as much as hers—and he’d die before letting those two get away with his money.

Time to make a few phone calls.

Sands usually didn’t out and out hate his contacts. He had no respect for them and held them in the utmost contempt, but they were too useful to really hate them.

But if he ever decided to, Gracia Hadriénos would be the one to hate. That one he would’ve enjoyed shooting under the table—many times over. It was almost a shame she’d proven so useful—because then he didn’t have an excuse to do so.

He’d been scouring the whole state via his slowly recovering network of contacts for information as to what El had done and where he had gone in those few days leading up to the coup, and he’d gotten lucky—El had gone to a mariachi bar right in Culiacán. He’d been elatedly positive at first that that was where he would find his two rogues, but they had apparently given him the slip—they...
had been there, but now they were gone. A few discreet questions had lead him to Hadrienos, the leading lady of the place—and the woman who interacted the most with the marachis that trailed in and out of the nasty little dive. So he’d sent her a little love note asking her if he might have a word with her, to discuss a business proposition.

He’d been vaguely disgusted but entirely unsurprised to discover that when he’d said he’d had business, she’d thought he’d meant business, not information. Still, he’d almost been startled into shooting her when the noise and press of people of the bar had masked her approach so that he hadn’t known she was there until he’d felt her hands suddenly on his shoulders, rubbing unpleasantly. But he’d kept his cool, and told her in no uncertain terms that he was not paying her for that sort of nonsense (he’d never paid money for sex in his life, and he certainly had no intention of starting now). She’d been put out at first, until he’d reassured her that he still wanted to pay her for services rendered—just not the usual.

What he’d wanted from her was simple—just to come up with any information pertaining to two marachis that had been here a year and four months ago—and that maybe they’d been seen with a third one, a man who’d been a little tall, with dark hair to his shoulders and with an exceptionally cold look in his eyes. She said that already sounded familiar…but had decided to milk the situation for what it was worth and told him that it would probably take another meeting and another lunchbox, as she put it. But he hadn’t said anything, merely smiled and tipped his hat and left, inwardly lamenting on his way out that it was bimbos like her that illustrated why he never bothered to collect many female contacts—men were just far more reliable (and God, but when the female of the species decided to turn on you, they went straight for the balls—straight for the eyes). But she’d already contacted him again and told him where to meet, because she had the info he wanted—and hopefully, after he got what he came for, he could wash his hands of her for good.

If she would ever actually arrive, that is. She was late, which didn’t do much to help the female stereotype. While he did appreciate being able to get to the meeting place before the contact that he would be ready with both his arm and his gun, he didn’t appreciate being forced to wait any longer than necessary. He hadn’t even wanted to come to this place, anyway—he’d been here before, and the pibil was crap.

He was already halfway through said pibil (Chiclet had inhaled his tamales like a little Mexican Hoover) when she’d finally decided to sashay into the dive.

“There she is,” Chiclet said quietly around a mouthful of tortilla, and Sands’s back straightened, his finger squeezing tight on the trigger when he heard the click of her high-heeled shoes.

“It’s good to see you again, Señor Andrews,” she said, sliding into the seat across from him. “Who’s the kid?” She didn’t wait for him to answer before he heard her turn to face Chiclet. “You’re a handsome little thing—what’s your name?”

“Never mind him—he doesn’t talk,” Sands said sharply. “Now,” he said, his voice dropping down into its usual, more even cadence. “I have your pay—and you said you had, as you put it, ‘a regular goldmine’ of information?”

She huffed, irritated. “Yes, I do.” Her voice took on a smug quality. “I asked around. And while I have the goods on what those two looked like, a couple of the other girls remembered exactly who they were. Exactly, as in I have their names.”

Sands couldn’t believe his luck. She had names. She had two names, which could lead to locations.

“One sang, the other played—kept groping me,” she sniffed haughtily. “I saw the singer meet that big Mexican by the doorway—long hair. That’s how I remembered who you were talking about. But
I left after that. I don’t know who the big one was, but I know the other two—"

“I know you know those two, you just said you knew them. Now, could you please disclose the names of the individuals in question? I would greatly appreciate it,” he said, admiring himself for the only slightly brittle tone.

“Why do you want to know them, anyway?” she asked, and he suppressed an agitated grimace.

“They owe me money,” he said softly, giving her his most charming smile. “Now—names, please? Names and faces to go with them, or you don’t get the rest of your pay, darling.”

She paused for a moment, and he could feel her regarding him. “Lorenzo was the name of the one who did the singing. He was tall, short hair, nice eyes and a pretty mouth. Thin. No surprise to find he owed you money—it was his favorite. His friend preferred the liquor, but he needed money too, to get it. Fideo was his name. Short, a little fat and not as pretty, with kind of long, curly hair. Liked the ladies, but was drunk most of the time. And that’s all I know. Now pay up,” she said, her voice sharp.

Sands smiled amiably, and swung down to pick up the Beauty and the Beast lunchbox Chiclet had purchased for him. “Five grand, all in there,” he said, setting it down in the clear spot he’d already scouted with his fingers. She snatched it up immediately, her long fingernails ticking on the thin plastic, and he heard her snap it open (he was reminded unpleasantly of Belini and once again cursed him for having the nerve to be dead when he actually needed his sleazy services).

She sniffed through her nose. “I thought I said I wanted it in fifties.”

“It’s money, sugar,” he replied. “Fifties or hundreds, it doesn’t much matter, so long as it folds and fits nice and neat in the box—or tucks in your g-string. Services rendered are now paid for. Thank you—you may go,” he said, sliding a cigarette from the pack in his pocket before leaning over to Chiclet for a light.

“A pleasure doing business with you, Señor Andrews,” she purred, sounding much happier after riffling through the neat stacks of bills that he’d put in the box—hundreds notwithstanding. “You will give me a call if you ever need anything else?” she asked, and he could feel her leaning over the table and wiggling a bit—no doubt to display her cleavage to the best advantage.

That ploy never worked with him—even when he’d had eyes. “I’ll call you first thing if I ever get a hankering for a case of the clap,” he said smoothly.

She spluttered, and he could tell she was trying to work up a good insult, but she clearly didn’t have the brains to manage it and she simply swept away, taking the lunchbox with her, angrily clacking her way out of the dive.

“Gone now?” he asked in a low voice.

“Sí, Señor,” Chiclet answered.

“Finally,” he muttered, putting his cigarette down momentarily to disengage his fake arm, setting down the knife in its plastic grip before tucking it away in his bag. “Was it just me, or was she ugly?” he asked Chiclet, cocking his head a little.

“No, Señor—she was pretty,” Chiclet answered.

“Good. I hate ugly chicks.”
“Careful—there’s a new pothole.”

Sands felt Chiclet’s fingers close on his wrist, and then he was tugged slightly to the left to avoid the newest obstacle in the road that might prove difficult to negotiate for someone such as himself. He made a note of it. “This road gets any worse, the whole street is gonna wind up in the sewer,” he remarked as he straightened his course again when Chiclet withdrew his hand. He shifted his grip on the briefcase in his right hand, as Chiclet was holding the bag that held his fake arm, a spare gun, more ammunition, and a spare pair of sunglasses.

He was meeting José again today. He’d contacted him in March shortly after getting the names of his quarry, as he was a cop and it would be easiest for him to find people for him. And find people he had—but it had been a bitch, taking him three long months in order to do so. So it had been pricey, hence the tiny briefcase instead of his usual lunchbox as means of transport. Amazingly enough, he’d found a briefcase small enough for twenty-thousand dollars in fifties, a little case that Grace Kelly would’ve been proud of. Twenty-thousand was a lot, all things considered—chump change in the good old days, but a hefty chunk of moolah on his current, more modest budget—but given what this info meant to him, no price was too high at this point.

“He’s there already,” Chiclet said, letting him know that they’d reached the outdoor café.

“Dammit—is he ever late?” Sands growled angrily. But he tamped down in his irritation in a flash, assuming his usual cool mask that he reserved for confrontations and business transactions, and settled down into the chair that Chiclet scooted surreptitiously with his foot when he sat down in his own.

“I didn’t bother ordering—our business won’t take long,” José said the minute he sat.

“What—you don’t want to eat with me?” Sands said, pretending to be hurt. José snorted.

“No, I just have things to do today besides shoot the breeze with you, and your info is right here in this nice little envelope,” he said, and Sands heard him swishing the paper through the air in front of him, “so I don’t have to stay and talk. Let’s just do the exchange and get this over with so I can go get my meds and be on my way.”

Sands raised an eyebrow. “Meds? To my knowledge, those sorts of extracurricular activities aren’t condoned by the police force.”

Jose chuckled. “I doubt anyone cares if I take some home-brewed herbal painkillers,” he said dryly.

Sands would have blinked if he could have.

“I know, I know,” said José in response to Sands’s incredulous expression. “Sounds stupid—I’ll be the first to admit it. But there’s this old guy who comes to the square on weekends, and he sells these funny bottles of medicine and stuff, and by God if they don’t work just like magic. It’s amazing—I just use the salve he gives me twice a week, and my bum leg doesn’t bother me for a month. It’s pretty incredible, actually. I’d have never pegged the old fella for real—he looks like a real sleaze, and he’s a total asshole—but whatever he is, he knows his stuff.”

Sands pursed his lips. “The asshole in question—that wouldn’t be old Don Greene by any chance, would it?”

He could tell José was surprised. “Oh—you know him?”

“I know him. Let’s make our exchange, please,” he said, cutting off his line of inquiry and pulling the briefcase up and onto the table. He let José reach out and take it, drumming his fingers on the
table. José snapped the case open, gave a grunt of approval, and Sands heard the sound of a piece of paper—the envelope—slapping down on the tabletop in front of him.

“Done and done,” José said, sounding quite satisfied. “Now I’m off. Catch you later.”

“Actually, I’ll go with you,” Sands said abruptly. “Hold our table, kid.”

“Sí, Senor,” he affirmed as Sands got up. He could tell José was looking at him.

“Greene a friend of yours?” he asked as Sands carefully followed José’s footsteps.

“Definitely not,” Sands replied.

“But you said—”

“I said I knew him—didn’t say I liked him.”

“Then what—you take his stuff too?”

Sands wrinkled his nose. “I’d rather drink Conquistador Instant Leprosy. Now, why don’t you just mind your own business, José, and I’ll mind mine.”

Greene was not happy when they arrived, which certainly improved Sands’s afternoon. He smiled cheekily down at the old bugger as José put in his order.

“The usual, Señor,” he said politely, and he heard Greene rustling about in his basket. Sands turned to José.

“You sure you wanna do this? I mean, I know this guy,” he said, pointing down at Greene, who was audibly grinding his teeth, as usual. “He’s a real nutjob. And strapping fellow though you are, are you really willing to risk your health by drinking that stuff he sells?”

“No risk involved at this point,” answered José, sounding amused as he fiddled with what sounded like pesos. “I’ve used it before, and it works like a charm—not even any side effects.”

Sands shrugged. “Your liver.”

“Yes,” grated Greene, snapping the basket closed. “It’s your liver—and it’s fine.” Sands heard him slap a little jar into José’s hand followed by the crinkle of money being exchanged. But José just chuckled.

“Gracias, Señor. And hasta luego to you too, Andrews.” And with that, José’s footsteps went crunching away. They were barely out of earshot when Greene turned on Sands.

“You,” he snarled furiously. Sands bounced on his heels, sticking his hands in his pockets and giving a grin.

“Yes,” Sands said conversationally, rocking back and forth. “Actually, I came over here because I’m hungry.” He cocked his head and jerked his thumb behind him before returning his hand to his pocket, waiting patiently for Greene to cotton on. But he either pretended not to know what Sands was talking about, or he was just that stupid.
“I don’t really give a damn if you’re hungry, Andrews.”

“Well, fine, then,” Sands said, pretending to be affronted. “You sit there with your sandwich and your hot sun and your hat. I’ll be over there, in the cool and the shade, with a drink and a nice plate full of something that’s actually substantial and being waited on by pretty girls, and you’ll have to sit and stew in your own juices and think about how you passed up a free lunch just because you were afraid some lone gunman would show up and I’d have to save you again.”

He could practically hear Greene’s back go rigid, and he smirked, victorious. With a stream of growled muttering that Sands couldn’t quite make out but knew was decidedly unflattering to him, Greene got up, snatched up his basket, and stomped off across the plaza. Grinning with merry good humor, Sands followed the sound of Greene’s quick, fussy footsteps on the pavement and the pungent, herbal smell that always seemed to surround him back to the café.

Chiclet yelled, “Over here!” when they came in, undoubtedly flagging Greene down as well, and Sands wended his way over to the sound of his kid’s voice and sat down in his seat. Greene didn’t, and Sands stiffened when he marched right over to him, grabbed his left wrist, and jerked it skyward. He held his arm up, mildly surprised, and raised an eyebrow in Greene’s direction. “Now, now—not in public,” he said.

Greene snorted with a sound like a hacking cat. “Just checking,” he sneered, and threw Sands’s arm away from him and sat heavily across from him.

“You don’t trust me?” asked Sands, mocking and annoyed. He put his suspect hand over his heart. “That hurts.”

Greene snorted again. There was a brief silence, and then Chiclet spoke; Sands guessed Greene must have looked at him, because he said, “Hola, señor,” which annoyed Sands. He told him not to talk when they were doing business. But Chiclet kept talking. “I ordered for everyone already. And I told them no salsa on yours, señor,” he said, undoubtedly to Greene, and Sands scowled at the little shit, and from his silent fidgeting, guessed that Greene probably was too.

“So,” Sands said, breaking the silence and tapping out a cigarette, “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“You’ve never seen me,” Greene shot back waspishly.

Sands stopped, and looked at him stonily, his mouth tightening, before going about his business of lighting his smoke. “Well, I can see that you’d want to lay low,” he said, sucking in a relaxing lungful of smoke, “given that you’re supplying members of the local cartel with illegal narcotics.”

“I am doing nothing of the kind!”

Greene snarled, and Sands felt a triumphant smirk teasing the corners of his mouth. “They keep to their business, and I keep to mine, and if our paths happen to cross, I assure you it was due to no action of mine!”
Sands relaxed more fully than he had in months, and he smiled across the table. “Isn’t that nice.”

A rapid clicking of heels on tile broke the glowering silence radiating from the other side of the table, and then the waitress was beside the table with their lunch.

He picked up his fork and tasted the pibil immediately, despite the fact that’d he’d come here several times before and knew that it was good. Chiclet was clinking his own silverware around on his plate—the kid ate like a horse—and he heard Greene pick up his own cutlery in a rather desultory fashion, take a bite, and cough hoarsely.

Sands tipped back a sip of his tequila, nipped at a slice of lime, and took a quick pull on his cigarette. “You know,” he remarked, “you really need to cut back.” He brandished the butt of his cigarette at Greene like a baton before crushing it out in the ashtray. “They’re clearly doing your voice no good.”

Sands could almost feel the frost in the air when Greene answered, “For your information, I haven’t smoked in twenty years.”

Sands shrugged. “Too little too late, then—the thirty years you did before that sure did a number on you.”

Greene sputtered incoherently, a reaction that Sands had never managed to provoke before, and it was with an expression of polite curiosity that he asked, “Everyone says you must be in your sixties—is everyone mistaken?”

“My age is none of your business!” Greene snapped, clearly indignant.

“Ah—seventy.”

“I’m forty-two!” Greene spat, apparently reaching his limit.

Sands regarded him with an expression of slight incredulity that he knew from experience was guaranteed to enrage anyone when it came to discussing their age. “Life, the universe, and everything, hmm?” he asked, and after a moment more said, “You’re still old.”

Greene was eating rapidly and angrily, and Sands found that his lunch was tasting better and better as the meal wore on. “So if it wasn’t cigarettes…” he trailed off, laying a finger on his Adam’s apple. Greene was coldly silent, and Sands prodded, “Well, you surely don’t expect me to believe you’ve always sounded like a Mercedes McCambridge with laryngitis.”

“I cut myself shaving,” Greene bit out.

Oh-ho. Touchy. “That’s quite a razor you have there. Compensation, much?” he asked mildly.

Greene was chewing rather violently and refused to answer, and Sands smirked to himself. Cut, indeed. Not swallowed. And not illness, either, or he’d just say it. Sounds to me like the Greene Man had a nasty little accident. He filed it away for future reference, and then said, “You know, you really should try my pork,” pointing to his plate with his fork.

“No, thank you,” Greene grated.

Sands clucked and shook his head. “Your loss—puerco pibil really is the best Mexico has to offer.”

“That’s hardly any recommendation.”
Sands chuckled. “True, true—but when you’re stuck here, you really might as well just make the best of it.”

Greene wouldn’t answer again, and Sands smiled.

But then he was back to business, tensing at the sound of approaching footsteps. “Buenos tardes, señores,” he heard a male voice say, one that after a moment he identified as the manager of this place. “Forgive my interruption, but I wanted to bring you this—“ there was the sound of a basket being set down with a rustle of paper, and the sharp smell of grease and cinnamon reached his nose, “with my thanks. For the last time you two were here,” the man clarified. “When you helped us clear out that punk who tried to rob us—that was the third time he’d hit us.” There was a smirk in his voice as he went on, saying, “I’d wanted to thank you then, but you left so suddenly, and I hadn’t seen you both in together since then.”

There was a silence, and Sands could feel that Greene was nonplussed and uncomfortable, by the way his was shifting uneasily in his seat, but Sands was pleased. “Well, then, you’re very welcome. But really, it was no trouble at all, was it, Greene?”

Greene didn’t reply, but Sands didn’t expect him to, and the manager—Ramón, if he remembered correctly (which he always did)—said, “Well, anyway, thank you again, sirs, and you are always welcome here.”

Sands smiled benignly at him as he moved away, and then pointed at the basket and looked at Chiclet, who obligingly told him that they were churros. He gave an amused snort and then looked back up at his dubious lunch companion. “I told you that we were safe as kittens,” he said to Greene.

Greene just started eating again, but Sands could tell that he wasn’t happy—which really just put him in an even better mood. “There’s no need to be such a grump,” he said pleasantly, stirring his rice with his fork. “They love me. And against all odds, they seem to like you.”

Greene still didn’t say anything, but nonetheless, it was with a sense of satisfaction that Sands resumed eating his lunch.

“Take me down—oh, baby, take me down—oh won’t you please take me down,” he whispered, strumming hard on the strings of his new guitar, making a beautiful racket fit to wake up anything within a two-mile radius.

When Sands had woken up that morning, it had been too hot to masturbate, his nonexistent eyes had been itching like crazy because sweat had run into one of them, and he knew—just knew—that he’d had a nightmare about that fucking drill, and been fully aware of the fact that Greene had probably heard him screaming (again, goddammit). He never had quiet nightmares about that—no, they had to be loud and panicked and thrashing, and he’d already wound up on the floor at least three times this year alone because of his crazed tossing in a pointless effort to get away from that same nightmare.

However, despite his own racket, the hot, heavy silence of his room had pressed down all around him the minute he’d suddenly become aware of his surroundings, as always happened when he woke up these days.

Somehow, all of that had added up to the fact that he needed—needed—to buy himself a guitar.

He still wasn’t sure how it all worked out, but he wasn’t complaining.

He and Chiclet had gone out and scoured the two-bit city for the best guitar makers in town. It had
taken all day, but he’d eventually found a real beauty. Smooth, varnished, and glossy black—so Chiclet had told him, anyway. Six strings of the finest quality, so the salesman had told him. Sands had played a few chords, tuning it a bit, and then had decided it was the best they were going to get. He’d not even bothered bargaining with the little creep—just paid the full price. Then they’d taken it home (a round-about way—Sands felt like he was being followed), and, after extensive re-familiarizing himself with the feel of the guitar in his hands, he’d played a little bit of “Hotel California” and all of “Cancion” for Chiclet, who’d applauded wildly afterwards.

It felt good to have the guitar. It had felt wonderful to run his fingers along the polished wood, up and down the neck and across the heavy wire of the strings. Tuning it had been a bit of a pain, but he’d managed to not break any of the strings. It was definitely worth the price he paid for it—when he set his mind and his fingers to it, he could make this guitar sing beautiful music.

Well, could, if he could stop missing the strings.

He scowled at the sour note he just hit. “You bitch,” he grumbled, setting his fingers right again and strumming to regain his bearings before once again launching into “Paradise City.” He hadn’t been able to get the riff right since he’d picked it up, a string of notes that he’d been able to hit every time two years ago. He despised that being blind had affected his playing, especially since he’d once boasted that he could play the entire guitar section of any of his favorite songs blindfolded.

Well, technically, he was—Chiclet had left early, and his sunglasses had been bothering him, what with how sweaty he was today in the thick, muggy heat (which meant another shower—Christ) while walking around with his kid. So he’d already doffed them and put on a blindfold. He didn’t like admitting it, but sometimes, he really preferred the blindfold. It made him look blind, yes, but nobody else had to see him in it—so when it was just him, it was more comfortable.

He sighed, pausing his playing, looking up the ceiling for a brief moment. It felt like midnight. It just somehow felt like it.

“What day is it?” he asked nobody, and, not caring that he knew for certain it wasn’t the date he was thinking of, he played a thin and reedy version of “Happy Birthday,” not bothering to sing along.

It was early June, he knew that—and that meant Sands was going to be thirty-eight years old in just a few weeks. He didn’t feel like it. In truth, at the moment he felt older.

It was a particularly foreign feeling to him. He’d never felt “old” in his entire life. He knew he looked younger than he was—a particular trait he knew he’d picked up from his mother. She still looked in her twenties when she’d been pushing forty, so that was perhaps the only thing he’d ever been glad that she gave him. And he’d never felt his age before, not once, and for a long time, he knew he could definitely live his life perpetually feeling twenty-five, never really aging inside, just outside, and even then, not all that much. It sounded great to him.

But this year, he felt old. He felt his age, because of the slug in his leg, because of all he’d gone through, because of the deliberate way he had go about even the simplest of tasks like some creaky, senile old fart. He just felt…aged. And part of what made him feel so old was that he couldn’t even reassure himself that at least he didn’t look it—

He hit another sour note, and pursed his lips when he did. “Quit thinking about that nonsense,” he said to himself. “It doesn’t matter—it doesn’t matter. You know that you look good, and that’s all that matters.”

He smiled, switching abruptly to the Rolling Stones, “Jumping Jack Flash.” Well, it didn’t really matter if he felt his age. He may be having trouble with his old riffs—he hadn’t played in a year and
a half—but his hands were plenty dexterous enough for what he planned for his own private belated birthday celebration. You see, that was what really mattered on birthdays—what kind of presents you got. His guitar was one damn fine present, if a bit early. But it was nothing compared to the late presents he was setting up for himself.

Lorenzo and Fideo. They would be his—he’d bought and paid for the both of them, with money and with blood—and he was going to enjoy every minute he had with them.

He chuckled to himself, and in his pleasure eased right through the bridge of the song without a miss, and he laughed outright. *Almost.* He was almost ready. He had names, he had places, he had informants, and he had the tools of his trade.

All he was missing were the means to his end—the eyes with which to see his way. And he was sorry to say it, but Chiclet would be no good in this situation. Chiclet hadn’t even been able to even shoot an obviously “bad” man for him, and Sands had a lot more than a mere shooting in store for the two *mariachis*.

No, he needed somebody with a strong stomach who could see him and not be too revolted after he was done with those two. He needed someone who he could manipulate into doing what he was told, someone who Sands knew he could play like a fiddle, and who could be trusted to keep his mouth shut about the particulars, because it’d be his ass out in the wind as well if he squealed.

And he already had the perfect man in mind.

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If there was one thing Sands hated, it was repetitive irony. Unfortunately, that was exactly what he was getting right now—a repeat, and boy, was it ironic. The same café, the same man, virtually the same request. What made it ironic was that it was Sands who was seeking retribution this time around, not Ramirez.

“You know, when I said I’d see you later, I didn’t actually *mean* that,” Ramirez said, and Sands could tell from his voice he was smiling thinly, so he returned it.

“You know, given what I’ve come to talk about, it’s not exactly in your best interest to be bringing up the fact that you left me bleeding to death in the street, Jorge. It might make me start feeling… uncharitable,” Sands said softly. Ramirez didn’t answer, which was probably a wise move on his part. Sands took a sip of tequila, drumming his fingers on the table. “What did you think of my pork?”

He felt Ramirez stare blankly at him. “What pork?”

“My pork, Jorge,” he said patiently, pointing down at his own dish. “I thought for sure you’d remember it.” He smirked. “Or at least the bill I stuck you with.”

“Oh, yes,” Ramirez said, bemused comprehension filling his voice. “That pork. I didn’t like it.”

“Your loss.” Sands took a bite of his own, savoring the spicy flavor on his tongue. “I suppose you want to know why we are talking yet again?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Ramirez said dryly. “I’m still retired, you know—and from the looks of you, you should be too.”

“Now, really, Jorge—we’ve been over this,” he admonished. “You got right back into business in a *day*—you don’t really expect me to believe all that ‘retirement’ malarkey? Accident or no accident, I’m still hard at work, and given that you’re still breathing, it stands to reason that you are too.”
“That may be, but I’m far too old for that kind of nonsense. Day of the Dead taught me that much.”

“Too old for the bad times, eh?” Sands drawled, sucking on his cigarette for a moment, blowing smoke out of his nose. “Too old for the enemy when they catch you with your pants down?”

“Yes. And I’m not ashamed to admit it. I’m in my fifties. I’m too old, S—um, Andrews. Too old for work, too old to come out of my ‘retirement’ again, and too old to be jerked around by the likes of you.”

Sands cocked his eyebrow in a deliberate half-leer. “Well, that can happen to men your age. They have medication for that now.”

“You’d better say what you want and be done with it, before I leave,” Ramirez said gruffly.

“All right—let’s cut to Hecuba, then,” he said, putting his left hand palm down on the table and leaning forward. “What would you say if I told you that you were in danger of certain parties finding out what I already know—that you weren’t all that retired on said Day of the Dead? Certain parties being not only the FBI and CIA, but the cartels as well?” Sands asked. He could feel Ramirez leveling a shrewd gaze at him.

“I’d call you a liar.”

Sands smiled, leaning back and stubbing out his cigarette in the tray sitting next to his tequila. “Jorge, when have I ever lied to you? And be honest. Did I lie to you? Ever?” And he was pleased to hear that hanging silence, because even Sands knew that much was true. He’d lied to everyone else, from El to Belini to Susana, but he had not lied to Ramirez. He hadn’t needed to. Offering imaginary pay to a straight-as-an-arrow ex-FBI agent would have been pointless. The only way to get someone like that to do what you wanted was to make them want it to. And so he’d told nothing but the truth, picked at a few sore points and salted them well, and then handed him the phone. And Ramirez had played exactly the kind of ball Sands wanted.

He’d hopefully be just as pliant as he had been then. Things looked promising when Ramirez quietly said, “Go on, then.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Sands said amiably. He leaned forward again, stirring up his rice. “Now…nobody’s supposed to know you were involved in the coup, right? Nobody’s supposed to know you were involved in the overthrowing of the Barillo cartel.” He took a bite of pibil. “Well, I know. But really—why would I squeal? I’m just as wanted,” he said around his mouthful. “Besides, you are one of exactly one people still alive who knows about my little ‘accident’ and how it came about. It is in both our best interests to keep a lid on this particular can of worms.” He tapped his fork on the edge of his plate. “If it was just you and me, everything would be just hunky-dory, so happy together.” He smiled. “But it isn’t just you and me. You and I happen to be two of…” He paused for a moment. “…four people who know about that coup and who was involved. And how.”

“Four? And I take it that you think these other two are a problem?” Ramirez said, sounding a little skeptical.

“I do indeed. Right now, it’s us and them—two fine, upstanding agents working in the service of their countries—” Ramirez snorted, “—and the two individuals hired by me and who reneged on our agreement. And those two happen to be what I came here to talk about, Jorge.”

“I’m not really interested in helping you collect payment for services rendered,” he said flatly. “You watched out for yourself, and I’ll watch out for myself. If that’s all you called me up for—”
“Now, honestly—do I look like the type to be motivated by something that petty? Please,” Sands scoffed. “I won’t lie that I’m not necessarily the happiest camper about their ill-timed defection—but what’s at stake here is a tad bigger than a mere violation of contract.”

“Then why don’t you get to the point for once and just tell me?”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. These two mercenaries have money issues—given their profession, I’m not surprised. One’s a drunk, the other’s a whore—they will do anything for a buck, you see.” Sands pulled out a cigarette and his lighter, igniting the end of his cigarette with practiced perfection.

“And what does that have to do with me?”

“As much as it has to do with me. I wasn’t just speaking figuratively about being caught with your pants down,” he said, blowing a puff of hot smoke out into the equally hot June air. “And if you’ll also recall, I also said those two know about how we were involved in the coup—now, let’s put two and two together, Jorge.”

Ramirez was very still and listening very closely—Sands could tell.

“There are big rewards on both sides out on the heads on those involved in that coup. The remnants of the Barillo cartel would be mighty pleased to see the people who brought about its demise. The Berguenos, too—the cartels stick together. And then across the border we have the CIA and FBI, and they like their rules—they don’t like people who don’t play by them, as evidenced by me. And I doubt they’d take your ‘I’m retired’ stuff anymore than I did—particularly when they got wind of your idea of retirement—and how you ‘retired’ your little friends Guevara and Barillo.” Sands stopped his monologue, drawing on his cigarette and regarding Ramirez blandly.

“Those two mercenaries were in it for the money—just the money. They’d squeal on their own mothers for a nickel. And you know what? If they catch me, I’ll sing like a canary—and the first name I’ll be giving is yours,” he said, pointing his cigarette across the table.

“And vice versa,” said Ramirez, unsmilingly. Sands, on the other hand, did smile.

“Well, I for one really have no interest in being caught by some cartel, nor am I too terribly anxious to get slammed by the CIA. Or the FBI, for that matter.” He set his cigarette down and picked his fork back up. “Now, I’m just taking a wild guess, here, but I’d say that you don’t, either.” He leaned forward again, his voice low. “They know about us both. The Barillo cartel isn’t dead yet, Jorge, and our little sewing-circles back stateside have eyes and ears everywhere. Those two have to be silenced—one way, or another. Now,” he went on, leaning back and taking a bite of rice, “we each have one half of the puzzle. I know how to get to those two. You have eyes. Two men, two halves, and a common goal. What do you say for one last hurrah in the realm of inter-agency cooperation?”

Ramirez was staring at him, and he knew it—that same cold, focused stare he’d given him that day Sands had first met the ex-agent.

The stare that meant Sands had him.

“So where are they?” Ramirez asked at last.

Sands grinned.
Ill Met by Moonlight

Chapter Summary

Snape and Sands make a few surprising discoveries.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Snape sprinkled a pinch of allium salts into the pale green mixture bubbling slowly in his cauldron, stirred twice, and sniffed the contents.

_Hmm. More eucalyptus, I think._

He rummaged around among the bottles of various plant essences that he’d pulled from the neat rows on his shelves and set out on his bench; next to the mortar full of ground rosemary, he found the small green bottle he was looking for and poured in a few more drops.

He sniffed again. Just right this time. He corked the bottle, set it aside, and lowered the heat beneath his cauldron. He stirred three more times, and then let it alone, righting the various ingredients he’d set out to use while it simmered.

His potions stores were rigorously maintained, everything carefully labelled and sorted alphabetically and shelved safely away. A place for everything, and everything in its place. He absolutely could not abide not knowing the exact location of any component he might need in his brewing.

He gathered up the last few jars and bottles, sliding them into their places on his shelves. Then he turned back to his cauldron and eyed the pungent substance inside. It was perfect, and he scowled at it.

He could not believe he was brewing a flea repellent.

That’s what he got for allowing that mangy, parasite-ridden stray access to his house.

That cat was violating the terms of their agreement. It would keep the rats out, and Snape wouldn’t kill it—that was the deal. But no, the nasty little brute was actively stealing into his house now and again; Snape had spotted it dashing to and from the hole in the kitchen, disappearing to who knew where, but always coming back. He suspected that it was using his house as its base of operations—even going so far as to _sleep_ in here. And yet, despite the fact that his sparsely furnished house hardly had anywhere even a cat could hide, he never saw it save for when it crept to and from the kitchen. It was utterly ridiculous.

No—what it _was_ was utterly intolerable. Snape’s first instinct upon realizing that his pest control service had turned into a boarder had been to shut the wretched thing out and be done with it; if the miserable animal was going to renge on their bargain, so would he.

…but he hadn’t seen a rat in months. He hasn’t even _heard_ one. Not a one, not since last Halloween, when that first skirmish between predator and prey had spilled out onto his carpet. So the cat hadn’t exactly _reneged_, it was just taking advantage of the situation, and Snape was forced to
admit that in that situation he would have done the same. And really, he was so used to nasty, unwelcome guests by this point that one more was a small price to pay for no more rats.

And so he had gone about his business, dutifully and deliberately ignoring the erstwhile feline, save for a few dirty looks thrown in its direction when he happened to catch it trespassing.

At least, that was how things had been going—up until last evening. He’d been sitting down in his living room with his teacup, listening to the soft summer rains pattering down on the rooftop and plunking against the glass of his windows, quietly reading the paper after his solitary supper. He’d only just started taking the local paper a month or two ago—now that he had the Santiago brat to fetch it for him. After all this time, his Spanish was finally good enough that he felt comfortable reading it, his income steady enough that he could afford it, and his resignation to staying here for a very long time to the point that he thought it might be prudent to keep up with the local news.

News indeed—it read more like a bloody Who’s Who of Culiacán Crime. He’d been snorting in disgust over the gushing editorial detailing the very large donation made to the church by the current drug lord, when he’d realized that since he’d sat down, he was itching incessantly as his own arm. And when he felt the next itching sting, he looked down at it in annoyance, instead of just scratching—and there was a flea, biting happily into the flesh of his arm.

He’d stared at it, quite unable to believe what he was seeing, before gathering his wits enough to pinch the little bugger right off and crack it between his nails.

…He had fleas.

…That despicable cat had fleas.

And it was bringing them into his house!

That was out of the question. And so he’d marched straight up to his workroom with every intention of brewing up a very quick and very permanent solution to his problem, one that would eliminate both the fleas and their carrier. But just before he could start, he looked in his greenhouse, and as lively as ever was his venomous tentacula, which he’d been feeding tripe lately—and he remembered the way he’d been stuffing it full of all the rats finding their ways in before the cat had come, and he remembered the tooth marks on his furniture, and the rat droppings on his kitchen floor.

So in the end, while the fleas had to go, he had grudgingly decided that the cat could stay.

And so he was brewing flea repellent. This particular brew was a handy mixture well suited to his situation—it was safe to feed to animals, so his unwanted guest wouldn’t be bringing in any more of the pests, but it could also be used around the house to wipe out all the of the cat’s diminutive six-legged friends that had already hitched their ways inside. He already planned on liberally sprinkling his furniture and his carpet with it—he was not about to share his house with insects.

Fleas, indeed.

It looked nearly done; the bait was already sitting to the side on his workbench. He’d felt like an idiot, but when the Santiago boy had come by this morning for the grocery list, he’d added an extra item—one tin of cat food. The boy had made no comment about it on either of his visits (and he didn’t know how lucky it was for him that he hadn’t), but Snape was annoyed anyway and had to restrain himself from explaining everything to the boy anyway, just to soothe his own indignation—he was in no way feeding the wretched thing—he was only baiting a trap. He did not keep pets, nor did he take in strays. This was a business arrangement, and that was all.
Snape popped off the top of the small, flat can with a flick of his wand and dumped the nasty, smelly mass out onto a saucer. His nose wrinkled; well, if nothing else, the foul reek from that revolting paste would cover any odour of the potion. He rummaged in his pocket and came up with a peppermint, popping it in his mouth to mask the stink.

Dousing the fire under the cauldron with his wand, he ladled out just the right dosage for the scrawny little beast, pouring the pale green concoction over the food and mixing it thoroughly. He set it aside, and then siphoned off the rest of the mixture into a bottle with a shaker top.

His workroom was safe; he was sparing with his wards by necessity on the outside of his house, but his workroom was another story, and it was warded and bespelled tighter than a snare drum—nothing got out, and nothing got in—not even fleas. So he went to his bedroom first with his fresh concoction, sprinkling generous amounts of the potion around the base of the walls and at the foot of his bed; it left a pungent but not unpleasant scent in its wake, a fresh, herbal aroma that followed him down the stairs as he went to the kitchen to bait his trap.

He knelt and carefully positioned the plate of potion-laced cat food by the hole in the cabinet, and then stood, looking dourly down at the saucer sitting innocently on the tiles. Even he knew that feeding an animal was the surest way to get it to stay for good. But if it came down to picking between rats, fleas, or the cat, the choice was clear (if necessarily unpleasant).

He left the saucer where it was, where the cat was sure to happen upon it, and went about baptising the rest of his house, cleansing it of its pestilence.

Halfway through his task, he was nearly startled out of his skin by a loud, insistent pounding on the wall.

He barely kept from dropping the bottle in his hand, such was the sudden jolt, but his surprise quickly gave way to furious indignation when he realized where it was coming from.

Where else?

“Greene!” came a muffled, sing-songy voice call from next door, accompanied by more heavy thumps. “Greene—I know you’re in there! Now come out, come out, wherever you are! I am in dire need of your expert services!”

That bloody Yank! What did he want now?

He would not go over there. He refused.

Andrews pounded again. “Greene, if you don’t get your bony British bum over here, so help me God, I am going to eat every meal with you, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for every day of the rest of your life!”

And he would, too.

Dammit.

Growling with impotent fury, Snape slammed the bottle down on top of the cupboard next to his record player and stormed out the door.

That mincing little high-handed twat, he snarled inwardly as he marched through the puddles in the street to the house next door. Who did he think he was? Swaggering into his house as if he owned it, as if he somehow knew there was nothing Snape could do to stop him without tipping his hand, eating his food, harassing him in the square, driving off his customers, and now dragging him out of
his house in the middle of the night. What next? Would he just move in?

He threw open the door in a right froth. “What, Andrews?!” he demanded into the dark of the house. “What is so urgent that you couldn’t wait for your little catamite to do it for you in the morning?”

“Blow it out your floppy old he-pussy, Greene, and get in here,” came Andrews’s voice from the bathroom.

“I don’t know what it is that you’re doing in there that requires help,” Snape said after a moment, “but rest assured that whatever it is, I want no part of it.”

“Well, if what you’re thinking were in fact the case, I can assure you that you would enjoy every minute of it, but sadly for you, the situation is not nearly that exciting.” There was a pause, and Andrews’s next words sounded a bit brittle, a bit forced. “What I need is someone with eyes. I knocked over a glass in here and it broke, and I don’t have shoes on.”

Snape smirked. Oh, how precious. After all the trouble that sorry bastard had put him through, here he was relying on him for help. Perhaps this was worth the visit after all.

“How the mighty have fallen,” he purred as he moved through the room. “Tell me, Andrews,” he went on as he crossed into the bathroom, “after what I have endured at your hands, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just—” He stopped mid-sentence, his mouth still open in shock.

Andrews was covered in blood.

He was standing by the sink, the porcelain stained a sickly pink in the basin, with clotted red handprints on the edge. His sleeves were sodden and red, smearing pink streaks wherever they touched. His face was spotted and flecked, and Snape could see that his hair was matted with it as well, and droplets were drying darkly on the lenses of his sunglasses.

“Don’t mind the mess,” said Andrews mildly. “I’m out of tampons.”

“What in God’s name happened to you?” Snape demanded, appalled.

Andrews smiled, and his grin gleamed white in the darkness. “Nothing,” he said.

“Then how do you explain—this?”

Andrews shrugged, and turned back to the sink, twisting on the taps and sticking his blood-grimed hands under the spigot; the water ran red. “I told you, I knocked over the glass.”

He gestured downward, and Snape could see the wickedly glistening shards of glass littering the floor all around Andrews’s narrow bare feet. Drops of still-wet blood had fallen from him here and there, tiny flowers blooming blackly on the tile where they had landed.

“I don’t give a damn about the glass, Andrews,” Snape snarled. “What is all this blood?”

“I think you just answered your own question, there, chickabiddy.”

Snape ground his teeth. “What happened, Andrews?”

Andrews looked at him. “Ninjas,” he said seriously. “They ambushed me. Thousands of them.” And then he chuckled, even as it made his hair tremble and dance and catch in the sticky red runnels of the stuff that clung to his cheeks. Then he turned back to the sink. “Are you gonna get the glass, or just leave me here to cut my feet to ribbons?”
Snape stood still, revolted, but he swept out of the bathroom and into the kitchen; he found a well-used broom stashed in the cupboard under the stairs, and he jerked it angrily out and took it back into the bathroom.

Andrews had removed his shirt, revealing a slender torso and two thin arms, one of which was marred with a pale, twisting knot of scars near the shoulder. The ruined, bloody rag of his shirt was tossed carelessly into the bathtub, and Andrews was rubbing himself down with an unpleasantly pink-stained washrag, whistling merrily all the while. He turned his head as Snape approached, and one corner of his mouth twitched upwards in a smile.

Angrily, Snape swept the broom in wide arcs, the glass ringing and clattering beneath the broomcorn, clearing a path across the tile from where Andrews stood to the door.

“Thank you, Jeeves,” said Andrews dismissively, going back to his grisly ablutions. “You may go—and don’t forget, I’ll expect my breakfast piping hot at seven o’clock sharp.”

“You will not,” said Snape coldly.

Andrews stilled, his head tilted to one side and his eyebrows flitting upwards over the rims of his glasses. “I won’t?” he asked, his voice betraying nothing but mild curiosity, but Snape read otherwise in the downward twist of his mouth.

“No,” said Snape flatly. “I told you that I wanted no part of whatever you were doing in here, and after seeing you, I can tell that I was understating the truth. I want no part of anything you’re doing. Ever.”

Andrews turned to face him, the pale skin of his neck and chest smeared with blood in great drying swaths. They regarded each other in silence for a moment, but then Andrews smiled, a slow, dangerous smile. “All righty, then” he said pleasantly. “Suit yourself. If you want to run with your tail tucked firmly between your legs, that’s fine by me.” He turned back to the sink and picked up the cake of soap, humming quietly to himself.

Snape didn’t rise to the bait. He only snorted and swept out of the bathroom and to the front door, which he shut firmly and decisively behind him for Andrews’s benefit, and then he hastened back into his own home and locked the door behind him.

He leaned back against it, his head against the rippling wood, thoughtful and wary. What had he been doing?

He had a few guesses, and none of them pleasant. Well, they weren’t his problem—no matter what that stupid Yank had gone and involved himself with, Snape was secure in the knowledge that none of Andrews’s Muggle “associates” could find their way to him. And if they did show up with somewhat less than friendly intentions, it would likely be to collect Andrews himself for his no doubt well-deserved comeuppance, and good riddance to bad rubbish as far as he was concerned.

His thoughts were scattered to the wind when he flexed his fingers thoughtfully and suddenly felt wetness between them. He looked sharply down at his hands; there was blood on his left, smeared and crusting between his fingers.

He was in the kitchen like a shot, scrubbing it away under the water before the tap even had a chance to run clear. A poor epitaph, whoever you were, he thought grimly as the water ran down the black eye of the drain, but that’s all I can give you.

He dried his hand on his tea towel and turned—and saw the saucer sitting in the corner by the hole in
the cabinet. It had been licked clean, and Snape smirked.

No more vermin in *his* house.

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Good God, but he detested summer in Mexico.

To be perfectly honest, he detested everything in Mexico. But late summer really was the worst.

He’d hated the weather from the moment he’d stepped off the plane. Upwards of ninety bloody
degrees was hideous no matter where one was. By midday the whole country was a blast furnace,
firing his skin to a cracked pottery brown, leaving his clothes brittle and papery dry, his tongue and
eyes glazed and gritty. And that was just the first of the summer.

Here, as the summer wore on, it grew hotter and hotter until it was well nigh unbearable. And then
sometime in July, the rains would come.

The sky would open up and drench the town with sandy, scalding droplets that were little better than
mud. There would be a tiny respite from the flat dry heat, as the rain would pull down the dust that
choked the air, but the storms weren’t continuous, no—they would tease him, mock him, and then
clear away, and the heat would return, only now it was wet.

He’d thought the dusty misery of the dry heat of early summer had been the worst part of Mexico,
until experiencing the hellish joys of the sticky, muggy heat after a summer rain.

Like he was now.

The clouds from the most recent rainstorm had vanished so quickly that there wasn’t even the
slightest wisp left for shade. So he had no choice but to sit here, boiling in his own clothes in the
horrible steam room that was August in Culiacán. This year was so bad that he had actually broken
down and bought some of the loose-fitting white trousers that were so popular in this country. He
looked and felt ridiculous in them, and he only lowered himself to wear them when he was out of the
delightfully chilled bubble of the cooling charms on his house. He scowled down at his ankles
poking out of the cuffs; all he needed with a spangled sombrero and one of those awful rugs they
wore on their shoulders, and he’d blend right in.

He unenthusiastically finished off the remains of his bacon sandwich. He kept his lunches fresh with
a few more tiny cooling charms in his basket, but he could do nothing for himself without rousing
suspicion, and so the hot blanket of the noonday sky and the damp press of his sweaty clothes rather
robbed him of enthusiasm for much of anything save the frosty thermos of cold water tucked down
in the corner (and even that pleasure was muted, what with the flat, metallic taste left by his habitual
boiling of anything that came from a Mexican tap). Even the moist green flesh of the guava that he’d
brought along (having acquired several of the fruits along with the leaves for his potions stores) failed
to rouse his spirits. He ate it anyway, but rather gloomily.

Tossing the peel away on the ground, he sighed and looked up. It was past noon, and probably time
for him to cross the street and stake out his afternoon haunt across the way, where he was more
accessible to the bar. He popped a peppermint in his mouth in a desultory fashion, and then stood to
go.

Some idiot had set up a bead-laden handcart in his way, and he’d been forced to take a detour around
it. He scowled at the interloper as he passed; the regulars to the square knew their places, and he
always hated it when some newcomer swept in and disturbed the peace. He extricated himself from
the knot of sellers in the middle of the square, giving a perfunctory nod to the flower seller near the
cafe—Inez something-or-other, he thought her name was—when he caught her eye as he passed, and then made his way to his bench, where it was mercifully shady.

Snape had just settled himself tiredly down in his seat when the sounds of a scuffle reached his ears. He turned and looked down the alley behind him; three laughing, shouting boys were kicking a huddled mass on the ground, and from the sounds it was making, it wasn’t hard to deduce that it was another child that they were beating, having cornered him in the crook of the alley behind some crates and a dustbin. Their victim had lost his advantage, and now he had to pay the price; the targets of bullies like those were nearly always able to outrun their tormentors—Snape certainly had—but if they got themselves trapped, then they hadn’t a chance against the superior numbers of their foes.

Snape set his jaw and deliberately looked away, but then he heard someone (and he could guess who) give a grunting cry of pain to the cruel shouts and laughing jeers of the others, and he ground his teeth and stood up. The anti-theft and light Muggle-repelling charms would see to his basket, and it was with rising ire than he stormed down the alleyway towards the altercation.

Years patrolling the hallways of Hogwarts looking for miscreants sneaking about after curfew had helped him perfect the art of descending on misbehaving children without their knowing it until it was too late. He was pleased to see that he had not lost the ability with disuse. He shot out a hand and seized the apparent ringleader, who gave a most satisfying jump beneath his fingers. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded in Spanish, giving him a rough shake.

His companions deserted him—typical. The boy who was unable to run was trying to affect a look of tough indifference despite his situation even as he tried in vain to twist away. Snape, unimpressed by his adolescent bravado, stared him into submission. The young thug finally stopped struggling and met his eye with a foolish boldness that was not entirely masking his very real (and quite justified, in Snape’s opinion) fear. “He had it coming!” he said.

“Really?” Snape drawled, looking deep into his eyes. “And did you have it coming when your older brother locked you in the wardrobe in the dark when you were seven and didn’t let you out all day?”

The flickerings of panic in the boy’s eyes blossomed into full-blown terror; with a mighty wrench he escaped Snape’s grip and went pounding off after his erstwhile compatriots, running as if the Devil himself was on his heels. He has no idea. Snape sneered at his retreating back, and then looked down at the fallen form at his feet.

The boy they had been kicking was younger and smaller than any of them, by the look of him, and definitely more than a little stringy and ill-kempt. He was shaking his head, trying to throw off the effects of his losing bout, and trying to stand, valiantly wiping his eyes, blood trickling down his chin. Snape huffed in exasperation, reached down, and hauled the boy to his feet by one arm. He looked briefly startled, but his narrow face hardened into an expression of defiance. “Let me go!”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Snape snapped.

“I didn’t need your help!” he retorted stubbornly.

“Oh, yes, since you were doing such a marvellous job of defending yourself,” Snape mocked.

The boy flushed a dark red, and Snape snorted. He didn’t wait for the unappreciative twerp to start protesting, just dragged the recalcitrant little pillock by the arm back toward the square and shoved him down onto his bench. “Refusing aid in the face of unbeatable odds isn’t bravery, nitwit—it’s stupidity,” Snape informed him, rummaging in his basket.

“What do you care?” asked the boy sullenly, his ragged fringe flopping limply in his eyes.
Snape slammed the lid shut on his basket with a less-than-satisfying slap of wicker on wicker and glared at him. “I don’t,” he said coldly, tipping a few drops of dittany on a cloth and shoving it at the brat. “Here—put this on your lip.”

The boy gave him an ugly look that Snape returned with interest, but he did as he was told. Snape smirked at the boy’s startled expression when the cloth hissed a little upon contact with his wound, and when he pulled it away from his lip, it was no longer bleeding. “Put that anywhere else you’re bleeding,” Snape directed, and it was with slightly more alacrity that the brat tugged up the leg of his torn jeans and pressed the cloth to the nasty scrape on his knee, and then passed it over the ragged ones marring his elbows.

“Now,” said Snape, taking his cloth back when he was done, “next time you find yourself being chased by an enemy, don’t be stupid enough to get caught with no retreat.”

The little ingrate glared up at him from behind his too-long hair as he stood, but it didn’t have quite the force behind it as before. “Now go away,” Snape said firmly, propelling him forward with a small shove in his back. The boy meandered off, but he kept glancing back behind him, his gaze half suspicious, half confused. Snape glared at him all the way across the square, where he disappeared down a side street. He snorted to himself as he settled back down on his bench. He glanced around and caught the eye of Inez the flower girl; the nosey twit had been watching him, and when she saw that he was scowling back at her, she actually had the nerve to smile at him.

He hated this place.

Snape was rather surprised to find himself at loose ends tonight. He’d awakened this morning at his usual time and simply gone about his usual morning routine. Well, almost usual—he was exceedingly annoyed with himself when, while he was making breakfast, he realized that he’d pulled out two eggs to fry. He put one away with nearly enough force to break it, outraged that Andrews had so thoroughly managed to insinuate himself in everyday life that he was affecting his routine, even though it had been two months since Snape had told the man that he was to keep himself and his unsavoury activities out of his house. That was unacceptable, and Snape was determined to put him out of his life altogether as completely as he’d put him out of his house.

And so he finished his quiet, pleasantly solitary breakfast, and then washed his dishes and went about his daily business. He brewed a fresh batch of fever reducer, put the finishing touches on a cauldronful of Pepperup Potion that he would trade at the nasty little apothecary across town for fresh ingredients, and he chopped, bottled, and preserved the fresh herbs that he’d gone out for yesterday (that was one aspect of his weekly grocery shopping that he didn’t trust to the Santiago idiot).

But he did all of this with such efficiency that he able to finish his usual potions work by teatime. That gave him time to revamp the expansion charms on his greenhouses; it was getting a bit crowded in there, what with his ever-growing flitterbloom upstairs and his over-enthusiastic leaping toadstools down in the cellar. That ate up the rest of the afternoon, but after dinner he found himself with nothing to do to keep himself occupied.

He spared a brief, bitter thought for his now defunct library back on Spinner’s End—God knew where its contents were now, no doubt thanks to Potter. But there was no use waxing lachrymose over that particular puddle of milk, and so after a perfunctory perusal of his pathetically tiny selection of scrounged texts (all carefully charmed to look like encyclopaedias), he simply decided to put on a record, sit down with a glass of whisky, and try his hand at a crossword written in Spanish.

He found the grid of black and white squares tucked in the back of last Sunday’s paper and liberated
it, folding it neatly so he could work it on the back of one of his books. He took the risk of Summoning a pencil from his desk upstairs—no one caught him—and then went about pouring himself a liberal dollop of Firewhisky and rifling through his albums, eventually deciding on *Let It Bleed*, and staring on Side Two just for the hell of it.

The soft hisses and pops of the needle tracing the record’s grooves were familiar and comforting, a constant fuzzy background beneath the first strains of “Midnight Rambler” (to this day he refused to use whatever ridiculous devices the Muggles were passing off for music these days—nothing would supplant vinyl. Although it would probably be easier for him to recapture the grandeur of his former collection if he would just break down and use CDs, whatever they were). He settled in and geared himself up to do battle with his puzzle.

He found, rather to his pleased disgust, that he was not terribly limited by the language itself, aside from some of the more obscure synonyms. No, what consistently tripped him up was his ignorance of Mexican culture and history—and that was a situation that he had no desire to remedy any time soon.

Unfortunately, he soon found that was a serious liability when trying to complete a crossword, so he was forced to give it up as a bad job. He supposed that he would just have to resign himself to re-reading one of his dilapidated old potions texts. He really wished he could afford to take out a subscription to *Potions Today*—although he wasn’t sure if he would take it even if he could afford it, because it would be a rather obvious trail should someone—like Potter—try and track him down.

So he pulled out a tatty old Alchemy text that he’d discovered in a back alley shop in Bruges and thought he might as well re-read that dreadful article on fluid transmutation—he enjoyed finding new reasons to despise it. Perhaps one day he would write up a summary of his complaints and send it to the authors. As the Stones quietly told him that he couldn’t always get what he wanted (as if he didn’t know it), he settled down in his chair with his book, just in time to be very nearly startled out of it by a gunshot.

He jumped, almost lost his grip on his glass, and then leapt to his feet, his jaw clenched in fury. That bleeding Muggle was at it again! He’d put up some wards with a tad more force behind them after the first time this had happened, so Andrews wouldn’t be shooting out his windows any more, but dammit, he was entitled to his hard-earned peace and quiet!

He was going straight over there to set the little swine straight—this instant.

But before he could, he heard something else—a heavy thump, and then a shout—and it didn’t sound like Andrews.

He stopped where he stood, his head tilted to the side, and he listened, tense, aware of the familiar weight of his wand in his sleeve.

“*He killed Pépe!*”

“And now we’re gonna kill him, the motherfucker!” And then a great yell of pain and a loud crash, as though someone had been thrown onto a table and smashed it beneath him.

Snape was at his window in four quick strides and jerked open the curtain, just as he heard the sound of a door being slammed open, and he saw a pale, limp body thrown out into the street. *Andrews*.

Andrews had pushed himself to his knees just before two men descended on him, running out of the open door to his house, where they started kicking him, one of them using a baseball bat to liven the party, dropping him back to the ground with a grunt.
Andrews was still trying to get up, to push himself back up to his hands and knees, to get away from them, when the smaller one slammed the bat down across his back, flattening him again, and the big one hauled back and kicked him in the stomach so hard that he rolled over and curled up into a ball, and the little one raised the bat high.

**Dammit.**

Snape threw open his door without thinking, his wand already in his hand, and as the big one went to swing another kick, Snape swung his wand and snarled, “*Stupefy!*”

His aim was true, and his spellwork not in the least bit rusty despite his three-year-long duelling hiatus. The filthy Muggle trash was thrown clear across the street by the force of his curse, where he fell and lay in a crumpled heap, unmoving. Snape turned; the little one was just staring, his mouth hanging open, the bat still raised high above his head.

Snape dealt with him in the same manner as his friend before he even had time to blink, felling him like a tree. Then he strode over to the still forms lying in the street and kicked the little one on his back to see his face.

No one he knew, at least—that was something. A look at the other one told him that they were both strangers to him, which would make this considerably easier to deal with.

A heaving noise behind him startled him into whirling around, his wand ready; Andrews was vomiting on the pavement, courtesy of the kick to the gut, no doubt, along with whatever swill he’d been imbibing tonight. Snape gave him a look of disgust before turning back to the two miscreants.

Two quick and expert memory charms later, he stood over them and made a small noise of satisfaction. They would remember nothing of their little escapade, save a whale of a headache and a vague feeling of foreboding that would keep them off this street again.

He turned to Andrews, planning on bundling him back into the house and giving him a similar treatment and washing his hands of the whole business, only to find the man staring straight at him.

He would rather drink the Gryffindor Sixth Years’ antidotes than admit it, but Andrews’s way of “looking” so directly at him without any eyes unnerved him.

“How—Stupefy?” Andrews asked suddenly, his usually polished voice somewhat slushy through a split lip, and Snape stiffened, and then sighed, closing his eyes tiredly for a moment before he spoke again.

“Yes—*Stupefy,*” he agreed, cordially enough, and then raised his wand.

“*Standard Stunning Spell,*” Andrews said abruptly, and both Snape’s wand and his jaw dropped. “Characterized by a bolt of red light, incantation ‘*Stupefy,*’ from Latin, ‘to stun.’ Low-grade defensive spell, only indirectly harmful. Renders opponent unconscious, duration dependent on the strength of the spell and the accuracy and skill of the caster.” Andrews rattled all this off with the air of one reciting from memory as he lay out in the street.

Snape just stared. It was rare that he found himself at a loss for words, but in this case, he had nothing.

*He knew.*

Andrews’s head came up an inch or two from the ground again and turned toward him. “That right?
S’veen a while.”

Snape managed to close his mouth, his ire rising once again. “Get inside,” he snapped, striding furiously over to where the idiot lay and glaring down at him.

“Don’t know if I can,” Andrews replied amiably, laying his head back down on the pavement again and lacing his fingers gingerly across his chest. “One of those boy scouts got me in the leg. Don’t know if it’ll hold me up.” He looked up at him. “Besides, there’s a dead body in there—gotta do something about that.”

Snape ground his teeth, gave a quick look around, and then raised his wand. “Mobilicorpus.”

Andrews gave a strangled shout and started flailing as he rose gently into the air. “Be still, you blithering idiot, and keep quiet!” Snape hissed. “I’m taking you inside!”

Andrews stopped struggling, but remained stiff and tense until Snape dropped him rather unceremoniously in his chair.

A quick look around the place told Snape that he had been spot on with his assessment of the sounds coming from next door. The normally meticulously neat room was a mess; the sofa was crooked, the other chair in the room was overturned, and the long, low table in the middle had been well and truly smashed and was scattered in pieces across the floor, likely by the sudden impact of a body being thrown into it.

A body, indeed. Andrews wasn’t lying; there was a dead man sprawled across the floor, his head propped grotesquely up against the wall where the liberal splatter of gore and the trailing smear above his head showed that he had landed where he now lay after flying backwards against the wall and sliding down it—after being shot right in the ear.

Snape moved to stand over the body, leaning down to get a look at him; Andrews certainly never did anything halfway, from the look of the red ruin that used to be the side of the man’s head, but enough of his face was still in one piece that Snape found that he recognized him. From across the room, he’d thought he was just another Mexican hoodlum, but now that he could seem him up close, he realized that the face of the big, unshaven brute looked vaguely familiar. He narrowed his eyes, looking at the deep-set, piggish eyes, the thinning hair, the crooked nose—and then he remembered. It was the great buffoon from the plaza last year, the one who’d tried to start a fight with him, only to be thwarted when Andrews broke his nose.

Looked like he’d finally got around to carrying out those feeble threats from that day—although it clearly hadn’t gone as he planned it.

“He sounded familiar—anyone I know?” Andrews asked.

Snape grunted. “It’s that idiot whose nose you broke. Last summer, back in the square.”

“Ah. He carries a torch, I see.”

“Carried,” Snape corrected him vaguely, prowling about the body to the other side and examining the mess that the bullet had made upon exit. Muttering to himself about Andrews’s lack of delicacy in matters of self-defence, he used his wand—no point in hiding it now—to remove the corpse’s shirt and wrap the shattered skull with it, and then drag the body outside.

He tied all three of them together with a spell, got a good grip on the knotted cords, and then closed his eyes.
Apparating with someone else in tow was always more difficult than by yourself. It didn’t exactly take more effort to get where you wanted to go, but you certainly did seem take a very long time in the nothingness between here and there, as though the load was dragging behind you, catching on something somewhere in the in-between.

He reappeared down a dark alley on the other side of town—not too far from one of his magical stops, actually—a place where he could get quite a few black market items—and dumped his unwelcome burden there. He left them scattered around on the ground, the lot of them reeking with alcohol—they would simply awake to find themselves in a strange place, badly hung over and their friend dead. They could sort themselves out—or leave it to the police.

Snape spun on his heel and reappeared in the alleyway across from his house. Andrews’s front room was dimly lit, and Snape quickly crossed the street and went inside.

Andrews was still sitting inside where Snape had left him; his leg was straight out and stiff in front of him, and he was holding his arm close to his body. His entire attitude radiated discomfort, but he was obviously tense and waiting. He turned his unseeing eyes towards Snape when he came in, and he seemed to relax after a moment. “Did you clean up after me?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Snape in clipped tones, looking at him for a moment. Then he blew a sharp breath from his nostrils and, with one last wary look at Andrews, he cleaned up the blood and repaired and righted the furniture with a few quick spells, before turning back to regard his neighbour with a critical eye.

He was definitely the worse for wear. His mouth was bleeding, his nose was obviously broken, and blood was seeping from somewhere under his hairline. He couldn’t see it, but Snape suspected that there were any number of unpleasant bruises blooming purply beneath his clothing, and possibly a fracture or two that were hiding quietly beneath their blankets of flesh.

One earpiece of Andrews’s glasses was twisted and crooked, so they were sitting wrong on his nose, and a sliver of one lens had snapped out, affording Snape a glimpse of the empty darkness beneath.

Andrews would have never looked straight at him if he’d known. Not like he was now, alert and shrewd despite having been kicked in the head.

They regarded each other in silence for a moment, until Snape ground his teeth and moved forward. “Where are you hurt?” he asked brusquely.

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Andrews tilted his head a little. “Everywhere?” he said laconically.

“Where exactly, idiot, or would you rather I leave you to your war wounds?” Snape demanded.

Andrews looked off, appearing nonchalant, but Snape could tell he was still on point. “Nothing serious—mostly just aches and pains.” He grimaced a little as he shifted. “And they may have broken a rib.”

Snape huffed through his nose, annoyed, but raised his wand and verbally cast a simple diagnostic spell. Andrews tensed again but didn’t speak; the trails of light that were spiralling over his body and pooling at his injuries made no sound and didn’t touch him, but Snape knew from experience that one could feel them anyway, a thousand little pinpricks of energy travelling over you like miniature lightning.

It picked up his older wounds, of course; they lit up a dullish sort of brown. The ones that found his eye sockets gave him very unsettling appearance, glowing flatly from behind his sunglasses. The
new ones were bright and red, though, and that was where Snape turned his attention—a broken rib, as Andrews himself had guessed, a surprisingly mild concussion, a good many cuts and bruises.

“What is that?” Andrews demanded, an edge to his voice.

“A simple diagnostic,” Snape assured him, blowing out a derisive breath. “Lift up your shirt,” he ordered, and Andrews gave him a slightly suspicious frown but did so.

His ribcage looked like a cadre of toddlers had been using it as a canvas, expressing their art with a jar of blackcurrant jam. That would no doubt feel pleasant in the morning—unless Snape did something about it. The lingering light of spell showed him where he needed to work. Broken ribs were easy enough to mend, as long as one was careful, and he made short work of it. A delicate but simple spell on Andrews’s otherwise empty head took care of his concussion, and another soothed the myriad of cuts and lacerations he’d taken, as well as easing his stiff leg. Andrews was miraculously and thankfully silent during the whole procedure, but remained tense until Snape pronounced him finished.

“Take off your glasses,” he said as Andrews lowered his shirt with an expression of pleased amazement as he realized that he was no longer in pain—an expression that quickly dissolved into one of taut, wary anger. Snape sneered at him. “Your nose is broken—as are said glasses, incidentally. And besides, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Andrews looked unpleasantly surprised and even angrier; it was with visible reluctance that he reached up and plucked the sunglasses from his mangled nose, and once again Snape looked into the blank hollows in his face.

He’d seen worse. Much worse.

He’d done worse, if he was going to be honest with himself.

But he wasn’t here for that—he had a job to do. And he did it, mending the crooked nose and split lip with a word; Andrews looked startled at the sudden lack of pain for only a moment, before swiftly trying to jam his glasses back on.

“Just a moment, Andrews,” he grated, and plucked the glasses from his fingers. Andrews went rigid again, and looked as though he were about to fight for them, but Snape ignored him, cast a quick verbal Reparo, and then handed them back with exaggerated care.

Andrews took them and shoved them back on his face; only then did he relax (although not quite all the way, Snape thought). Personally, having the glasses back where they belonged was something of a relief to Snape as well—the gaping holes in Andrews’s face were unnerving.

“That’s a neat trick,” Andrews suddenly said, his voice conversational. “Why don’t you do it to yourself? Fix that voice of yours.”

Snape was in no mood for his pointless banter. “Explain yourself this instant, Andrews,” he said coldly, pointing his wand at his nose.

Andrews gave a half-smile. “All righty—I’ll start by telling you to put that stick of yours away—don’t even think about wiping my memory.”

“I will if you don’t tell me how you know about that.”

Andrews smiled guilelessly. “No, you won’t—because I’m tagged for Memory Modification, as well as all Class 10 Black Magic. You put a spell on me, and you’ll find yourself under arrest for violation
of the United States International Magical Secrecy Act of 1948.” He shifted in his seat, reaching down to pick up a wad of black material crumpled on the floor beside his chair—a pair of trousers. The ones that he wasn’t wearing, apparently. He felt around until he found the right back pocket, and he slid his fingers in and pulled out a small black wallet, which he flipped open with the air of one producing pictures of his grandchildren. “I’m CIA. You mess with my memory, and they will find you.”

Snape snatched up the badge. There was Andrews, his face cool and blank (and with eyes) in the identification photo. Central Intelligence Agency, it said, the letters CIA emblazoned across it in huge typeface with a typical American lack of subtlety.

“Sheldon J. Sands,” he read flatly.

Andrews—or rather Sands, apparently—pursed his lips. “Only my grandmother ever called me Sheldon, and despite the fact that you are just as much of a dried up old bitch as she was, if you ever call me that again, you’ll be drinking your morning bacon and eggs through a straw,” he said, very matter-of-factly. “It’s Sands. Just Sands.”

Snape snapped the little wallet shut and shoved it back in his waiting hand; Andrews—Sands took it and tucked it away in the pocket of his trousers before dropping them carelessly back on the floor. “Very well, then, Just Sands,” said Snape, “exactly how does that explain your knowing about magic?”

Sands waved away Snape’s remark. “They brief us on it—all clandestine agents need to be prepared for any and all situations we may encounter in the field—and that includes you and your wand-wielding brethren.” Sands reached into his shirt pocket and came up with a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and shook one out and lit it with the accompanying lighter. He inhaled deeply, and then blew it out and upward, and breathed back in his own smoke through his nose. And then he smiled, a smile that Snape didn’t like one bit. “So. A wizard.”

“Quite,” said Snape tersely.

Sands took another drag. “Things are beginning to fall into place now, I think,” he remarked. “I’ll admit—I never could quite get you nailed down, Greene. You weren’t working for the cartels, but you weren’t working for the law either, and no matter how you tried to pretend, you weren’t just an unfriendly hermit—you are definitely hiding from somebody. All that just didn’t quite add up.”

Snape felt his back getting more and more rigid as Sands went on. “But now, well, this puts a whole new spin on things.” He regarded Snape over the edge of the casually relaxed hand holding his cigarette. “They did keep us up to date on major events in the magical community—both in the US and abroad, you know. That includes some little terrorist dust-up they had back in England a few years ago—and you know, now that I think about it, that would have gone down just before you showed up here, wouldn’t it?” And he smiled again, slow and smug. “You back the wrong horse, mate?” he asked, grinning like a dragon, thin lines of smoke curling from between his teeth.

“That is none of your affair,” Snape said tightly, but Sands just snorted.

“Oh, but everything and everyone in town is my affair—and that includes you,” he said pleasantly, pointing with his cigarette.

“Rather like the little coup dust-up here two years ago?” Snape asked, his voice hard. “Did you back the wrong horse, Sands?”

The smile disappeared from Sands’s face. “I didn’t ‘back’ anything—I owned that horse. That whole
‘little dust-up’ was mine,” he said coldly.

Was it indeed? Might that explain your involvement with the Barillos? “I’m hardly impressed—it failed, as I recall,” was all Snape said, his lip curling.

Sands smiled, his expression cool. “That’s because I wanted it to. I set it up, and I watched it fall.” He tapped his ash over the side of his chair and then went on, his voice suddenly snide. “Those idiots in England, on the other hand—they took over all right, but they couldn’t make it stick. Now that was what I’d call a failure.” He sucked thoughtfully on his cigarette. “Although I can’t say I’m surprised—that weirdsmobile in charge of the whole thing sounded like a Grade-A Loony—you know, that one with the made-up name—Voldemort, or something like that.”

An icicle stabbed its way down Snape’s spine, and he twitched in spite of himself, even as Sands snorted in contempt. “What a dipstick—absolutely no subtlety.” He shook his head disappointedly. “Why didn’t he just tape a great big ‘Kick Me’ sign on his nuts? No wonder he got his ass handed to him—and by some kid, no less—Harry something-or-other, what was his name—?”

“Potter,” Snape spat, the name wrung from his throat before he was even aware of what he was saying.

Sands paused, raising an eyebrow over the back of his limp hand. “Oh—so you do know something about that?” he asked with feigned surprise. “But you don’t seem to be too fond of the conquering hero. That’s odd, I must say—I got the impression that everybody over in Britain seems to think that he’s just the berries,” he said. He looked pointedly at Snape. “With the noted exception of those he deposed, of course.”

Snape ground his teeth, furious with himself, but said nothing. To his further anger, his deliberate silence seemed to please Sands just as much as it would have if he’d said anything; Snape could practically hear the gears turning in that manure-filled little head of his. “Well?” Sands asked expectantly, tapping his fingers on his thigh and settling deeper into his chair, wincing as he did so.

“Well what?” Snape asked icily.

Sands flicked his fingers upwards. “Well, are you a good witch, or a bad witch?” he asked mildly, and Snape wanted nothing more than to hex that nasty look of smug complacency right off his face. “I think you owe me a bit of an explanation, here, so I’ll know whether I should drop a house on you or not.”

“If you’ll recall, I just saved your life—I owe you nothing,” Snape replied stiffly.

Sands tilted his head for a moment, his lips pursed, and then he smiled again. “Well, if you won’t tell me yourself, I guess I’ll just have to go through the official channels. We’re supposed to report any wizard engagements, you know,” he informed him. “But, since you’re just an average kind of guy, it wouldn’t cause you any trouble if I mentioned you to a few people in high places in my organization. I mean, surely it’s not like there’s anybody looking for you—not a fine upstanding citizen like yourself.”

“Don’t you dare!” Snape snarled.

Sands looked extremely satisfied with himself. “You might as well tell me what you’re wanted for—if I’m feeling generous, I might be able to offer amnesty,” he said.

“I am not wanted by anyone!”

“No?” Sands asked. “I understood that your people were pretty serious about rounding up the
In the remnants of the hostile forces—including the ones who tried to flee to the US.”

“I was not a hostile force!” Snape roared, forgetting himself. “They would have all been dead if it wasn’t for me! They did their level best to get themselves killed despite my efforts! I was on their side—I was always on their side—even though they were too stupid to realize it, and now all that is behind me, and I just want to be left alone!”

Snape finally managed to stop himself, his breathing short. Sands’s eyebrows had crawled up his forehead as he’d ranted, and now he was looking at Snape with a speculative expression. “I think I can understand that,” he said after a moment, “but you know, ‘alone’ is a precious commodity these days—just how is it that you plan to keep it?”

“Because everyone thinks I’m dead!” Snape spat. “And I intend to keep it that way!”

“Ah,” said Sands, and disconcertingly, he smiled. “Say no more.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “Sands, I don’t care who finds out,” he said dangerously, “but if you breathe one word to anyone about me—about anything—I will kill you. I’ve earned what little freedom I have, and I’m not about to lose it just because some stupid Muggle can’t keep his mouth shut and his arse out of trouble. Cross me, and you won’t live to regret it.”

“Oh, go piss it up a well rope, Greene,” sneered Sands, now just looking annoyed. “I don’t give a hoot in hell about your little magical politics. If you haven’t done anything to me, I have no reason to do anything to you.”

They regarded each other in tense silence, before Sands gestured to the chair across the table. “Have a seat.”

“No,” said Snape coldly.

“Fine, then. Stand. That some kind of magic thing?” he asked mockingly, but Snape thought he heard a thin rill of hostility beneath his blithe sarcasm. Snape didn’t answer, and Sands took one last drag before dropping the butt of his cigarette on the floor and crushing it into the floorboards with his sandaled heel. “Well, then—now that all that is out of the way, I believe we haven’t been properly introduced—at least, you haven’t,” he said expectantly.

Snape’s first instinct was to say nothing. Sands had obviously deduced that his name was phoney—he’d done the same himself—and he didn’t need to know any more than that. But if he didn’t tell, would Sands take it upon himself to find out? Did he have access to magical channels? He’d heard about foreign wizards that worked for the government being Traced—it was entirely possible that some foreign Muggles were too, so he couldn’t take the chance of modifying his memory. He was stuck with him.

Sands had only seemed to recall the Dark Lord’s name, and hadn’t even been able to remember Potter’s… if he knew his, he could inform someone…but Sands wasn’t looking for him, hadn’t been sent after him—of that he was finally sure. Sands’s being here was just a coincidence, so just maybe if he played along, he would keep quiet…

“Snape,” he said shortly.

Sands’s face showed no sign of recognition at the name, and Snape relaxed marginally. “Suits you,” he simply said. “More than that Greene thing, anyway—who’d you dig that up?”

“Probably from the same bin of blandly anonymous pseudonyms in which you found ‘Andrews’,” Snape replied sardonically.
Sands just snorted, but didn’t deny it and just sat in silence. But still Snape didn’t leave, rather taking the previously offered chair after a moment’s hesitation. He couldn’t leave, not yet—not with Sands knowing what he did, not without some assurance of his own safety.

He didn’t get it; the next thing Sands asked when he roused himself to speak was a blunt, “So—how did you die?”

Snape sucked in a quiet breath and glowered across the table before answering, “I was murdered.”

Sands bounced his eyebrows appreciatively. “Good one—very professional,” he said, his voice friendly.

Snape harrumphed, and then asked, “Does your getting shot qualify as the same?”

Sands’s face wasn’t quite so friendly now, and he gave him a rather hard look for a moment before replying. “Oh, mine was just the run-of-the-mill lost in the confusion sort of thing. MIA, and all that,” he said, acting nonchalant. “A neat little stamp on the file and that’s that. Not a big nice funeral with much mourning weeping and beating of breasts like you no doubt garnered.”

“Hardly,” Snape said dryly.

“Hmm—more of a party, then?” smirked Sands.

“With Potter no doubt leading the chorus of all my ex-students.”

“Oh, you were a teacher!” Sands said delightedly, and Snape cursed himself. “That explains why you’re so pissy all the time.”

“Then what’s your excuse for being a complete ass every minute of the day?” he snapped, angry that every detail of his past suddenly seemed to be bubbling to the surface, now that he had a waiting ear.

Sands was undaunted. “I worked for the government—it’s what we do.”

“And you were no doubt a star employee,” Snape sneered.

“The best,” he said proudly, but with an undercurrent of dark amusement.

Snape quite honestly never quite knew how to deal with Andrew’s—Sands’s irrepresible pleasantness in the face of insults to his person, so he tried a different tack. “Well, with a name like Sheldon, I can hardly fault you for embracing your inner idiot.”

Sands scowled, obviously put out, his face creasing into that irritating pout of his, and Snape felt the corner of his mouth twitch. “Laugh it up, chucklehead—I’ll have you know that my name was an inspiration to me,” said Sands loftily. His voice dropped, and he leaned forward, smiling nastily across the table. “I had the highest civilian kill rate in my year.” Then he leaned back again and added nonchalantly, “What else could I do to make a reputation for myself as a field agent with a name like Sheldon?”

Snape shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. “I don’t imagine that anything you endured could have been much worse than growing up in a poor mill town with a name like Severus.”

Sands stilled, and then raised his eyebrows, nodding his head. “You win—it sucks to be you,” he conceded.

You have no idea. Snape growled in his throat. “Name or no, I hardly feel that you lived up to your
boasted reputation if you let those three incompetents sneak up on you,” he said nastily.

Sands glared. “They caught me with my pants down,” he said sulkily.

Snape glanced down at the pale, knobbly knees shining whitely in the moonlight, and sneered, “I fail to see how it could be otherwise, given that they’re on the floor.”

“These pants,” Sands said, tugging at the elastic of his baby-blue shorts, pulling the waistband out and letting it pop back into place. “Even CIA agents have to pee. Fortunately for me,” he went on, “I keep a gun in the toilet tank.”

Snape blinked at him. “I see,” he said.

There was a silence; Sands was sitting quietly, his fingers drumming incessantly on the edge of his chair. Snape looked down at his fingers, laced between his knees.

“So,” Sands inquired suddenly. “Speaking of water from the toilet, all that new-age holistic snake-oil you’ve been hawking in the square—that stuff’s legit, huh? Just like magic?”

“Exactly,” Snape replied.

Sands tapped his lip with his index finger. “Including that crap you give José for his old gunshot wound?”

Snape regarded him for a moment, his eyebrows lifting of their own accord. “Yes,” he said slowly.

“How much do you extort out of him for that stuff?”

Snape snorted. “Three hundred pesos—and it’s hardly extortion if it relieves his pain for a month,” he shot back.

“Hmm.” Sands didn’t say anything else.

Snape glanced around; there was no clock in this house, but it had been nearly nine when he’d first heard the sounds of the altercation, and he imagined it was nearing ten, if not past. Tomorrow was Friday—he had to go out in the morning, and he wanted to go home and go to bed.

He looked at Sands. The man was sitting quietly, his expression pensive. Snape hoped that he had made it more than clear that he knew Sands’s motivations were entirely personal, and much in the same vein as his own. “I have no desire to involve myself with the Muggle affairs of this area,” he said delicately into the silence.


“Then we just might be simpatico after all,” said Snape smoothly, and Sands laughed.

“I told you so,” he said smugly, and Snape snorted.

Snape rose to leave; as he neared the door, Sands spoke again. “I’m not done with you,” he said, and Snape turned, his back stiffening, but Sands merely said, “I’m not fully recuperated yet—that was quite a beating I took—I’ll be needing room service. Breakfast, seven o’clock.”

“I am not bringing you breakfast!” Snape said, outraged.

“Fine, then,” Sands huffed. “I’ll come over and get it myself. I will haul myself bodily out of bed,
dragging my bum leg, crawling on my sore arm, bleeding to death from my lip, and probably puncture my lung in the process, so you don’t have to cross the street.”

“That is perfectly acceptable to me,” Snape sneered.

“Okay—but don’t expect me to bring you any lasagne tomorrow night,” Sands replied, fishing out another cigarette from his shirt pocket.

“What lasagne?”

“I’m teaching Chiclet how to make it—and if you want any, you’ll just have to haul your sorry self over here and get it yourself, now won’t you?” Sands said.

“So it would seem,” replied Snape.

“Glad to see we understand each other—now get out of my house.”

Snape made a noise of disgust and let himself out, giving the door a very satisfactory slam behind him as he went. Oh, but the gratitude was overwhelming. He saved that stupid Muggle’s skinny arse, and what thanks does he get? He decides to start stealing his eggs again.

Oh, well. At least he wouldn’t have to cook dinner tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Homage to The Wizard of Oz.

The aside fic "Debriefing," featuring a young Sands still in CIA training, details how Sands originally found out about magic.
“So I ended up in an Aegean Art class, and I spent a semester studying the Minoans and those weird little Cycladic figurines and stuff like that. I’d also picked up an interpretive dance class for that semester—artsy chicks are always easy if you can convincingly fake interest. Only problem is that dance majors are all butt-ugly—rail-thin and with faces like fish. Well, the girls, anyway—the boys, on the other hand, were gorgeous, so I fit right in there. But I got kind of sick of the entire class hitting on me—there’s only so much of me to go around, you know—so I didn’t stick with that but that one semester. But I liked the language classes that I picked up that same way—to the point that I made language studies one of my majors. I speak five, you know. Spanish, French, Italian, German, and Japanese. Well, almost Japanese. I read it more than speak it. Never got quite enough language immersion to qualify as fluent in that one.”

“Fascinating.”

“Isn’t it, though? Anyway, my father tried to talk me into the whole law thing, and by that I mean lawyers, but I’m not some kind of ambulance chaser, so I didn’t even consider that. However, I had always been intrigued by the idea of law **enforcement**—but not a policeman, detective or otherwise. I wasn’t interested spending my days as a PI following around cheating girlfriends and deadbeat druggies—or worse, eating ten pounds of Twinkies a day, sitting on my ass in a black and white. I thought about the FBI for all of two seconds, but I wasn’t dumb enough for that outfit, nor did I fancy the idea of having to report directly to the Feds—that, and I’d seen *The Silence of the Lambs*. Anthony Hopkins scares me.”

“How quaint.”

“Shut up. So I went CIA instead—in all honesty, there never really was any question. Your average spook has a little more autonomy than your average G-man, which was very much to my liking. So I officially finished college when I was twenty-four, fast-tracked my way into the CIA, and now here I am.”

“And just what does any of this have to do with anything?”

Sands smirked. “It’s simple. I have three bachelor’s degrees, with six minors, I speak five languages, and I’ve been to more continents than you have. All of this, contrary to your previous assertions, adds up to the plain and simple fact that I am smarter than you.”

“Exactly by what twisted logic have you come to that conclusion?”

Sands took a slug of coffee. He’d taken to bringing his own in the past few months, since Greene—no, *Snape*—was too much of a pussy to drink it. “I just told you—weren’t you listening?”
“No,” Snape said flatly.

Sands sighed. “You know, you’re like a woman—you never listen when a man speaks. No wonder you aren’t married. I’ll bet the only woman ever interested in you was a huge lesbian.”

Snape’s silence was enough to know that he’d just scored a point, so he merely smiled smugly to himself and continued eating his breakfast. He reached out to grab the jar of jelly that was always next to the salt and pepper and found himself groping at air.

“Where’s the jelly?” Sands demanded.

“In the icebox.”

“Well, get it out, then.”

“No. I don’t want any,” Snape replied coldly.

“I do,” said Sands, annoyed.

“Then help yourself,” Snape sneered. “That’s what you usually do, isn’t it?”

Sands sneered back at him, but hove himself up out of the chair and moved toward the low hum of the fridge. He slid his hands over the lightly pebbled surface until he found the handle, and pulled it open.

“You know, you’re a real jerk, making me look around in here, what with all your magic shenanigans,” he informed Snape. “There could be bats roosting in here for all I know, or the mayonnaise might try to bite me.” He found a series of cold tin caps under his fingers in the rack inside the door. Too thin, too short, too round…this one felt right. “What’s this one?” he asked, holding up the jar.

“Eye of newt,” Snape said dryly.

Sands paused, considered the matter, and then popped the cap off and stuck his tongue down in the jar, taking a great big lick of the contents. “Hrm. Tastes just like strawberry.” He grinned at Snape —almost able to hear him grinding his teeth—and then sauntered back to the table. Another point for him.

He spread his toast with some of his new jelly. He would rather it have been the raspberry that he knew was tucked away in there somewhere, but he had no desire to continue rooting around in there just so Snape could be amused at his expense—nor was he planning on passing up on his ill-gotten gains. Somehow, they always tasted that much sweeter, and the jelly was no exception—even if it was strawberry.

“That hits the spot,” he said, polishing off the last bit of sweet, crunchy toast. Snape was still fuming across the table, Sands could tell, as he tossed back the rest of his coffee before it went stone cold and then fished around in his pocket for an after-breakfast cigarette. “Clear up this mess, why don’t you,” he directed, waving his hand at the dishes in front of him.

“You can do it yourself,” Snape said nastily, standing up and sweeping off to the sink with his own plate, leaving Sands’s in front of him.

“That’s hardly polite—I’m the guest, you know,” Sands admonished.

Snape snorted abrasively. “No, what you are is a spoiled brat who thinks that the world owes him a
living,” he said. “Just because you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth doesn’t entitle you to preferential treatment, nor does it give you the right to walk all over and take whatever you wish from ‘the unwashed poor’.

Sands raised an eyebrow; beneath the sarcasm he could feel what he suspected was unintentional bitterness oozing from Snape’s words. A slow smile spread across his face. “Ooooh,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette on the tabletop. “Did a rich boy beat you up at recess and steal your favorite ball?”

Snape was fast—Sands had to give him that. He heard it a split second before it happened, a rustle of clothing as he moved, that strange swishy noise and a sharp little crackle, but had absolutely no time to dodge. He hissed and his head snapped to the side when a horrible sting slashed across his left cheek, burning from where Snape’s spell hit home.

They were both perfectly still, neither of them moving; Sands didn’t hear Snape lower his wand, so he didn’t turn back to face him, lest he be hit again, and just sat still, feeling the line of heat burning on his cheek, undoubtedly darkening to a red welt.

The success of his own jibe was a something of a split victory due to Snape’s immediate and unanswerable retaliation—and Sands didn’t share. So, with deliberate calm, he got up out of his chair, grabbed his jelly, and left.

“Stupid tea-swilling fuckmook,” he muttered when he was out of Snape’s house, and he stomped back to his own.

Sands did not mind eating lunch with Chiclet—far from it, considering it was a form of payment for services rendered. He also enjoyed being outside in the air; being March, it was still cool enough to enjoy sitting al fresco at the café to feel the breeze. What he didn’t like was being out in the open for too long where unwanted eyes (damn it) might see him. What he really didn’t like was that stinging spell that Snape had lashed across his face this morning, the faggoty little fuck.

The pibil was good today. Not very good, mind you, but decent, and that made him happy. But Snape was an asshat, and that pissed him off. Leave it to him to ruin a perfectly good breakfast with his stupid magic spells. His face still hurt, although Chiclet assured him that there wasn’t a mark anymore. He was probably lying.

The café in this sleepy part of town was never terribly busy, which made it all the easier for him to keep one ear on Chiclet and the other on the babble of voices around him. And when a voice sounded out of place, he noticed. Like he noticed right now. Someone was speaking English.

“Allá,” he heard someone say, and he knew he’d been spotted. But he didn’t move, and he’d eaten another bite and was about to take another shot of tequila when the kid in question walked up and stopped right next to their table.

“Excuse me,” the young and very obviously British voice said. “But I was told you speak English?” he asked, his voice lilting upwards.
Sands deliberately lowered his glass, all kinds of sirens going off in his head. However, he merely smiled pleasantly and looked up at the interloper. “Maybe,” he said congenially. “Have a seat.” He heard the Brit pull up a spare chair and sit down nearer to Chiclet, who in turn scooted out of the way. “That’s my kid,” Sands continued. “Say hello, kid.”

“Buenos días, señor,” Chiclet said obediently.

“Hello,” said the stranger, somewhat uncertainly.

“He’s polite, isn’t he?”

“Er—yes, he is. Well, sir, could I ask you—”

“Try my pork.” He could feel the Brit blinking stupidly at him.

“What? Oh, no, thank you—”

“Try my pork,” he insisted, his smile fixed and hard.

Sands heard the sound of fidgeting, and then of someone reaching across the table and a finger dipping into his plate, followed by unenthusiastic chewing and something of a cough. “Uh…thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” said Sands benignly. “Now—what can I do you for?”

“Well, you see, sir, I’m looking for someone.”

“Are you now.” It was not a question, and Sands could tell it made the kid uncomfortable. “What’s your name?”

“Potter—Harry Potter.”

Sands raised an eyebrow. “Are you really—or are you just shitting me?”

The kid was still for a moment, and Sands felt the prickling press of his suspicious scrutiny. “That’s my name,” he finally answered.

Sands smiled charmingly. “Well, then—who are you looking for?”

Potter was quiet for a moment, but when he spoke, there was something vaguely like hope in his voice. “An English fellow. An old professor of mine, actually.” Sands could hear him gesturing rather vaguely around in the air in front of his face in that way people did when they were describing someone as he shifted in his seat. “About my height, a big nose, long and—well, a bit greasy hair—or it could be short now, I’m not sure. He might have a big scar on his neck—”

“I’ve never seen him before in my life,” Sands said, cutting smoothly across the bumbling kid, who stopped short. “But I can tell you what you should do next, mate.” He pushed his plate towards him and leaned conspiratorially across the table, crooking his finger to draw the kid in closer; Potter tensed but leaned in to hear. “Finish this,” he murmured, pointing to the plate, “pay my check—and then just get on your little broomstick and fly away!”

He felt the kid jolt in his seat; Sands rose quickly. “Chiclet, we’re leaving. Ramón!” he called to the manager as Potter started to sputter. “He’s got my tab!” he said pointing to the protesting Limey, and then he grabbed Chiclet by the shoulder and steered him out the door, ignoring Potter’s cries for him to wait.

The minute they were out the door, Sands tilted his head down and muttered in the kid’s ear,
“Chiclet, get us home, as fast as your little Mexican legs can take us!”

Chiclet obeyed, as always, and like the bright kid he was, took them by way of a back alley so the Potter idiot wouldn’t be able to follow. They made it home in record time; Sands grabbed Chiclet and stopped him in front of his house. “Did that guy follow us?” he demanded.

“No, Señor,” Chiclet said after taking a look around.

“Good.” After a moment’s thought, he added, “Go hide in my basement. Don Greene will be with you in a moment.”

“Sí,” he said, and Sands waited until he heard him patter across the street and the door open and close before making his way to the house next to his and pounding furiously and insistently instead of his usual polite knock.

He heard a muffled oath through the wood, and then the door was yanked open beneath his banging fist. “Hi!” he said brightly, waving his hand before dropping it back down and putting both hands behind his back.

“What the hell do you want?” Snape growled.

“Guess who I saw in town today!”

“The Queen Mother,” he sneered.

“Close!” Sands said, wagging a finger at him. He grinned a moment more, bouncing on the balls of his feet, and then said, “I saw an old student of yours.” He could almost hear the blood drain from Snape’s face. “You know—Potter,” he said.

There was a moment’s pause, and then he yelped as a long-fingered hand seized him by his shirtfront and dragged him bodily over the front step; the door slammed shut behind him.

“So help me, Sands, if this is some kind of sick joke, I will kill you!” Snape spat in his face, punctuating every word with a vicious shake. Sands took it limply, just waiting for him to finish his tantrum, until the shaking became so violent that he felt his sunglasses begin to slide down his nose. That was enough of that; he stiffened against the onslaught and grabbed a fistful of the front of Snape’s shirt, gripping it just under his chin; his fingers bunched up in the starched material, and he found that he could feel the tiny, zig-zagging lines of a myriad of scars cutting into Snape’s flesh, leading under his high collar. They froze.

“Let go,” Sands said evenly. They regarded each other for a moment, Snape breathing heavily and mintily in Sands’s face, and then Snape’s fingers finally unclenched. Sands released his grip and flicked his sunglasses back up. “Thank you,” he said, more pleasantly as he straightened his shirt. “My clothes are expensive. And no,” he said, sensing that Snape was about to start up again, “it’s not a joke.” He rummaged around in his pocket for a cigarette. “There’s some little Limey bastard back in town who says his name is Harry Potter, and he’s asking around for an old teacher of his with greasy hair and a big nose, and you—” he reached up and honked Snape’s impressive bazoo before he could jerk away, “—have a big nose,” he finished.

Snape started pacing, cursing softly under his breath. Sands had already lit up his cigarette and was blowing the first drag back out through his nose when Snape finally spoke, stopping mid-pace. “I’m leaving,” he said, and spun on his heel towards the stairs.

“No, you’re not,” Sands said casually.
“Yes, I am—I can’t let Potter find me here!”

“And he won’t—you’re gonna go hide in my place, and I’ll stay here and head him off at the pass.”

“Potter has never been deterred by the concept of privacy, you idiot—if he comes here, he won’t think twice about snooping through all the nearby houses!” Snape snarled.

“So go hide in my basement—you’ll be fine there.”

“How, exactly, is your basement supposed to keep me hidden?”

“Well, it is underground, for one thing, and the door isn’t obvious. For another, it’s got a dirt floor, there’s a shovel down there, and I have a gun. If he tries to go down there, we’ll just shoot him,” he said patiently. He could practically hear Snape’s sneer, but the lack of response told him that he was winning. “I’ll wait here, and when he comes looking for you, I’ll take care of him, and then you can go home, all safe and sound. So, run along—Chiclet will keep you company, and help yourself to the booze—and I’ll take care of everything.”

“You can’t kill The Bloody Boy Who Fucking Lived, Sands,” Snape said flatly. “You will be found out.”

“Will you relax?” he said in exasperation. “I’ve done this before. Now, tootle along, wot-wot, and I guarantee that The Bloody Boy Who Fucking Lived will still be living, but will never darken your door again.”

Snape seemed to waffle for a moment, and then Sands heard the loud noise of that disappearing thing he did. He huffed through his nose, pleased, and then settled in to wait.

It was well into mid-afternoon when the hesitant knock came on the door. Sands straightened in the armchair where he had been ashing on Snape’s rug and sampling Snape’s wizard whiskey (goddamn, but it was a kick in the balls every time) and dangled his gun over the side of the chair, where it was out of sight. “Yes?” he called, pitching his voice quieter and lower and with a decidedly neutral accent, so that he didn’t sound quite like himself, and maybe could pass for someone else—like Snape, maybe.

The door opened a crack (the pussy), and then swung wide. The little cheese-dick stepped in decisively, but froze just inside the door. “Yes?” Sands repeated lazily.

“Oh—it’s you.”

“Yes—me,” Sands agreed.

“I—I’m sorry, I—I was told—I think I have the wrong house—”

“No. You don’t,” Sands interrupted with a slight shake of his head.

“But I was told—”

“You were told,” Sands said, “to take your scrawny little bee-hind back to Jolly Olde England. Instead, you come barging into my house.”

“You—do you live here?”

“I do.”
“Oh.” The kid deflated, Sands could tell.

“What do you want, Redcoat?” Sands asked into the silence. “Why are you bothering me?”

Now the kid got defensive. “I told you—I’m looking for someone.”

“Yes, well—usually, when people come and live in this dump, it’s because they don’t want to be found. Case in point—me,” he said, pointing to himself. “And so I suspect the same could be said for whoever you’re looking for. Now,” he said, before the little prick could start up again, “why don’t you do that disappearing act of yours and run along home?”

He could feel the kid’s eyes on him, scrutinizing. “What do you mean, disappearing act?” he asked warily.

“What do you think?” he asked. He made a sort of “hocus-pocus” gesture with his free hand. “Poof! You’re gone!”

“So you’re the one who put up these wards?”

Sands grinned. “Just call me Mr. Wizard.”

There was another thick silence, and then Potter asked, “Do you know Don Greene?”

Hmm. Maybe the kid wasn’t as stupid as he’d thought. “Yeah—what about him?” Sands asked blandly.

“Who is he?”

Sands shrugged with artful carelessness, his mind working furiously, and he chose his next words carefully. “Just some old Muggle who lived a few streets over—he made some really good spiced tea. His wife died a month ago, though, and he moved away to go live with his daughter.” He deliberately tinged his voice with distrust. “And just what do you want with him?”

“I—nothing.” The kid wasn’t very good at keeping his thoughts to himself—the disappointment was practically dripping off of him, and Sands could hear him worrying at his lip. When he spoke again, it was with something very like desperation. “I—I have to find him—please, sir, if you—”

“I—nothing.” The kid wasn’t very good at keeping his thoughts to himself—the disappointment was practically dripping off of him, and Sands could hear him worrying at his lip. When he spoke again, it was with something very like desperation. “I—I have to find him—please, sir, if you—”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me,” Sands cut him off abruptly, and he heard Potter start. “Those who call me ‘sir’ don’t live to tell about it. Now—don’t come back here again, Potter. Ever.” The idiot started to talk again, and Sands could tell that he was bristling now, so Sands picked up the conversation before Potter could start again. “I have no idea who or what you are looking for, little man, but what I can tell you is that what we have here is clearly a case of mistaken identity. I’m not your teacher and I never was—just because I have long hair and speak English, someone clearly gave you the wrong name. But more to the point, I didn’t move down here for just for the waters—I don’t like visitors. So, why don’t you just fuck off.” His finger tightened lovingly on the trigger.

They stared at each other for nearly a minute, and then Potter shuffled backwards. “Sorry to have bothered you,” he mumbled, and Sands heard the door shut. He didn’t move for another two hours; he just sat, his gun in his lap, and listened.

Snape had not locked the door of Sands’s house magically when he went in to camp out; Sands had not expected him to. That would’ve aroused suspicion, should the little nosy parker have decided to go snooping around. But he hadn’t; after he’d left, all Sands had heard was the muffled crack that meant Potter had done the Famous Magical Disappearing Act. He fiddled with the keys for a
moment, and then finally got his door open, kicking it shut behind him as he went inside.

“Chiclet!” he hollered. “Get up here!”

He’d already settled into his armchair, digging around in his pocket for his cigarettes, when he heard the sound of Chiclet coming down the stairs.

“Is he gone?” he asked without preamble.

“Yeah, he’s gone. And unless I’m mistaken—which I’m not—he won’t be back, either. I thought I told you to go to the basement?”

“Don Greene didn’t want to—said he wanted to have another way out, so we sat upstairs by your escape hatch. He helped me with my English verbs.” A pause, then: “He’s really mad, Señor.”

Sands snorted in annoyed contempt. “Well, then, go tell Greene that the big bad man is gone—that the Knight in Shining Armor has once again saved the Damsel in Distress—and then blast him out of my guest room,” Sands replied, flicking his lighter open and lighting up his cig.

“Sí, Señor.” Chiclet’s footsteps receded again, clomping up the stairs. He waited patiently, leaning back and splaying out in his chair, letting smoke curl upwards towards the ceiling, listening to the vague mutterings of Snape talking to Chiclet up in the unused bedroom, but not bothering to strain himself to catch what they were saying.

Finally, as he stubbed out his smoke, he heard two sets of footsteps coming back down the stairs.

“What did you do?” Snape rasped at once, sounding very wary and tense, standing at the foot of the stairwell as Chiclet came to stand next to Sands.

“We talked,” Sands said idly. “We had a nice conversation and I politely informed him that I like my peace and quiet and it would be greatly appreciated if he would not try to disturb said peace and quiet by stirring up the town looking for me. Then I showed him the door, and he left. It was all very pleasant—you should’ve been there.”

“And this is supposed to make me feel better?” Snape growled.

Sands regarded him with raised brows. “I wouldn’t expect it to—you enjoy being miserable too much to stop now. But he’s not here anymore, and he’s not coming back, just like I said. You’re just mad because you have to admit I’m right,” he said smartly.

“I don’t have to admit a damn thing,” Snape retorted. “You have no guarantees that he won’t be back.”

Sands sighed tiredly. “Look—I know he’s not coming back. The pussy way he went skulking back out with his tail between his legs made that pretty obvious. That, and I’m pretty sure I got the message across that if he came back, I’d put a bullet right between the fucker’s eyes,” he said. To Chiclet, he added, “Get the tequila.” Sands turned his head, giving Snape an exasperated look. “Just come sit down, would you? He’s not hiding up my ass, you know.”

“I don’t want to hear about your sexual preferences—what I want to know is what you told him!” Snape hissed.

Sands snorted. “I told him that I’d never seen you, never even heard of you, and that he had a case of mistaken identity. I told him that Don Greene was an old widower who moved away last month, and that his old teacher wasn’t here and never had been, and even if he was, he obviously didn’t want to
be found. Good enough?"

“No.”

“Well, that’s all I got, so you’re just SOL beyond that. So—ball’s in your court, my good man,” he said, gripping the neck of the bottle that Chiclet had put in his hand. “You can either run like the coward you are,” he said, and he heard Snape twitch, “or you can stay here in your nice little home with your nice little business and your nice little neighbor.” Snape snorted in contempt, but Sands merely tipped back his bottle and took a drink. “It’s all up to you.” Sands swung his head around to regard his neighbor. “I, for one, will be extremely pissed off if I lose my Meals on Wheels services—I might have to kill Potter for that.”

Snape didn’t speak. Chiclet asked him if he wanted a drink, no doubt holding up Sands’s sample of that whiskey Snape drank. Snape didn’t answer, but Sands could tell by the subdued manner that Chiclet was now putting the bottle back that Snape must have given him a glare fit to peel the paint.

Sands took another drink, and then said in exasperation, “Oh, for the love of—I got rid of him, just like I said I would! What more do you want?”

“I don’t want to be found!” Snape barked.

“And you weren’t. Now—are you going to go about your business, or are you going to let that little pantywaist dictate your every move for the rest of your life? What do you owe this kid, anyway?”

“Nothing!” Snape snarled. “I owe him nothing! I paid my debt to him in blood and now I’m through!”

Sands smiled. Paid his debt, did he? It was so funny to hear the Unflappable Molly Brown get his undies in a knot, in no small part because he always seemed to slip up and mention something that Sands suspected Snape would have rather kept to himself—and usually with regards to one Harry Potter. It happened so rarely—but Sands always made a note of what it took to do it any time he did—as well as whatever he would say when it happened.

But it was best not to overplay one’s hand; all he said now was, “That’s more like it. Now—sit down, have a drink to calm your nerves, and then you can go back home and do whatever it is you do with yourself in that upstairs room of yours. And dinner’s on you, by the way,” he added.

There was a silence, and after second to two, Snape sat down. “Ah—now that’s the old pepper,” Sands said. Snape growled something unintelligible, but Sands heard him take the glass of whiskey that Chiclet had poured him, and Sands raised his glass. “Cheers,” he said, waggling his eyebrows, and then he drank, and eventually Snape did too.

Sands listened to the muffled, methodical crunch of dirt and gravel under his boots. It was a sound he’d always liked, but recent events had made him appreciate it even more. He loved that sound now—that sound meant that he was walking, walking a beat, walking to a beat, a beat that was his very own and nobody else’s. He cocked his head and listened to the quicker, lighter footsteps of the kid beside him, the soft rubber soles of his sneakers shushing in the road dust, heard the crunch of paper and plastic as Chiclet shifted the bags of groceries in his arms. He felt a breeze whistling gently through the air and ruffling his hair. The church bells were solemnly tolling the time—high noon. Perfect time for a showdown—and he had an idea that he was going to get one in just a bit. He grinned.

Today had been a balmy but sunny eighty-five—a rarity for the normally miserably hot and dry
summers in this country. As such, Sands had officially declared it a Good Day and had decided to find some way to spend it outdoors. When Chiclet had shown up on his doorstep this morning, he’d informed the kid that he would be accompanying him as he went on his regular Wednesday grocery run. Now they were walking home, Sands carrying his own groceries in one bag, and Chiclet carrying Snape’s in two. He was enjoying the general silence, following the kid’s footsteps, when said kid decided to be a bitch and interrupt his pleasant musings with the same complaint he’d had back at the butcher’s.

“Señor, I really don’t think that he’s going to like this,” Chiclet insisted. “Don Greene is always very specific about what he wants me to buy.”

“Yeah, well, Don Greene’s head comes to a point. Look, I know bacon,” he said, cutting off the little shit when he tried to start up again, “and that in your bag is bacon. Greene’s specs don’t ring of ‘Oooo, I have to have it this way or I won’t eat it’, anyway,” he added. “It rings of a skinflint. And I, for one, am tired of eating that limp, fatty shoe leather he keeps trying to pass off as pig.”

“Well, then what about the eggs? He always wants small brown eggs, and only six—well, twelve, now that you eat with him, but——”

“It’s all about money with him, I assure you,” Sands said airily. “He’s too much of a mustard seed butt to spend his cash on what’s important—namely me and my breakfast—so I’m spending it for him.” He hefted his own groceries a little higher on his elbow, wanting a cigarette. “Besides, I bought everything. What do you care?”

“It’s just that if I get something wrong, he gets really mad and yells at me for it, and I think that this is going to make him even madder than when I mess up——”

“And you’re scared he’ll yell at me, too? Well, trust me, kid—I’ve put up with a lot worse in my time. I can handle a tantrum from Don Greene.” Sands paused. “What do you mean he yells at you?” he asked suspiciously. He heard Chiclet shift uncomfortably.

“He—he just gets mad, Señor—you know how he is.”

“Meaning?”

Chiclet sighed. “He calls me an idiot and says he’ll stop paying me if I don’t watch what I’m doing.”

Sands pursed his lips—Snape had no right to yell at his kid, however incompetent he was. He’d have to have a talk with him about that.

“But you didn’t just change his order, you bought a bunch of extra stuff—he gets even madder about that,” Chiclet droned on. “Almost every time I try to pick up something extra if I could get a good deal, he always gets really mad—except for that one time I found cheap strawberries last year, but —”

“Well, that’s what we bought him, now, isn’t it?” Sands demanded indignantly. “Good on pancakes.”

Chiclet sighed again—Sands was about two seconds away from tripping him on principle. “I don’t think he eats pancakes, Señor.”

“He does now,” Sands replied. “He’d better, anyway—I haven’t had pancakes in a long time, and I could seriously go for a short stack in the morning. Maybe we should’ve bought him a waffle iron, too—nah, maybe later.” He hoisted his bag up again, as it kept slipping, and made a mental note to remember to get one the next time he decided to go shopping with Chiclet (which he wasn’t likely to
do, because the little shit was really pissing him off with his constant bitching).

All too soon they were back down on their own street, and Sands reached awkwardly into his pocket for his keys, balancing the heavy sack of groceries precariously in one arm. He finally fished his keys out and unlocked his front door, hearing Chiclet come in behind him with Snape’s groceries. “Set those down on the couch for now, and unload mine first,” he ordered, wending his way to the kitchen and resting his own bag on the counter.

“Right, Señor,” Chiclet affirmed, and Sands heard lots of loud rattling of paper and quick footsteps before the bag was taken from him and Chiclet went through and began dashing the items to their proper places. He himself, on the other hand, ambled back to the living room and sat down in his chair and lit up a cigarette.

He was only halfway through with it when Chiclet came back into the living room, declaring his task finished. Sands grimaced and made to drop his cigarette butt on the floor so he could put it out, but found it yet again snatched from him and put out in the ashtray.

“How many times am I gonna have to tell you not to do that?” Sands growled irritably at him, heaving his butt out of the chair and getting back to his feet.

“You’re ruining your floor, Senor,” Chiclet replied, the little smartass. Sands scowled horribly at him, and then moved across the room to the couch and picking up one sack of groceries.

“Let’s go make our delivery,” he said, moving around the coffee table towards the door.

“I can deliver them, Señor,” Chiclet said.

“I don’t doubt you can,” Sands snapped back at him. “But, in case you didn’t notice, I want to go over there with you today.”

Chiclet said nothing, which was fortunate for him, because if that little shit back-talked one more time, he was going backhand him. He opened the door and ambled out, pausing in the street for Chiclet to shut and lock the door behind them. Sands moved next door before Chiclet, trailing his fingers along the sides of the houses until he reached Snape’s doorjamb, at which point he knocked smartly on the door and waited.

Snape probably had the door locked nine ways from Sunday, and not just with real locks, but most likely also with all sorts of spells and crap, and a one-way peephole and some kind of magical periscope from the upstairs—he’d been jumpier than a one-legged frog ever since Harry Potter had shown up, and his paranoia was getting on Sands’s nerves. Take now, for instance: Sands had his groceries, but Snape was so scared of some kid that he was making him wait on his front stoop. Sands didn’t like waiting. He gave Snape a good solid ten seconds to come and let him in, and when he didn’t show, Sands knocked smartly on the door and waited.

“Señor, he doesn’t like people to keep knocking on his door like that!” hissed Chiclet urgently. Sands raised an eyebrow at him and promptly beat heavily on the door three more times. The door was suddenly wrenched open.

“What are you—” Snape stopped talking the minute he saw Sands, who grinned.

“Honey, I’m home!” he chirruped, and then brushed past Snape, snapping his fingers at Chiclet when he hesitated on the front step.

“Get out of my house!” Snape barked, furious, following Sands as he swept into the kitchen with his kid in tow.
Sands clucked reprovingly. “Do you not want your groceries?” he asked innocently.

“Yes, but you barging in here and making yourself at home is not part of the arrangement, so get out!”

“Well, I changed your order, so I thought I might go through and inform you of the improvements I obligingly made to your menu. You’ll thank me,” Sands replied, waiting for Chiclet to set the groceries down on the counter. He heard the bags crinkle down in front of him, and then began digging around through the bag for the items he’d changed. He hauled out the slab of sliced bacon first, still cold even after the walk.

“This,” he declared, waving it in Snape’s general direction, “is called bacon. You’d do well to remember it. It’s not those cheap pieces of fat that you buy—there is actual meat involved. And I expect some of it on my plate tomorrow morning. And these?” He pulled out the carton of extra large eggs. “These are eggs—chicken eggs, not those robin eggs you’ve been using. And tomorrow, I want two of them.” He held up two fingers. “Count ‘em—two.” He took care to flip his fork-fingered hand backwards into the good old British “Fuck you,” smiling at Snape before reaching back in the bag. “I also bought you grape jelly—real jelly—but I still got you that sissy strawberry crap you eat. Chiclet, you put the steak in the wrong bag,” he groused, pulling out the three cuts of meat and shoving them at the kid. “That’s also meat, as you will find out this evening,” he said, pointing at the kid and his burden. “Don’t worry—we still have your usual lousy chicken. You are what you eat, after all.”

He could all but hear Snape quivering with indignation in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Let’s see, what else—here’s your milk, I bought you a gallon so you can actually serve me a glass of it instead of a thimbleful. I got you that cardboard you’ve been serving me, but I also bought actual bread—see? White. Only way to go. I bought you real vegetables, too. I know green food is a foreign concept on that side of the Atlantic, but as you don’t live over there anymore, you really should assimilate. Chiclet says the only vegetable you eat is the occasional tomato—screw that.” He hefted the fat cucumber he’d selected up in front of his face. “Check this out—now this is a vegetable. Is that hot or what? It’ll be great on the salad you’ll be making tomorrow for dinner,” he said, setting it down next to the head of lettuce and diving back in. “I also took the liberty of adding cottage cheese to your menu, because it puts hair on your chest, and I have a sneaking suspicion that you could use it.”

“I don’t eat cottage cheese!” Snape burst out, sounding utterly enraged.

“I do, though,” Sands replied, pulling it out and setting it on the counter. “And grapefruit—good with breakfast, you know—with cottage cheese. And strawberries. I want these on my pancakes—I bought you pancake mix, too. I figured you were too much of a wiener to do it the real way. Or do your type even know how to use this stuff?” he asked, waving the box in the air at him. “This beyond you—too technologically advanced?”

“Andrews, get out of here!” Snape snarled angrily, striding over and snatching the Bisquick out of Sands’s hands and shoving him away from the counter.

“Now, is that any way to talk to your benefactor?” Sands asked mildly, pulling out from his pocket the pathetic little wad of Mexican money that Snape had given Chiclet earlier that morning. Sands tossed it on the kitchen table, smirking at Snape’s silent boiling.

Sands didn’t leave—instead, he settled himself into his usual chair, folding his fingers on the table. “It’s lunchtime, Greene. You’ll find all the makings for sandwiches in the other bag, I believe. Leaf-lettuce, mayo, mustard, meats, cheese—and some chips. Sorry—crisps.” He leaned back in his seat,
resting his head on his laced hands behind him. “I like turkey and ham on white with lettuce, mustard, pickle, and two slices of American cheese. Chiclet wants peanut butter and jelly—the grape jelly. I’m sure you want something weird, like liver and pickles with tartar sauce. You British people eat like perpetually pregnant women.” He paused, looking expectant. When Snape didn’t move, he huffed irritably, blowing his hair out of his face. “Well?”

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t throw you and all of this out!” Snape hissed.

“Because I bought it, you ingrate,” Sands said coolly. “And you want to eat it and you know it. There—two reasons. Now make the sandwiches.” Sands flourished his hand and mock-bowed in his seat. “Please.”

Snape was still for a moment more, fuming, but then began storming about the kitchen, slamming plates and glasses on the counter before snatching the sandwich makings out of the paper bags. “You—boy!” he snapped, and Sands heard Chiclet jump to attention. “Get over here!”

Sands chuckled as Snape began delegating tasks to the kid. “You’re so domestic, Greene,” he said pleasantly. “You’ll make somebody a lovely little wife someday.”

“All-righty, then, Jorge—same as before. Give me an hour to talk with this guy, and if I’m not standing out here when you show back up, you’d better come find me—don’t even think about leaving me or my dead body out here alone.”

“Just don’t get yourself into as big a mess as last time,” Ramirez answered tersely.

Sands sighed. “I apologized for your seats, didn’t I? I tried to be reasonable—he and his goons jumped me. I had to flee for my life. It isn’t my fault he wanted to play hardball.”

“Yes, but it is your fault when you roll around in what’s left afterwards like a dog marking his territory.”

Sands didn’t reply, although he dearly wanted to—it wouldn’t do to provoke Ramirez. He might take a mind to just leave him here if he poked at him too much, and then where would he be? So, he merely looked to the side and asked, “What time is it?”

“Ten-forty,” Ramirez said.

“Eleven-forty, Jorge. On the dot. Keep an eye out,” Sands said in clipped tones before opening the car door and exiting the battered old Buick, his bag clutched tightly in one hand.

Yes, his bag. His other bag was bigger, but it had to be, to hold a fake arm, his usual lunchbox money-totes, his gun, and any necessary papers. This one was the smaller one—an old-school doctor’s bag, actually—and the one he’d brought with him last time. It was small, but it was more than enough to hold everything he’d need for this particular mission. And it was a proven commodity, too—Lorenzo had really been quite overwhelmed by his little bag of tricks.

Sands waited until he heard Ramirez’s car chug down the street and turn the corner out of sight. Then he turned and moved down the previously walked and scouted path, his boots moving slowly but purposefully over the cracked pavement, both his legs and arm delightfully pain free from his careful application of one of Snape’s salves this afternoon. He held his hand discreetly out in front of him as he counted the steps to the door of the ratty motel that Fideo happened to frequent. He liked his ladies, Fideo did; Gracia hadn’t been lying (good for her, too—very good. People who lied to him didn’t last long). Sands had been quite disgusted to have his suspicions confirmed as to how the little monkey-spank was spending money that was rightfully his—on cheap booze and diseased
Well, dear Fideo would be paying for those commodities out of his flesh this time around.

His gloved fingertips brushed the peeling paint of the door just when he thought they would. He slid his fingers lightly across the number on the hotel door—15, just where he should be. He moved quietly over to number 17, pressing his ear to the door; nothing on that side. He did the same thing to number 13, and heard nothing from there either. Good—he’d paid a random stranger to rent both rooms out for him today—now nobody would come running to Fideo’s rescue. Likely as not, if anyone did happen to hear anything untoward, they’d think it was cartel business and simply go on their merry ways—just because the cartel liked to maintain good public relations didn’t mean they wouldn’t think twice about shooting someone who butted in, and everyone here knew it.

Sands leaned forward and held his ear just away from the splintered wood of the door, tense and listening. The grunts and creaking sounds he heard from inside were unmistakable, and he grinned; how he loved it when he had the opportunity to literally catch someone with his pants down. He pulled out his gun, his fingers tight on the crosshatched plastic grip, ready to make his grand entrance.

And what an entrance it was. He pulled back his foot and kicked hard on the door, right on the lock, breaking it open with ease. “Room service!” he called merrily, aiming his gun towards the sound of the shocked gasps and a woman’s shriek. He kicked the door shut behind him, his mouth stretching into a grin as he heard the frantic scrambling of two people fighting their ways out of tangled sheets, the curses and thumps as they groped in the dark.

There was a great deal of yelling going on; poor Fideo was apparently rather annoyed by the intrusion. How dreadful; *coitus interruptus* was a real bitch, Sands knew, but that was just the way the cookie crumbled. His little piece of ass was more scared than angry, it sounded; she was babbling something about Fideo getting in trouble, that she had warned him about getting in with the wrong people. Her voice was closer, and from the sound of things, the little shit was hiding behind her.

No matter—she was going to be out of the picture, anyway. He couldn’t be having witnesses.

So he raised his gun; she obligingly started screaming for him not to kill Fideo, and he took careful aim at all the racket and fired once. She gave one final shriek and hit the ground with a thump as Fideo started shouting in earnest, and he knew he had aimed true. Then he heard rustling—and a click. Fideo had a gun—what a naughty boy—but not for long. Sands aimed again for that familiar sound and fired. Fideo screamed and the gun thumped to the floor. Perfect.

Sands reached behind his shoulder and put the chain on the door, his gun still out and ready. “Don’t try again, dearie. I’ve got you, and you know it.”

“You killed her…” Fideo panted uselessly. Sands shrugged

“You’re fault for putting her in the way.” He moved across the room, stalking his prey, listening to every frightened sound he made and every panted breath he took. “Hello, Fideo. You don’t know me, do you?”

“No, I fucking *don’t*,” he gasped, and Sands could hear wet sounds—he hoped that it hurt bad, where he’d shot him, and he wished he could see it. But that aside, he’d make do for listening for what was to come—for *feeling* it. He smiled down at the writhing little worm.

“Good. If you’d heard of me, you might have tried to cut and run—and we can’t have that. You and me, see—we have an appointment. Two men enter, one man leave, and all that.”
Fideo’s breaths took on a whistling quality, and Sands knew that he’d gotten his point across. “You kill me, and he’ll come after you—the mariachi is my friend, he will”—Fideo was babbling, gasping, but Sands just laughed at him.

“Your friend? Oh, yes, your friend. Your little mariachi friend happens to be dead, Fideo. Very dead,” he purred.

“What?” Fideo sounded more disbelieving than angry. “You—you’re lying—no way you could—”

“He died slowly, too, and rather messily.” He kicked one leg up and stood it on the edge of the rumpled bed, leaning down on his knee, his gun still raised. “He and I, we had a good time. He and I, we had a good time. He managed to keep quiet, I’ll give him that—until I started on his fingers, anyway. He was very touchy about those, and understandably—I hear you mariachis are defensive of your hands.” Sands chuckled. “After that, he kept screaming—all the way up to the end,” Sands leered unpleasantly.

But then, to Sands’s annoyed surprise, Fideo merely gave a choked laugh.

“You expect me to believe that?” he sneered. “You? Some skinny little gringo bastard, defeat El Mariachi? Nobody can beat El Mariachi! Nobody!”

That ugly, cold feeling went straight down his spine like an icy handful of snow down his shirt and settled heavily into his stomach—that familiar shock he’d had jolted him in the gut that day Ajedrez had plopped her smug little ass in front of him on the Day of the Dead.

“Excuse me?” he asked quietly. No. No. It could not be true—that man was dead already, he died…

“Assassins can’t stop him, the cartels can’t stop him, the fucking military can’t stop him—and whoever you are? You can’t stop him, either—you kill me, and he’ll come for you!”

“What do you mean he’s alive?” Sands asked, his voice so soft as to be almost inaudible. “El Mariachi…he died on the Day of the Dead. Marquez caught him—” His jaw twitched when Fideo laughed again, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

“You are so fucking stupid—anyone who could think El Mariachi could be defeated has to have shit for brains—” His words were cut off and he choked when Sands abruptly darted forward and grabbed him by the throat, pressing his gun tightly against the pig fucker’s head, teeth bared.

“So help me God, if you are lying to me, I will make what I did to your friend Lorenzo seem like a walk in the park. I will do things to you that you’ve never even imagined, shitsplatter—tell me the truth! Is El Mariachi still alive?!” he hissed furiously, loosening his fingers enough so that Fideo would be able to answer, but still shaking him hard, holding him so that he couldn’t get away.

And he could feel that stupid bastard smiling—laughing—when he said it. “Yes, he’s alive, you stupid American fucker—alive and well and you’ll never find him, until the day that he comes to kill you.”

“Famous last words,” Sands growled, and pulled the trigger. Blood splattered across his face, pattering on his sunglasses like rain. He released Fideo, staggering backwards and away from the now dead mariachi, tasting red coppery heat on his tongue. He spat, breathing hard, unable to believe what he’d just been told, unable to process it, to even understand it—to do anything with it.

El. El still alive. Didn’t die.

Sands had thought he’d lost his inside man. He’d gone to pieces the moment El hadn’t picked up his phone. The cartel was shadowing him, Cucuy was a backstabbing bastard, and suddenly El
Mariachi, the man he’d pinned so much on, was gone…and he’d panicked.

Still alive. Alive and well. Surely he must still be in Guitar Town.

Sands had gone to that café because El was dead. He’d been running with his tail between his legs—something he wasn’t entirely adverse to doing, when it came to saving his own skin—but not something that he liked—and that time it hadn’t worked. He’d cut off his own line there, cut off his own balls and handed them to her…

The President survived, the money’s gone…and El is still alive.

He had only been in that café because of El. Because El hadn’t had his phone, because El hadn’t picked up, because El had led Sands to believe that he’d been captured and killed.

Anyone who thinks El Mariachi can be defeated has to have shit for brains!

“Son of a bitch!” he roared, swinging around and firing shot after shot at Fideo’s corpse, hearing the wet sounds of the bullets hitting meat, but that only made him madder because Fideo wasn’t alive to scream and writhe under his onslaught, and what had been the point anyway—after all this time, Fideo had only been a minor player, and Lorenzo too; they may have stolen the money, but it ultimately wasn’t their fault that Sands was blind, no—that was El’s fault.

His ire rose again, and he moved to fire his gun again, but it made nothing but an impotent little click. And yet it was enough to snap him back to at least partial reality.

“Get a grip—get a grip, man, just…” He grabbed a handful of his hair, smearing Fideo’s blood on his hands and across his face, and staggered around the room until he found a chair to sit in. Collapsing down into it, he leaned on his knees, hanging his head down and wishing he could, just for once, close his eyes and think.

It felt like days, but Ramirez showed up only a few minutes past when the digital watch he’d bought for these occasions beeped, letting him know that it was eleven thirty five—he was right on time. The moment he heard his car come roaring into the parking lot and heard the double honk, he abandoned his post just inside Fideo’s door and came out, storming to Ramirez’s car and slamming the door once he’d gotten inside.

“Drive,” he said shortly, and Ramirez did, easing the car into gear and pulling away from the scene.

“Sands—what happened?” Ramirez replied slowly.

Sands knew what Ramirez was referring to. He’d fortunately retained enough wherewithal to make sure nobody could easily identify Fideo’s body—or that of his whore. That, however, meant blood on his hands and sleeves. While he’d easily wiped his face and hair clean on a towel in the bathroom, he’d not have the same privilege with his gloves and sleeves, leaving them stained with was undoubtedly a glorious red—but he couldn’t fucking see it, so he didn’t think about it.

“I was taking care of business,” he said tersely.

“You killed this one, too, didn’t you?”

Sands grimaced. Ramirez had been extremely pissy about Lorenzo’s death, so it stood to reason he’d be pissy about this one, too. “Yes, I did. And then I took care of the body so no one would know who he was, just like last time.”
“That’s what you said last time, but I remember a lot more blood.”

Sands jammed a cigarette in his mouth. This conversation was going straight to shit. “You would have, because there was a lot more that time. At least I got something for my pains this time,” he said as he lit up, speaking as much to soothe himself as his erstwhile partner. “I got a name.”

“What does that have to do with keeping him quiet?”

“Because now I have to make sure that another one keeps quiet. And I fully intend to.”

Sands was nearly thrown into the dashboard as the car came to a screeching halt. “You aren’t interested in keeping anyone quiet.” Ramirez’s voice was dark, angry. “You lying bastard—neither one of them fought back, did they? You went in there and killed them—killed them both!” Sands didn’t answer; his teeth were clenching tighter and tighter on the filter. “You never had any intention of negotiating!” Ramirez raged. “This was about you getting your petty revenge!”

“Well, I didn’t get it, so stop your whining,” Sands growled.

“You’ve made me an accessory to murder, you son of a bitch! Give me a good reason why I shouldn’t kick you out here and leave you to rot in the desert!” Ramirez shouted.

Sands had had enough; he whipped his gun out and aimed it right at Ramirez’s big fat mouth. “That’s your reason, jackass. Now drive, goddammit!” Sands snarled in response. There was a pause, and even though he knew Ramirez wasn’t scared—but he should be—the car jerked back into motion. “And yes—you are an accessory to murder now, aren’t you?” he asked coldly. “Mr. A-Number-One FBI agent, straight as an arrow, hero of the force—seeking revenge and then killing to cover his crime.” Ramirez was silent, seething in his seat next to him; Sands sneered at him. “That’ll make a great story for the papers should anyone happen to find out about it.” He tucked his gun back down the front of his jeans, shifting awkwardly in the seat as he did. He drummed his fingers impatiently on his knee, trying to think.

El. El Mariachi. That filthy, lying, cheating motherfucker…cozily holed up in Guitar Town, no doubt, strumming away at some cheap guitar, hiding out, whole and complete and content. Sands remembered how El had looked at him—those eyes. Those big, dark, pretty eyes…fuck…

Ramirez’s voice jarred him out of his thoughts. “What?” he asked irritably.

“I said, what was the name? You said he gave one, so what was it?” Ramirez asked again. “What information did you want from him?”

“I didn’t want any information—he volunteered it in an effort to save himself—a wasted effort,” he said, grinding it in. “He said El Mariachi would come after me if I killed him.”

The car jerked to a stop again. “What?!”


“I know enough about him to know not to cross him—did you just bring El Mariachi down on my head, Sands? If you did, I don’t care about the consequences—I’m leaving you out here, I don’t care —”

“I asked you what you knew about El Mariachi!” Sands shouted him down.
“He’s a gunfighter—pistolero. Fights with a guitar—and is unbeatable. Nobody crosses him, nobody can beat him—he is practically a legend. I didn’t believe the stories, didn’t believe they were real—but they are! He is real, and I’ve seen what he can do!” Ramirez hissed furiously.

“What do you mean you’ve seen him?” Sands barked. “When?”

“The Day of the Dead—the coup—he killed Barillo.”

“You knew?! You knew and you didn’t tell me?” Sands snarled.

“Why do you care?” Ramirez shot back. “What does he mean to you?”

“He means twenty-million pesos and my fucking eyes, that’s what he means!” Sands shouted in return. Sands ground his teeth furiously, resisting the urge to kill Ramirez right now, because that wouldn’t get him anywhere at all. “He cost me everything, that lying son of a whore—and he’s going to pay for it.”

“And that is your business,” Ramirez answered, his voice hard. “I know where this is going. You weren’t covering anybody’s ass when you went after those two—not yours, and certainly not mine. And I helped you—because you did lie to me, Sands—and I fully regret ever getting mixed up in this, but what’s done is done, and I intend to live with my regret.” The car turned, and Ramirez sped up, undoubtedly hitting that long stretch of highway between here and Culiacán. “This one is all you—I’m not getting mixed up with El Mariachi. You want to bring him down on your own head, fine, but I’m not about to get myself killed just so you can settle a score—a score that’s all in your own head in the first place.”

Sands didn’t reply to that—he didn’t trust himself. He needed Ramirez, goddammit—he needed someone, he couldn’t take care of himself right now, and if he took it into his head to leave Sands out in the desert, both of them would be in a world of hurt. So he played the silent type, trying to hide the way that his hands were trembling.

The drive back took much longer than he would’ve liked, swathed as it was in the thick, angry silence. He was enormously thankful when Ramirez finally stopped the car and informed him that they’d reached the end of his street. Sands jerked the door open, picked up his bag and got out, and slammed it shut, trailing his fingers along the car as he circled around it to make his way back home.

“Sands.”

He turned, pausing when he heard Ramirez’s voice.

“Look, Sands. I’ve seen him—he didn’t say a word, didn’t do anything—but he killed Barillo like he was nothing. That was enough for me—you can’t win. I don’t know what he’s done to you—what you think he’s done to you—but there’s no point. You need to admit when you’re the one who screwed things up.” Sands heard Ramirez shift, lean out of his door, and when he next spoke, his voice was decisive, pitiless. “You need to learn when someone is better than you.”

Sands clenched his fist so tightly that he felt his nails digging into his palm, leaving a line of little crescent-shaped divets in his flesh. “Get out,” he said flatly. “Get out of here before I decide that you lied to me too and that I have to keep you quiet like those mariachis.”

Ramirez didn’t say anything else—Sands heard him ease back inside and put the car into gear; the engine thrummed as he accelerated, and the sound slowly receded into the night, leaving Sands alone in the street.
Sands drained the second shot glass in his hand and then held out in front of him, contemplating it in his mind, imagining the clear curves of the glass, the tracing of white in the moonlight darkness, the beaded drops of tequila that clung to the sides. And then he threw it across the room, listening to it smash against the wall, shattering and tinkling to the floor in a shower of glassy splinters.

It felt good to throw things, dammit, so he was going to throw them. He’d never believed in just sitting around and keeping it all bottled up. It was much better to find something to throw and then just throw it. His sisters had always chastised him for it, telling him that it was childish and that he needed to grow out of that behavior and stop throwing his things when he was angry. So he’d obliged them and thrown their things instead; they’d let the matter drop after that. But now he didn’t have his sisters’ things to throw—only his own. And besides, shot glasses were cheap, and he had at least four around here.

Speaking of which, he needed a new one. So he got up for the second time and jerked open his liquor cabinet, pulling out the other two nested little glasses and stalking back to his chair, collapsing into it. He set the glasses down on the table and poured them both full to the brim with tequila. He really was just about ready to skip them and move onto drinking from the bottle—but they were here, so he might as well use them. He took one shot, and then leaned back with his face tilted upwards towards the ceiling, the fingers of his left hand curled tightly on the arms of his chair, his right white-knuckled on his glass, and that dull, hateful rage still boiling in his gut.

El. El Mariachi. That guitar-playing, gun-toting legend. The man himself. Sands had thought him dead. Sands had known he was dead, had been sure of it.

And yet Fideo’s words echoed in his brain, and it was with an unpleasant wrench that he realized that said corpse had ultimately been right—stupid to think him dead. Of course El had to still be alive—and he’d stolen Sands money and kept the President alive. And where had he left Sands? He’d left Sands in a state of panic, in the dark, which is where Sands was going to be for-fucking-ever, because in the end all he’d left Sands was that goddamned fucking drill.

That was enough to make him throw a third shot glass against his wall—the opposite wall this time, and the satisfactory crash of breaking glass was music to Sands’s ears.

_Music…_

He snarled, bearing his teeth at the endless dark, the shine of the third throw gone already.

This ruined _everything._

 Forgiving the fourth glass still sitting full and going straight for the bottle right now, he swished it around and tilted it back, clenching his fingers tightly around the neck.

As he swallowed the last of the tequila, he nearly jumped out of his seat when he heard that familiar loud _crack_, and, even though he knew exactly what—and _who_—it was, he hurled the now-empty bottle in the direction of the sound, then heard a swish before the tequila bottle exploded.

“Ever heard of _knocking_?” Sands sneered, heaving himself up and making his way towards the liquor cabinet.

“All I know of knocking I learned from you,” Snape replied nastily. “And how much have you had to drink?”

Sands snorted, pulling out a new bottle. “Don’t worry, _Mommy_, I can take care of myself. Why don’t you just pop back over where you belong, over in your _own_ shitheap?”
“Because I find that when you get exceptionally pissed, you become even louder than usual—an impressive feat, to be sure, but not one that I find particularly endearing.”

“And your point being?” Sands asked snidely, closing his cabinet and turning to glare at his pedantic intruder.

“My point being that you are making an intolerable racket that is carrying through our shared wall.” Sands heard Snape settling down into his usual chair, and he growled in irritation, slouching back to his own seat.

“Well, boo-fucking-hoo,” he said flatly. “Why don’t you just wave your fairy wand and make it all better? That’s what you people do, isn’t it?” He’d already cracked the new tequila bottle open and was taking a pull on it when he became very aware of Snape’s level and calculating stare—he could always tell when Snape was staring at him, and he despised it. Not that he’d ever tell Snape that.

“A difficult day at the office, I see.”

Sands’s head snapped towards Snape. “And what would you know about it?” His fingers gripped the neck of the bottle a little tighter. “What I do is my business, bitchcakes, not yours. You wanna sit in here and just drink that shit of yours and piss me off just by being here, fine, but keep your big fat nose out of it.”

“I’ve already had my nightcap—but I will relieve you of ‘that shit of mine’—emphasis on the word ‘mine,’” Snape said smoothly, getting up to cross the room and open Sands’s liquor cabinet.

Sands contemplated throwing his last, still-full shot glass at the sorry little buttnugget, but he refrained, and not just for the sake of the tequila in it. It was his last one, after all, and somehow he suspected that Snape wouldn’t fix it for him if he cracked it on his head. So he just drank the shot of tequila to remove the temptation and set the glass back down and went back to his bottle, and as he did he heard Snape settle back down into his chair.

Snape was watching him again—looking at him—Sands could feel it, and he grimaced. “What do you want?” he demanded.

“I want a little peace and quiet, but it would seem that I’m not going to get that until you’ve drunk yourself into a stupor—so I am waiting for said event to take place so that I can see to it that you won’t be shooting out my windows again, as you are obviously incapable of taking care of yourself when in such a state.”

Sands bristled. “I can take care of myself any time and any place, Chinless Wonder—which is more than I can say for someone on the run for four years, hiding from a kid,” he sneered.

Snape stiffened in his seat, but when he next spoke his voice was cool and calculating. “Any time?” he asked. “Including the Day of the Dead?”

Sands hurled his glass right at the fucker’s face before he even finished speaking. The glass, of course, never reached its target, but was rather deflected to the side where it shattered against the wall—Sands didn’t really expect it to hit, and he was already regretting doing it, but it had felt good to throw it. But now he was out of ammo, and all he could do was seethe in silence.

At least his own comment had hit the mark; he heard the sound of Snape uncorking his bottle of wizard piss and taking a sip. Sands took a swig from his own, getting even more irritated that he’d thrown his glass. Besides needing it back so he could take moderate shots now instead of straight swigs, just so he could keep from passing out just to spite that asscrack, he hated that he had let his
fury get the better of him to the point that he’d let Snape know that his jibe had gotten to him—or rather, just how badly it had gotten to him. Sands still didn’t know everything he’d blabbed in his drunkenness that night a year ago, and Snape’s continuous stream of tiny, maddening hints about how much he might know always drove him crazy—and Snape knew it.

The silence was deafening—he couldn’t even hear Snape’s breathing, which was a testament to how much he’d already had to drink. Sound sometimes became a tad muffled. He hated it, but at this point, he didn’t care—he was simply too furious. Furious at Snape, furious at Ramirez, furious at Fideo, and most of all, furious at El Mariachi.

Snape was quiet now, at least, nursing at his bottle as well, if a little slower than Sands was. The bitch. Sands gave a quiet belch; as far as he was concerned, he was just going to ride this bottle all night long, preferably while making as much noise as possible—Snape needed to learn who was the alpha male around here.

But the stupid whoremaster wouldn’t fucking stop staring at him. He could feel his eyes, boring into his skull, the goddamn bastard. He wanted nothing more than to just grab the sonofabitch’s hair and grind his face into the dirt, to show him what he could do with his staring—with his eyes. And then he would grind El’s face into the dirt, show him that nobody but nobody double-crossed him, nobody left with his pants down and his ass in the wind and lived to tell the tale. When he got done with him, it was going to make what he’d done to Lorenzo look like a cake walk; he’d start with his hands and end with his voice, and he’d talk about his dear dead girlfriend the whole time. Well, El could just join his precious darling and her spawn—he would join her, if Sands had anything to do with it—and oh, but he would. He took another swig of tequila, savoring the burn in his throat and hissing satisfactorily.

“Are you finished yet?” Snape suddenly demanded, raising his rough voice to a higher volume than usual, telling Sands that he was either very annoyed or was a tiddle bit lipsy. Probably both.

Sands set the bottle down. “No. I’m going to stay here all night,” he said coolly. “I’m going to drink this whole bottle, and then I’m going to step outside and puke it back up on your doorstep, after which you will be treated to an encore performance consisting of a drum solo on our mutual wall.”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Snape said, his voice clipped. “You will either go to bed of your own volition, or I will escort you there.”

“Now, I know you don’t actually expect me to believe that you can get it up after what you’ve been drinking,” Sands said, his voice thick with contempt.

He heard Snape mutter darkly to himself, followed by that unmistakable little swishy noise and knew that Snape had pulled out his wand. Aside from the Freudian implications that never failed to amuse him, he knew what that meant. “Don’t you even think about putting a spell on me, asshole,” Sands said flatly.

“I have no intention of ‘putting a spell on you,’” Snape said crossly. “You are intoxicated, and as you have declined the option of seeing yourself to bed, I am putting you in it as promised.”

“Yeah, well, I would venture a guess that you are also intoxicated—and I hate it when you pick me up with that thing, so forget it. I’ll sleep right here in my own vomit tonight, thank you very much.”

He heard Snape huff in annoyance, that rough sound of the air rasping through his mangled throat, and then approaching footsteps. A strong hand seized him by the arm and hauled him to his feet; he contemplated letting himself sag so Snape would drop him, but really, the floor was hard and it wasn’t worth the trouble—but making Snape work for him, well, now, that was appealing.
So Sands came to his feet readily enough, and only when he was standing up did he deliberately slump onto Snape, making him curse, stagger, and then roughly start dragging him toward the narrow staircase. “You’re such a tender caretaker, Snape—you really are. I can see how babysitting appealed to you,” he remarked.

“And you are utterly useless—I can see how government work appealed to you,” Snape said acidly; Sands could feel him listing under his weight as they climbed. He waited until they were just a few steps from the top, and then he accidentally-on-purpose dragged his feet, stumbled, and pushed Snape against the wall.

Snape retaliated just as Sands expected him to—really, the stodgy old bastard was too predictable. So he managed to catch himself when Snape threw him off, gripping the creaking banister to keep himself from falling to the floor.

“Do that again and I’ll send you up the stairs by your ankle!” Snape barked.

“Do what? Trip?” Sands asked innocently, innocence that they both knew was a lie, and Snape yanked him back onto to his feet again and all but chucked him into the room.

After catching himself on his dresser, Sands straightened and pursed his lips, drawing in a slow breath through his nose. “It occurs to me,” he said, “that for one who so dearly doesn’t want to be a member the ‘unwashed poor’ anymore, you certainly aren’t doing anything to ingratiate yourself with your betters.”

There was that soft little swish of clothes and a furious intake of breath as Snape stopped in his tracks and jerked his head around. “I am no one’s inferior!” he hissed. “And I certainly don’t owe any consideration to the likes of you!”

“You know, Snape—that’s your problem—one of many,” Sands replied mockingly. “You’ll never learn your place if you keep tripping over your own pride.”

Snape snorted, a harsh sound that always sounded to Sands like it hurt. “You, with an ego the size of Mexico itself, have the nerve to lecture me on pride?”

“Not a lecture—just an observation.” His fingers curled tight on the rippling wood beneath them. “You really do need to learn that some people are better than you.”

“Well, clearly your little visual instruction was unsuccessful in daunting your own arrogance—just what did you have in mind for me?” Snape sneered.

Sands turned towards him, his jaw tight. “Bend over the desk, fucker, and I’ll show you the true meaning of humility.”

He could hear the smirk in Snape’s voice, and oh, how he wanted to wipe it right off his face. “Missing your old girlfriend, are you?”

Sands moved, walking in the direction of the bed but around where he could hear Snape’s voice, flanking him so that he stood between him and the door. “On second thought, that probably wouldn’t be the wisest thing for me to do,” he crooned. “Wouldn’t want you to start pining for the good old days as Harry Potter’s bitch.”

The air dropped ten degrees just before the fist connected with his jaw. He’d been expecting it, but while Snape’s aim was a bit off from all the whiskey he’d been drinking, there was still plenty of force behind it, and the clip to his lip nearly knocked him off his feet.
Sands grinned, licking his throbbing lip and tasting blood, and feeling his cock twitch in response as he raised his head back up. “Tender spot, hmm? Well, how about this one, instead?” And he grabbed Snape’s crotch.

Snape let out a sound somewhere between a shout and a yelp—which would have been funny under any circumstances but here was just hilarious—and tried to twist away, but there was only so much a man could do when someone had you by the balls. “What are you doing—?!” Snape grated, his voice spiraling upward, before his gyrations tripped him up and Sands took the opportunity to tackle him onto the bed.

Sands landed on top and felt the air rush out of his opponent in a whoosh. He took the opportunity to change his grip in order to deliver a few well-timed and expert strokes through the coarse twill of Snape’s pants and felt an amusing hardening in response. “Looks like I was right—you do need a little ‘humility,’” he remarked.

Snape snarled something inarticulate in reply and started fighting him again, but Sands just tightened his hold every time it felt like Snape was getting away, squeezing him into submission and moving around so that they faced each other. “Now, now—that’s not the way at all,” he admonished. “You’re ruining the moment—trust me, I know what I’m talking about here.”

“Well, I know nothing about this, and I have no intention of finding out, so get off me!” Snape was twisting on the mattress in what Sands knew was an attempt to free his wand from where it was trapped beneath him.


“I am nothing of the kind! But I’m no bloody poof, either, now let me go, Sands, or so help me—”

“You can’t get to your little stick, peckerwood—so you’ll just have to play with mine instead.” Snape’s burgeoning erection hadn’t seemed to have gone down, making something of a liar out him, and Sands’s own was already straining cheerfully against his jeans. “At the Academy, they told us that ‘a wizard is only as good as his wandwork,’ you know,” he said conversationally, moving his hand back and forth.

“As if I haven’t already heard every lewd wand joke in existence,” Snape sneered, trying desperately to roll over in order to get his wand where he could reach it. Sands took advantage of his letting go of his wrist to flick open the buttons of Snape’s pants. Snape realized what he was doing and stopped reaching for his wand, instead going back to grappling with him, trying to get Sands’s hands away from his groin.

It wasn’t working. Sands knew that his neighbor always got a bit fumble-fingered when he’d been drinking, and a few good twists could make him lose his grip entirely. He himself didn’t have that problem—he just had issues standing up (on his feet, anyway). So at the moment, he had the high ground on this particular battlefield, and he intended to use it.

Snape’s hair was short, but not enough that he couldn’t tangle his fingers in it, and so he grabbed him by the back of the head and jerked, pulling Snape’s chin up. Sands went for the throat, snatching a mouthful of his collar and ripping it open with his teeth.

Snape swore, went to close the torn fabric (how predictable), leaving Sands free to reach in his open fly. With nothing between their skin but the thin cotton of Snape’s tighty-whities (also predictable), it didn’t take much to bring him to full attention.

It was bigger than his, dammit.
Oh, well—you worked with what you had. And what he had right now was Snape’s prick, and he planned to work it, all right—make the little pissant squeak.

“Contrary to your previous assertions,” Sands informed him, “it feels to me that you’re right at home in this situation.”

“Fuck you,” Snape rasped, “and get your hands off me!”

Sands clucked reprovingly. “Tsk, tsk. Such language, and when I’m trying to do you a favor. Relax, my good man,” he said in his best posh-British. “You are the clay in the hands of a master sculptor.”

“While I have no doubt that your right hand is as well-traversed as a whore’s minge, I want no part of it!”

“You’re just jealous that your hand is such a crappy lay. Let me show you how it’s done—it’ll do wonders for your personality.”

Sands lunged for his neck with his teeth again, and when Snape let go of his wrist to fight him off, Sands snatched down the front of Snape’s underwear and curled his fingers around the hot flesh of his cock.

Snape let out a hiss; his fingers tightened where he’d gripped Sand’s arm and he shook him. “Dammit, you gayarse, let go!”

“I ain’t no goddamn queermo,” Sands said levelly, circling the tip of his dick and prodding at the wet slit with his thumb. He was rewarded with a choked curse and an abrupt jerk against his hand.

“Then what, exactly, would you call this?” Snape demanded, his sarcasm robbed of some of its sting by emerging as a strangled croak. Sands could feel the tension radiating off him in waves; his one hand was still clenched on his arm, the other wrapped tight around his right wrist.

“I’d call this damned funny—there you sit, your balls as blue as B. B. King and your dick stiffer than Jimmy Hoffa, and you’re debating semantics.” He leaned forward again, towards Snape’s gaping collar. Snape didn’t answer him, but nor did he let go of his wrist this time. Sands reached up with his free left hand and yanked off a few more of his shirt buttons, and then nosed into the folds of his collar.

Snape was taut beside him, his hand locked around Sands’s wrist, when Sands flicked out his tongue and licked his throat. Tucked under Snape’s chin like he was, he felt his tiny gasp as much as heard it, and when the vice-like grip on his right hand loosened, just a little, it was all he needed to start working his hand in earnest.

A helpless noise wrung itself from Snape’s throat, and Sands chuckled against his neck, moving his free hand to unzip his own fly and get a good grip on his own aching cock, jerking the two in time.

Snape was still stiff and tense, but he wasn’t struggling anymore, and Sands was rather enjoying finding out what maneuvers it took to make the man gasp and twitch beneath his curled fingers. He bumped Snape’s chin with his head, pushing for room to explore that secret, torn flesh always hidden beneath his neatly starched collars, delving into the twisting landscape of scar tissue with his tongue.

Snape’s bristly beard was rubbing his forehead raw. Sands hated facial hair, dammit, especially in bed—and the bastard was obviously doing it on purpose. He made his displeasure known by moving to the side and biting Snape’s earlobe. Snape’s fingers were flexing where they were digging into his arm, and Sands felt the rapid rise and fall of his chest.
He let go long enough to spit into his left palm and then reached back down to slick himself up, and then he moved, pushing his hips forward to wrap both hands around both their dicks at once, gripping them together, and the slide of skin against flushed skin under his palms made him suck in a sharp breath just as he felt Snape groan and push back against him.

“Hands of the master,” he muttered before dragging his tongue down behind Snape’s ear and back towards that funny little twisting knot of scars that was shaped sort of like a flower, beneath which he could feel the racing of his blood.

“Bastard,” Snape panted, pretense gone as he fucked the circle of Sands’s hands, his cock rubbing against Sands’s own in short, rapid strokes.

Sands just hmmed against his neck, sucking lightly at that cluster of scars. He moved his hips away again, but kept both hands where they were; one slid into the confines of Snape’s pants to rub the heavy sac behind his cock, and he heard the accompanying abrupt inhale. Grinning to himself, he deliberately moved his fingers even further back and snickered when he felt Snape go rigid at the thought of an imminent invasion, before retreating back out of his pants and returning his left hand to the better man.

Snape’s movements were getting jerkier, less coordinated, and Sands smirked against him, tightening his grip and speeding his movements. His grin widened as he felt Snape pick up his own speed, plunging between his fingers with small, rough grunts.

Sands slowed, eliciting a mewl of frustration from his reluctant companion and forcing him to take the lead, to push against Sands’s hand, to move his hips while Sands was still—to work for it. And then Sands switched tactics and suddenly pumped his fist furiously against the frantic thrusting, and Snape abruptly came with a hoarse cry, choking on what sounded like a name (What was that? Lily? Did he say Lily?). A thick spurt of gluey wetness hit his cupped palm, and for a moment Snape was frozen, his back arched against him and his body quivering like a guitar string, before he suddenly sank back into the mattress, limp and breathing heavily.

Sands didn’t move from where he was buried in the crook of Snape’s neck. He experimentally rubbed at the wetness on his fingers before gripping his own stiff cock with a well-practiced hand.

Now who’s the faggot, bitch? The come on his hand was slick and warm, and his fist worked faster. I think you need to practice your wandwork. He was close, his face pushing against Snape’s neck. You just need to learn that I’m better than you.

He came with a thick grunt and a warm little jet on his fingers, sinking his teeth into the unmarked flesh where Snape’s shoulder met his neck, tasting blood and making him gasp. And then he relaxed, releasing his grip, his chin drooping so that his nose was pressed against Snape’s collarbone.

The room was quiet, save for their ragged breathing. Sands reached forward, smearing his come on Snape’s softening prick, enjoying his sharp hiss when his hand touched the still sensitive flesh.

Sands tilted his head down, rubbing his face in the coarse, well-worn material of Snape’s shirt. He always smelled like his potions, eleven herbs and spices or whatever, and those stupid peppermints that he was never without. He fisted his sticky right hand in the loose fabric hanging around his chest, his left on Snape’s narrow hip, using his limp weight to pull himself in closer. Sands moved his mouth higher, back towards his neck, the movements of his lips and tongue on the knotted skin slower now, lazy, no longer so aggressive. He slid to the side, moving upwards, and as he neared Snape’s earlobe, he felt him move, just the tiniest bit, tilting his head to give him room.

Sands grinned against him and whispered in his ear, “Humility 101.”
After all the time and effort that Sands had just spent on his behalf, the wand-waving fuckwad could have at least had the decency to punch him in a different place this time, he thought as he hit the floor—not to land one right on the same spot on the corner of his mouth and reopen the same old wound.

He thumped his head pretty good when he landed, so he just laid there, listening to Snape’s furious stride down the stairs. Sands could tell by the sound of his quick, prissy footsteps that the pole was firmly back up his ass again. You’d think with that in mind he’d have enjoyed himself more.

Halfway down the stairs he heard the tell-tale *crack* of Snape disappearing. He smirked—the old goat must have been *really* pissed off if he was so intent on storming out that he forgot to just Apparate out in the first place.

Sands dragged himself to his feet and fell on his back into the bed, not bothering to get in it, or take off his clothes, or even to put his dick back in his pants.

He needed a cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

Homage to *The Wizard of Oz*.

To see what Harry was doing in Mexico, go check out the companion fic in the series "*Dead Ends*", that tells how he tracked Snape and why he went home before he found him.
Chapter Summary

Snape about town.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Snape slammed the door behind him as he left the apothecary, seething with outrage over Fernando’s latest half-jovial, half-threatening request for potions in return for the ingredients that he needed. Of all the demeaning things he’d lowered himself to concocting, of all the useless mixtures he’d wasted his brewing skills upon, of all the stupid things he’d had to do, brewing contraceptive potions had to be the worst.

He growled furiously to himself, biting down hard with his back teeth on what was left of his peppermint as he stalked down the street, which was still quiet this early in the morning. Fernando was ostensibly closed at this time of day—to the Muggles, at least. But these early hours just around sunrise were the only times that his little shop was open to wizards only.

Snape had previously made it a point to avoid the shop during those hours—more specifically, of avoiding other wizards, lest he be recognized. But now he’d forgone that safeguard for the sake of avoiding—other people.

He violently crammed the scribbled list of Fernando’s latest order into his breast pocket. The great slimy lump had been overly friendly and overly demanding lately—had been ever since last spring. At the end of March, he’d gone in for his usual monthly supply restock, and had been alarmed to find Fernando giving him a disturbingly knowing and speculative look, a look that he didn’t like at all.

As it happened, Potter had been there, sniffing around and asking after him. Had Snape known that the little bastard had traced him to this place, he’d have wagered that he’d have been caught out in a heartbeat—Fernando would sell his own mother for a Knut.

But shockingly, Fernando had covered for him.

Potter apparently hadn’t offered a reward to tempt the man (because he was an idiot—any fool could take one look at Fernando and know that he could be easily bought, and it wasn’t as if precious Potter didn’t have enough money for it), and Fernando had apparently considered Snape a resource that he didn’t care to lose, and so he’d lied to Potter, and Snape was thankfully safe.

Although in hindsight, perhaps it wasn’t quite the blessing that it had originally seemed, because now the man seemed to think that Snape owed him something. Never mind that his business in the potions market had tripled since he started doing business with Snape, that he was gouging his customers with insane prices, reaping the benefits of Snape’s work while he never saw a penny—no, now he was supposed to be indebted to the ungrateful boor.

Snape made his feelings on the matter quite clear, and as Potter hadn’t given Fernando his real name, leaving the man still in the dark as to the nature of his own identity and thus without any actual
leverage, they had for the most part resumed their previous working relationship—except that the disgusting man kept bringing it up now and again, and usually when he wanted something.

_Contraceptive potions indeed._

On the other hand, perhaps he was doing a favour to this waste of space that was trying to pass itself off as an independent country. After all, most of what was wrong with Mexico could be traced back to Mexicans. _The fewer of those, the better_, he thought viciously as he turned down the next street.

Besides—if he was going to be honest with himself, Fernando’s latest addition to his roster of potions really wasn’t the most demeaning thing he’d ever brewed. No, that honour went to something else, something that he was inflicting upon himself and thus couldn’t even properly blame on anyone else.

He, Severus Snape, had decided to start selling lotion.

And here he’d thought that simply being caught by Potter was the worst fate he could imagine, but no—now if Potter caught him, it would be that much worse, because he would catch him playing the part of a bloody cosmetician.

He grimaced at the thought—his current disgrace was really the culmination of a long, veritable tragedy of errors starting all the way back three months ago.

With Sands.

He bared his teeth in an unconscious snarl. Yes, _everything_ came back to that stupid, manipulating, arrogant, shit-sucking Muggle bastard.

He was why Snape was here in the first place, going out early in the morning, chancing being seen by another wizard, walking down a street nearly a mile from where he lived and not down his usual quicker route, out in the open, slinking in amongst these more well-to-do houses rather than keeping to the shadows of the poorest parts of town. Because Sands never came here, so he didn’t have to see him.

He’d managed to force himself to go about his usual routine after—after that, but of course Sands couldn’t leave it alone. He’d tried to brazenly march over and eat his breakfast the following week as if nothing had happened. Snape had locked his door against him, just one more layer of spells on his newly-reinforced front door, but the little pisstop had stayed outside the door making a terrific racket until Snape had been forced to bespell his door and windows to keep the noise out. And then when he’d realized what he’d done, Sands had gone back into his own house and starting raising a ruckus against the wall, banging and singing and _yodeling_ and Lord knew what else. But when he started making obscene, mocking panting noises, Snape had had enough, and charmed the wall too. He did it so that he could still hear some sound outside—loud, alarming sounds that it would be in his best interest to be aware of—but no more Sands.

And of course, the arse-licking bastard had decided to try a different tack. Two days later, as Snape was returning home, he was appalled to find Sands standing casually in his doorway, smoking a cigarette, just as he had when he’d first met him nearly three years ago. But this time he wasn’t smiling coolly, no—he was grinning madly, his teeth white and sharp in the dark, and when Snape had rushed furiously past him, he’d called snidely, “Hey, Don Greene! My neighbour’s PMSing—you got anything for that?”

Snape had slammed the door behind him, furious, and hadn’t been able to concentrate on anything for the rest of the night, and when he slept, he was troubled by restless, uncomfortable dreams, and
worst of all, when he woke his cock was horribly, achingly stiff beneath the sheets.

He *hated* that stupid, goat-fucking *Muggle*!

And so the next day he’d changed his route. He’d doubled back to get to the plaza, cutting through a more upscale neighbourhood, and taking twice the time to get there, all because of *Sands*.

*Everything* was because of Sands.

Right down to the fact that he was out scouting for supplies to start brewing lotions and other pointless female nonsense. Because apparently he was something of an oddity in those richer neighbourhoods that he now passed through on his way to the square; once they realized that he wasn’t just a random stranger who got lost but was passing through on a regular basis, they weren’t a bit shy about accosting him in the street, asking him who he was and what he was doing here and what he had in his basket.

Especially the women. And when he told them that he sold medicines, something about that either failed to penetrate or simply fired the wrong neurons in their foolishly female brains, and it seemed as though they invariably made some bizarre leap from *medicine* to *cosmetics*—perfumes and philtres and lotions and soaps, never mind the useful things he had, no—they wanted all that feminine rubbish. He’d certainly sold a great deal of his spot-vanisher, at least. The little prima donnas couldn’t get enough of that. And they paid good money, too. He’d soon realized that if they would buy something so patently catering to their vanity, that it would be the same with the other nonsense they kept wanting to buy from him.

And so here he was—he was just going to grit his teeth and do it.

That was most of what he’d been out buying today. Lotions and the like didn’t take much by the way of magical ingredients, just a few here and there to make it better—more effective and long lasting—than the stuff Muggles sold. It took mostly non-magical ingredients, although some were exotic enough that they could only be acquired in a magical emporium. After visiting Fernando, the grocers, the Muggle chemist, and the herbalist, he’d already acquired nearly everything on his list, with one noted exception.

Function wasn’t good enough for women—they needed show, too. Or, in this case, scent. So here he was, going to the plaza on a weekday to buy flowers from the girl in the square.

It was not yet eight—nearly an hour before his usual time to arrive in the plaza on weekends. He wasn’t about to try and purchase flowers that had been picked through and sitting out in the heat of the day—if he was going to do this, he was going to do it properly. And, of course, eight in the morning was typically far too early to be up and about for—some people.

Scowling, he pulled the brim of his hat lower and approached the battered little flower cart—Inez had apparently just set up shop, and was sitting on a crate behind her wares and braiding flower stems, making the neat bunches and bouquets for sale alongside the single blossoms. He stopped in front of her and asked, “What do you charge?”

She looked startled, her mouth dropping open a little, but she shut it when he scowled at her, and she said, “Oh, I—it’s between one and three hundred pesos for the bouquets—” she held out the half-finished one in her hand, “—more for specialty items—or you can buy singles. The price is different for the different flowers.” She fished behind the cart and came out with a neatly hand-lettered sign that spelled out the prices in question.

He grunted, looking over the top of his sunglasses in order to examine it. “Do you offer a discount
for bulk purchases?” he asked, perusing the prices—it wasn’t quite as bad as it might have been.

“Oh—um—yes, I think so—depending on what you’re buying.”

He sneered at her obviously inquiring tone and then turned back to the flowers, ignoring her ill-disguised curiosity. There were some roses, of course, always a popular item. And callas—they were everywhere in this wretched country—never the proper ones—proper lilies. He picked one up and smelled it thoughtfully—it was mild, but pleasant enough, and he supposed that it would be in his own interest to join the multitude of people who used the flower as a marketing ploy. There was also lavender—which he discovered rather to his surprised annoyance looked to be of better quality than what he had been buying across town for his potion stores.

Well—that should be enough for a start—he’d already grudgingly acquired a small carton of strawberries and a vial of vanilla extract, and he supposed that between those two items and three different floral scents, he should be able to make enough flowery nonsense to get the word out. So he started working his way methodically through her stocks, selecting only the best blossoms, on both appearance and size and scent—two bunches of the roses and the callas, and three of the lavender, as he was running low in his supplies of the latter anyway.

When he was finished, he looked up to find the girl watching him with a bewildered expression, and he glared at her. She flushed a little and stood, and he thrust his purchases at her. She kept shooting him furtive glances as she counted through the bunches and quoted her price, and he didn’t bother haggling with her, such was his haste to get away from the annoying creature (and the fact that said price was really quite fair).

He gave her a handful of bills and waited impatiently for his change, and once he got it, he swept off, leaving her with her mouth open as she tried to thank him for stopping by—he wasn’t doing her a favour, so she could drop the idiotic pretence. He was well aware that no one in this town wanted anything to do with him beyond simple business transactions, which was fine by him, as it was entirely mutual.

He carried his flowers in his hands, lest they get crushed, with his bags looped over his arm, and went back out the way he came—opposite to where he lived, and incidentally opposite from his neighbor.

He stalked angrily through the streets, deliberately avoiding the eyes of anyone he happened to pass as the town woke up and began to go about its daily business. He’d been gradually discovering the ins and outs of his new routes, which ways were the quickest, which were the quietest. So it didn’t take him too long to near the opposite end of Calle del Sombras—although it was longer than it should have been, dammit.

And ultimately, it was all for naught, because there was Sands, walking blithely down the street.

Though it infuriated him, it was not difficult to choose peace of mind over pride, and he ducked hurriedly down the nearest alley as quickly as if he’d seen Potter himself. He felt his teeth clench as Sands went walking by—at least, until Snape realized in disbelief that Sands was alone. Completely alone. Santiago was nowhere to be seen.

And he was walking with a cane.

Snape stared. The merest mention of the fact that he was blind was enough to make Sands turn ugly (like last time, mocked a voice in his head, which he quashed furiously). And yet here he was, out by himself, tapping along like a blind man.
What the devil was he doing?

Just then Sands stopped abruptly, right across from where Snape stood, and he cursed himself inwardly, ducking back pointlessly into the shadows as Sands cocked his head, listening.

Snape held his breath, but only just caught himself from cursing aloud when he realized that his hand had stolen unbidden to the right side of his neck. He jerked his hand away.

That had been the worst—of all the insults and humiliations Sands had heaped upon him that night, that had been the absolute worst. When he’d awakened from his potion-induced sleep that morning and dragged himself downstairs to the bathroom and tried to look himself in the eye, there it was, staring back at him.

Teeth marks. Bloodied teeth marks. On his neck.

If Sands had been standing in front of him in that moment, he’d have killed him, his law agency be damned.

Even now his fingers were curling as if around his wand as Sands slowly began to move again.

Snape had healed the mark; not a trace of that bite remained on his otherwise mangled throat. But he could still feel it.

Sands had passed now, but still Snape waited in the alley, waited until he had turned the corner out of sight, before he crossed the street and went inside his house, firmly closing and re-warding his door against his neighbour.

Snape was getting tired of cheese sandwiches. They had been a staple of his childhood, along with Marmite and the occasional bacon sandwich on Sundays, and he’d never thought anything of it. His first exposure to any sort of variety in lunches had been when he was nine and—

Even then, he still ate the sandwiches his mum or dad provided, the same sorts of sandwiches day in and day out, until he’d gone off to school. There he’d finally had a chance to taste all the lovely things that he’d only seen on the telly or heard about from his mum or from—

But when he went back home, there were always cheese sandwiches, and he didn’t mind—they were familiar, like a well-worn pair of shoes waiting for him when he came home. And after he’d started teaching, his life had fallen into that same simple pattern, of more variety in his diet during term-time, and back to the old familiar staples during the summer holiday.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have those nine months of plenty every year any more—now he was eating like he had when he was a boy, and he was discovering that he’d spoiled himself, that he didn’t want to eat like that anymore.

But there was nothing for it—just like his father before him, he couldn’t afford any better, couldn’t rely on inherited money to feed him, and his only other source was—out of the question. And had been for months, so there was no point in belabouring the issue—he’d best just make do with what he had.

He sighed and picked up his plate, casting his eyes out the front window before turning towards the sink. It was getting hot again. The past few months had been blessedly cool—at least, relative for Mexico, a not-totally intolerable eighty degrees or so. But now spring was approaching, and in Mexico, that meant heat. And tomorrow was Friday—back to the ceaseless drudgery of sitting out in the sticky yellow sunlight, along with the March swarms of insects, relying on the good will of the
denizens of his miserable country for his livelihood.

He wished it was cool outside—he wished that there were still remnants of snow on the ground from a late storm, and that as he lay in bed tonight he could hear the dripping of melting icicles on the eaves, and when he woke up the next day the sun would be bright and chill, and there would be tiny shoots and leaves poking bravely up through the cold ground, and he could walk down by the lake and enjoy the clear springtime sunshine—

Furious with himself, he quashed the sudden, unexpected pangs of homesickness and fiercely scrubbed his plate and glass and then wiped them dry. He was in Mexico, not at Hogwarts, or in Britain at all, and he could never go back, especially now that Potter had somehow got the idea that he might be alive—how in the hell had the interfering wart found him?—so he had better just get used to the idea and stop wallowing in self-pity.

Snape put away his dishes and then set aside the wet tea towel to dry, sighed once more, and then turned to leave the kitchen, to take a hot shower and go to bed.

He stopped. There were little red dots sprinkled across the floor, little wet spots flecked on the tiles running clear across the room. They had not been there before.

Brow furrowed, he walked over and bent down to inspect them. A fingertip brushed across one of them came up wet and red; blood, there was no doubt about it. And the trail led from the hole in his cabinets, across the kitchen, and out into the living room.

He narrowed his eyes and followed the blood like an nasty trail of breadcrumbs out into the living room and right to the foot of his record and drinks cabinet. He knelt down, already half suspecting what he would find—and yet what he saw was an unpleasant surprise.

Holed up in the narrow space beneath the cupboard and the floor, sitting in a smear of blood and licking at its leg, was that worthless cat. Snape knew that it was still sneaking in through the kitchen, and now here it was again. It started when it saw Snape's face so close as he stared at it, and it laid its bleeding ears back and hissed.

Snape snorted in disgust and stood up, glaring pointlessly down at his furniture. This was a fine pickle. That stupid beast—its job was to kill rats, not tangle with dogs or brawl with the other cats that patrolled the neighbourhood—particularly not with anything that could do that much damage. The idiot creature had probably been out picking fights with other toms—undoubtedly over a female.

His lip curled. Only a female would prompt any otherwise intelligent male to act so unutterably stupidly. And judging from the matted, bloody hair and the mass of welts criss-crossing its body, it had been one dilly of a fight—for it, anyway. Its opponent had to have been twice its size—probably some big, pampered purebred with a collar and a glossy coat from the other side of town—the better side, he thought sourly to himself. One with a virtual harem of jennies of his own, but no, he had to have the only one that this filthy, ratty little mongrel wanted too.

He couldn't just leave it to die under his cabinet—the smell would be dreadful. To say nothing of the bloodstains it was leaving on his floorboards. And the rats—once one of the filthy beggars found out that the way was clear, the lot of them would move right back in, lock, stock, and barrel.

Well, there was only one thing for it. “Don’t you move,” he said severely to his cupboard, and he hurried upstairs.

He let himself into his workroom, and rather than bother with sorting through his basket, he just brought the whole thing down with him. He locked the door behind him on his way out and went
back down stairs, Summoning the tea towel from beside the sink as he went; it smacked damply in his hand, and he set down his basket on the couch and hunkered down beside the cabinet once again.

The cat was huddled in a pathetic little ball, quivering, but he still had enough life and bad-temper in him to flatten his ears and hiss at him again. Snape just snorted, and a very low-powered Stupefy put paid to that.

“Mobilitatus,” he murmured, and the cat’s limp body scooted neatly out from under the cabinet and was deposited on the tea towel he’d laid on the floor.

He bundled it efficiently up and took it to the couch.

Lord, what a wretched creature. He was hardly more than pocky skin stretched over a cage of tiny bones, a rack of ribs clearly visible, his hair matted in some places and threadbare in others, and his body was laced with cuts and abrasions, some of which were clearly swollen and filled with pus. Snape wrinkled his nose—few things smelled worse than injured cat.

The worst injury was on the cat’s thigh, a huge gash that was still slowly leaking blood onto the towel. It seemed to Snape that he did little more than patch up useless, helpless mongrels these days. He sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and then went to work.

He opened up the disgusting abscesses and drained them, scouring away the filth and that awful smell of septic tissue. A quick disinfecting charm took care of any residual germs, and a few drops of dittany on the worst injuries closed the skin up nicely, and a spot of charmwork took care of the rest.

He turned a critical eye to the amount of blood decorating his floor, and it was with a huff of annoyance that he dug into his pocket for his vial of blood-replenishing potion. He prised the thing’s jaws open and poured a few drops down his throat; he honestly didn’t even know if the stuff worked on cats, but there you have it.

Then he stood, looked down at his mangy houseguest, and sighed. “Ennervate,” he muttered over him, very gently, and the animal opened its eyes.

The little beast somehow managed to look confused. He hauled himself off his side and sat sphinx-like for a moment, looking around, until he caught sight of the very large creature looming above him.

He looked up at Snape, who was watching him with a mixture of irritation and impatience, and went rigid, but his didn’t move, just stared up at his landlord with wide yellow eyes.

Snape snorted and turned away; his motion sent the cat into a stiffened crouch, a line of fur rising up along his back, but Snape ignored it. He just went about his business of scouring away the trail of blood with his wand, from the spatter under the cupboard to the patch in the kitchen where the cat had squeezed himself inside through the gap the rats had made.

He stood still for a moment after he’d wiped it all away; the stupid animal had lost quite a lot of blood. He would need to get out and find food, and soon, which was fine with Snape, because that would mean one less rat in the world, and that the cat would be out of his hair.

But he supposed he could speed things along.

He went over to the cupboard and opened it, pulling out a bowl, and then over to the icebox. He had enough milk to spare, he discovered, so he poured some in the dish. He had plenty of bacon, too—but that only made him angry, because the reason he still had so much bacon laying around was because that little shitehawk next door hadn’t been over for breakfast since—before.
Scowling, he snatched up two slices along with the bowl and strode angrily back into the living room.

The cat was taking a thorough inventory of his suddenly uninjured body, but he paused in his enthusiastic licking and watched Snape warily as he approached.

Snape just sneered at him and set the bowl and the bacon on the end of the couch and retreated to the other side of the room, where he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, waiting.

The cat, despite having tensed when Snape drew close to the couch, was clearly not about to pass up a free meal where he could get it, and had dashed to the opposite end of the sofa and was devouring the raw meat with gusto. He polished it off in short order, and then all but dived head first into the milk.

…He could not believe that he had just fed that cat—fed it for no other purpose than feeding it. He glared at the little leech as he blithely sucked up his milk. This was not part of their arrangement. The cat was supposed to kill rats, not eat him out of house and home.

The cat had inhaled that milk, and now was licking the clean bowl. “There’s no more, idiot,” he said roughly to him, and strode over to the couch to collect the bloodied towel and the dish.

Apparently, Snape’s sudden motion was enough to startle the little monster, and he made it clear that he had recovered every bit of his old impertinence by hissing furiously, puffing up to twice his normal size, and then practically flying out of the room, back into the kitchen, and right out of the exit beneath the cabinets.

Now there was gratitude.

This town—no, this entire country—was a madhouse the entire week leading up to and on the fifth of May. It started slow, just a sort of gradual winding up that started near the end of April, and then it exploded on the first of the month. It was probably some kind of residual urge to misbehave after the long span of Lent, he supposed.

Snape had briefly wondered if he should be insulted that this whole continent took such great delight in celebrating their freedom from Europe, but soon decided that he simply didn’t care.

In fact, there was probably a similar celebration going on back in England even now—celebrating the fall of the Dark Lord. He understood there had been just such a celebration on the November the first of 1981, but truthfully, he didn’t remember much of that day, and if anyone had been stupid enough to try and express any sort of happiness to him on that day, he’d have probably killed him.

They’d probably christened today “Harry Potter Day.” And maybe their titular hero was on his way right now to personally wish Snape a Happy Potter.

Snape scowled and stood up abruptly; it was past noon and time for him to change locations. He wended his way across the plaza, through the many carts decorated with Mexican flags and the carousers getting an early start on the festivities (if he had to hear one more drunken chorus of “México Lindo y Querido,” he was going to go utterly insane), before finally coming to his bench. There was a little girl perched on it, and he sent her packing with one venomous glare before settling down on it himself.

He was hungry; he opened his basket and pulled out his cooled sandwich and his small thermos of water. Actually, it was noticeably larger on the inside than out; he’d discovered not long after he took up this horrid occupation that he’d need quite a reservoir to get him through the whole day outside
under the hot Mexican sun.

He was hungry, but still he unwrapped his sandwich in a rather desultory fashion. Cheese again. As usual. What he really wanted was some steak and kidney pie, or maybe Yorkshire pudding, and not those horrid sopapillas that were everywhere in this county, or even some plain, real luncheon meat, but he hadn’t had that since—he hadn’t had any of that in months, because he couldn’t afford it.

A pack of revellers passed by, chatting and laughing together, and he glared at them.

But once they were gone, he heard a familiar set of shambling footfalls coming from the right, and he had already set his aside his lunch and was halfway into his basket before Rodriguez was standing next to him, saying hello. Snape nodded by way of reply as he reached for his usual order, when Rodriguez said, “Not today, ese.”

Snape looked up, surprised. Rodriguez was smiling ruefully down at him, and although he was as rumpled as ever, his eyes were surprisingly clear. Snape raised an eyebrow at him, and Rodriguez chuckled, and then shuffled over and set his wide bum heavily down on the opposite end of the bench.

“My daughter was visiting me yesterday,” Rodriguez offered in an explanatory manner. “Had to put on a good front, you know,” he said, shrugging. But then his eyes gleamed. “But she isn’t here now,” he said conspiratorially, and held up a suspiciously bottle-shaped paper bag.

Snape snorted, and Rodriguez seemed to be amused by it as well. “Perhaps you should be ready for tomorrow, then?” Snape asked dryly, holding out the little yellow vial.

Rodriguez eyed it speculatively for a moment, and then grunted in agreement. “Probably should at that,” he said, and he rooted around in one pocket, pulling out a wad of grubby notes. He thumbed out a series of twenties—too much, as usual, but he never asked for change—and swapped them for the dose of hangover cure. He tucked the vial in his front pocket, while Snape stowed his money in his basket—but Rodriguez didn’t leave.

Snape stilled, looking at him, and then with a grunt of annoyance went back into his wallet to make change.

But when he turned back to Rodriguez, he found that he wasn’t looking at him—rather, he was slouched comfortably back, his head tilted back towards the sky, his eyes closed and his hands laced across his ample middle as he soaked up the yellow sunlight that washed that end of the bench. Snape regarded him in silence before slowly putting the money away.

Rodriguez cracked open one eye. “‘S nice over here—that why you move around when you’re sitting out here?”

Snape was vaguely taken aback that Rodriguez knew his moving habits when he was working the plaza, as well as perplexed and annoyed by his continued presence. “It gets too hot on the other side in the afternoons,” he said brusquely.

Rodriguez snorted amusedly. “Guess you’re not one for the heat, huh?”

Snape scowled, and Rodriguez just chuckled again before shifting in his seat. Snape was initially relieved that he was leaving—but no, he had just leaned down to retrieve another crumpled paper bag from where he’d apparently set it down when he sat down. He opened it up and proceeded to pull out a tightly rolled tortilla of some kind that smelled of meat and onions and started to eat.

Snape blinked at him—what on earth was he doing? Rodriguez didn’t seem to be in any hurry to
leave, but was rather settling in, with every appearance of just eating his lunch, occasionally dipping into his bottle on the side.

The meaty smell was making Snape hungry, and it was with a small huff of irritation that he retrieved his sandwich from where he left it. He wasn’t about to let anyone disrupt his schedule.

They chewed in silence, Snape annoyed and Rodriguez apparently oblivious. It was the older man who finally broke the wall of silence between them. “My daughter’s a good girl,” he said out of nowhere. “She lives out on the coast, you know—her mother took her when she left me, but Jacinta, she still comes to see her old papa.” He took a long pull from his wrapped bottle and then belched in satisfaction. “So I try to lay off the sauce for her, when she comes.” He went back to his tortilla. “But don’t you worry,” he said confidentially around a mouthful, “the tequila and I, we have a working relationship, so I’ll still be coming ’round for your stuff.” He chuckled at his own wit as he swallowed.

Snape certainly hoped so—Rodriguez was his best and most regular customer. He took a sip of his own chilled water, politely declining the bottle that Rodriguez offered him. “It’s good for what ails you,” he said wheedlingly.

“I’m not ill,” Snape replied dryly.

Rodriguez snorted. “I suppose you wouldn’t be, what with you being your own doctor—where’d you learn to make all that stuff, anyway?”

“Old family recipes,” Snape answered shortly, and wished the man would go away.

Rodriguez didn’t say anything more, thankfully, but neither did he leave. He just kept on eating his lunch, and after a moment, Snape did the same.

Rodriguez ate his way through about four of his stuffed tortillas before finally crumpling his now empty lunch sack, for which Snape was grateful—they smelled rather good, and upon finishing both his sandwich and his mango, he found that the smell was still making him hungry.

And yet Rodriguez still wouldn’t leave. Snape groused to himself but didn’t say anything—insulting the man would be bad for business, so he said nothing as Rodriguez continued to sit in the sun and drink his tequila next to him.

He must have sat there for nearly twenty minutes; Snape’s annoyance had slowly begun to turn to bewilderment over the time. What did the man want? Snape hadn’t said anything to him, and Rodriguez hadn’t seemed to want him to. The man’s presence was just beginning to make him acutely uncomfortable when one of the passing celebrants approached Rodriguez.

“Hey, Berto!” the man laughed, staggering towards the bench, and Rodriguez laughed back, standing up (remarkably steadily, given his impressive inroads into his bottle).

“Qué pasa, Tajo?” he bellowed good-naturedly, pounding his friend on the back. Snape scowled at the two of them and hunched down on his bench as they started up a rapid dialogue in Spanish that he deliberately ignored. At least, until he heard his name.

He snapped his head up in time to see Rodriguez gesture to him and say to his friend, “Sí—my amigo Greene, here, he keeps me steady at work.” He elbowed his companion. “Wouldn’t hurt for you to try his stuff—the boss will never know you’ve been at the cantina!”

His friend—Tajo apparently—regarded Snape with some interest, and Snape just looked steadily back. “Really?” he asked, sounding more than a little intoxicated.
Snape looked him right in the eye. “Really,” he affirmed.

“Well, then I’ll try some! How much?”

Snape smirked to himself. “Fifty pesos,” he said, and he fished out a vial of Rodriguez’s usual for his friend and exchanged it for the crumpled and tequila-scented notes from the man.

Rodriguez laughed. “You won’t regret it, ese—Greene, he knows his shit,” he informed his friend.

“I do indeed,” Snape said smoothly, and the two men laughed uproariously.

“Well, ese, I got things to do and people to see, so I’ll say adiós, and Feliz Cinco de Mayo,” Rodriguez said.

“The same to you,” Snape said politely, and Rodriguez nodded and his companion flung a friendly hand in his direction before the two men wandered off, talking and laughing together.

Snape watched them go, his bench suddenly very quiet, even amidst all the uproar around him, and he frowned as he leaned back, wanting nothing more than to go home, to get away from all the loud, grating laughter in the square.

Thank God the rain had finally let up. It had been pouring buckets when Snape had awakened this morning—the storm had blown up all of a sudden yesterday, as they were prone to do in August, but he’d held on to a vain hope that the clouds wouldn’t burst until Monday—and the day had only gone downhill from there. He’d stubbed his toe on his desk as he’d shuffled out of the room to go to the loo, and then while slicing a tomato to go with his breakfast he’d dropped his knife and cut himself, and by the time that he’d gone upstairs to find that his latest experimental batch of hand lotion that he’d left to simmer overnight had congealed into a crusty grey mass while he’d slept, he had been that far from simply giving the day a great big “fuck you,” and staying in.

But it was Sunday, and Snape had been in the square on every Sunday for the past five years, (and if that thought wasn’t just the cap he’d needed to make this morning perfect). His regular appearance was vital to the maintenance of his “customer relations,” as they were, of always being available when someone needed him. Even if it was raining. He’d been lucky enough not to have had any really heavily raining weekends this year, but he supposed that now he was paying for that bit of good fortune.

And so Snape had gone out as usual, armed with his large umbrella, which was slightly charmed to keep the rain out—only slightly—not enough to seem suspicious if anyone looked at it, but enough to keep him drier than the average citizen.

Regrettably, “drier” didn’t necessarily mean “dry,” and on his walk to the square on the uneven and potholed streets, his socks and the turn-ups of his trousers got well and truly soaked, and so he was in an understandably black mood by the time he reached his morning spot and, rather than sitting on his bench, he appropriated a small crate from the nearest alley, (mostly) dried the wood with a very surreptitious charm, and squatted glumly under an awning all morning.

And, of course, to add insult in injury, hardly anyone stopped by. He could have just as easily forgone the pitiful handful of pesos he’d accrued this morning in return for not having to sit out here in this miserable hot rain. He’d dourly thought that it would be just his luck that today of all days would be the one that Potter would decide to darken his door once again, that he would find him out here huddled beside the building like a homeless old sot.

But the powers that be seemed to have finally decided to take pity on him (for a change), and the rain
had begun to taper off around eleven, and now here it was, nearly noon, and it had all but dried up. And, even better, the clouds were still heavy up above, keeping the sun behind them and staving off the inevitable moment when the burning rays dried up the puddled roads and soaked earth, turning the whole town into a sauna.

He supposed that now was a good a time as any to move himself to his afternoon place. He took his crate with him, in the likely event that the rain started up again and he was forced to once again take refuge under a nearby building.

The wood on the seat of his bench was dark and wet, and he looked furtively around before waving his right hand over it, in the sleeve of which was his wand. He didn’t risk drying it completely, and it was with a grimace that he sat down and felt the cool damp seep through the seat of his trousers.

It was still quiet, and so he thought about eating his lunch, for something to do, if nothing else, but all he had was a boring bacon sandwich and one of the ubiquitous guavas, and was having trouble mustering up any enthusiasm for it. So he just sat for a little while longer and watched the square.

People were slowly beginning to filter into the plaza, those with more sense than he had who had waited until a break in the rain before going out today. The woman with her heavy blanket rolled full of handmade jewellery was first, settling out on the damp grass in the middle of the square, and not far behind her was the flower seller with her cart. Then the swarthy man with his tooled leather parked himself over by the clothing store, and then the old woman who sold the tamales came wheeling up.

Only she didn’t go to her usual place where the main thoroughfare opened out into the plaza, rather going in the opposite direction.

Right towards Snape.

His eyes followed the old woman as she wheeled her cart steadily across the square, and he stiffened when she stopped right in front of his bench and turned to face him, her gnarled hands planted firmly on her wide hips as she looked him over.

She looked him up and down as if inspecting a purchase (and she did not look impressed), and then said in a gravelly voice, “Well, boy—they tell me you sell medicine.”

“I do,” Snape said, annoyed, “but I am hardly a boy.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, then, just how old are you?”

He shifted, a bit uncomfortable, but answered, “Forty-four.”

She snorted roughly. “Son, I was already a wife and mother while you were still in short pants—that makes you a boy as far as I’m concerned,” she informed him, and without so much as a by-your-leave, she settled down on the bench beside him.
She twisted in her seat to regard him with a gimlet eye. “Well, then, boy,” she said, “I’m interested in what you have to offer. I can’t afford those fancy medicines, and anyway they don’t last long, from what I’ve heard. But I’ve heard nothing but good things about what you’re selling, so I guess it’s worth my while to look into it.”

Affronted by her presumption, but not one to turn down a source of income, Snape reined in his irritation and simply asked, “What is your trouble?”

She grimaced. “My joints. Arthritis, they call it.” She held up her brown, work-roughened hands; Snape could easily see the puffiness at the knuckles. “I’m not one to complain, mind you,” she said. “It’s just that these hands are my livelihood since my husband passed on—and it’s getting that on rainy days like these, I can hardly roll my tamales anymore,” she said, gesturing to her cart, from which a small puff of steam and an admittedly enticing smell was slowly rising.

“So, then—what have you got there in your store there, and what’s it going to cost me?”

Snape looked at her. “It rather depends, Señora…?”

“He or she, Valejo. Josefina Valejo.” Her eyes twinkled with dry good humour. “And don’t think I don’t know that those little rats in the square call me ‘Doña Viejo’ behind my back.” She quirked a smile at him, and added, “But then, I image you know all about those little monsters, wouldn’t you, Don Greene?”

He snorted despite himself and nodded in reluctant agreement. “Indeed,” he conceded. Then he gestured to her hands. “If I may?”

She held out a hand for inspection. He took it in his own; the skin was dark against his own, even with the sun he’d been getting since he came here, but he could still see the riverlike tracery of blue veins beneath; her nails were short and square, and her calluses rasped against his palm. He peered down at it and rubbed what he hoped was a gentle finger over the first knuckle; the joints were swollen and obviously painful, and her fingers had begun to develop that claw-like appearance of so many old Muggle women.

One of his simple painkillers would let her get on with her work…but that was definitely a temporary measure, which she had made clear was not what she wanted. But there was a salve for rheumatism that would for the most part cure it, and quite effectively, too—it was readily available in any magical apothecary. She obviously wouldn’t have access to that, but maybe he could provide it…though he’d have to dilute it down, lessen the effects somewhat so it wouldn’t seem too patently magical, and wouldn’t work too quickly…and then there was the matter of the powdered bicorn horn that it required—that would raise the price…

He looked up at her; she was watching him frankly, her dark eyes sharp beneath her thatch of iron-grey hair. “Well?” she asked.

“I…believe that I can make something for you,” he said slowly, releasing her hand.

“That’s what I like to hear,” she said, and she grinned. But she sobered immediately. “This isn’t one of those things like the doctors have, is it?” she asked seriously. “That I’ll have to be taking every day until the Christ calls me to his side? Because I have no time for that.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I—I can’t give you a complete recovery, but I can certainly give you something that will lessen the pain and swelling—permanently.”

“Now we’re talking,” she said, leaning toward him. “So—what’s the price, then?” she asked, her voice shrewd.
He did a quick estimation in his head for ingredients, plus time and effort, and what the going rate was for that particular potion back in England when he left…

“I think around fifteen hundred pesos,” he said after a moment.

She didn’t look surprised, but she grunted and sat back. “Well, that’s not as bad as I’d thought it would be, but I expected it would be expensive.” She eyed him beadily. “Truth is, young fellow, I barely see that much in a month.”

“I see,” he said.

They regarded each other in silence for a moment, which she broke. “Tell you what—I imagine this miracle cure of yours will help me make more tamales in a day, so why don’t I pay you in kind? Free lunch and dinner on me when you’re here on weekends for, say, two months.”

Snape blinked. His eyes cut over to the battered old handcart sitting beside him. He would never be a connoisseur of Mexican cuisine; it was too spicy and the flavours were still foreign to him. But whatever was in that cart did smell awfully good, particularly when compared to the lacklustre bacon sandwich tucked in the corner of his basket.

He looked back at the old woman; she was watching him steadily. Her black eyes were clear and her back still straight, her clothes well-worn but clean.

“I believe that will be satisfactory,” he said slowly.

She gave a rough bark of laughter. “Done!” She held out her crone’s hand. “Shake on it, son, and we’ll call it a deal.” And Snape did; her grip was still strong despite her aching joints. “When will you have it?”

“It will take me a day or so to get the necessary ingredients, and another two to brew—I believe I can have it for you on Wednesday.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re not here on Wednesdays, boy.”

“I’ll be in town—I can bring it by.”

She looked at him for a moment, and then a slow grin spread across her wrinkled face. “I knew you were all right,” she said, rather to his consternation, and she patted his shoulder before she heaved herself up from the bench. “Wednesday it is.” And then she made her way back over to her cart.

Snape watched as she curled her fingers around the handles, grimacing as if it hurt her, and without thinking he stood up and called, “Señora?”

She stopped, turning to face him with an inquiring expression. He rummaged in his basket for a moment, before straightening up and offering her a small vial. “This will help you for the time being,” he said. “Just take a sip of this before you need to work. It should last you until I have what you asked for.” And before he even knew what he was saying, he added, “On the house.”

She looked at him, looked at the vial, and chuckled. She opened the top of her cart and reached in; when she took the vial from his hand, she replaced it with a hot, steaming bundle wrapped in waxy paper. “On the house,” she said, her dark eyes twinkling, and then she picked up her cart and rolled it away.

Snape detested Christmas in this place. A stiflingly hot summer, however unpleasant, was at least in
the proper order of things. Summers were supposed to be hot. Christmases, however, were most emphatically not. Christmases were supposed to be cold, roofs blanketed with snow, frost painting patterns on the windows, tree branches weighted not with greenery but with glittering ice, the streets filled with slush and all the passers-by buried under layers of leather, fur, and wool.

It was not supposed to be eighty-five bloody degrees in the shade. It was an affront to the sensibilities.

He crossed his arms and slumped back onto his bench. He was so utterly sick of this place, of waking up day after day, facing the same mind-numbing drudgery in his shabby, silent little house, in this insular, nasty little town. He’d managed to make the best of it for years, but after so long he’d been so inundated with all things Mexican to the point that he was finding everything about this place absolutely intolerable. He wanted to go home—away from Mexico, and back to England, where things were as they should be.

But no—he couldn’t go back, because that was where Potter was. And Snape knew that the moment he set foot on his native soil, the Darling of Gryffindor would be on him like a gnome on a horklump.

Provided that he didn’t decide to bring his presumptuous, prying presence back to Mexico for a second time and flush Snape out of his hiding place just for his own amusement.

Snape would have been disgusted with himself for sitting out here on the bench and sulking if he wasn’t feeling too wretched to care. It was probably the mockery of the Christmas season in this country that had him so out of sorts. Contrary to his students’ whispered comparisons between himself and Dickens’s famously unpleasant protagonist, Snape liked Christmas. He enjoyed the decorations that festooned the castle, ornate almost to the point of garishness. He liked Christmas carols, and once upon a time he had possessed a passable baritone for singing. That he’d only ever sung them for one other person—and only then after much cajolery, and almost never again past the age of sixteen—was beside the point. He liked mulled wine and plum pudding and roasted chestnuts, and he loved the smell of holly and evergreen, and he even liked mistletoe, because that one Christmas at school when he was thirteen he’d been walking through the halls—

He viciously yanked off his hat and ran a frustrated hand through his sweaty hair before jamming it back on his head. He just wanted this day to be over—at least back in his own house he’d tried to recapture a bit of his lost Christmas cheer. There was a proper tree, even if it was necessarily tiny, and he’d made the concession of a few decorations around the living room. And it was cooler in there, too. And quiet.

It was pathetic, but it was familiar, and it was his. Just his, and no one else’s. Frankly given his financial straits, he should be pleased that he didn’t have to buy gifts for anyone.

“¿Pardon—señor?”

Snape turned at the sound of the girl’s voice next to him, and found himself face to face with Inez the flower girl. He tilted his head up and regarded her along the bridge of his nose, trying not to let his general anger at the world (and at Potter) show for the sake of (hopefully) making a sale. “Yes?” he asked, forcing his voice into a reasonable facsimile of politeness.

She smiled at him, her even teeth white in her dark face. “Hello, Señor Greene,” she said. “I just wanted to give you some of these.”

He stared blankly at her outstretched hands; she was holding a little paper boat filled with those sugar-covered dumplings that everyone around here seemed to eat at this time of year.
“Mama makes them and I sell them along with the flowers every year in December,” she was wittering on, “and I thought you might like to try some.”

His mouth twisted. “Young lady, if I had the money to spare for such frivolities, I would not sit in this wretched plaza day after day,” he said coldly.

She grinned. “Oh, no charge, sir—I just wanted to say Feliz Navidad.”

He blinked at her, looked down at the dumplings again, and back up at her—and found himself at a loss for words. But he recovered himself quickly and scowled. “I don’t take charity,” he spat.

The impudent girl had the nerve to chuckle. “It’s not charity, señor,” she said with smiling exasperation, and he glowered at her for her impertinence. “It’s a gift.”

The meddlesome twit was clearly not going to leave him alone unless he played along with her little farce. What did she expect—gratitude? He angrily flipped open the lid of his basket and randomly grabbed one of the pots of lotion that he’d been making with the flowers from her stand. It would have to be calla right now, wouldn’t it?

“I don’t take something for nothing,” he informed her fiercely, “so here,” he said, snatching up the boat and thrusting the jar into her hands. “If that’s what it takes to be left alone.”

“I said no charge, señor,” she said reprovingly.

“Then consider it a gift,” he sneered, setting the dumplings heavily down on top of his basket and glowering at her.

He was pleased to see that her good cheer seemed to be wearing thin, but still she didn’t leave. She just held up the jar and asked, “What is it?”

He crossed his arms and grunted, “Hand cream.” Even after nearly a year, it was still mortifying that he was putting his skills to use brewing hand lotion.

“Oh!” Dammitall, she sounded all bright and cheerful again. He looked up at her, irritated; she had opened the pot and was smelling it—why on earth did women feel compelled to stick their noses into everything? “Is this what you’ve been buying all those flowers for?”

“Yes,” he said tiredly; he was annoyed with her, but his anger was burning itself out and now he just wished she would go away.

“So that’s why you spend so much time picking them out! I’d wondered.”

“Your powers of observation are truly stunning.”

She looked down at him for a moment, her brow slightly furrowed, and he scowled back, but then, to his intense irritation, she smiled again. “Well, anyway—I just wanted to say thank you for being such a good customer—and clearly my flowers are being put to good use!—and to say Feliz Navidad. And thank you for the gift,” she said, the ironic stress on the word obvious, and oh, the little brat had just better be glad that she had left before he had got a word in edgeways, because he would have let her have it.

But she was already gone in a swirl of blue skirts and white apron, her long dark braids dancing behind her, and he found himself scowling uselessly at the patch of dusty ground on which she had been standing the moment before. He grumbled to himself, and then looked over at his basket. The little dish of dumplings was warm, the paper stained with grease, and he could smell the yeast of the dough and the cinnamon that covered them.
Grudgingly, and because he didn’t know what else he was supposed to do with them, he picked one up and took a bite.

And it was very good, sweet and warm and crisp, and he found himself finishing it off rather quicker than he thought he would have—just in time to look up and catch Inez’s eye as she stood by her cart, back in position behind her pots of many-coloured poinsettias. And she smirked at him.

He hated this place.

Snape stuck a finger into the thickly bubbling concoction in the cauldron in front of him and then pulled it out, inspecting the pale purple sludge with a critical eye. It was ridiculous the amount of consideration that Muggles put into what a product looked like. Who cared what it looked like if it worked? And women were the worst. Lavender-scented lotion should be purple, that impudent girl had insisted. He’d been sorely tempted to give her purple—hexing her hair a brilliant fuchsia would have been immensely satisfying.

So now it was purple. He’d had to add berry juice to get it just the right shade, and then had to compensate for that smell, as it was supposed to be lavender, and plus he was still trying to improve the texture. If he had to sell this rubbish to get by, then he was going to do it well. Besides, if he could build a reputation for particularly good lotions, not just the garden variety garbage pawned off on the tourists, he might be able to turn a tidy profit and be able to buy something decent to eat for a change.

He rubbed his fingers together and then huffed; it would do, he supposed. He still thought that more aloe might be beneficial, but thus far, too much seemed to cause the seal’s milk to curdle. He’d have to work on that.

He turned off the heat beneath the cauldron and summoned the small plastic pots stacked on the far bench. He’d decided against using glass for this; women were hard on their lotion bottles, he’d discovered, and they went through the stuff like mad. Plastic was cheaper, anyway, and since he had no worries about its effects on the contents (or the containers themselves), as was the case with some potions, he’d had no qualms about using it.

The little jars sailed obediently from their stacks, lining up smartly on the edge of the workbench. He fed one end of a long rubber tube into his cauldron and tapped the other with his wand.

The lotion came oozing out in a little purple glurt. He patiently passed the end over each of the jars, filling them to the top with this latest batch, until each one was filled. A quick flick of his wand over them flattened the tops, and a second, twiddling wave left a small imprint of a lavender blossom on the surface of the cream, which would set as it cooled. His lip curled. Those stupid women wanted it to be pretty, did they? Well, then, they’d get what they wanted—just so long as they paid.

Then he turned away and tiredly scoured away the remnants in the bottom of the cauldron and picked up the rubber tube to take it downstairs and wash it. He would cap and label the jars—prettily, of course—when they had cooled.

He stepped out of his workroom, into the fresh air on the landing and descended the stairs. He’d just started the tap in the kitchen sink when there came a light, quick thumping on the door as Snape was putting away his dishes. He glanced up at his clock. It was nearly five; Santiago was running late today.

He turned off the water and crossed the room to open the door. There was young Santiago, two paper bags balanced on his arms. “I have your shoppings, sir,” he said in the accented English that
he’d been using these days.

“‘Shopping’ is a gerund, idiot,” Snape corrected, annoyed, turning back into his house and hearing the boy come in behind him. “You don’t pluralize comprando, do you?”

“Oh—sorry—shopping, then,” the boy said, bringing the bags into the kitchen behind Snape. Snape snorted; one would think after all the time he spent around English speakers, he would have picked up on these things by now. He certainly never seemed to have any trouble understanding English.

The boy came in and set his burden down on the kitchen table, but paused momentarily, his round little nose quivering over the small, sparse patch of hair that he was apparently trying to cultivate on his upper lip, and he looked vaguely askance at Snape.

Snape felt his face creasing into a thunderous scowl even as his cheeks heated unpleasantly; he undoubtedly smelled like a bloody tart’s boudoir after being holed up in his workroom brewing lotion all day—but if that brat said a word, he would regret it.

The boy seemed to realize his imminent danger and decided that discretion was the better part of valour, going quietly about unloading Snape’s purchases. Still irritated, Snape turned back to his sink; the pile of comestibles that the boy was setting out look pitifully small, and he knew that the still bulging parcels contained a wealth of better, more expensive food destined for next door. He groused to himself as he rinsed out the length of tubing and set it aside to take it back upstairs.

He then turned back to the table and took up the milk and bread to put them away as Santiago dug in the bottoms of the bags for anything left from his order. He came up with a bottle of ketchup before rolling up the tops of the bags up to leave.

Only he didn’t leave; Snape had his back to him, putting the small loaf in his breadbox, when he heard the boy speak, his voice tentative. “Sir?”

Snape didn’t like the tone of his voice one bit, so he turned and fixed him with a level gaze. The boy was rubbing the back of his head with one hand, apparently casting about for words. “What?” Snape demanded.

Santiago sighed and cut his eyes away for a moment, before turning back and blurting in Spanish, “It’s Señor, sir.”

Snape felt himself swelling with anger, the frown on his face deepening into a horrible glower. “I have no interest in hearing anything whatsoever about that blithering idiot, and so I’ll thank you keep him out of the conversation!”

Santiago sighed again and dejectedly picked up one of the grocery bags. “I know you’re mad at him, sir,” he said, and Snape stiffened and shifted uncomfortably where he stood, his cheeks prickling again, but relaxed marginally at the boy’s next words. “I don’t know what he did, but I understand that you’re mad. But I—” He stopped and bit his lip. “I just worry about him, sir,” he managed to get out. “He’s—he’s all the time going out—alone, and he never used to do that—and he keeps sending me on weird errands and delivering all these messages—and he won’t tell me what he’s doing, and—and I’m afraid he’s going to get in trouble,” he finished.

“And what do you expect me to do about it?” Snape snarled angrily.

Santiago slumped a little. “Nothing, sir,” he said dully. He picked up the remaining bag and made his way to the door.

Snape glared at his retreating back as he shut the door behind him and heard him go dejectedly next
door and go inside. Then he harrumphed and went back to his kitchen table, putting away the cheese and the chicken and the tomatoes in his icebox.

Snape had seen that arsewipe going out on his own, it was true. He pointedly ignored him, but he still saw him. And he saw him alone with increasing frequency, stumping along with a patently false limp, leaning on a cane that he didn’t need—not for his leg, anyway—and without his little indentured servant to lead him around. Either he was finally trying to learn self-sufficiency—or else he was getting up to something he didn’t want the boy privy to.

The sorry tosspot was never without the boy. The few times he was, it almost invariably ended badly—like when Snape had found him covered with blood in his bathroom, or when he’d nearly been beaten to death, or that other time—before.

Snarling impotently to himself, Snape slammed the icebox closed and snatched up his rubber tubing before stomping back upstairs. He had work to do; he didn’t need to be standing around musing over matters that didn’t concern him—matters that it behooved him to avoid.

Snape grunted in disgust as he reached the landing. After all that had happened to him, one would think that miserable bastard would know that no good came of poking his ferret’s nose where it didn’t belong. If Sands was too stupid to have figured things out by now, well, then that was his problem.

Snape didn’t care in the least.

Chapter End Notes

Señora Valejo isn’t entirely our creation; we borrowed her from OUaTiM, and you may remember seeing her. She’s the old woman with the pistols and the bandoliers in the coup scene.
See No Evil

Chapter Summary

Sands gets the ball rolling.

When Sands woke up that morning, he was hungry. He wanted something to eat. He wanted a neat pile of scrambled eggs, fluffy and piping hot, with sizzling, crispy bacon, and hot buttered toast. And coffee. And maybe a short stack while he was at it, soft but lacy-edged and drenched in syrup. He was, after all, very hungry.

But that was a moot point, because Little Miss Prissy-Pants wasn’t speaking to him.

He scowled, throwing the covers off onto the floor and heaving himself up out of bed. He’d slept naked last night because it had been damned hot—and still was, really. He shuffled his way over to the dresser and pulled out a full set of clothes—shorts, undershirt, jeans, shirt, socks. Perfect on the first go. Well, at least something was going his way.

It had been nine months since he’d last seen Snape. Nine. It was really pissing him off how long Snape could go with the silent treatment, and especially over something so trivial. Sands pulled his shirt on over his head, grimacing. So they’d gotten drunk and fooled around—there was no harm in that. And Snape had learned a little humility—everybody needed a good dose of that in their lives; it built character. Sands didn’t see what the big deal was—the lousy old crumpet-sucker had clearly been desperate. If you looked at it from the right angle, Sands had done him a big favor. But no, Snape would rather act like an uptight old prude and throw a tantrum.

Sands got the first leg of his jeans on with no trouble, but as he hopped about on his clad leg, trying to get the other in his pants as well (and they kept moving, dammit!), he lost his balance and fell to the floor with a grunt and a thud. Growling in annoyance, he kicked them off where he lay and then stood up, jeans in hand and legs still bare. He crammed the irritating things haphazardly back into their appropriate drawer; if they didn’t want to cooperate this morning, he just wouldn’t wear them. Besides, he had no reason to get dressed—it wasn’t like he was going anywhere.

He plodded downstairs in his undershirt and shorts and swung ‘round into the bathroom; he ran his hand through his hair as he pissed, wondering if he could put off that shower for another day or two. He decided that he could, and flushed the toilet with a rattle and a bang and moved over to the sink to brush his teeth.

While Sands was enjoying his minty freshness with his mind otherwise empty, there came a sudden burst of unwelcome realization. It came to him so suddenly that he actually stopped all movement for a moment, spearmint foam dribbling down his chin, before letting out a groan and spitting irritably into the basin. Why, of all times, did that have to be today? He was in a crappy enough mood as it was.

Sands was forty years old today.

Forty. Forty frickin’ years old. Sands hated the very idea of it. Thirty-seven had been good at first (Susana had surprised him with black leather—she may have been a back-stabbing bitch, but she’d had one hell of a body), but now didn’t bear thinking about, thirty-eight too had been a party at first
but was now tainted with stupid, stupid reality, while thirty-nine had passed unheeded. But forty…it sounded old. It was old. What was worse was that it felt old.

Forty years old, and look where he was. Hiding out in Culiacán, blind, and alone in some shitheap. This was not where he had envisioned himself age forty, that was for sure. He’d expected to finally have been transferred out of this dump, riding high on an assignment in Columbia or Argentina, setting his board with national leaders and drug lords alike, playing countries and continents for his own private amusement, setting them up and watching them fall. Instead, he was skulking around in back alleys and local dives, eating into his dwindling funds, with nobody for company but his kid and some crotchety old goat for a neighbor. Scowling, he realized he didn’t even have the neighbor anymore. He hadn’t heard a peep from Snape in all this time. He knew that Snape had been taking a different route home lately—and he was probably doing his disappearing act straight into his house, the jerkwad, so Sands could never catch him. So all Sands had was his stupid kid.

It wasn’t fair, and he knew it, but that was the way it was, as David Bowie would tell him. He was just going to have to deal with it on his fortieth birthday.

There was really only one thing he wanted for his birthday this year—any year—and that was El Mariachi’s head on a platter. But he knew he wasn’t going to be getting that on this auspicious day, so he was going to settle—he was going to take himself out for dinner and spend some money on somebody else.

And that somebody else had just arrived.

As he walked out of the bathroom, hitching up his shorts and scratching his balls and putting his sunglasses on, the familiar jingle of a bell sounded outside, and shortly after, Chiclet burst through the door. “Buenos dias, Señor!” he said brightly, oblivious to Sands’s state of undress. “I woke up early this morning, and I figured since I was already up, I might as well come over now.”

“Goodie for you,” he said flatly, meandering over to his chair and settling down into it. He yawned, scratching the back of his head. “And just what prompted you to get up so early this fine morning?”

“Well, it’s only seven.”

“Mmm. Well, you might as well just take the list now, then, as I don’t have anything for you to do. You can go to school early and hang around the flagpole and check out the girls this morning,” Sands said.

Chiclet fidgeted a little. “Well, I was hoping to wait over here until seven-thirty. I don’t know when Don Greene wakes up, but that’s when I usually get here, and I don’t want to disturb him.”

Sands glared at him; Chiclet already knew that Snape’s name—pseudo or otherwise—was taboo at this point. “Well, I can guarantee you he’ll be up—I happen to know for a fact that the old dingleberry has breakfast every morning promptly at seven. So you can just tootle over there and get his precious grocery list, too, and then you can get lost. I’m not going to entertain you for thirty minutes just so you can cater to his schedule. You aren’t on his—you’re on mine,” Sands said snippily. “Anyway—we’re going out today, so hurry home from school, and no loitering next door.”

“We are?” Chiclet asked, curious.

“Yes, we are. It’s going to start raining cats and dogs in a few weeks and I want to take advantage of the weather,” Sands snapped.

“Oh—well, all right, Señor,” Chiclet said uncertainly, and trotted into the kitchen to get Sands’s
“Cook me some scrambled eggs while you’re in there,” Sands called after a moment.

“Okay,” Chiclet said, and Sands heard the cabinets open, the sound of a pan being set on his stove, and the rattling of the kid rummaging around in the fridge.

It didn’t take Chiclet long, and, as Sands got up and ambled into the kitchen, he thought they smelled pretty good. He took one more sniff before sitting down in his customary seat, hearing Chiclet rush around and get a plate for him. A few moments more, and a plate of eggs was set down with a thunk, followed by a mug of fresh coffee. He picked up his fork and took a bite, and was vindictively pleased to discover they were just as good as Snape’s were. He loved it when Chiclet cooked a good breakfast—it proved that Sands didn’t need that old fart at all.

He salted and peppered his eggs—and told that kid to add Tabasco to his grocery list—and then continued to eat, taking a swig of his coffee to the sounds of Chiclet cleaning up the kitchen and putting everything away where it belonged.

“Are they all right, Señor?” Chiclet asked with his ever-present, eager-to-please concern.

“They’re fine,” Sands replied around a mouthful.

“What—I guess I’ll go over to—I guess I’ll go now. Bye, Señor!”

Sands scowled, chewing a little more forcefully than usual as Chiclet scampered off and out the door. Unable to help himself, pushed back his chair with a noisy scrape on the floor and got up, dashing over to the front window and pressing his ear to the glass, hoping to catch a few traces of conversation from next door. He got there just in time to hear Snape open the door, but he didn’t say anything. Sands huffed in annoyance, stalking back to the kitchen and finishing his eggs standing up as he heard Chiclet’s tinny bell ring-a-ling away from the house. He dropped the dirty plate in the sink (Chiclet could clean that one up when he got back) before meandering to back out into the living room and to his chair, flopping sulkily down into it.

He only sat for a moment, wallowing in silent contemplation of his sucky situation, before standing abruptly and going back upstairs. He had nothing to do until Chiclet got back, so he might as well go back to bed, to try to sleep through this whack day. Shucking his shorts and undershirt—it was burning up in here, and that just pissed him off even more, and in no small part because he wanted to go next door; Snape and his fairy magic kept his house cool and comfortable year round—he got back under the sticky sheets. Sands took his sunglasses off and dropped them on his nightstand, groping for his blindfold and tying it firmly around his head. He settled down into bed, wiggling around—his sheets were getting funky; he’d have to get the kid to wash them—hands laced behind his head, already sweating from the heat, and found to his disgust that his head was churning so that he wasn’t about to get to sleep any time soon.

Snape really had no business being such a bitch about everything—after all, toward the end he’d been all but begging for it. That’s what happened to angsty little men who got all hung up over their old girlfriends—it was hell on the sex life. Years of pointless pining for the girl he left behind had clearly left old Snape more than a little hard up. And anyway, if he hadn’t wanted it, nothing would’ve happened. Sands had dealt with people like him before—they were all alike. All repressed and uptight, convinced of their own stalwart fortitude and unable to take life easier—unable to take advantage of a situation proper. Unable to see when somebody was trying to do them a favor. Unable to admit it when they wanted it. Unable to see when they’d been bested.

Sands had given Snape a few days to cool off before testing the waters again—he’d half expected
not to be let in for breakfast the following week. But he had been sorely disappointed in spite of himself (and admittedly extremely annoyed by it) upon discovering that the door was most definitely locked—magically, so no amount of his own breaking-and-entering skills would get through it. Miffed, he’d treated Snape to a glorious demonstration of his percussion skills on the front door, just to make him as mad as he was himself.

It had worked; it had apparently made Snape mad enough to cast some kind of spell on the door. He’d heard a barked command from inside in that phony Latin his type used, and then beneath his beating fists he’d felt a bizarre, almost electrical pulse, and the air around them went flat and dead. He’d started, really mad now that the wet end had the nerve to put a spell on him—but as it turned out, he hadn’t. No, he’d realized what Snape had done when he raised his fist to beat on the door again and had been unpleasantly discomfited to find that no matter how furiously he pounded, he didn’t make a sound against his front door—or any part of the rest of the façade, either.

Angry but undaunted, he’d gone back inside his own house and picked up where he left off, throwing things at their shared wall, followed shortly by a rendition of “Respect” in his best Aretha at the top of his lungs—and when that didn’t get a response, he spitefully brought his imitation talents to the fore and treated the tight-assed old prick to his own take on the pathetic, desperate sounds Snape had made in Sands’s bed a week ago.

That got a response, all right—Snape had put a spell on the walls, too. The turd. That left Sands high and dry, all by himself to make noise and be hungry and alone and wait for Chiclet to finish up at school so he could finally eat.

And that’s exactly how it had been for nine frickin’ months. Snape kept his wall charmed against any sound from either direction, he took a different route home, and absolutely refused to speak to Sands at all.

What a bitch. What a woman.

Sands scowled, rolling over on his side and trying to get comfortable—a difficult task when lying puddle of one’s own sweat. His back hurt, because he’d slept wrong, which was just a nice shot of lemon juice in the paper cut on his dick that was today’s birthday. He supposed his age was eventually going to catch up with him—he’d just been hoping it would be somewhere around sixty, rather than forty. He would’ve voluntarily retired at sixty and retreated to some tropical island, living out the rest of his days in paradise, drinking Polynesian cocktails with little umbrellas in them and getting oiled up by topless native girls.

Forced retirement sucked big fat hairy donkey balls.

He sighed, pressing his arm over his blindfold. Why, why, why was falling asleep so difficult? That wasn’t very fair, either. But, as per usual, that’s the way it was.

Well, the way it was sucked it, too. It could go to all nine hells, as far as he was concerned.

He twisted angrily around and hissed as his leg twinged painfully. It had started up with that crap again lately, as Sands was no longer doing business with old Don Greene. He had been buying some of those “magic” salves that José had recommended—and dammit if they didn’t work just as well as he’d said. But now that Snape refused to acknowledge his presence—refusing even to sell anything to him via Chiclet, which was really too much—that blessed relief he’d come to take for granted was gone. So he was left with those familiar and unwelcome spasms of pain in his thighs, and it was all Snape’s fault. Leave it to that window-licker to give up one of his best customers over something so stupid.
Sands reached down and gingerly massaged his thigh before flopping back onto his pillow. Snape would eventually cave. He’d have to. And Sands would be waiting for him when he came crawling back—and boy, but was he going to enjoy that. And it was on that thought that he finally, mercifully, drifted off to sleep.

Sands was jolted out of a sound sleep by the slam of a door. The gun was already out from under his pillow and in his hand by the time he heard the cheery call of, “Only me!” and he relaxed. Groaning slightly as his residual sleepiness caught up with him after snapping awake, he slowly sat up, rubbing his face with his hands. Sleeping all day…bad habit. He’d wanted to do it—but he hated it when he did.

He scowled down at the floorboards and that stupid kid—he’d woken up with a woody, but he couldn’t very well do anything about it now that Chiclet was here. He concentrated on thoughts of Belini in a thong, and that put paid to most of his hard problem, although it left him feeling more than a little stiff and cranky. Growling, he threw off the covers and got up, digging around in his dresser for clothes, and he managed to get into his jeans without falling over this time. Not bothering with his boots yet, he picked them up and carried them out of the room and down the hall.

“Did you get everything?” he asked as he stumped down the stairs.

“Everything but the milk—they were out of the kind you like. I’ll pick it up tomorrow,” Chiclet replied, bustling about in the kitchen.

“Dammit,” Sands groused. He plonked down into his chair and tugged on his boots. This was the second time that place had been out of real milk in as many months. He had a good mind to tell Chiclet to start shopping somewhere else—his money would spend just as well at a different market, and they could blow him if they didn’t like it—that, or they could start having what he wanted when he wanted it.

“Did you remember to get me two cartons of smokes?” Sands demanded.

“Sí, Señor,” Chiclet called.

Sands grunted—he’d been smoking a lot more lately. That was probably Snape’s fault, too. And speaking of—he fished around in his pocket for the nearly empty pack from yesterday that should still be in there. He was not disappointed; his fingers found the crumpled paper and crinkling plastic. He pulled out the very last cig, crushing the empty pack in his hand and throwing it on the floor, before lighting up and taking a satisfying drag.

He waited until Chiclet was through putting everything away (the little shit didn’t even pause in his work as he walked by and picked up the wad of ex-cigarette pack and threw it away), and then got up out of his chair. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast—take me somewhere to eat,” he said.

“Okay.” Chiclet pattered towards the front door, and Sands followed his footsteps.

“Where are we going?” Sands asked as they stepped outside into the dusty air.

He heard Chiclet shrug as he locked the door. “Wherever you want to go, Señor. I thought we were just going to El Cisne Oro—you say the pibil is good there.”

“Fair enough,” said Sands agreeably. The pibil was good down at the square, and they were always very snappy with getting his order. “Maybe we can go dig up something decent for dessert afterwards—I’m sick of fried bread.” He turned and followed Chiclet as they turned down the side alleyway, pausing momentarily to flip off Snape’s house before setting off on his familiar path into
town, knowing his leg would probably be sore after the all-day walking, and hating it.

“Are you—are you and Don Greene still not talking?” Chiclet asked uncertainly. Sands glared at him.

“I’m talking fine. He won’t talk to me. And keep your nose out of it,” he ordered irritably. “If Don Greene wants to be a stuck-up piece of shit, it’s certainly no concern of mine—or yours!”

Sands was sitting quietly in his living room, his fingers drumming on the arm of his chair, Chiclet perched on the couch across from him. Sands was pleasantly and decidedly full from the pasta that Chiclet had made under his close supervision *(dammit)*, and the little chef was now sipping his Coke and not talking—for once.

He’d been quite tractable lately—he’d been a bit of a bitch when he was arranging his soirees with the mariachis, always wanting to know what he was doing—that was not what he paid him for! But now he was back to his old chipper, obedient little self, and had been for the past month or so.

And good thing, too—Sands needed the little shit to be on top of his game for what lay ahead. He needed to follow directions, and not get sidetracked by his childish morality issues. Bigger things were at stake here.

“You’re going to be sixteen soon, aren’t you?” Sands asked abruptly, breaking the silence with his question.

“I’m already sixteen,” Chiclet replied, sounding slightly surprised. “I’ll be seventeen in December.”

Sands jolted in his chair, taken aback—and unpleasantly so. But he just flicked his head, dismissing his discomfiture as if he would an irksome fly. “Okay, fine, whatever—either way, you’re old enough to be driving, right? And you already know how, after all.”

“I suppose so. I drive my uncle’s truck sometimes, but—.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” said Sands dismissively. “The point is that you can drive—so let’s get going—we’re going to go get you a car,” he said, heaving himself up out of his chair. “Consider it an early birthday present.”

“What?” Chiclet sounded incredulous. “Señor, no! A bike is one thing, but a *car*—”

“—is essential for a growing boy,” Sands cut him off. “You need a car, and I’m going to buy it for you.”

“Señor, that’s crazy! I don’t need a car, I have my bike! And if I need one, it’ll be when I’m out of school, and anyway, I’ve been saving—”

“No, no, and more no,” Sands interrupted yet again, starting to get pissed off at the ungrateful little SOB. “For one thing, I’m not gonna stand by while you buy some junk heap and get killed when the engine catches fire. And two, if you really are pushing seventeen, then it’s high time you had a car. I got my first car when I was fifteen—a blue Stingray. ‘Wait until after school’ my butt,” he scoffed. “You’re getting one today. And thirdly,” he said loudly over Chiclet’s renewed protestations, “I need you to have a car—and so that’s final.”

Sands ignored Chiclet’s bitching all the way to the car dealership. The kid would not fracking shut up—he kept insisting that a car was simply too *much*, that he didn’t even have a *license* yet, that Señor had already done so much for him already, and that he didn’t need a car, that he could drive
Señor anywhere he wanted if he got his own car, but not one for him, and that if he really had to buy his own car, he had his own money, and that it was just stupid for Señor to buy him one, as all the money he had saved was Señor’s anyway, and that he should just not do this!

It was very annoying. Sands played deaf through the whole thing, interrupting Chiclet’s monologue of objections occasionally to give orders, to get the kid to hail them a cab and then to direct him where to go. He obeyed quickly enough, but never turned off the talk-box, just kept at it, picking up right where he’d left off. By the time they reached the dealership, Sands’s nerves were very badly frayed. Fortunately, Chiclet finally seemed to sense trouble, and he mercifully shut up.

Sands was pleased to find that the cars at this particular dealer were still new imports, as he recalled from better days. He was not about to put himself or his kid in anything from this crapper of a country. Not to mention that driving around in a car that you were fully aware somebody else had farted in was never pleasant. So, new and foreign it was—but he didn’t want anything too huge and flashy. Anything like that tended to stick out a mite around these parts, and he had a feeling that might end up being detrimental to what he had planned.

This place seemed to specialize in rice-burners, which could kiss his ass, and sportier cars from the good old US of A. The kid would need something that wasn’t too conspicuous, but something that could handle the crappy streets in this country—driving on a road was practically off-road. He needed something with some muscle—he was a teenage boy, after all, and a hot car was a necessity—but not over the top. Chiclet was just a little squirt, after all, and from a poor family. Something on the high-end would be suspicious.

Tilting his head back to take in a little of the afternoon sun—something he always took advantage of in July, as the rainy season tended to make sunlight a not-so-reliable commodity—he thought of a typical street in Mexico, thought of the cars that drove by, thought of all the cars he’d seen since coming to Culiacán, thought of all the cars out on the Day of the Dead—

A Jeep. That should do it. A Wrangler—plenty manly and with a good engine and four-wheel drive, but not something that anyone would give a second glance around here.

He made Chiclet take him directly to where the Jeeps were parked, finding the right model and then telling him to pick out one that he liked. Which turned out to be a mistake, because the one Chiclet picked happened to be yellow.

“You’ll look like a taxi cab,” Sands said.

“The taxis here are green, Señor,” Chiclet replied smartly.

Sands glared pointlessly at him, his mouth tight. “Shut up and tell me how it looks.”

“It’s great, Señor—and much too expensive, and I don’t need it,” he said, his tone scolding.

“Mmm-hmm,” Sands replied. “How much is it?”

“Twenty-four thousand.”

“Easily negotiable—and you don’t need all that high-end crap anyway,” Sands said dismissively. “They only mark them that high so somebody can come talk them down. Car dealers are all Arab camel traders at heart—or at least, they think they are. Come on—let me show you how it’s done.”

The dealer, as it turned out, was very fond of haggling indeed. Too bad for him that he couldn’t haggle his way out of a wet paper bag. It took Sands all of twenty minutes to talk him down to an even twenty thousand for the mostly basic package—air conditioning was not an option; in this
country, it was a necessity. The gentleman in question became very receptive once Sands made it clear that he would be paying cash for his car. That same cash also helped convince the jolly little prick to make the purchase in Chiclet’s name, despite his not even having a license yet. Then again, it might have been Sands’s carefully accidental display of the piece under his jacket that did that—one never knew.

Chiclet still hadn’t warmed completely to the idea of his own car even up to the point when they were handed the keys. But once he started driving it back to Sands’s house, well—what kid his age wouldn’t be won over? It wasn’t a bad little car, really—it thrummed happily along (though not as beautifully as Sands’s old car), and was quite a smooth ride. Chiclet was soon babbling rapturously about it more than he’d gushed about his bike almost three years ago (Sweet Jebus, had it really been that long?).

“Señor, I don’t know how to thank you,” Chiclet said for the umpteenth time, and Sands was alarmed at how emotional the kid sounded. Sheesh—it was only a car, after all. No need for him to wet himself.

“You can thank me by making sure it doesn’t get stolen,” Sands informed him. “This car has an alarm for a reason. Use it.”

“Oh, I will, Señor! And don’t worry—I’m gonna take good care of it—you wait and see!” Sands pursed his lips at that, but Chiclet was already off again, thank you, thank you, thank you, and it all was very tiresome.

Well—one had to take the bitter with the sweet. If Sands had to endure Chiclet’s crap in order to get himself a pair of eyes on wheels, well, then, he could cope. Because Sands had errands for the kid to run. Errands outside of Culiacán. Errands in Guitar Town.

Sands knew he would have to wait a month or two before springing his new duties on him—let the kid get a proper license, let the new wear off the car. But once Chiclet had adjusted, once things were running smoothly, he’d move.

*Look out, El…ready or not, here I come…*

Sands had no idea what time it was, and that pissed him off to no end. He wanted to know what time it was so he would know exactly how late Chiclet was so he could yell at him when the little shit finally came back from Guitar Town. He was hungry, and Chiclet was supposed to be back by now, surely, so he could cook something for him so they could eat—and he could tell him what he saw. Unfortunately, he still wasn’t back. How long, exactly, did it take someone to scope out a town and then report back with the details? It hadn’t taken Cucuy this long. It hadn’t even taken this long when he and Chiclet had gone together the first time last month. Then again, that trip had merely been a confirmation of destination, to make sure his memory was still sharp (it was, of course)—they just went there and back, and didn’t stop to sightsee (*dammit*).

Sands forced himself to chill out, throwing himself in his chair so as to make himself stop pacing. He was well aware that he was overly tense, but he felt it was understandable—because when it came down to it, the man he was after might not be in Guitar Town at all. For that matter, Sands wasn’t even sure that El was in fact alive—the unwelcome thought that he might be chasing a genuine wild goose had crossed his mind more than once, popping up more frequently the further along he went with his plans. He had no desire to set up a neat little arrangement only to have it topple down on top of him (again). Fideo could have been lying—maybe El really was dead, and he was just dropping the name to try and save his own hide. Sands knew men would say anything in a life or death
situation. Once upon a time he’d been very good at gauging what was the truth and what was a lie straight from CYA-ville just by looking a person in the eye.

But he couldn’t do that anymore.

So he’d done the next best thing—he’d equipped Chiclet with a car, given a very thorough description of who he was looking for, and sent him out with a wad of cash, a camera with no film, and instructions to browse the merchandise and look inconspicuous. Hopefully, when he got back, Sands would have his man.

Sands fidgeted in his seat, his stomach rumbling. He didn’t like sitting still. He wanted to be up and about, to be putting his own plans in motion. Scheming and plotting and going out on business had made him feel better than he had in months—it made him feel active, made him feel involved in things, made him feel in control again—made him feel better about doing little but sit around on his butt for weeks on end. It made him feel less bored, if anything, to think and plan and set up the pieces the way he wanted them.

However, the great Shakespearian tragedy *El Mariachi Muerto* couldn’t very well go on without the titular main player.

This was ridiculous. Sands was sitting here and starving to death ten feet away from his kitchen. He heaved himself up out of his chair, standing firmly on the left leg for a moment and testing the right—it had been aching abominably this morning, cramping up in ways that reminded him of the bad old days back when he was camping out with Nuñez, but it seemed fine now. So he meandered into the kitchen to make his own lunch. Sandwiches sounded very good right now, and he didn’t need Chiclet (*or* Snape) to make them for him.

Well, he didn’t need him much. He got jelly on the countertop, and that was after he’d almost put mayonnaise on the bread by mistake (what kind of asshole put mayonnaise in a jelly-shaped jar?!) but other than that, he considered his lunch a perfect success. Not bothering to clean it up (Chiclet could do that when he got back, and he could just be glad about it, the tardy little punk), he picked up his sandwich and deposited it on the kitchen table. He almost sat down before turning on his heel and marching straight back to the fridge. He was hungry—he was going to have two sandwiches. Take that, Mary Poppins. He rummaged around in the fridge until he found the turkey, the cheese, the lettuce, and the tomato. He was quite aggravated to find that the little shit hadn’t sliced his tomato for him like Sands had told him to, and he nearly cut his finger off trying to do it himself. Chiclet was going to pay for that. He slapped on the mayo (not the jelly, he was careful to check), and assembled himself a sandwich that Dagwood would have been proud of.

He did put away the veggies and the mayo on his own—didn’t do to leave those out in the heat—and paused in the open door of his fridge. He pursed his lips for a moment before deciding that, because he was alone, he could get away with drinking one of the Cokes he kept in stock for Chiclet—as there was nobody to see him demean himself in such a fashion.

He ate his sandwiches in the silence, sipping what was admittedly a very good Coca-Cola—he hadn’t had one in a very long time, and he forgotten how nice a cold one could be. Unconsciously, he found himself wondering what Snape was eating. Probably those nasty excuses for grilled cheese he ate all the time. Sands vindictively bit into his very fresh, very good turkey sandwich; he knew for a fact Snape was back to his old ghetto groceries again, and it served him right.

He polished off the last of his crust before moving on to his after-dinner sandwich. He frowned—he’d put too much peanut butter on it, and it was sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Dear God, but he was bored. He hated eating alone; that was all Snape’s fault, too. Swallowing the
last of his sandwich, he left his plate and glass where they were and marched back out into the living room, irritated but at least mostly sated.

He was just easing back into his chair when he heard the familiar quick knock and then the key rattling in the lock. The door swung open and in popped Chiclet with a hearty, “Hi, Señor!”

Sands raised an eyebrow. “Your good mood had better mean good news,” he said, “because you’re late.”

“I looked around like you said to,” Chiclet said, more subdued now. “And I think I might’ve seen the man you’re looking for.”

Sands sat up a little straighter. “‘Think?’ That’s not very definitive,” he said flatly. “Get with the program, kid—I need information.”

“Well, that’s all I’ve got. I saw a tall man with long hair who was dressed like a mariachi, but he disappeared before I could get a good look at him, and the people started looking at me funny when I tried to follow him, so I stopped and came back.”

“Why the hell did that take so long?” Sands demanded.

“I had to pick up something for my mom,” Chiclet said, and Sands scowled. “You’re on my payroll, not theirs,” he groused. “And don’t look at me like that.”

Chiclet gave a little snort and went into the kitchen to clean it up from Sands’s lunch, and Sands shot him the bird as he went.

Hmm. Tall and long-haired and dressed like a mariachi. The appearance alone wasn’t enough to go on, but the way the town seemed to hide him…it was enough.

When Sands was seven years old, he’d stolen his grandmother’s cane.

Abigail Sands was a hideous old harpy and was the reason Sands was here in the first place. She’d wanted a grandson to carry her dearly departed husband’s name. Fortunately for her, when his grandmother said, “Fuck,” her son said, “How hard?” so she got her grandson—and not-so-fortunately for Sands, he’d wound up with the name Sheldon Jeffrey.

Visits to Grandma Abigail were hellish—the old bat was the bitchiest bitch to ever come down Bitch Lane. She wasn’t happy unless she was criticizing someone. Her son and daughter-in-law were her favorite targets, but as the namesake of her henpecked old man, Sands was next on the list. Everyone else just rolled over and took it when she laid into them—that’s just how she is, they’d say.

Sands didn’t care how she was—by the time he was seven, he’d had enough. He’d graduated from the hide-in-the-closet method of dealing with her rants and had moved on to the revenge business. So, after she had presented him with yet another list of reasons of why he was a disgrace to her Sheldon’s name, he’d stolen her cane, run up to the third floor, and thrown it out the window. It arced beautifully through the air and landed smack in her prize rosebushes. It had been very funny. Sands still thought it was, but not so much anymore. Not now.

Sands grimaced. This was, perhaps, the most degrading thing he’d ever done in his life—and that included the time he’d been on assignment and posed as part of the entertainment in a strip club. He, Agent Sands, boy wonder, tops in his year, the agent so good the CIA couldn’t find anywhere but Mexico to contain him…leaning heavily on a cane, pretending to limp his way down the street, all
while hoping said limp distracted people from the real reason he carried the goddamned thing in the first place.

Not funny at all. But he had to do it. Chiclet had been busy today—who the hell did he think he was, making plans when Sands needed him? But Sands couldn’t reschedule. So he was, stumping along with a goddamn cane.

And if that wasn’t bad enough on his day out without Chiclet, it sounded like he’d already attracted trouble.

Just because he was “obviously” lame didn’t mean he was deaf—did they honestly think he couldn’t hear them? They sounded like a herd of elephants—giggling elephants. Here they thought they were sneaking up on him—and Sands already knew their position, how many there were, and their intentions. There they were—about ten feet behind him. Three of the little rats, feeling their oats and out to have some fun with the cripple.

Well, they were right about one thing—fun would be had.

They suddenly sped up, closing the distance, and Sands tightened his grip on his cane and pushed his sunglasses farther up his nose. He heard who he assessed to be the ringleader dart right up behind him. Just as Sands took another step, he felt fingers wrap around his cane, and the idiot fucker tried to jerk it right out of his hand.

Sands was ready for him. His fingers clamped down on the handle and he jerked it right back out of his hands in return. The laughter around him faltered, but it hadn’t quite died as he whirled where he stood and delivered a very firm (and very professional, he thought) high-kick to in the approximate direction of the shithead’s gut. He was pleased to find that he’d underestimated; high-pitched caterwauling filled the air as the heel of Sands’s boot connected with his balls. The ringleader went down, and went down hard, and after a moment of shocked silence, his buddies started cursing, advancing angrily on him, but this time with considerably more wariness.

“You stupid fucker!” one of them shouted at him. But Sands just grinned, and before the asshat would have even had time to blink, his gun was out and pointed right between his eyes.

“I’m not the one who was dumb enough to attack an armed man,” Sands replied pleasantly. He dropped his gun down and fired a shot at their feet, and he couldn’t help but laugh at the sudden sound of their pounding footfalls receding into the distance. Then he frowned; the leader was still there, and now trying to get up. Well, Sands decided, as he was the Robin Hood to his less-than-stalwart Merry Men, the bulk of this educational experience would fall upon him.

Sands strode over and stood directly over him. “Never!” He brought the cane down hard, knobbed end first, and the little punk squealed like a stuck pig. “Underestimate!” He slashed it through the air, cracking him right on the skull. “Your opponent!” He drove the end down hard on the small of his back, and the pussy howled in pain. “You’ll regret it,” Sands finished, his smile pleasant. “I hope that was informative. Should you need further instruction, I’m always available. Have a nice day.” And he left, careful to step heavily on the kid’s hand as he left, and walking towards the café to see Marco.

Marco—his new Belini, although that moniker was an insult to the both of them. Sands had dug him up right around the time he’d come across Gracia; Marco had been frequenting the same bar and frequenting the same woman that Sands had at the time (although for entirely different reasons). He wasn’t a necessarily ideal replacement for the late Belini—that skunk had been a diamond in the compost heap. Marco was greedier, for one, in terms of denomination, but his love of himself outweighed his love of money, so there were some things that he just wouldn’t do. Sands had
considered shooting him, and more than once, but as Sands wasn’t sitting quite as pretty as he had been when it had been Belini, he held his tongue (and his trigger finger) and would either talk him down or just hand over the money.

Marco was also a lot more paranoid than Belini, and oftentimes arrived at the prearranged coordinates early. Today was no different.

“Ah, sí—allá está,” the waitress said when he asked if his party had arrived, and he followed the staccato click of her heels across the room and through the familiar maze of tables, fake-limping his way to Marco, who Sands knew from experience always sat facing the door when he was early, so it was with considerable ill grace that he took the opposite seat.

“Pueco pibil and a tequila with lime?” the waitress asked before Sands could speak, and he smiled sharply up at her.

“Smart girl,” he replied, and she clicked away, taking Sands’s unused menu with her.

“I thought these meetings were supposed to be on neutral territory, Andrews,” Marco said immediately.

“This is neutral—if it weren’t, you’d probably be dead,” Sands answered pleasantly enough. “Besides, it is in your best interest to meet me at this particular café. When I’m in unfamiliar surroundings, I tend to be less liberal with my cash.”

“I could take my business elsewhere,” Marco said airily.

“But you won’t. Not with the very simple task I have for you, in conjunction with the exceedingly generous compensation that I will provide.” He waited until he was positive Marco was listening carefully before leaning forward. “I need names, Marco. Cartel names.”

Marco was quiet for a moment, and then said, “If you think I’m gonna go up against the Berguenos for you—”

“Did I ask you go up against anyone?” Sands asked. “That’s not what I heard me say. I heard me say that I wanted names. That’s all.”

“Andrews, I don’t cross the cartels,” Marco said, sounding more and more suspicious.

“Marco, dear—do take a powder,” Sands said, annoyed. “You aren’t listening. I don’t want to cross anyone—I want to talk. I want to meet with select members of the Bergueno cartel on business.” He reached into the bag at his feet and drew out his lunchbox, setting it on the table between them and popping it open to display the contents. “First, you’ll get a down payment of five grand—then you give me names, I pay you the balance of fifteen thousand, and then you’re gone.”

“Yeah—I’m gone, because Bergueno puts me away for good for double-crossing him,” he replied, and while he still sounded suspicious, he certainly didn’t sound quite as hostile while looking in the face of five thousand smackeroos.

“That’s the beauty of it—no one is double-crossing anyone. I really do want to meet these fine upstanding gentlemen on business, in which you are totally uninvolved beyond giving me the names of the gentlemen in question. And you get a total of twenty thousand dollars.” He pulled on his cigarette. “So I fail to see what you have to complain about.”

“I guess I really don’t, not for twenty grand easy money,” Marco said.
Sands smiled. “I knew we could come to an understanding. So, here—you take this,” he said, pushing the box across the table, and it was snatched up quickly, “And you can meet with me within the week at a location of my choosing, and we’ll complete the transaction.” He listened to Marco shuffling through his money before abruptly warning him, “Now, don’t just take that money and run, Marco—I will find you.”

“Hey, have I ever let you down yet?” Marco said, sounding positively jovial now. “I’ll just ring your phone when the deal is done. So,” he said, leaning forward, “just who are you looking for?”

Sands didn’t have a chance to answer just yet; the waitress trotted out, bringing Sands’s and Marco’s lunch. He thanked her with a charming smile, and he felt her smile back at him. He tasted the pibil, and found it to be excellent. He looked up at Marco, and he felt a smirk tugging the corner of his lips. It was going to be a very good day.

He may have been a coward and a fink, but Marco was at least reliable. It had taken a week, another meeting, and the full twenty grand to get it, but at the end of the day, Sands found himself in possession of two names with phone numbers that Marco had “accidentally” dropped on the table. As such, Sands had quickly established contact with a one Felipe Perez, second cousin to Vincinte Bergueno, and personal secretary Bergueno’s second in command and thus with an inside track to the man himself. He wasn’t the run-of-the-mill faceless underling—didn’t like to get his hands dirty, apparently—but nor was he in a position to order a hit on someone—that someone being Sands. So it was that he felt relatively safe sitting across from this particular gentleman—even unarmed as he was, gauging the risk of not having a gun on him actually lower in this case.

“Hello,” he said charmingly, smiling as Perez sat down across from him at the café. Sands was alone this time—Chiclet said he was busy. Again.

“Buenos tardes,” Perez replied evenly. “Lovely spot you’ve chosen to meet.”

“I’ve found the food in this little café to be quite stellar,” Sands said. The waiter came around, and Sands jumped in before he could speak. “Puero pibil and tequila with lime for me,” he said quickly, a smile on his face but his voice hard. “And the gentleman across the way is on my bill as well.” Sands smiled and gestured towards Perez, who ordered rajas con crema.

“Do you make it a habit to sample the local cuisine?” Perez asked, his voice still formally pleasant.

Sands played along. “The pibil in particular—it’s become something of a hobby of mine during my stint in Mexico.”

“Among other things?” Perez asked, the phrase a question but his tone most assuredly not.

There was the opening. “Well, in my business, it pays to be intimate with the, ah, local color, as it were,” Sands said, before pointedly adding, “I’m sure you can relate.”

“Quite, said Perez. “But I’m not entirely sure how I can relate to you. We usually don’t receive calls from the US Central Intelligence—if that’s really what you are. So I’m sure you can understand my reticence to meet with you. But you claim that this is an arrangement to our mutual advantage?”

“Quite right,” Sands said, stubbing out his cigarette before flipping out his badge for Perez’s inspection. “I am, in fact, CIA—and believe me, I entirely understand your distrust,” he said. “There is no point in pretending—my people don’t like your people.” Perez hmmed in wry agreement but said nothing. “However,” Sands amended, “the higher-ups on my side of the fence tend to regard you as something of a necessary evil. This country needs law, order, and organization—and when
the government strikes out, you step up to the plate.”

“And your point?” Perez asked dryly.

“My point being that there are instances when it behooves us to work together,” Sands replied.

And then the waiter returned with their dinners, and for the moment they were both occupied with their meals. His pibil was as excellent as ever. It seemed it got better every time he came here—if that cook wasn’t careful, he was going to wind up dead.

Sands waited for Perez to break the silence; he did not disappoint. “So, am I to understand that you are here to make some sort of arrangement between our respective backers?” he asked, setting down his fork with a clink.

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” agreed Sands. “Tell me—have you ever heard of a little place called Guitar Town?”

“No, I have not. It sounds made up.”

Sands gave him an easy grin. “I thought so, too, until I saw it for myself. On the outside, they do nothing but sell guitars. Guitar makers and guitar sellers and guitar players, just as far as the eye can see. Just a hole-in-the-wall town that the rest of Mexico forgot about.” Sands leaned forward. “But it isn’t. The whole town is a front. It’s nothing but a hideout for half the wanted criminals in Mexico, filled to the brim with, ah, pistoleros.”

Perez snorted. “And I suppose next you’ll tell me that the legendary Guitar Fighter himself lives there?” he scoffed.

Sands’s smile never faltered. “I wouldn’t know about that, but what I do know is that when it comes down to it, the CIA likes that nest of snakes even less than it likes your nest of snakes.”

Perez calmly answered, “That seems to be your problem rather than mine.”

Sands stirred his rice. “Yes, but that’s where you would be wrong. When I say wanted criminals, I don’t necessarily just mean those wanted by the government—there are a fair handful of fellows wanted by your boys as well. Fellows who would be more than happy to join up with anyone promising them revenge or a cut of your pie—either the government, or one of your competitors.”

He smiled again. “And all told, there are enough of them to make an army.”

Perez was quiet, chewing his food deliberately. Sands followed suit, going back to his pibil and waiting patiently for Perez to speak again. When he finally did, Sands was pleased to hear a note of interest in his voice.

“So what is it, exactly, that you’re offering?” he asked bluntly.

Sands kept his grin hidden. “Information. Our intelligence on the town in return for your action against it,” he said firmly. “Should your people go in and, say, absorb this town, bring its wayward members into your fold, then you have just strengthened your own position, which is what we want as well—unofficially, of course. Or, on the other hand, should something untoward happen in that neck of the woods, we wouldn’t be sorry to hear it, and could see to it that there are no repercussions from the official channels.” Now Sands grinned. “It’s a win-win situation for both of us. A threat is gone, and the balance is maintained.”

Perez had remained silent and still, listening to Sands’s words, and he remained so for a moment more before he picked up his fork and went back to his dinner. “You have given me something to
think about,” he said. “I imagine that there are members of my organization who would be interested in hearing what you have to say—but I am in no position to make any agreements,” he added seriously, and Sands nodded graciously.

“Just think it over,” said Sands. “You have my number, should you or anyone else in your ‘organization’ feel the need to contact me.”

“I can tell you now that we’re not going to take any unnecessary risks. If this ‘Guitar Town’ of yours is as heavily armed as you say, it is entirely possible that it isn’t worth the time or effort.”

Sands nodded pleasantly again. “Don’t you worry—I’m not asking anyone to make any major sacrifices. We’re just trying enjoy a bit of mutualism, here—but just because we may work together doesn’t mean that we necessarily have to like each other—or even trust each other.”

Perez gave a small snort. “But I think we understand each other,” he said, and Sands chuckled in return.

*If you only knew.*

Dinner was ended quickly afterwards; they both ate quickly and didn’t talk much, their limited conversation ranging from such stimulating topics as the weather and the Easter celebrations last weekend.

Perez stood as soon as he was finished, curtly thanked Sands for the meal, and left rather quickly. Sands waited until he was gone, finishing up his pibil, before signaling the waiter for his check and paying and leaving himself.

He wished he knew what time it was—Chiclet may have thrown him to the wolves as far as getting here, but he’d promised that he’d be done with his errands by the time Sands was done and would come pick him up—in his new car, he’d said proudly.

Errands—Sands *gave* him errands to run—he didn’t need any of his own.

Sands felt his way outside, carefully keeping his fingertips on the wrought-iron railing in front of the café, which ended at the corner of the building, and he toed his way across the road to the next building, and he leaned against the stuccoed façade lighting up a smoke to cover up the irritating smell of flowers in this corner of the plaza as he waited for his ride.

He snorted. Waiting for his ride, like a goddamn schoolboy. He was going to have a few words with Chiclet about these “errands” of his. Sands didn’t buy him a car just so he could go gallivanting all over Christendom when he was needed here. He could have walked home if he’d brought his cane, but when one was meeting with the cartel, one could show nothing that might be interpreted as weakness.

Sands wasn’t weak. Sands was the Grand Master, and all the people his players, and he would set them upon each other, pulled on invisible strings as they danced to his tune.

But Sands found that he was having trouble enjoying such thoughts properly, as the longer he stood there, he realized that he felt the sensation of eyes on him, the prickling between his shoulder blades, and if he listened, he could hear someone nearby breathing.

He turned to face whoever it was with a thin-lipped expression, and when he did, a female voice suddenly spoke up in Spanish, light and chipper and cheery—all traits that he hated in a woman’s voice. “Good evening, sir. Would you like to buy some flowers?”
Sands smiled patronizingly at the girl with the flower cart not far from where he stood. “Missy, do I look like the type to buy flowers?” he asked softly, ashing on the ground.

“Well, you never know,” she countered pleasantly. “I’ve had some very unusual customers.”

Sands snorted to himself. “Then lemme spell it out for you. No, I don’t want to buy any flowers,” he said. He leaned heavily back against the building behind him, but felt his back stiffen against his will when he heard a very familiar rasping voice speaking to someone across the square. His face twisted into a scowl, and he pointed that way. “But I bet he wants some—a nice big bouquet of lilies. You should take him some; he’d be so pleased.”

He felt the girl following his finger with her eyes. “Oh—you mean Don Greene, señor?” she asked brightly. “He does buy lilies—he’s very picky about them, too.”

Sands snorted again, this time in contempt. “Now why doesn’t that surprise me?” he sneered, tossing his cigarette away. “He probably jerks off with them, the old prune.”

“That’s no way to speak about Don Greene.” The girl’s voice was suddenly stern, and it pissed Sands off.

He pursed his lips and glared at her. “I’ll speak about Don Greene any way I choose,” he snapped. “Really, sir, Don Greene is—” she started, her voice taking on a lecturing tone, but Sands cut her off. “I know exactly what Don Greene is—because I know Don Greene. Do you? I don’t think so. But I do. So I can call him an old prune or an asshat if I want—because that’s what he is.”

“How do you know anything about Don Greene?” Now her voice was curious, and vaguely suspicious. Sands sighed, wishing he had eyes to roll.

“How I know him really isn’t any of your business, girly-girl—suffice to say that I do. And given just how well I know him, I also know that you are in no position to be contradicting me when it comes to the finer points of his less-than-genial personality.” Sands asked, already fishing out another cigarette—he always chain smoked when he was irritated. And once again it was Snape’s fault.

“Well, I—okay, so I don’t really know him,” she admitted, and Sands sniffed in disdain. “But I see him in the square on weekends—every weekend since I’ve started working here. And I’ve seen him help a lot of people—and I think he’s a good man, even if he is a little grouchy.”

“A little grouchy?” Sands repeated incredulously. “Buttercup, that dickweed could out-bitch an entire battalion of Jewish mothers-in-law and still have enough energy left to take on their daughters. What the hell has he ever done for anyone?”

“Oh, just little things—he helps some of the kids who pass through he square, and he made something for Señora Valejo’s arthritis—and there are all the medicines that he sells. They’re very reasonably priced, and they always work,” she said matter-of-factly, and Sands decided that didn’t like her.

“A little grouchy?” he said, lighting up his smoke. “Priced. You think any of those people got away scot-free? No, they paid. That bastard doesn’t offer up anything for free, so don’t you go thinking he’s some kind of do-gooder.” She started to speak again, but he went on over her. “I’m not saying that they paid up front, mind you—but they paid up somehow. That’s how he works—no free lunch with Don Greene. You’ll pay—you’ll always pay. I should know. I did,” he muttered, his lip curling.
The girl was silent (as she should be), but Sands didn’t have time for her anymore, because he heard the sound of very familiar footsteps approaching—Chiclet was here.

“I’m here, Señor—I just had to park up the way,” Chiclet said, sounding slightly out of breath but happy. “Hola, Inez,” he added to the girl next to Sands.

“Hola, Jesús,” she said, back to her bright and cheerful self again. “How are your parents?”

Sands glared at the little shit, heaving himself away from the wall. Chiclet got the message. “Uh, fine—but I gotta go. Buenos tardes, Inez,” Chiclet said, scuffing his shoe a little before setting off and walking back the way he came. Sands followed the sound, and settled in stride beside Chiclet.

“Who is that chick?” Sands grunted.

“Inez Rosas—she lives a few streets away from us. She’s nice—used to watch me and my brothers and sisters when we were younger and my parents were out,” Chiclet replied, slowing down and pulling out his keys with a jangle of metal.

“I don’t care how nice she is—she’s annoying,” he said irritably, reaching out a hand to find Chiclet’s car, waiting to be let in.

“Well, you didn’t have to talk to her—”

“She started it,” Sands barked, hauling himself into his seat and slamming his door.

“Well, I like Inez,” Chiclet said stubbornly, and Sands’s scowl deepened as the Jeep roared to life and they took off in the direction of home. Sands refused to speak to Chiclet for the duration of the relatively short trip, and the little shit had the nerve to sulk back at him, instead of giving him the satisfaction of trying to talk to him so Sands could snub him.

In the end, Sands did have to speak first, to tell Chiclet to park at the end of the street, and not right in front of his house—just in case someone was watching. They walked down the street in silence; Sands’s leg was starting to hurt, goddammit. And this had been such a good day, too—leave it to end on a sour note, all because Snape had his head up his ass.

Still scowling, Sands let himself in once they reached his door. He heard Chiclet follow him inside, and the kid shut the door and locked it behind them while Sands made his way to his chair, flopping down into it and rubbing his leg with a grimace. Chiclet moved beside him, and his sullen air seemed to be gone. “Can I get you anything, Señor?” he asked, sounding appropriately dutiful.

Sands toyed briefly with the notion of snubbing him now, but the little shit had developed an attitude problem lately, and if he did, the brat might leave in a huff. So Sands simply told him to get him a tequila and to be snappy about it.

Chiclet obeyed—good boy—fetching Sands’s golden heaven from the liquor cabinet. He held out his hand and a shot glass was plunked into it, followed by the familiar sound and weight of pouring liquid. “Cheers,” he said, amiably enough. “You should have some—puts hair on your chest.”

“No thanks, Señor,” Chiclet said smilingly, and turned to put the tequila away.

Sands froze, dropping his glass on the floor with a thump—it didn’t break, but the contents spilled everywhere.

“Señor!” Chiclet came dashing back, and Sands heard him scoop up the glass, and there it was again.
The faintest whiff of jasmine. 

His hand shot out and he grabbed what he knew would be that little shit’s arm, and then yanked him down hard. Chiclet came with a yelp, dropping the glass again, and this time it did break, shattering on the floor. Sands leaned a bit closer, inhaling deeply, his nose almost against Chiclet’s shirt. 

*That* was most definitely jasmine. Jasmine…motherfucking *jasmine*…of all things, why did it have to be *jasmine*? 

He tilted his head up to look right at the little son of a bitch. “Since when did you start wearing perfume?” he whispered icily. 

He felt Chiclet go stiff in his grasp, his whole body a confession. He tightened his grip, and felt the fucker flinch. “How long, and *don’t* you dare lie to me.” 

Chiclet kept himself still, his breath a bit shaky, and he hesitantly said, “Four…four months. Her name is Belicia.” 

Sands didn’t give a shit about her name—four months? For four fucking *months*, he’d been off with some whore when Sands *needed* him? And that stupid little bastard thought he could’ve hidden it from him forever? 

*Well, why not*? a nasty, spiteful voice that sounded far too much like Snape hissed snidely at him. *It’s not like you can watch him.* 

“And she wears *jasmine,*” Sands sneered, that dull, furious heat burning in the pit of his stomach, his eye sockets prickling maddeningly. “*Jasmine.* So that’s what you’ve been using my car for, is it?” 

He didn’t wait for Chiclet to answer before pushing him as hard as he could away from him. He heard the shit stumble and fall, and Sands stood, clenching his hands into fists. “Get out. You get the fuck out of my house.” He didn’t hear Chiclet move, so he did instead, standing over him. “*I said get out!*” he shouted down at the floor. 

That got him moving. He scrambled to his feet; the door opened and slammed shut, leaving Sands alone. That stink of jasmine lingered oppressively in the air. He could feel himself shaking, and he all but collapsed into his armchair, leaning forward and tentatively reaching under his sunglasses to itch his burning eye sockets. 

She had worn jasmine. She had loved the stuff. He’d actually bought her jasmine-scented soap once. He remembered how intoxicating it had been—he’d never been one to be just bowled over by a woman’s scent, but on some weird level, hers had done it. He’d liked it—no, he’d *loved* it. She’d smile a slow, sly smile, lean close, and then suck on his lower lip, and then he’d get a whiff of that seductive scent—that smell, that *jasmine,* and then she would have him, would always, *always* have him, even when he thought he had her. She’d thrown a bottle of her jasmine perfume at him the day before he’d handed his ass to her, the smell blooming thickly up from where it shattered and surrounding him, and he’d smelled that same jasmine scent when she’d leaned in close and whispered to him right on the Day of the Dead, smelled it over the smoke and sulfur and blood—*his* blood—

“You stupid fucking shit,” he whispered shakily, grasping his hair tightly. He knew what was going to happen tonight—he knew there would be nightmares. There would be horrible, vivid nightmares, and he would scream—and then *Snape* would hear it and he’d *laugh* at him—

Sands slammed his fists down on the arms of his chair. “*Fuck!*” he bellowed, and in the stillness of
the empty room, the returning echo sounded like laughter.
Love Thy Neighbor

Chapter Summary

Don Greene arrives.

Thank God the insufferable woman finally decided that it was time for her to leave. Did she honestly think that just because he had stooped to selling potions for PMS, he wanted to hear every nauseating detail of her menstrual cycle?

Snape muttered vague threats and insults under his breath; he was well aware would they never amount to anything, but they certainly felt good to voice as he stowed the day’s earnings away, deep in the lowest hidden compartment of his basket. It had been a good day today; he’d pulled in nearly a thousand pesos.

It galled to admit that his debasing decision to expand his wares to feminine fripperies had in fact been a lift to his business, but there was no denying it.

An unpleasant side-effect of his branching out had been an increase in the number of empty-headed females who stopped to sample his wares, and with that particular breed of customer came endless rounds of pointless chattering in his face concerning topics that he hadn’t the least interest in hearing—or, as in the case of his last customer, topics that he actually had a vested interest in avoiding.

But it was past nine—a good day, but a long one, and he was more than ready to go home. His stomach had started rumbling a good hour and a half ago, but the square had been busy and he hadn’t been able to leave until just now. He grumbled to himself; now he had a long walk ahead of him, and when he got home, he’d just have to work and wait even longer to get something for dinner. He would probably just end up eating some leftovers; he thought there was still a little bit of cold chicken in the icebox.

What he really wanted was something hearty and hot and waiting for him, but that was obviously no longer an option.

His lip curled unconsciously at the thought, and he exited the plaza, and headed west, headed home.

“Wait!”

Snape nearly stopped in his tracks, and then picked up his pace, hurrying away. He was in no mood to deal with even one more vapid girl hoping for some miraculous cosmetic bordering on the realms of love potions.

“Oh, please, señor—wait!”

Oh, for the love of Merlin. He stopped, muttering under his breath, and turned, scowling at his pursuer.

Rather to his surprise, he found that he recognized the girl; it was Inez Rosas, the annoyingly pleasant flower seller from the plaza—who hadn’t been there today, he’d noticed—hadn’t been there all weekend. She was running down the street, chasing after him. “Please, Don Greene—wait!”
She slowed as she approached, trotting right up to where he was waiting impatiently, and he was vaguely alarmed to see that her lip was trembling, her eyes wide and wet, and her habitually disgustingly cheerful expression was twisted into one of barely-restrained fear.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I—sir, please—I need your help,” she panted.

“With what?”

“I—sir, it’s my father—he—”

“Spit it out, girl—what is it?” he barked.

She knotted her hands in her worn white apron. “Sir, my father’s sick. Very sick. I think—” A sob tried to fight its way out of her throat, and she forced it back down. “I think he may be dying.” Her expression was desperate. “Please. Do you—can you help him?”

Snape eyed her, not liking the way this conversation was going at all. “And what, exactly, makes you think I can do anything for him?” he asked.

Inez looked up at him with a disturbingly trusting expression. “Señor—everyone knows that your medicines are the best. Everything you have always works. Do you think that—that maybe you have something for my papa?”

Her eyes never left him, frightened but hopeful, and it made him uncomfortable. “Have you taken him to a doctor?” Snape asked her.

Now she cut her gaze away to the ground. “Yes, sir, but we—we don’t have much money—Papa does what he can, but they don’t pay farmhands much—and they just said he had kidney stones, but he—he’s gotten so much worse and we—we can’t afford to take him in again—oh, sir, please, can’t you help him?” she begged.

Her hands were clasped pleadingly in front of her chest, the same warm little hands with clever fingers that braided the stems of the lilies that she sold on Easter and potted the poinsettias that she sold at Christmas, the hands that he remembered holding out a steaming bundle of sweet, crispy **buñelos** for him at Christmas time.

His mouth drew into a hard line and he huffed through his nose. “I want you to understand that there is no guarantee that I will be able to do anything, young lady,” he said severely.

She looked surprised, and then, to his dismay, seemed to suddenly be fighting grateful tears. “Oh—**thank you, señor!”**

“Never mind that,” he said brusquely. “Take me to where you live.”

Now she cut her gaze away to the ground. “Yes, sir, but we—we don’t have much money—Papa does what he can, but they don’t pay farmhands much—and they just said he had kidney stones, but he—he’s gotten so much worse and we—we can’t afford to take him in again—oh, sir, please, can’t you help him?” she begged.

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“Never mind that,” he said brusquely. “Take me to where you live.”

She nodded and set off at a trot; his long stride kept up easily with her quick little patter. “What is wrong with him?” Snape asked as they hurried along.

“The doctors said it was kidney stones,” she said again. “He said it hurt him, all in his middle, and the doctors said they would go away.” She bit her lip, and her voice trembled. “But Papa, he works so hard—and it’s sugar season, and he had to go out and work, or else we wouldn’t have enough money—” she broke off and seemed to collect herself, before going on. “He collapsed at work, and he had to come home, and now he has a dreadfully high fever and chills and he can’t keep any food down.”
They turned down the next street; it was darker here, further from the plaza, the sagging, tired houses with the broken windows and cracked stucco not unlike those on Calle del Sombras. “There,” said the girl, pointing to one of the few houses on the block that was lighted inside, with a few flowers in the window boxes, the cracks in the façade neatly filled, and a fresh coat of paint on the warped wooden door.

She ran to the door with a burst of speed and threw it open, and Snape followed her inside. He was greeted by wide eyes from all sides; there had to be at least eight children crammed in here, all in well-worn but clean clothing. But despite there being so many of them, the room was silent as they all sat huddled on the tired old furniture, and there was an air of despair hanging heavy over the house.

Inez—apparently the oldest of the bunch—had thundered up the stairs, leaving him alone at the front door and feeling rather like an insect beneath a lens as her small army of brothers and sisters stared at him, and he glowered back at the lot of them until one by one they dropped their insolent eyes.

They all looked up at the sound of footsteps at the top of the stairs; Inez had emerged and was leaning down and called, “Don Greene! You can come up now, please!”

Sparing one last scowl for the impertinent rabble surrounding him, he swept up the stairs, and Inez led him into the nearest bedroom.

He was assailed by the sticky heat as he walked through the door, so much worse here than it had been below, along with the sour, sweet smell of sickness. A thick-bodied, weary woman in a sweat-stained floral-print dress was sitting beside the bed, and she rose as Snape entered. “Don Greene,” she said, and he nodded. “Thank you for coming, but,” she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, “I’m not sure that there’s anything you can do.”

Inez sobbed beside her, and Snape shot her an irritated look before saying stiffly to her mother, “Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”

Señora Rosas sighed tiredly. “If you like—but even if you can do anything, it’s not like we could afford to pay you for it. Between the doctor bills from last time and the money we owe on the house —” She drew in a great, shuddering breath. “I don’t know what we’re going to do…” She trailed off, and Inez buried her face in her mother’s shoulder.

“I should like you to vacate this room immediately,” Snape said, pointing toward the doorway, and amazingly enough, they did as they were told, and once the door was shut he turned towards the bed.

Mr. Rosas lay prone on the sagging, dilapidated mattress, bundled up in a mass of threadbare blankets and propped up on a pile of sad old pillows, covered in sweat and breathing shallowly. He seemed to be asleep, but when Snape roughly pulled up a chair and sat down to get a look at him, his eyes cracked open.

“Who are you?” he asked hoarsely.

“Greene,” he said tersely, regarding his pallor with a critical eye and reaching for his wrist, which was buried beneath the blankets.

Rosas gave a soft huff. “Right—the old nut in the square.”

Snape snorted. “The same.”

“Ignacio Rosas,” he said by way of introduction. He looked at Snape, and then said, “My girl has mentioned you. Said your medicines never miss. She bring you here for me?”
“Yes,” Snape said, his voice clipped as he felt for the man’s pulse, which was beating out a rapid tattoo beneath his clammy, sweat-slicked skin.

Rosas made a rough sound between a laugh and a cough. “Poor thing—she’s always been the optimist—and she never seems to lose that, no matter how many times she’s disappointed. She’s a good girl, though,” he added.

Snape grunted in response, rummaging in his basket for a fever-reducer. “Are there any symptoms besides the pain and fever?” he asked.

“I bleed when I piss—if I piss at all—I think my kidneys are going,” Rosas answered. Snape looked at him sharply; he was smiling sadly. “I appreciate you coming—for Inez—but you and I both know there’s nothing to be done for that.” He sighed, and shifted against his pillows, grimacing in obvious pain. “I’m not worried for me, but I am worried about my family,” he told Snape earnestly, who just sat there uncomfortably. What was it about deathbeds that prompted people to spill everything to the nearest available ear?

Don’t you know? sneered a nasty voice in his head, and he scowled to himself. “Here,” he said harshly, uncorking a vial. “Take this—it will help with the fever.” He held it to Rosas’s lips, who swallowed it obediently down.

“I don’t bring in much,” Rosas said, licking cracked lips, “but it was enough for us to get by—now what’ll they do? Inez does what she can, but she only just turned nineteen last month, and Lupe—she has to take care of the little ones.” He gave a weak cough, and then looked at Snape, his eyes fever-bright. “I have beautiful children, don’t I?” he said softly, smiling.

“Quite,” said Snape dismissively, holding out a sleeping draught. “Now this.”

Rosas swallowed without question, and Snape sat by, waiting. “I just wish I could take care of them,” Rosas whispered as his eyes fell shut.

Finally. Snape shook out his wand and locked the door with a wave and a word, before standing up and casting a diagnostic spell over the limp body of the man before him. The little runners of light sprang obligingly from his wand tip and began to trace and twirl all over his body, quickly finding their ways to the sides of his lower back, lighting up in vivid red his kidneys.

Dammit. He was right. A second, more specific spell confirmed Rosas’s own suspicions; his kidney stones coupled with what he suspected to be a poor man’s diet and dehydration from working so long in the heat had been just too much for his organs to handle, and now they were simply shutting down—and quickly.

Snape blew an angry breath through his nose.

Fuck.

It was simple enough to cure by magic—the tissue restorative took a few of the more exotic potion ingredients, but he could procure them easily enough, and though the potion was fussy and tedious to brew, it was well within his abilities. Although it did take a few days—if he got the ingredients quickly enough and started work on it right away, he could have it finished by Thursday—which even then would be a close thing, but he could do it.

But it was magic. Muggle medicine couldn’t solve this problem—but if he could, if he did, and someone (Potter) found out…

It simply wasn’t an option.
Grumbling and frustrated, he stood, to go, but hesitated, and then, before he could think better of it, he waved his wand in a quick spiralling motion over Rosas’s midsection, muttering the words of a spell. If he couldn’t repair the man’s kidneys, he could at least shatter the stones, so he wasn’t in quite so much pain. And it might buy him a little more time with his family.

Hot, angry, and uncomfortable, he left the man to his drugged sleep and stomped down the stairs for the unpleasant task of telling the family that their father was dying and that he could do nothing to stop it.

The lot of them were clustered tightly together, whispering softly, but their voices were suddenly silenced at the sound of his tread on the floor, and they looked up. Ten pairs of eyes were suddenly upon him, eyes above tear-stained cheeks, eyes that were sorrowful and anxious and yet fighting against the hope that wanted to surface at the sight of him.

They’d pinned all their faith on him—they believed in him—and he’d failed them.

He looked round the room, at their silent, expectant faces, and saw Inez move into view, clutching at her mother’s arm, her wide brown eyes looking at him with a desperate sort of helpless hope.

“I can cure him,” he said, his voice rough, “but we have to work quickly.”

There was a sort of collective gasp, and the eyes of the children filled with a wild sort of joy and they all began to raise their voices in an excited babble, but he cut across them all with a barked, “Quiet!”

They went silent, staring at him. “You!” he barked, snapping his fingers at Inez, who jumped to attention. “Get me paper and a pencil—I need ingredients.”

She dashed into the kitchen, he heard the sound of her slamming drawers open and shut, rummaging loudly through their contents.

The mother rushed over to him. “Señor—what—how—?” She was clearly trying to voice her confusion through her shock and hope, and he jerked his arm out of her clutching grasp.

“Not now, woman—I have work to do!”

Inez dashed back into the room, pen and paper in hand, and he snatched them up and set them on the end table, leaning his elbows against it and closing his eyes and rubbing his nose as he mentally inventoried his stores.

*Dittany, yes, fluxweed, rat spleen, pokeweed, asphodel, plenty of foxglove, runespoor blood, hellebore, belladonna*…he needed essence of mandrake, a salamander’s heart, and powdered dragon horn—the first two he could get on credit, with the promise that he would brew up some cleaning solution or whatever other inane requests Fernando got from his customers—but that last one was going to cost him.

He scribbled down what he’d need from the apothecary on the pad along with an explanatory and explicitly threatening note to Fernando before ripping off the top sheet. Inez was standing nearby, her lip quivering as she kept her mouth clamped firmly shut against whatever she dearly wanted to say.

“She,” he said, thrusting the folded sheet into her hands. “Do you know the chemist north of here on *Ciudades Hermanas*, on the corner of *Rio Tabala*?” he demanded.

She nodded, and he grabbed his basket. “Go there—go around the back and beat on the door—the proprietors let you in if you tell him that I sent you—give him this note, and he’ll know what to give you. Do not,” he said forcefully, “open the packages.” He rummaged around deep in his basket; he still didn’t trust banks in this godforsaken country, so he kept all of his money tucked away.
wherever he could hide it, and not just in his house—in his basket he should have enough secreted away to pay for this.

He looked skyward as he tried to remember the going rates back on Diagon Alley five years ago. A dram of powdered dragon’s horn ran around ten galleons…muttering to himself, he jerked out the thick bundle of banknotes.

He heard someone suck in a sharp breath; he ignored it as he thumbed out twelve thousand-peso notes—and then three more for good measure, in case that crook decided to overcharge (which he was sure he would, but he would deal with that later). “Here,” he said again, shoving the money into Inez’s shaking fingers. “That should cover it—if not, tell Fernando that I’ll foot the rest when I see him next. Now, you go as quickly as you can—I have to start brewing his potion immediately, so you bring what he gives you to—”

Snape stopped short, choking on the words lodged in his throat, but forced himself to go on, “—to my house. Number 13 Calle del Sombras, west of the plaza. Just—just come straight in and call me—do not go upstairs!” he growled. “I’ll come down for it. Well, move, idiot—we have to hurry!” he snarled, and she leapt as if stung and went dashing out the door.

“Out of the way!” he bellowed to the gaggle of children, who backed away hurriedly as if he was catching, clearing a path to the door. “Keep your husband warm, but if his fever keeps going up, put him in a tepid bath to bring it down—and make sure he drinks plenty of water,” he instructed the gaping woman, and then swept out the door and shut it behind him.

He walked swiftly, but only to the nearest alleyway; he ducked in between the sagging buildings, took a quick look around for anyone watching, and Apparated away.

He popped back into existence in the alley across the street from his house and very nearly on top of a mangy old mutt rooting around in the dustbin. Snape refrained from cursing it as it snarled at him—just barely—and hurried out of the alley and across the street.

He stopped, standing still in front of his house, looking up at it, just staring. And then, with a sound somewhere between a bitter laugh and an angry growl, he jerked his wand with a furious slashing motion across the façade.

The air quivered for a moment, and then seemed to stretch before suddenly snapping with an electric sizzle as his wards and locks and spying spells and Muggle-repelling charms shattered, leaving his house open and exposed to any and all who might pass.

He put his wand away and went inside.

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Snape hovered over the gently bubbling cauldron, absently wiping away the runnel of sweat that was threatening to drip in his eye, his right hand steady as he held the bottle of hellebore. In his left he held a pinch of crushed monarch’s wings, sprinkling them in slowly as he tipped the bottle. One, two...three drops. The potion fizzed angrily, roiling up around the cauldron’s sides, but settled down shortly after, darkening slightly from a pale cream to a more yellowish hue, and he stirred it slowly thrice with a silver stirring rod. Excellent.

He corked the little black glass bottle and set it aside as he stood, straightening his tired back, listening to the cracking sounds that rattled their ways down his stiff and aching spine. He wiped a tired hand across his eyes—brewing tissue restorative for any other reason than an academic exercise or a test of one’s mettle was not a pleasant experience. One false move and it was as good as useless—and there were many, many opportunities for false moves.
Thank God he was at a stopping point, at least for now. It had to simmer for a day before he could start the finicky business of titrating in the dragon horn and pokeberry juice mixture. He shook his head for a moment to clear away the sleep and the potion fumes and glanced at the cheap plastic clock he’d hung on the wall—it was nearly midnight.

He started wearily putting away the ingredients that he no longer needed, scowling as he picked up the tiny bottle of essence of mandrake. He’d been so engrossed in his work, mincing the marigold roots to the miniscule slivers needed for the potion that he’d completely forgotten that he was due a guest, and when he’d heard the voice calling his name from downstairs, he had been two seconds away from flying down there, wand blazing, before he realized that it was Inez back from the apothecary.

“Just a moment!” he’d barked furiously through the door—he had to get those roots sliced and into the base to steep immediately.

He hurried, but not enough to adversely affect his work, and when he finished he tipped the cutting board over the cauldron and then dashed downstairs. There was Inez, flushed and breathing heavily, her arms full of wrapped parcels. If Fernando shorted him in any way, he was going to pay dearly.

“Here!” she said, holding out her arms, and he snatched up their contents. “Señor—” she started.

“Not now, girl—I’m working!” he cut viciously across her and flew back up the stairs—time was of the essence, and he needed to get the mandrake in just after the runespoor blood, or it would lose its potency.

And so he worked on into the night. He’d only just reached the first intermediate stage. Now he could sleep, at least for a little while; he would have to wake himself up every two hours or so to check the consistency. And to make sure that something hadn’t gone wrong due to inferior ingredients, and if it had, to try and compensate for it—he didn’t trust that charlatan Fernando any further than he could throw him, even with the painful incentives to be honest that Snape had spelled out in his note, and heaven help the cheating swine if he shorted him on his ingredients, or tried to foist some shoddy garbage off onto him.

He sighed again, and then let himself out of his workroom, hearing the charmed door lock and seal itself shut behind him. He was tired, and now that his head had cleared somewhat, he realized that he was still hungry, too. Perhaps he could risk using a little magic downstairs, and maybe charm himself a quick meal, instead of having to make it for himself.

It was a mark of how hard he’d been concentrating on his work—almost to the point of exhaustion—that he didn’t see Inez sitting on the sofa in his living room until she stood up.

The sudden movement of her rise nearly startled him into drawing his wand on her (again), and he scowled horribly at the intruder when he realized who it was. “What the devil are you doing here?” he demanded.

“You—you didn’t say I could leave,” she said haltingly.

He stared. “Have you been sitting down here this whole time?” he growled.

“Yes, sir—I thought you might need me to get something else,” she said.

*Idiot girl!* He snarled under his breath—she could have seen or heard something she shouldn’t!

“Well, I don’t,” he said shortly. “And I still have a great deal of work to do and little enough time to do it, and have neither the time nor inclination to entertain you.” He stalked into the kitchen and lit
his stove; he lifted the kettle and felt that it was full, so he set it down and pulled out a cup and a bag of tea, setting it aside for when the kettle boiled.

He was annoyed to find that his unwanted guest was still standing uncertainly beside the sofa, and he glared at her. “Well? What is it now?”

“Señor—can you—can you really save Papa?” she asked breathlessly, the question clearly having been burning a hole through her tongue all night, and he nearly groaned.

“Yes, I can, but not if I’m under constant siege!” he snarled at her. “I have to pay attention to what I’m doing, and I don’t have time to reassure hysterical females, so if you plan to start with that, I’ll thank you to take yourself out of my house immediately!”

She shrank a little under his obvious annoyance, but when he shut his mouth, she made no move to leave; rather, she looked at the floor and worried at her lip. “Sir, I—we’re very poor, sir,” she blurted.

Snape gave a rude snort. “Of that I am well aware,” he said snidely. “Explain exactly what that has to do with me.”

She swallowed. “Sir, we—the man at the drugstore took all your money, and he said you owe him more, and I—we don’t make that kind of money, I have to feed my brothers and sisters, and anything left goes to—”

“Spare me your sob story,” he said callously. “Your financial straits are no concern of mine, and frankly, I couldn’t care less.”

The girl blanched, and he sneered at her. She was going to have to grow thicker skin with regards to her own poverty and face the facts of her situation—as well he knew. “If you’re looking for pity, you aren’t going to get it from me,” he said nastily. “I should think it would be obvious even to you that I am most certainly not rolling in wealth—why else would I sit out on the street corner like some kind of indigent day after day?”

Inez was looking at the floor and didn’t answer; he crossed his arms in irritation. If she didn’t leave at once, he was going to be forced to remove her. Abruptly, she straightened her back and looked him in the eye. “I can’t pay you for what you’re making, sir.”

Another rough snort escaped him. “And do you think I didn’t know that?” he demanded. His lip curled as he looked down at her, and she squirmed most satisfactorily where she stood beneath his withering glare.

He heard the hollow rattle of his kettle boiling in the kitchen, and he turned and stalked back to make himself his cup of tea—he needed it. “Miss Rosas,” he said coldly as he walked away from her, “I have no idea what you hope to gain by belabouring this issue, but I can assure you that it is going nowhere.” He lifted the angrily whistling kettle and poured the boiling water over the teabag; it swirled golden in the bottom of the cup. “Whatever tale of sorrow you wish to spin is better saved for more sympathetic ears, because I most emphatically do not care.” He picked up his cup and turned to walk back into the living room and to send the annoying girl packing. “So spare me your litany of woe. I have no interest whatsoever in listening to—what do you think you are DOING?!”

His cup fell from his nerveless fingers; dimly, he heard it smash on the floor at his feet where he stood, his jaw hanging loose. Inez looked startled by his sudden shout, but her darkly flushed face was full of resolve as she dropped her top on the ground, crossing her arms over her stomach as if she dearly wanted to cover herself but wouldn’t, and thus affording him an eyeful of the soft swells
of her absolutely *obscenely* perky little breasts.

He tore his appalled gaze away from them, and when he met her eyes, his mortified fury surged like a tidal wave and his throat unlocked. “You put your clothes back on THIS INSTANT!” he roared at her.

But to his absolute horror, her face crumpled and she burst into tears. “Please, sir!” she wailed. “Please—you *have* to give Papa his medicine, you just *have* to! You *can’t* let him die—please, I’ll do *anything*!”

And Snape suddenly understood exactly what she was doing, and he found himself spiralling upwards into heights of outrage that were near stratospheric in altitude.

*How DARE she?!!*

His teeth bared in fury, he marched right over to her, scooping her top up from the floor, all the while resolutely keeping his eyes below her navel or above her collarbone. She jumped at his sudden approach, and she looked frightened, but she seemed to square her shoulders in as if steeling herself, and he growled wordlessly in his burning anger and thrust her top back in her hands. “Put that back *on*, you idiot!” he raged, and then manoeuvred so that he was behind her, grasping her shoulders and frog-marching to her to the sofa.

He shoved her down onto it and then rounded on her, glaring down at her with enough force to singe the upholstery. “Now, you listen to me, you brainless little *nit,*” he snarled, “don’t you *ever* do that again, do you understand?! What were you *thinking*?! What do you *take* me for?! Do you honestly think me so utterly depraved, so completely without in morals as to demand *that* as payment?”

She was staring at him, wide-eyed, clutching her top to her chest. “I—I don’t have any money—I just—I just thought—”

“No, you *didn’t* think!” he bellowed, and she cringed. “I am not a *rapist*—nor am I some kind of *paedophile!*”

Tears were still leaking slowly out of the corners of her downcast eyes, and he released a sharp breath somewhere between a growl and a sigh. “Now, you listen to me,” he said, his voice low and seething, leaning down on one knee on the sofa. She looked up. “Since my meaning apparently failed to penetrate that empty, cobwebbed head of yours, I’ll spell it out for you—I am *not* asking for payment!”

She blinked. “You—you’re not?”

“No, you stupid girl! Isn’t that what I just said?” he sneered. “What, did you think I would just let your father die if it was in my power to prevent it?”

One look at her face told him that was exactly what she had thought, and he flopped down on the sofa and ran a hand over his eyes in disgust. He was used to everyone thinking the worst of him—it wasn’t surprising back in England, as he had done very little to disabuse anyone of that notion—but that certainly didn’t mean that he *enjoyed* it. “I am *not* asking you to pay for anything—in any way,” he growled, looking up at her, still fuming, “and I am *not* just going to let him die. I will brew his medicine, and I will give it to him, and that will be the *end* of our association—do I make myself clear?”

And to his furious dismay, she burst into tears again, only this time it was worse, because she dropped her top and threw her arms around him, sobbing on his shoulder. “I—thank you, sir—and
I’m so sorry!"

He sat stiffly, appalled and outraged, his arms pinned at his sides in the unwanted embrace, and stared resolutely over her bare shoulder, praying to whatever gods there may be that he could just get the little idiot off him and out of his house, but she showed no signs of stopping. Her tears soaked his shirt as she babbled her inane thanks and apologies, and, even more alarmingly, as she clung to him, he could feel the hideously enticing press of her pebbled nipples poking him in the chest.

“Miss Rosas,” he grated through clenched teeth during a brief respite in her honking sobs, “Put—your—clothes on.”

She froze, and then she jerked away from him, snatching up her top and pressing it to her front, her face going a mortified red, and he sneered at her and stood. He deliberately turned his back and went into the kitchen, sidestepping the smashed remains of his teacup—he’d have to put that to rights after she left, and all he could do was hope that it would withstand yet another charmed repair job—and went into the kitchen to put away the box of teabags, just for something to do in safety the other room while she put herself back in order.

The whispery little rustling sounds of her clothes had finished, and with a deep scowl on his face he turned around and found her sitting awkwardly on his sofa, her hands knotted in her lap and her eyes on the floor, still snuffling a little and wiping her eyes on the back of her hand. She was fully dressed again, thankfully, and it was with a grunt of disgust that he handed her his worn old handkerchief.

She took it gratefully and went about mopping herself up. He took it back when she was finished, jamming it in his back pocket. “Miss Rosas,” he said, and she looked at him, her cheeks still pink. “I don’t know where you got the insane idea that your actions here were required—” she flushed horribly—“but I will tell you now that such a bargain is unacceptable under any circumstances—do you understand?”

She twisted her fingers together. “I’d do anything to save Papa’s life,” she said quietly, earnestly. “I’d give anything that anyone asked of me to save the people I care about.”

Oh, good God. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Then may I suggest that you avoid getting yourself into situations where someone might be tempted to take you up on your ridiculous offer—anyone who would agree to such an arrangement is not worth your time, nor is what he is selling,” he said tiredly. He looked down at his watch; it was a hideous Muggle creation of rubber and plastic (aside from his wand, his own, proper pocket watch had been the only Wizarding artefact on his person on the night that he “died,” and while he hadn’t been able to bring himself to part with it, it was stored carefully out of sight in his workroom, as it was no longer befitting to his outward persona), but it kept the time well enough. It was pushing one o’clock, and he ground his teeth in irritation.

“Come along, Miss Rosas,” he said. “It is nearly one o’clock, and I for one have had enough of your society to last me a lifetime.” She blushed again and stood, and as her eyes found the floor again she saw the mess of his ex-teacup on the floor, and she made toward it, kneeling to clean it up. “Leave it,” he snapped irritably. “I’ll take care of it later—right now it’s late. I’m taking you home.”

“Oh—but you don’t need—”

“Don’t be any more of an idiot than you’ve already proven yourself to be,” he said crossly. “I’m not throwing an unarmed girl out to the wolves at this time of night.” He crossed the floor and jerked open his front door, impatiently gesturing her out. She moved quickly, thank goodness, and he locked the door behind them and set out towards her house.
Inez was mercifully silent on the walk home, and she kept up with his brisk pace, and so he was able to dump her back on her family with a minimum of trouble. The only exception had been just as they’d stopped at her door, and she’d turned to him with a look of distressingly reverent admiration, taking his rough and work-stained hand in her own soft little brown one and earnestly squeezing his fingers as she thanked him again.

Uncomfortable and unable to think of anything scathing enough to say, he’d shaken her off and gruffly told her to get inside, because he had to get back to work and didn’t have time for her nonsense; his weak attempt to be insulting fell rather flat, and the idiot girl didn’t stop smiling at him as she made her way to the door. Once he was rid of her, the girl back inside and safe with the rabble of her family, he turned tail and got away from there as quickly as possible, lest he be accosted by the rest of the brood, and ducked into the nearest alleyway and Apparated away.

He’d gone upstairs to check the potion first thing after getting back; he was pleased to see that it was simmering nicely, and he’d taken the liberty of opening the charmed hatch in the roof, to let in the moonlight to strengthen the effects of the moonflower pollen.

Then he made his tired way back downstairs, pausing to repair his cup (and it held) and to scour away the brown stain on the floor left by the tea inside.

He glanced at his clock—it was half-past one, and he was starving. He was too tired to care about security—this late at night, the thought of being caught seemed like nothing but pointless paranoia. So it was with a flick of his wand he heated the water in his kettle for another cup of tea, Summoning the bread and cheese and the leftover chicken so he could make himself a sandwich.

He carried his meagre meal into the living room on a napkin, his tea steeping in the now-whole cup. His kitchen chairs looked hard and uninviting, and it was with a sigh of something very like relief that he slumped down on his sagging old sofa to eat his dinner.

He almost found himself wishing that he had a television set; the mindless drone would have been soothing in the stillness of the house, he reflected. Although all the programming here would all be in Spanish, and that would annoy him. Oh, well—one couldn’t have everything.

In fact, he couldn’t seem to have anything.

He snorted at his own self-pitying thoughts and was about to pick up the other half of his sandwich when movement caught his eye. He looked up, and felt his face dropping into a horrible glower; that mangy cat had just crept ‘round the partition into the living room from the kitchen.

He scowled at the impertinent little beast. He seemed surprised to see anyone here; no doubt he had been sneaking in late at night when Snape himself was asleep. “This is my house,” he informed him. “I’ll keep whatever hours I wish.” He took an irritated bite of his sandwich.

Snape deliberately ignored the cat, who watched him warily from the edge of the kitchen tile before slowly inching into the room. He carefully walked around the edge of the rug until he stood just by the corner of the table, peering out at Snape from behind the scratched wooden leg.

“And don’t try begging for any of my food!” Snape snapped at him. “You’re supposed to be eating rats, not my dinner!”

The cat blinked at him—and then, with a wiggle of his narrow flanks, jumped up on the far end of the sofa.

Snape stared, unable to believe the sheer audacity of the miserable creature. He was watching him
warily, to be sure, but that didn’t stop him from brazenly settling down on the far cushion, his little black paws tucked under his chest, facing Snape so that he could watch him.

Snape glared at him. The cat glared back. After a moment of the silent contest of wills, Snape dourly went back to what was left of his sandwich. It didn’t take long to finish it, nor to drink down his tea, and he laid his head back on the sofa cushions. His eyes were hot and prickly with weariness, and he thought that maybe he could manage a short nap before he had to close the trapdoor again. Rubbing the back of his neck, he sat back up; the cat was still there, but his eyes were drooping too. Snape snorted at his unwanted boarder and got up; the cat started a little, but he stayed where he was, firmly ensconced at the end of his sofa, getting hair and fleas and who knew what else all over the upholstery. *Irritating animal.* “Good night,” Snape sneered at him, and he went upstairs to get some sleep.

Really, he didn’t know why he even took the paper here. It was nothing but religion, crime statistics on the more distant states, and stories of how wonderful the local crime lords were—carefully neglecting to mention that they were in fact crime lords.

Snape folded the paper and tossed it on his coffee table in disgust before fishing a peppermint out of his pocket. He didn’t particularly want one, but it was something to put in his mouth; what he really wanted was a cup of tea, but for the first time in he didn’t know how long, he had actually overtaxed his stocks and was out of teabags—undoubtedly due to the late nights he’d been working for the past week and a half. It was Wednesday, though, and Santiago had dropped by this morning as usual (for some reason, he had thought that the young man had looked vaguely distressed today—Snape sincerely hoped that something dreadful had happened to his shit-eating employer), and so he could have his tea when he got back.

If he ever got back, the useless little piglet. It was already past four and he had yet to show up.

Snape leaned his head back and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He was tired—not sleepy, but just worn out. He’d spent all of last week babysitting that tissue-regenerative—he’d forgotten just how hideous the brewing process was. He probably had never managed more than four consecutive hours of sleep all last week—he was constantly up and down, adding this and mixing that, and in the end all that it yielded was a single dose. He’d meant to try and experiment with that after the first time he’d brewed it, after finding out just how horrid it was, to see if he might be able to tone it down—but he’d quickly decided that it simply wasn’t worth the effort to brew and re-brew it to try all the possible different variables. And this time, well, he would have been gambling with a man’s life to satisfy his own academic curiosity, and that was out of the question.

So he’d slavishly followed the standard instructions and had produced a picture-perfect end result, and had promptly delivered the thick red potion to the Rosas family.

That had been a very near thing, really; when he’d beaten on the door, it had been answered by a little boy with a tearstained face who had told him that his mother was upstairs with his father and a priest. Alarmed that he had been too late, he’d raced up the stairs to find the man nearly insensate, but thankfully still alive. He’d ordered the man’s wife and the priest out of the room and bespelled the potion down his throat immediately.

Even then, he’d worried that it still might be too late. He’d sat by the man’s bedside for nearly four hours, forbidding the family entry, minding Rosas’s pulse, giving him another fever-reducer and forcing water down his throat, and casting the necessary spells to cleanse his blood and restore his humours.

At last, after a tense evening of waiting, Snape had decided that he was out of danger. He’d opened
the door and called Mrs. Rosas up; she’d flown up the stairs, her face white, and for a moment right after he told her that her husband would live, he’d been resignedly certain that she was going to faint. But she hadn’t—although in hindsight, it might have been preferable to her sudden, wild histrionics. He’d shouted her down, sitting her in the chair and waiting for her weeping and babbled praise to Dios to subside, and then had given her a battery of pain relievers and fever potions and told her to keep her husband in bed for a week, to give him plenty of fluids, and above all else, to tell no one of the miraculous nature of the cure he had provided, before beating a hasty retreat.

He hoped with all his being that he was through with that family. Inez had tried to drop in on him at various points during the previous week, and he had unceremoniously thrown her out—he had absolutely no desire to be alone anywhere with that girl ever again.

He’d hoped for some rest after concluding that bit of business, but it was only afterwards that he realized that in concentrating so fiercely on that single potion, that he’d neglected his others. So it was that he’d stayed up nearly all night on Thursday and had worked through Friday morning so as to have enough of his usual brews for sale that evening, and then had worked late into the nights every night that weekend to keep up with demand. And even after the weekend was over, he’d still kept up his gruelling work pace, in order to get himself back to where he should be in terms of his stocks. Today was actually the first day since Inez had come to him begging for help that he’d felt comfortable taking some time for himself, to relax.

Now if that little idiot would just get here with his tea, he could enjoy himself.

Almost as if he’d Summoned him, he heard a sudden sharp rap on his door. About time, he grumbled to himself, and he got up and opened the door.

And he froze in horror; standing on his porch was not Santiago, but rather the entire Rosas family, beaming up at him.

The descended on him as a body; he stumbled backwards into his living room as Mrs. Rosas flung herself at him, kissing his hand as if he were the Pope, and her husband was not far behind her, beaming and shaking his hand, and then there was Inez, and dammit, he’d told her to keep away from him, and yet now she was hanging off him again, babbling overjoyed thanks in this ear, and she actually had the effrontery to kiss him, and he couldn’t seem to shake them off!

He was surrounded by a sea of children, all gripping his hands and clothes with sticky little fingers and babbling their thanks that he most emphatically did not want, but he couldn’t get a word in edgeways.

“Don Greene, I cannot thank you enough,” Rosas was saying earnestly, still wringing his fingers. “When Inez told us how much it was going to cost—” Snape felt his face prickle with a horrible heat and he shot a sharp glance at Inez; she blushed a little too but she didn’t stop smiling, and her father was still going on, “—I didn’t know how we were going to pay, but then she told us what you’d said—you are a great man, señor.”

His wife was blowing her nose into a large red handkerchief with a sound like a foghorn. “Yes, you are, señor,” she said, putting a reverent hand on his shoulder. “You saved my husband and the father of my children—we can never repay you!”

“I told you Don Greene could help,” said Inez, her voice warm and choked with admiration.

Snape finally managed to shake off all the grasping hands and tried to distance himself from the bevy of children that had flanked him. “I did no different than anyone else would have done,” he said severely. “And I don’t need your thanks!”
“Nonsense!” Mrs. Rosas said fondly. “It’s the least we can do for you after what you did for Ignacio.” And she took from one of her brood a covered dish and shoved it at him. “My best *carnitas*—just something for me to say thank you,” she said. Then she snatched up a steaming sack from another one of her many brats. “And Inez made *buñelos* for you.”

“Since you liked them,” the girl in question offered shyly, and Snape glared at her over the stack of unwanted food in his arms.

“And from me,” said Rosas, and he held up a bottle of tequila, which his wife took and tucked in the crook of Snape’s arm. “Truly, señor, we are in your debt—and if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call us.”

Snape floundered, helpless under the onslaught of unsolicited gratitude. He juggled his burden a little in an effort not to drop it. “All I ask of you,” he finally managed to grate, “is that you not speak of this to anyone.”

“Oh, so modest, Don Greene,” Mrs. Rosas clucked, her voice admiring.

“Modesty has nothing to do with it,” he growled. “I do not want this town to get the idea that I can work miracles. I just want my peace and quiet.”

Rosas chuckled irritatingly, but his nod was one of understanding. “I can imagine—you’d have people bothering you day and night.”

“Quite,” said Snape tightly. “So please keep the details to yourself.” He caught Inez’s eye entirely by accident, and she flushed, and infuriatingly, he did too. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have work to do,” he said roughly.

“Oh, yes, of course,” fluttered Mrs. Rosas, and she somehow managed to herd the gaggle of children towards the door with remarkable speed. They stopped on the threshold, however, and Snape despaired of ever getting rid of them. “Again—thank you so much, Don Greene,” she said earnestly, and it looked like she was going to start crying again. “You are a saint.”

“I am nothing of the kind,” Snape ground out, uncomfortable, but she just smiled and patted his arm and pushed her children out of the door; as they left he was treated to a chorus of high-pitched thank-yous from the lot of them and curseys from the girls. Rosas stopped to cut off the circulation in his hand one more time, thanking him again and again—the best thanks he could give Snape right now would be leave and take his brood with him.

Then again, maybe that wasn’t such a good idea, because now that he was gone it was just Inez standing here, and he scowled horribly, but the insolent girl wasn’t put off in the least, and she kissed his cheek *again*, and burdened as he was he couldn’t fight her off.

“Young woman, I’ll thank you to keep your hands off me!” he snarled as she pulled away.

But she didn’t remove her hand from his arm; rather, she squeezed her fingers as she whispered, “Thank you so much, Don Greene,” and her eyes welled up again, but she thankfully left, hurrying out after her family, and when Snape moved to close his door, he couldn’t avoid seeing the family retreating happily down the street, and they all waved to him.

He hated this place.

With a dark mutter, he kicked his door shut with a bang and went to relieve himself of the bundle in his arms. He set it down on the kitchen counter—what in Morgan’s name was he supposed to do with all of this? He hated tequila. And he hated Mexican food—well, all right, those sugared
dumplings were edible—but everything else was too spicy. Although whatever was in that dish smelled very good, at least—maybe he could force it down—but just so he wouldn’t have to cook his own dinner tonight.

Growling to himself, he put warming and preserving charms on the food and took the bottle of tequila and stowed it in his drinks cabinet; he’d decide what to do about it later. Right now he just wanted to sit down.

He’d only just flopped back down in his chair, trying to regain his shattered equilibrium, when someone knocked on the door again.

*Oh, for God’s sake, what did they want from him now?* With a wordless snarl, he got back to his feet, strode furiously to the door, and yanked it open—and there was Santiago.

“Oh—it’s you,” he said flatly, and went back inside, sitting tiredly to the door, and yanked it open—and there was Santiago.

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attempting to draft him as some kind of errand boy!

This was it, was what it was. Snape rose abruptly, standing where he was for a moment before pinning Santiago with a glare. “You stay here,” he growled. “Right here,” he added warningly, pointing to his sofa, and Santiago sat obediently down, his hands on his thighs, looking up at him with something vaguely like hope. Snape gave him one last glare before he strode out of his house and into the alley across the way and, after a brief glance up and down the street, he closed his eyes and turned on his heel, Apparating straight into Sands’s living room.

He was greeted with a strangled yelp and a flurry of movement from Sands, who’d been slumped in his favourite chair—sans trousers, as usual. “Don’t fucking do that, you asshole!” he shouted angrily, his gun clenched in his fist and pointed right at Snape, who still held his wand warily aloft. “And who invited you over here?!”

“We’re neighbours, remember?” Snape sneered. “Su casa es mi casa.”

“That’s not part of the Gospel According to Snape,” Sands sneered right back at him. “So you can just march your sorry butt back next door—and you can use the goddamned front door this time!”

“Believe me, I have no more desire to be in your presence than you have to be in mine,” Snape said coolly, “but unfortunately for the both of us, we have very little choice in the matter, as I am here on behalf of your dogsbody.”

Sands bowed up immediately, making a growling noise that was most unbecoming to this otherwise girlish face. “Oh, are you now? Well, the two of you can just go fuck yourselves,” he said tartly.

Snape stared at him before shaking his head in disgust. “I thought you said it was women who didn’t know how to share?” he said snidely.

“This has nothing to do with sharing!” Sands yelled, obviously outraged. “And it also has nothing to do with you, I might add, so why the hell are you even over here?”

“Because, as usual, you find a way to involve me in your little dramas,” Snape shot back. “I happen to agree entirely—your lovers’ spat over Santiago stepping out on you is none of my business, but when the brat tries to foist his babysitting duties off on me, then it becomes my business!”

Sands had risen in an obvious effort to be intimidating, pushing himself up in Snape’s face, but the attempt failed miserably, in no small part due to his lack of trousers. “What, is that little shit afraid to come over here and face me? Is that it? Well, you can go bitch at him for this, then—I certainly didn’t ask you to come over here! And I don’t need a babysitter!”

“Your state of dress says otherwise.”

“I can dress however I want in my own house!” Sands growled. “I’ve been perfectly fine by myself all week—I don’t need that lying bastard, and I definitely don’t need you!”

“Very well,” said Snape smoothly. “Then you can go out and obtain your own provisions.”

Sands’s face twisted for a moment, but then he just petulantly said, “Fuck you,” and flopped back into his chair.

Snape snorted in contempt, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked down at his filthy, pouting, half-naked neighbour. “What is this about, Sands?” His lip curled. “I would have thought that you, of all people, wouldn’t begrudge the boy sowing his oats, as it were.”
Sands glowered, clamping down on the words that clearly wanted to escape from his lips. “I am attending to some very important business right now,” he finally bit out, “so he doesn’t have the luxury of hanky-panky time.”

A smirk crept across Snape’s face. “I thought you said you didn’t need him?”

Sands just showed him his middle finger and took a drink of that wretched tequila, and Snape knew that he’d won. It was with a satisfied harrumph that Snape walked over to Sands’s drinks cabinet and looked inside to see if he had any real whisky hiding amidst the tequila bottles. He was pleased to find that his own bottle of purloined Firewhisky was still hiding at the back, with a respectable amount in the bottom, but his pleasure was mitigated by his sudden recollection of exactly why it was still here, that he’d forgotten it in his haste to leave during his last ill-favoured visit over a year ago.

He picked it up, scowling and now somewhat ill at ease, but he went and sat down opposite Sands anyway.

The silence between them was not exactly a comfortable one, but it was one that Snape could live with. Sands was still sulking, of course, but Snape had found over the years that he oftentimes honestly preferred him that way—at least when he was sulking, he didn’t talk.

Not much, anyway—eventually Sands couldn’t stand the silence anymore, and he said, “What the hell is that kid doing with a girlfriend anyway?”

“The usual, I would presume,” Snape replied.

Sands’s lip curled at him. “Oh, yeah, tell me another one. That brain-damaged kid probably doesn’t even know what to do with a girl,” he groused.

“I doubt it,” Snape said dryly. “If I’m not mistaken, the boy is seventeen—unfortunate, to be sure, but well old enough to drive a car and grow a moustache and go out with a girl.”

He doubted Sands heard the last bit; he had just taken a drink, but the minute Snape had said the word “moustache,” he choked and nearly sprayed tequila all over the table. “What?!” he yelled shrilly.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “No, you wouldn’t have seen it, would you?” he said snidely. “I suppose he has quite a few secrets from you, then, doesn’t he?”

“Where is he?” Sands demanded, quivering with indignation in his seat.

“Waiting next door for me to talk—or beat, if necessary—some sense into your otherwise empty head.”

Sands slammed his bottle down on the table and stood up, and then marched right outside, his loose shorts flapping in the breeze and his skinny legs white and pale in the afternoon sunlight. Snape watched him go, bemused, and heard him stomp across the street outside and throw Snape’s own door open. “Get over here, you little shit!” Sands bawled, and stalked back over to his own house, Santiago scuttling along behind him, his expression one of confused hope.

The minute Santiago was across the threshold, Sands, who had been lying in wait just inside the door, grabbed him by the collar and jerked him close, reaching up with blundering fingers to prod at the boy’s upper lip, where he had been carefully cultivating a sparse, fuzzy moustache for the past six months.
Sands growled in his throat as he felt the meagre crop of hair under his questing fingers. “What the hell is this?” he snarled.

“It’s—it’s a moustache, Señor,” Santiago answered, sounding pathetic and bewildered.

“It’s a moustache, Señor!” Sands mocked in a high-pitched warbling lisp. “What it is,” he then said, “is history.” He chucked the boy toward the back of the house; he stumbled but caught himself.

“You get in the bathroom right now, and you’re not leaving until that is gone!”

“Hey!” Amazingly, Santiago actually stood up for himself. “It took me three months to grow that!”

“And it’ll take you three minutes to shave it off!” Sands retorted, herding the boy into the lavatory.

“You look ridiculous—I’m not having Salvador Dalí working for me!”

The two of them disappeared into the bathroom, Sands still ranting, Santiago now going quietly, his brief burst of defiance spent, and Snape snorted to himself. He carefully corked his whisky and stood to leave.

Sands heard him, apparently, and shouted from the bathroom, “I still want my food!”

“Then send your errand boy to fetch it,” Snape replied evenly. “I’m not waiting on you.”

“The hell you aren’t!” Sands snapped, his head poking around the doorjamb. “I want my eggs sunny-side up tomorrow, and you’re going to make them that way!”

“Your egg,” Snape said frostily. “I have tried time and time again to impress upon you that I am a man of limited means, and yet it seems that it has still failed to penetrate.”

Sands pursed his lips at him, huffing through his nose, and then retreated back into the bathroom; Snape heard him order Santiago to go back out after he shaved to buy some more eggs, and some better bacon, too—and some sausages, while he was at it. Santiago agreed meekly enough.

Snape sighed head-shakingly, and after a moment, put his whisky bottle away back in Sands’s cabinet; he wanted to have something decent to drink the next time he was over here.
Sands was still outraged that he’d had to schedule today with Chiclet. *Oh, yes, Mr. Executive, sir, do you think you could pencil me in?* He paid that little shit to work for him—not to take his money and run, to go spend it all on some bimbo. But that was exactly what he was doing—these days, it seemed like nine times out of ten, Chiclet was “unavailable” in the evenings.

Trust the gold-digging hussy to take advantage of the fact that Chiclet was clearly suffering from testosterone poisoning. Hopefully he’d get it out of his system and pitch her, and then he could get back to doing what he was supposed to be doing.

What Chiclet was supposed to be doing was keeping a sharp eye out (dammit). Sands was used to ratting around in the seedier parts of town, but in the past, he’d been able to keep his own eyes out. Not to mention that he’d had all the clout vested in him by the Agency. Now he was flying blind (wasn’t he just) and completely alone. He found in that particular situation, the relative danger of waltzing into a place like the one he was headed to today went up dramatically.

So, not only did he need both a car and a pair of eyes to take him where he needed to go, he also needed someone to keep a lookout, in case somebody tried to pull a fast one on him. So here was Chiclet, in his proper place striding along beside him—silent for once, thank God, although the little shit was probably pouting that he was here and not with his little darling—Sands thumping along with a cane, limping obviously. He was also sweating profusely, the wet August heat beating down on him like a club. He was wearing all black, as usual, and his sunglasses and his hat, and the smell of the fresh spirit-gum on his upper lip beneath his mustache filled his nose. But it was what he had to do today, how he had to look. He wouldn’t necessarily be easily recognized, but he would be noticed.

Chiclet’s footsteps slowed, and then stopped, and Sands came to a halt just behind him. “What do thine eyes see, Chiclet?” he asked quietly.

“We’re halfway down *Santa Catalina*—and there’s a bar there, on the left, like you said. *El Burro Loco.*”

“That’ll be the one we want, kid,” he replied. “Look sharp—this is a real knife-and-gun-club, if you know what I mean.”

*Sí.*

And they strode forward, crossing the street and marching right up to the bar in question. Sands had gotten the name of this place from Marco. This wasn’t just one of the local greasy-spoons or beer-swilling rattrops—this was a front business. The Berguenos were thick in here, using this as a place for underlings and deliverymen to congregate, to transfer information or merchandise or funds. Anything said here would get back to the heads, of that he was sure—even if it was just a rumor.

Like the one that Sands was about to plant.
Sands stopped just outside the bar, gestured Chiclet to stand behind him, and then shoved out his arms and threw the doors open with a bang. The babble of voices inside died down, and Sands felt all eyes turn on him—just like he wanted. He tilted his head, listening while seeming to look, and then brought down his cane. He went slowly, deliberately, the foot of his cane thocking loudly against the tiled floor, his footsteps limping and uneven, with Chiclet pattering along beside him.

The noise slowly began to pick up a little as Sands neared the bar and heaved himself ponderously up on one of the stools; Chiclet hopped up on one beside him. Sands turned, spinning the stool around to “look” out over the rest of the bar proper—the talk faltered a bit as he surveyed them all—and then he slowly wheeled back around and put his elbow up on the bar, snapping his fingers and ordering two tequilas.

There was a pregnant pause, during which he could feel the bartender sizing him up, but then two shot glasses were slammed down on the bar top, one in front of him, the other in front of his teetotaling kid. There was a clink of glass on the rims, then the soft glug of pouring alcohol.

“Thank you,” Sands said sweetly, and then tossed his back—and nearly spat it right back out all over the bar. “Jesus,” he wheezed. “You have the nerve to serve this stuff to kids?” He grabbed Chiclet’s shot and drank it himself. “Are you trying to embalm the little bastard while he’s still alive?” he asked dryly.

He felt the bartender’s eyes narrowing. “And what would some gringo know about good tequila?” he asked contemptuously.

Sands gave a quiet chuckle. “Quite a lot, actually, seeing as how I’ve lived here for years. I like it down here—good food, good whiskey—most of the time,” he added snidely, toasting the bartender with the remaining half of Chiclet’s tequila. “Pretty girls,” he went on, “and good weather.” He tipped back the dribble that was left of his shot. “I will miss it—but even all that isn’t enough to keep me here after what I’ve seen.”

He set down his glass with a thunk. “I am on my way out of this town, and for good—I wouldn’t stick around if you paid me,” he said, raising his voice.

“Well, as I don’t see any volunteers to pay you, you can be on your way,” said the bartender, and his friends in the bar laughed.

Sands smiled thinly. “I fully intend to—after I’ve had one more shot for the road,” he said, scooting his glass toward the bartender with his fingertips. “Gives me a chance to rest my leg,” he added, patting his thigh lightly and then holding up his cane. “I’m not as fast as I used to be, not since I got shot.” He raised his voice and added, “By that mariachi.”

The effect was immediate—the bar went deadly quiet. Sands hid his smirk as he felt all eyes swivel to stare at him. The bartender too was completely still, the only sound in the place that of the whirring fan above and a low drone of a lazily circling fly.

Excellent.

Sands leaned down on his elbow, releasing a gusty sigh. “I have seen some serious shit in my time in this country—but nothing has ever scared me like he did.” He reached into his pocket, fishing out a cigarette and taking his time in lighting up, taking a long, slow drag and letting it filter slowly out of his nose and mouth, savoring the undercurrent of tension that was rising steadily beneath his continued silence.

“It was a day not too different from this one—hot, still—and quiet,” Sands finally continued. “I’d
had a hard day at the office, you see, and I just wanted to have a cold one on my way home—to just wash away the cares of the day,” he said lightly.

No one seemed to be terribly amused, and Sands kept talking. “So there I was, just sitting—way down at the end of the bar, because, to be honest, I got the feeling like the people in that bar didn’t really want me around. Like I might see something they didn’t want me to see,” he said, louder this time. “And then,” he said, his voice dropping low, and he felt the press of the air as everyone leaned inward, “in walked the biggest Mexican I have ever seen.”

Sands leaned back, readjusting his butt on the wobbly stool beneath him, and took a fortifying drink of the piss-poor tequila the bartender had just put in his glass, wishing for a lime but not about to lose his audience to ask for one. “He walked in—and he walked slow—it was like seeing a tree uproot itself and walk across the ground. The irresistible force, as it were—slow, even, never stopping. The place went dead quiet—like even the radio was afraid to play with him in the room—and all you could here were his footsteps and the little jingle of the conchos on his pants and the swish of his guitar case against his thigh—a mariachi.

“So this guitar player, he just strolled right up to the bar,” he said, his tone back to being conversational again, “never looked at anyone, just stared straight ahead, and when he got to the bar, he leaned right into the ear of the guy behind the bar—I had to strain to hear him—and he said, ‘Here I am.’”

“There he was?” demanded the bartender. “What the hell was that supposed to mean?”

Sands bounced his eyebrows at the tense sniggering that went up around him. “That was what I wanted to know myself, really—only I didn’t get the chance to ask him, because the very minute he spoke, everyone in the bar stood up and drew their guns.” He sipped his tequila. “I guess they were looking for him,” he said mildly.

“So anyway, the Mariachi didn’t give any sign that he even knew they were there, except for this little turn of his head,” Sands paused, sucking in a deep breath, “and for just a moment, as he looked to the side, I saw his eyes.”

The bar had gone quiet again. “Have you heard old war veterans described as having ‘a hundred-yard stare’?” he asked the bartender, and when he heard his grunt of agreement, Sands said, “Well, this guy had a hundred-mile stare. Like he’d been sent to hell, but he’d fought his way back out.

“And that,” said Sands, his voice louder, and he was pleased to hear a few people start, “is exactly what he proceeded to do. He opened up that guitar case, and he played that whole bar.

“The carnage,” he said after drinking the last few drops of tequila and running his tongue along the rim, “was terrific. Whatever they’d wanted him for—they didn’t get it. He wasted everyone in that bar who’d pulled a gun on him—everyone.” Sands set his glass down. “In the end, all that was left was the man behind the bar, the mariachi—and me.”

“And how the hell did you get out of there alive?” the bartender in front of him growled.

“I almost didn’t,” said Sands dryly. He tapped his leg. “At the very end, when it was all over, I tried to get out of there, to sneak out the back—quietly—but he heard me. Whirled on the spot and shot my legs right out from under me. And as he looked at me—staring right through me—then the guy behind the bar pulled his piece—and the mariachi turned and nailed him in the shoulder.”

Sands rubbed his temple. “I obviously wasn’t going anywhere, but the mariachi, he hauled up the other guy like he was stuffed with feathers and just laid him out on the bar, and he leaned down right
in his face, and he spoke.”

The bartender leaned in close. “And what did he say?”

Sands shook his head. “That was the weirdest part. He leaned in, all nice and personal—and said that he just wanted to be left alone. Nuts, huh?” he said to the bartender’s incredulous noise. “But that’s what he said—I guess whoever ran that bar had been out for this guy, and this was his answer. He said that no matter how long it took, no matter who was looking for him, he would find them and hunt them down like dogs—just like Bucho and Barillo, he said, whatever that meant.”

There was a collective intake of breath, just as Sands let his out. “And that, my friend, is that—he left us both, what was left of that bartender and me, lying in pools of our own blood—just packed up his guitar case and left, that same slow, steady walk, as if he’d just stopped for a drink, rather than going to town on twenty armed men.”

The entire bar was shifting restlessly. “I don’t know where he went after that. And personally, I don’t want to know. I may not be looking for the guy—but I saw him, and now I’m afraid that some day down the road, someone who is looking for him might come looking for me—or worse, that he’ll decide I need to be shut up.”

Sands stood, leaning theatrically on his cane. “And that is why I’m gone—I am on the first plane out of this country, and I can only pray that that mariachi never finds me—because I don’t think the border isn’t enough to stop that guy—I don’t think an ocean could stop him.”

The bar was silent and tense. Sands tipped his hat. “Hasta la vista, my good men,” he said pleasantly, and Chiclet leapt obediently down from his stool as Sands tossed a careless twenty on the bar and followed him out, down the ranks of silent, staring men.

He didn’t speak again, even when they were outside—not until they’d gotten all the way back to Chiclet’s car did he open his mouth. “So,” he said, settling into his seat as Chiclet started the engine. “What did they do?”

“They watched you. They didn’t pay any attention to you, until you—until you mentioned the mariachi,” he replied, easing the car out of its parking space and out into the street.

“And then?”

“Then they listened. Listened to everything you said—and they looked scared.”

“Heh.” Sands leaned back in his seat, bouncing his cane between his knees.

Chiclet was quiet, but Sands could hear him fidgeting, and so he wasn’t surprised when he suddenly burst out with, “Señor, why did you tell that story?”

“Chiclet,” he said patiently, “you really shouldn’t meddle in the affairs of grown ups. Now shut up and drive.”

Sands paced. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do. Chiclet was out again—with Belicia, no doubt. Sands scowled at the thought of her. She was taking up all of Chiclet’s time these days—Sands was going to cut his pay if he kept this up. Sands needed him here, and he needed his head to be clear, not clogged up with dreams of pussy. That was the worst thing that could happen to a man—it gummed up the works, clouded his judgment, made him miss things. Important things.

Sands should know.
He threw himself into his chair, his stomach growling. He had wanted to go out tonight, given that he’d done nothing but stay in the past few days. He’d even showered this morning. But no, Chiclet had dropped by this morning just long enough to let him know that he wasn’t going to be able to go out with him tonight, because he already had a date with his precious Belicia. And now they were probably all nice and cuddly and disgusting, parked in the back of the drive-in, making out in the cramped but cozy enough back seat of Sands’s car (as if Chiclet had enough sense to get a woman on her back).

Sands growled; the very thought of that runty kid on the bicycle that he’d met five years ago second-basing it was almost enough make him lose appetite altogether. Almost—but not quite. He was still hungry. He could go out by himself, he supposed, but he hated doing that—eating alone made you look pathetic. Hell, it made you feel pretty pathetic, too. But here he was, alone, by himself, and probably would be for the rest of the night. Heaving himself up out of his chair again he started to cross the room into the kitchen, to go into the kitchen and make himself a lousy old cold sandwich. He was gonna make Chiclet clean out his toilet tomorrow for this.

But then he paused mid-step, one foot on the living room floorboards, the other on the kitchen tile.

He tilted his head, sniffing the air lightly. He smelled onions.

He moved to the left, holding out his hand until it reached the wall, and he sniffed again, deeper this time, at the hole near his bathroom door.

Definitely onions. And meat. And it was coming from next door. Sands grinned; now that was more like it.

After grubbing around on the floor to find his pants and putting them on (fighting briefly with them to get them over his shoes), Sands stood up, still zipping his fly as he crossed the room, and went outside and made his way next door and knocked once. He contemplated beating on the door until Snape let him in, but instead just waited quietly and patiently for Snape’s irritated footsteps to reach him, rocking on his heels and toes until the door swung open.

“What do you want?” Snape growled at him.

“Dinner,” Sands grinned, and then pushed his way inside. On the way in, he knocked his shin against Snape’s out-of-place coffee table. He righted himself after stumbling, his expression black, and he looked up at Snape and said, “Fuck you.”

He could feel that sorry bastard smirking as he made his way into the kitchen, but ignored him and went to stand by the kitchen table. Snape followed him in, going over to the stove. Sands could hear something sizzling and something else bubbling; there wasn’t much variety in Snape’s menu, but he was usually pretty darn good at the few things he did make—probably because he used some magic trick to pep it up, the dirty cheater. Well, if magic meant that Sands got good food, he could live with it. “What’s on the menu?” he asked, sticking his nose out.

“Bangers and mash,” said Snape shortly, and Sands grinned.

“Oh, izzat so, mate?” he hooted in his best Eliza Doolittle Mockney that he used as often as possible because Snape hated it like fire. “An’ maybe a bit o’ toad in the ‘ole, an’ pudding fer awfuhs, an’ then we can ‘ave a jolly little sing-song, wot-wot?”

“I am not from London,” Snape said, his voice glacial, his accent impeccable, “and if you are going to sit there with your jaw flapping, you can leave at once—otherwise, shut your gob and make yourself useful for once in your life.”
Sands snorted—not quite the response he’d hoped for, but it was enough. “Fine—what do I do?”

“Mash the potatoes,” Snape ordered.

“You’re in the way,” Sands replied pleasantly.

Sands barely had time to brace himself; there was that familiar swishy sound, and then something heavy sailed through the air and landed with a thunk on the kitchen table beside him. He congratulated himself on not jumping and glared at Snape. “Then where is your potato masher?”

“You can use a fork, like the rest of the lower classes,” Snape sneered, and swished the wand again, and this time, Sands nearly yelped as a fork lanced through the air, barely missing his ear, and buried itself in the tabletop not an inch from his fingers.

He clenched his jaw, but just yanked the fork out of the wood and went to mashing—the plebian way. “Where do you keep your butter these days?” Sands asked irritably after getting them good and smushed up.

“When it always is,” Snape snapped back at him. Sands resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at him as he walked over to the fridge and opened it up, finding a wrapped half-stick of margarine—what a cheapskate—sitting inside the door and taking it back to the table with him.

“What, exactly, are you doing to my food?” Snape demanded.

Sands looked at him indignantly. “Our food—and I know how to make mashed potatoes, Martha Stewart—so you just stick to your little gang-bangers over there, and I’ll mind my own business over here.”

There was no response but the sound of Snape turning back to the stove and stirring something in a pot, so Sands went back to mashing, dropping in half of the sorry excuse for butter, and then on second thought, the rest of it. He fumbled around the table and found the salt and pepper shakers; he shook one out onto his hand and tasted it; pepper, and he shook some into the pot, and then added the salt.

He did jump when what he guessed were two plates went whizzing through the air to clatter on the table, followed by the jangle of what he guessed was silverware. And he just knew Snape was smirking smugly from behind him as he flicked that precious wand of his, doing it just to piss him off.

Sands grumpily doled out a blob of potatoes on each plate—he made his bigger—and then sat down in his usual chair to wait for Jeeves. Snape came himself this time, not using his magic prick, and Sands heard him drop two sausages on his plate, and afterwards he came back with a pot of something that smelled of onions and made his stomach growl, and ladled it out on both their servings.

Deliberately flouting the endless rounds of manners lessons he’d had as a boy, Sands didn’t wait on his host and dived right in. And it was delicious, dammit, despite being excessively British, and he hated it when Snape made good food. That meant Sands would have a hard time one-upping him the next time around. But rest assured—he would. He wasn’t about to let some jug-eared stomach-eater get the better of him in the kitchen.

He was halfway finished, sopping up some of the onion sauce with a piece of crappy old wheat bread, when someone knocked on the door.

He froze, his head snapping up to look at Snape in alarm, suddenly aware of the comforting weight
of the gun in his pants. Snape, however, merely grunted in annoyance, and Sands heard the sound of his chair scraping backwards as he got up and went to the door. Sands stopped eating to listen, and when Snape opened the door, he heard a voice that was vaguely familiar, but nonetheless clearly that of someone who did not belong here.

Fuck.

He set his fork down angrily, half-tempted to march out there and tell whoever it was to just get out of here right now, but he saved it. This was very, very bad news, for everyone involved. He listened carefully to Snape, who was irritably telling whomever it was that he was in the middle of dinner and to go away, and that he’d told her never to come here again, but the person in question—a young girl, from the sound of things—insisted that someone had given her a special order and they wanted it by Friday and they would pay very well—five hundred pesos!—and she thought she should come by and give it to him, and if he would do it, could he have it ready by then?

*Never come here* again? *Meaning that she’d done it before?*

Okay. Now he was peeved.

Not long after, Snape slammed the door in the girl’s face and came stalking back into the kitchen, crinkling what sounded like paper in his hands. Sands heard him shove whatever it was in his pocket as he crossed the room before sitting back down in his chair and resuming his dinner.

Sands regarded him over his plate. “New girlfriend?” he asked coolly.

He heard the whispery sound of Snape’s clothes that Sands had come to associate with his neighbor stiffening in his seat. “She is nothing of the kind!” he growled.

“Well, I figured she was either that, or a hooker you’d picked up, seeing as how you’ve opened your house to her,” he replied, his voice neutral.

“I have not ‘opened my house’ to anyone,” Snape said coldly. “But should I choose to do so, it is none of your affair.”

“I beg to differ.” Sands took an angry bite and chewed noisily to keep him in suspense before tersely saying, “I had a vested interest in the supposed ‘security measures’ you claimed were up around here—if you’ll recall, that was one of the provisional measures that I put down as part of my giving you permission to stay here.”

That did it; Sands was pleased to hear Snape swelling in his seat. “I don’t need your permission for anything, you pestilential little gnome,” he said, and his voice was heated and angry. “Moreover, it’s really no concern of mine what games you were playing with my wards—I’ll do with them as I please, and if it happens to be at cross-purposes to your convoluted plans, well, then so much the worse for you.”

Sands’s previous satisfaction in successfully goading Snape had evaporated in the course of his reply, and now he was not happy at all. He did not in the least like the insinuations the old bugger was making—just what did he know exactly, and how much was he guessing?

Sands liked the baiting-game—but only when he was the one doing the baiting. Not to mention the fact that he had been depending on those “wards” or whatever to keep suspicious cartel operatives away from his house. “Not happy” was a bit too mild for what he was feeling right now—no, Snape had just royally pissed him off.

“You know,” Sands remarked, his smile tight, “it’s not very polite to go and take a great big dump all
over your neighbor just because you were lonely.”

Snape slammed down his fork on the table. “I couldn’t agree more—and that being the case, you will kindly remove your diseased carcass from my house this instant!”

Sands looked up at him; Snape had risen from his seat in his sudden outburst of ire, and Sands felt marginally better about the situation. So he stood and gathered up his plate and his fork, spared a sneer in Snape’s direction, and marched toward the door—avoiding the coffee table this time.

“Leave those!” Snape barked from behind him.

“Don’t worry,” Sands said sweetly. “I’ll bring them back for my breakfast tomorrow.”

Snape muttered something under his breath; Sands didn’t quite catch it, which annoyed him, so he paused by the door and said, “If you have something to say, why don’t you just say it, instead of taking the coward’s way out?”

“I said, get stuffed, you wanker!” Snape snarled.

Sands snorted. “Up yours, jack-off,” he mocked in reply, and he left.

He needed to go home and think, anyway—things had changed.

And as it turned out, it was a very good thing he did, because no sooner than had he settled down at his kitchen table (and eating alone anyway, dammit), than his phone rang.

He jerked himself up out of his seat and snapped it to his ear. “Hello?”

“Agent Sands? This is Perez.”

“Well, hello, Felipe. What can I do for you?”

“And I’m bringing Belicia to meet my parents next Monday, so I can’t come by then, either—you didn’t have anything planned, did you?”

Sands frowned down into his pibil, shaking his head against Chiclet’s inquest. No, he didn’t have anything planned—not that Chiclet would have rearranged his schedule if he had. And now anything Sands had wanted to plan wouldn’t be planned, either, because Chiclet had to parade his fuckbuddy around in front of his family to show off what a great catch he’d made. That was all Chiclet talked about these days—Belicia this, Belicia that, Belicia is so wonderful, she’s so beautiful, and she is so much fun, and he’d never met a girl like her, and did he mention she was wonderful?

Sands had tried anything and everything to keep Chiclet from talking about that stupid whore, but nothing could deter him. So Sands would just have to put up with it. He wouldn’t mind the talking about her nearly as much if Chiclet wasn’t constantly running off to see her all the time.

So all he could do was eat his pibil and drink his tequila and try to tune the little shit out. Not even the admittedly very good pibil was enough to lift his black mood as he concentrated on the babble of voices around him in an effort not to have to hear about God’s-Gift-to-the-World-Belicia.

“No, Pablo, you can’t have any chorizos!”

“—and then the stupid son of a bitch put me on probation, can you believe—”

“Oh, I think the yellow is perfect! It’ll go just right with the—”
“—got back from Guitar Town. Need to see the boss—he’ll need to hear this—”

Sands froze in his seat. He waited tensely for the voice and the accompanying footsteps to fade before he leaned in and rapidly beckoned to Chiclet, who leaned obediently across the table.

“Kid! Those two guys who just passed us—what do they look like and what are they doing?” he whispered urgently.

Chiclet paused for a moment, obviously looking around for who Sands meant, before answering, “They’re two big guys—they look pretty serious. They’re wearing suits and sunglasses. They’re just talking—going to their car across the street—a big black one, looks new.”

*Cartel.* Sands’s mind whirred crazily. Guitar Town…talk to the boss…things were *happening.* Things had happened.

“Chiclet, we’re leaving—get our bill—now!” he barked, and Chiclet shot out of his seat and dashed to the counter with all the alacrity he’d once had back when Sands had first met him.

Sands waited impatiently, his legs jittering, his fingers tapping. Chiclet came dashing back, thrusting the ticket in his hand. Sands fumbled for his money clip, but his hands were shaking, and *dammit,* where those bills the twenties or the tens—

“Pay that,” he said roughly, thrusting the whole wad into Chiclet’s hands and rising quickly. “Quick!” he hissed, and Chiclet threw some money down, and Sands snatched up the clip, grabbed the kid by the arm, and dragged him out of the café.

“Señor—what—?”

“Shut up,” he muttered. “Not yet—come on—get in the car.” He strode out of the café as fast as he possibly could without stumbling over chairs and other tables. Chiclet did what he was told, quickly jumping ahead of Sands so he could follow him, and they soon reached the jeep and hopped inside, Sands slamming the door shut. He heard Chiclet jangling the keys, and quickly stopped him.

“No, we aren’t leaving yet. Is Greene sitting over there in the square?” he asked.

Chiclet twisted in his seat, looking out the back windshield. “Yeah, he is—why?”

“Good. Now—listen very, very carefully to me, Chiclet. You get this wrong, and I’ll shoot you. You still know the way to Guitar Town, right?”

Chiclet hesitated. “*Sí,*” he said slowly.

“Good. You are going to go straight to Guitar Town right now, and you are going to tell anyone who will listen exactly what I tell you. You are going to tell them that a CIA Agent—*Agent* Sands—”

“Señor, your name—” Chiclet sounded alarmed, and it pissed Sands off.

“I know that’s my name, you idiot,” Sands hissed. “And you tell them that I am setting the cartel members on Guitar Town, stirring up trouble in Culiacán—*cartel* trouble—and that Guitar Town is in danger. Don’t just march in there and start singing it from the rooftops—you’re smarter than that; make sure it’s not suspicious, but you tell someone—*anyone*—what I told you, and you make sure it spreads around town before you come back home, get me?” he said fiercely, gripping his arm and giving it a shake.
“But—but Señor, the pistoleros—” Now the little shit sounded scared, and goddammit, he didn’t have time for that!

“Yes. The pistoleros. All of them. You tell them my name. Agent Sands, CIA. Spread it all over Guitar Town, then come back and report what happened—you tell them everything,” Sands said deliberately. “Say it.”

“I—I’ll tell them everything.”

Sands smiled coldly. “That’s my boy.” And then he unlocked the door and swung his leg out.

“Where are you going?” Chiclet asked, sounding anxious again.

“Home,” said Sands shortly. “I’ll get Greene to take me back.” And he shut the door and stepped back, and after a moment the car started with a roar, and it eased out of the way and down the road.

Close, so close… Sands turned and hurried back toward the plaza. Snape was across from the café, over by the bar, so a left turn from the street…

They had moved on Guitar Town!

He grunted in shocked surprise, his thoughts coming to an abrupt halt as he ran into something large and heavy directly in his path, and he cursed it.

“Oh, señor, are you all right?” A light female voice was by his side, a hand on his arm, and he shook it off.

“I’m fine,” he said shortly. “I need to talk to Greene.”

“Oh—he’s just over there—he’s always on his bench on weekends.”

Sands stilled and turned. “I know you,” he said slowly.

He could feel the girl blink, and then her voice was somewhat cooler when she next spoke. “Oh, yes—I didn’t I speak to you last spring?” she asked.

“And then you dropped in on Don Greene last month,” he sneered, and she started a little. “Who told you you could come around there?”

“I went to Don Greene about medicine for my father,” she said coldly, stepping away from him. “He told me where he lived himself.”

“Well, then I’ll thank you to keep away from there from now on.” Sands licked his lips. “Because that’s also where I live.”

And he turned away from her and her flower cart and marched across the square, slowly, so as not to bump into anything else, holding his hands slightly in front of him to feel his way and hating it.

“Greene!” he yelled when he knew he was close.

“What are you doing here?” came the rasped demand in reply, and Sands turned toward it like a homing beacon.

“Get up,” he said, coming to stand near the bench where Snape was squatting like an old toad. “We’re leaving.”
“I am not going anywhere,” Snape answered flatly. “You got here on your own—you can take yourself home on your own as well.”

Sands’s jaw clenched. “Chiclet brought me here,” he said through gritted teeth, “but he had to go, and now I am here on my own and I don’t have my—my cane, and so I—I need you to take me home. Now.”

There was a silence, but he could hear the smug note in Snape’s voice when he finally answered, and it was only by sheer willpower that he didn’t throttle the as**sfuck** right then and there. “Well,” he said smoothly, clearly savoring the moment, “I don’t leave the square for another half an hour—you can just wait.”

“Fine.” Sands sat down hard on the bench and leaned in close to Snape, pushing his chest against his arm. “I’ll wait here—right here—and I’ll pass the time by sharing any number of sensitive secrets with your customers,” he said, his voice low.

Snape went rigid beside him, and in the next moment he stood with a furious swish of clothes; Sands smiled nastily and got up, following his stiff, angry footsteps out of the square.

Sands ground out his cigarette on the floor beneath his heel even as he pulled out another one from his pocket, tapping his fingers on the side of his chair and the toes of his boots on the floor.

“Señor, you really shouldn’t do that,” Chiclet said quietly. “You’re leaving burn marks on your floor.”

“So what? I can’t see it,” he sneered, snapping his fingers for a light, which was obediently given to him.

“Señor—” Chiclet began.

“Shut up.” Sands snapped. “You’ve done nothing but jabber away all night. I’m not interested in whatever you have to say, because it’s probably about Belicia, and I don’t give two shits about her.”

“Señor, please—”

“Shut up! I’m thinking!” he barked, clenching his hands into fists and biting hard on the filter of his cigarette. Then he stood, pacing back and forth along the coffee table; his mind was always clearer when he was walking—walking his beat.

Three months. Three months of silence. There had been nothing—not a word from anybody or anything. He’d not met with the cartel members again since, and he hadn’t sent Chiclet to Guitar Town either—he hadn’t thought he’d needed to. Chiclet’s report on the reaction he’d gotten from certain members of the quaint little village had been more than promising—they didn’t want the cartels in their town, and they’d sounded quite willing to do battle to protect themselves. But now… now there was nothing.

El hadn’t come.

He ran a hand haphazardly through his hair, turning on his heel and marching the other way before doing it again, walking right back where he’d come from, and then turning and pacing back again. He knew that the stupid town looked out for their prize gunfighter, but surely El the Great and Terrible wouldn’t just stand by and let all his little minions take the fall, would he? Why the hell would that town just sit by as a cartel divided it up and picked and chose who lived and who died? Surely Sands hadn’t overplayed his hand—surely he hadn’t. He’d planned this. **Planned** it. Planned
it to the last letter, and he’d been careful this time, only one other person knew about it all, and even he didn’t know everything, because Sands wasn’t stupid enough to do that again, he wasn’t banking everything on one person anymore—because in the end, there was really only one person that he could trust.

And that stupid chick—Inez, was her name. He’d told her exactly where he’d lived, and surely she’d told—surely she’d tell if anyone asked, and surely she’d already told plenty of people where her precious Don Greene lived, so that meant people now knew where he lived. Surely word had gotten around—surely she’d gossiped; that’s what women did, after all.

And it hadn’t been just her, either—he’d let it slip to the greengrocer a few weeks after that, when he’d been going so stir-crazy that he’d gone out with Chiclet on one of his shopping runs. And when he’d gone out for lunch last month, he’d mentioned it—mentioned it in a bar, for Christssakes—someone had to have heard it there! Someone had to be able to tell El where he lived!

So why wasn’t anything happening? Why had things ground down to a halt for the past three months, just when they’d been going so swimmingly before? Why had he wasted those three months sitting around his house doing absolutely nothing except cleaning guns, waiting for a man who refused to show up? Why wouldn’t El come?

He was jarred out of his thoughts by Chiclet—that stupid kid was talking again, his pathetic, whiny voice grating on his very last nerve. “Look, kid,” Sands said sharply, cutting across his monologue. “If you want to stay here, fine—but I want it quiet. If all you’re gonna do is sit there and whine about how I’m not paying enough attention to you—if you can’t fucking shut up—you can just leave.”

And he turned to go upstairs and get into bed, where he could sit and at least be comfortable in his own bed while he thought about how things weren’t fucking working right now.

“So, okay, I’ll leave—but Señor, I need to talk to you first!” Chiclet said, his voice sharper than normal. Sands turned and glared pointlessly at the little shit, before stalking over to his chair and flopping down in it.

“What, then?” he asked irritably.

Chiclet moved across the room and sat down on the couch opposite him. He didn’t fidget, but Sands could tell he was working up to say something that he probably considered earth shattering. “I’m in love with Belicia, Señor,” he stated firmly.

“I don’t care,” Sands snapped back.

“I know you don’t, but—Señor, I’m going to marry her. I asked her last Christmas and she said yes. We—the wedding is in two weeks.”

Sands stiffened, his fingers curling into fists. Married…

“I—I was hoping you’d…come,” Chiclet ended lamely. “I haven’t really told Belicia much about you, but she does know I work for you, and she wants to meet you…I was hoping you could…you know, get to know her before we got married.” And when Sands didn’t answer, Chiclet said uncertainly, “Señor?”

Sands’s throat and chest tightened. “What? What do you expect me to say about it?” he asked, his voice slow and even.

Chiclet shifted in his seat. “I—I love her, Señor,” he said, a pleading note in his voice. “She—she’s
the most wonderful girl I’ve ever met—and I know you’ll like her—and I’ll still work for you, don’t worry, she’s going to come live here, we’ll live close, not in Guitar Town—"

Sands leapt out of his chair so fast that he barely heard Chiclet jump, and was further enraged when he heard the kid get to his feet, get up in his face. “Guitar Town?!” he shouted. “All this time you’ve been sneaking off to Guitar Town?!!”

He could all but hear Chiclet steeling himself. “Yes. I was with her—I can see a girl if I want—”

“You shut up, you little fucker!” Sands cut across him, taking a step forward. “Guitar Town—where they all look out for El Mariachi—and you think this bitch of yours is any different?!!”

“Don’t you call her that!” Chiclet hollered back at him. “You call me whatever you want, but don’t you insult her!”

Sands couldn’t see red, but he felt it all the same, boiling up from his guts and suffusing his brain with a burning rage. “Don’t you dare tell me what I can or can’t say—women are back-stabbing whores, all of them, and your precious Belicia is no different—”

“I said don’t you insult her! She’s not like that!”

“They’re all like that! And you sold me out for a fuck, you stupid son of a bitch!”

“I never sold you out!” Chiclet bellowed. “I did everything you asked! But you just can’t take it that I’m doing something for myself for a change instead of for you!”

His hands were on the lamp before Chiclet had finished, and it was whizzing through the air after Chiclet’s final word. It didn’t hit him, but smashed loudly against the wall behind him. Sands heard footsteps going towards the door, angry and quick. “Get out, you piece of shit!” Sands screamed.

“I’m going!” Chiclet shouted back. “And I’m not coming back—because you’re crazy! And you’ll be all alone when El Mariachi comes to kill you!”

Sands roared incoherently and scrabbled his hands across the tabletop, finding a half-full bottle of tequila and hurling it towards Chiclet, but it shattered against the door when it slammed shut, the contents spattering everywhere and glass tinkling to the ground. He spun around, intending to go upstairs, go to the kitchen, to back to his chair, go anywhere—but his ankles caught on the coffee table. He went down with an abrupt cry, falling flat on his face, his sunglasses flying off and clattering on the ground somewhere to his right.

For a while, he just lay there. He didn’t care how long he did, and he didn’t care how it looked, him sprawled out on the floor, sunglasses who knew where. He knew his nose was bleeding from where he’d hit it, but it didn’t feel broken. So he just lay there, dripping blood on his floor, breathing heavily.

He lay there, and he listened; he heard the traitorous little douchebag’s pissy, mincing steps recede—and then he heard them stop, heard the sound of him knocking on the door next door.

A sick, black tide of wrath rose up from his stomach to choke him. The little fuck was running to Snape, now, was he? And no doubt he was going to tell that rat-bastard everything—he was so fond of telling everyone everything these days.

The door next door opened, and Sands heard the goddamn two-faced prick start shouting something, but then the door closed again and he couldn’t hear anything, because his smeghead of a neighbor had all of his oh-so-wonderful magic walls up and Sands couldn’t hear, and he couldn’t fucking see.
Finally, he hove himself up on his hands and knees and crawled slowly forward, hands inching along the ground as he searched fruitlessly for his sunglasses, mopping up the already slowing trickle of blood under his left nostril. He’d just found them in the doorway to the bathroom when he was nearly startled out of his skin (again) by a loud crack in his living room.

“Don’t you ever come in here like a normal person?” he demanded, shoving his glasses back onto his face and slowly getting to his feet off of his hands and knees. Goddammit, why did he always have to be on the ground when Snape found him?!

“Do you ever stand on your own two feet like a normal person?” came the sneering reply. “Or do you enjoy having me pick you up from the ground?”

“Well, I wouldn’t want you to forget your place,” Sands said poisonously, turning to face Snape and crossing his arms. He felt the tell-tale stiffening of Snape’s spine—really, the little fairy was always wound up tighter than a snare drum. “What are you doing here? And don’t try to give me the run around—I know that pathetic coward went running to you. Once a teacher, always a teacher, is it? Severus Snape, friend of small children and protector from schoolyard bullies?”

“This is hardly the schoolyard,” Snape said icily. “And Mr. Santiago is hardly a child—a fact that you seem to have missed. Although I can hardly place all the blame on your eyes—did they dig too deep and hit your brain?”

“Shut your pie-hole, fuckwit,” Sands snapped. “I can see why they went for your neck—pity they didn’t finish the job,” he added, flicking his fingers at his Adam’s apple.

He could hear Snape grinding his teeth, but the sorry cum-bubble just said, “What did you do, Sands? I’ve watched that brat of yours take your abuse for five years, and he’s stood by you until now—what did you do?”

“I sent that turncoat little fucker out of my house,” he spat.

“What?” Sands could hear the incredulity in Snape’s voice, and he hated him for it. “You’ve really gone round the twist this time, Sands,” he said disgustedly. “The boy would no more turn on you than cut off his own arm.”

“What would you know about it?” Sands demanded. “Seems to me he’s running to you as often as not—or are you just lonely over there?”

Perhaps the boy craves the occasional snippet of intelligent conversation, rather than the ravings of a madman,” Snape said nastily.


“Don’t be ridiculous,” Snape said, dismissing him like a mouthy student. “I have no idea what twisted machinations of yours that you’ve been using that boy to implement, but no matter how depraved your schemes are, he wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, yeah!” Sands laughed harshly. “I thought so too—until the bastard started fucking the enemy!”

“At least he knew it was the enemy.”

Sands spun on his heel and punched the motherfucker in the mouth. He felt Snape’s lips crush back against his crooked teeth, heard him grunt in pain and surprise. There was hot wetness on his knuckles; he heard Snape stagger to the side. Sands stood over him, his breath coming in short bursts, the blood roaring in his ears.
The room was quiet except for the harsh sounds of their breathing, until Snape spoke. “Is that what this is about, Sands?” he asked, his voice low.

“Get out,” Sands said.

Snape straightened. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Sands,” he said, “but I would advise you to let well enough alone—I, for one, do not want find myself in the middle of whatever disaster you’ve precipitated when all of this comes crashing down on your head.”

“Well, then you can just hide under your bed again,” Sands said flatly. “That’s what you do when things get too hot, isn’t it? Or do you just run away?”

“I am not running anywhere!” Snape hissed.

“Why? Do you like it here?” Sands asked patronizingly. “Do you like playing doctor with all the little Mexican girls?” And then he grinned. “Or do you prefer the boys?”

Whatever Snape preferred, he was fast—he was on him before he even had time to dodge, but fortunately Sands had enough time to put his hands up and get a handful of Snape’s shirt. Snape’s fist connected with his nose, and Sands could imagine the way his eyes would’ve watered as pain bloomed horribly across his face. But he didn’t have time to bother with that, and he pulled back his right arm and rammed the heel of his hand right into the solar plexus.

Snape let go of him with a shocked wheeze, and Sands’s hands flew to his face, to cover his now profusely dripping nose and to make sure his glasses were where they should be. And then he chuckled from behind his cupped hand and smirked down at where Snape was clutching his stomach. “Once a teacher, always a teacher,” he crooned. “I finally understand your chosen profession.”

“I’m not the one who wanted to keep Santiago as my own personal little twelve-year-old toy!” Snape growled.

Sands stiffened, and his lip curled. “I don’t need him,” he said softly. He tilted his head. “But if I ever do need something to play with, you’re willing enough.”

“Fuck you!” Snape spat furiously, and Sands grinned.

“Don’t be so coy,” he smirked. “I was there—you and I both know you were begging for it at the end.”

“You know nothing!” Snape shouted hoarsely. “And that is because you are blind!”

Sands’s fists clenched, tight, tighter, his nails cutting deep into the meat of his palms. “I don’t need eyes to walk this beat,” he growled in response. “And I can still see right through you, faggot.”

“Not enough to know that I am not, you stupid shit-stabber!” Snape bellowed.

“No—you’re still hung up on Lily, aren’t you?”

Sands didn’t even hear it coming; fire slashed across the side of his face, and he jerked to the side, stumbling as his skin split open, the blood welling up hot and wet, splattering across his cheek and running down into his collar.

He heard the whip of the wand the second time, and he dodged; he felt as much as heard the rush of the spell inches from his shoulder as he ducked, and he heard the splinter of wood in the kitchen
behind him. “What’s the matter, Snape?” he taunted, moving quickly, moving in, keeping his ear trained on the flicking sound of that goddamn stick. “Wouldn’t she put out for you?!”

Snape gave an inarticulate howl of rage, and the sound and the split second was all Sands needed to launch himself at his target. Sands heard the first syllable pass his lips, “Cruc—!” but the wind was knocked out of him as Sands rammed his shoulder into his stomach.

He felt the air go out of Snape in a rush, felt his clawed hands descend on his shoulders, and then he was hauled up, and Snape smashed his fist into his face, and with the snap of breaking plastic, the bridge of his glasses broke, and they fell pointlessly from his face.

With a roar of fury, Sands seized him by the collar and swung wildly at his face; his punch caught Snape on the point of his cheekbone and he flew backwards. Sands’s fingers tore loose from his shirt with a rip of fabric and a tiny hail of flying buttons.

Sands tottered on his heel but caught himself, and he heard Snape move, and even as he charged again, he heard that swishy noise. The air vibrated with a deep thrum, and then a knot of force hit him like a cannonball in his stomach. All the air went out of him, and he was thrown violently backwards against his own wall.

He smashed against the plaster, his feet dangling above the floor. He felt the wall crack behind his head, and then he fell, and fell hard, collapsing painfully back onto the floor, catching his kidney on the corner of his liquor cabinet and his legs giving out under him.

He could feel Snape standing over him, moving towards him, and he scrabbled wildly in his pants despite his dizziness and finally yanked out his gun and aimed it upwards from the floor, right above the approaching footsteps, right where he heard the whistling, wheezing breath of that fucking wizard. “Go ahead,” he hissed around a mouthful of blood from his nose, coughing and trying to regain his breath. “Just try it, fuckface,” he rasped. “I want you to. Do it—and they’ll find you, and then you’ll get to go back home—with Potter.”

Snape didn’t move; Sands held the gun steady, training it on him. “Do it,” he said again. And when he heard him lower his wand, he laughed, although it was more of a cough. Snape’s footsteps were heavy, but he was moving away, moving towards the door. “Running away again?” Sands jeered from where he lay, his gun following him.

“You’re still blind, Sands!” Snape suddenly shouted, his voice choked and grating and horrible. “You’ve always been blind! And that’s why you lost—and that’s why you’ll lose this time, too!”

And with a crack like a tiny thunderbolt, he was gone.

Sands staggered to his feet, whirled around, and shot the wall to Snape’s house. “I won’t lose, you bastard!” he roared, beating the butt of the gun on the plaster. “Do you hear me! I never lose!” he bellowed. But the only answer was the echo of his voice, shouting back at him through his empty house.

Sands waited patiently at the café, his finger ready and waiting on the trigger of the gun that was resting on his knee beneath the table. Getting his dummy arm on by himself had been a real bitch, without—anyone there to help him with it, and he would have been in a pretty crappy mood over it if it weren’t for the fact that he was here on business—and he was always happy when he was working.

It had been another three months of agonizing waiting before Sands had finally come to grips with
the fact that his shapes hadn’t fallen—that it hadn’t been enough. That El wasn’t coming. And so he’d started going out again—started moving again, making new plays. He had to get him out of there, had to make El come to him—and then he’d show him what happened to those who crossed him.

And so here he was; he’d used his other number from Marco—thank goodness that he’d committed them both to memory, since that—now that he was working on his own. He’d dropped a line not to Perez, but to one Antonio Noriega—a member of the Baradez gang. They were ostensibly working under the Berguenos, but Sands had eyes (dammit) and ears everywhere, and after a meeting or two with Marco and a few discreet under-the-table deals with a couple of rats, he knew they were chafing under the current regime.

Footsteps were approaching. “You Sands?” came a rough voice from his side.

Sands smiled up at him. “I am indeed—Mr. Noriega, I presume?” he asked charmingly.

The man grunted in reply and sat heavily down across from him, right down the line of his gun. Sands reached in his pocket and pulled out his badge, flipping it out just long enough for Noriega to see that he meant business before snatching it back and tucking it out of sight.

“I don’t like talking with the law,” Noriega grunted. “Definitely not gringo law. Bad for business—especially if my bosses find out. Bergueno doesn’t like us getting too big for our britches.”

Sands’s lips curled upwards—oh, but this was too easy! “Well, fortunately for you, that is exactly what I am here to talk to you about,” he said, leaning back in his chair as he heard the sound of his waiter’s footsteps and smelled the aroma of his lunch, and he just smiled a Cheshire Cat smile across the table until the waiter was gone, and he stubbed out his cigarette and picked up his fork. “Because you see, Tony—may I call you Tony?” Not waiting for an answer, he went on. “This may come as something of a surprise to you, but over in the States, we don’t particularly care for the Berguenos.”

Tony made a noise somewhere between a snort and a scoff, and Sands smiled along. “They have a bad habit of circumventing our operations. The Barillos, well—they were all about brute force. No subtlety. It was pretty easy for us to get them right where we wanted them.” Sands’s pleasant expression never changed, but his hidden hand tightened painfully on the grip of his gun, and he stabbed his fork into a piece of pork rather violently. “The Berguenos, on the other hand—we’re not ashamed to admit that they’re much sneakier—and that they are most distressingly obstinate in their refusal to cooperate.”

He took a bite of pibil, the pepper and orange exploding on his tongue. “In fact,” he said, after a long, slow moment while he savored the taste, “they are so recalcitrant, that we would not be at all unhappy to see them go. And should they go,” he added, pointing his fork across the table, “you could get just as big in your britches as you wanted.”

There was a thick silence across the table, the only sound that of Sands’s fork clinking against his plate. But Sands knew that he had his audience’s attention.

Sands set down his fork and took a sip of tequila, sucking thoughtfully on a lime afterwards. And then he spoke. “So, Tony—rumor is on the streets that the Berguenos are strengthening their position.”

“I haven’t heard that.” Noriega’s voice was vaguely suspicious.

Sands smirked. “You don’t go down the same streets that I do.” He picked up his fork. “The truth of the matter is that while the Berguenos don’t like force—something that I understand is a point of
dispute between old Vicente and your boss—they certainly understand that it is on occasion necessary. And as such, they’ve been recruiting.” He took another bite. “They’ve been recruiting so many people, that unless they’re stopped, there won’t be anyone who can take them down. Not even Baradez.”

Noriega grunted. “We work for Bergueno,” he said. “That’s good for us.”

“Ah, but the baby bird has to leave the nest some time,” Sands countered. “Sometimes, Dad doesn’t realize that Son is chafing at the bit, that it’s time for him to step down and let the younger blood take over.” He twiddled his fork on his plate. “The problem there is always that dear old dad is holding the reins. Son can’t get out from under his thumb unless he has some clout of his own. And that,” he said, once again flashing his most charming smile, “is where we come in.”

There was a brief silence, and then Noriega said, “So, what? You’re just gonna come in here and take ‘em out?”

Sands chuckled politely. “Oh, come now, Tony—you and I both know that we don’t work that way! Subtlety, remember?” he said, wagging his finger. “We prefer to be the silent partner in these sorts of business ventures. No—we won’t necessarily front our own capital on this one—but we could put you in a position to acquire some of the local talent the field of hostile takeovers.”

He felt Noriega leaning in. “Like who?” he asked hoarsely.

Sands grinned; now he had him. “Have you ever heard of a little, out-of-the-way place called Guitar Town?”

“No,” said Noriega shortly.

“Most people haven’t. It’s a pastoral little village on the south side of the river between here and Navolato. Something right out of a picture postcard,” Sands said. “You’d never guess that it housed half of the most wanted criminals in the country.”

Noriega was perfectly still as Sands went on. “And not just any criminals—a good many of these individuals have serious bones to pick with your current employers. Types who really wouldn’t need a lot of convincing to go up against them.” Sands stirred his rice, soaking up all of the delicious sauce beneath it. “And ultimately, should someone sweep in and start bringing these guys into Culiacán, if they were working for the right side, well, my boys could probably see to it that there wasn’t any friction with the higher-ups. Provided, of course, that those bringing them in would remember us once they were in charge.”

Noriega didn’t speak; Sands could hear him worrying on his lip, and his hands were heavy on the table. “Just something to think about,” Sands added blandly.

“Yes,” Noriega said. “It sure is.”

Sands grinned widely and said no more, just went back to his lunch.

Noriega didn’t stick around; after a moment more of tapping the table with one finger, he stood abruptly and was gone just as quickly as he arrived, which didn’t fuss Sands at all. He just waited until he was sure he was gone before detaching his arm, stowing it in his bag and putting his gun back in his pocket, and then finishing up his pibil.

He signaled to the waitress with his credit when he was done; she brought him his check with all speed, and he felt for the ink of the line where he signed, paid, and left.
He pulled on his hat and stumped outside, grimacing a little despite his more than fruitful meeting with Noriega. Who knew how long it would take them to move—to prod that four-flushing guitarist out of his hole? And that mean more waiting—Sands hated waiting.

And then, to add insult to injury, the pibil had been fantastic—what may have been the best he’d ever had in his life—and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. Because he was alone, and there was no one to direct him to where he needed to go so he could properly shoot the cook.

And that was just awful.

He set on his route home, glad it was a weekday; the tourists were thinner, and the air was generally better here during the week, what without the stink of magic potions. He scowled, thumping his way down the street, leaning heavily on his cane. He still wasn’t over the mortification of having to use the thing to get around—and it was all the worse today, because he wasn’t entirely pretending to limp. His leg was killing him today. And he just bet that it was Snape’s fault—that he brewed that shit he sold to get people addicted to it. His leg had been slowly but surely quieting right up the point that he’d been suckered in to using that cock sucker’s fairy dust—and now that he was off of it again, it was acting up worse ever.

And to top it all off, he’d been having nightmares again, too, without the benefit of that stuff he made that helped him sleep.

But he didn’t care. He brought his cane down viciously on the pavement. He didn’t care, because he didn’t need that bastard—and he didn’t need that turncoat kid, either.

Sands hadn’t seen him (goddammit) in months, which was perfectly fine by him. The sorry son of a bitch. He’d had to find another kid to get his groceries for him—some little turd named Martín who charged too much, asked too many questions, and half the time got things wrong. He hated Martín, but he had to eat, so he didn’t have very much choice in the matter. At the moment, anyway—as soon as he found a replacement, he was going to put that kid out of both their miseries.

He reached up to swat at the whine of a mosquito by his ear—and then hissed, jerking his hand away wet with blood where he’d grazed the long, deep, ugly slash on his face, tearing it open again. He had Snape to thank for that, too—whatever he’d hit him with had definitely been some kind of black magic, because it wouldn’t stop bleeding for hours, and even then, the fucking thing wouldn’t heal, staying open and painful for months, only just now beginning to close. And Sands knew it was going to scar, too—black magic was always like that, he remembered—and it infuriated him every time he thought about it, because now it was just one more identifying mark on him—and he couldn’t see it.

Well—if he’d been forced to pick, he’d have to admit he’d prefer living with his now scarred visage over what might have happened. Crucio, Snape had tried to say. Sands remembered that one, oh yes—that one would’ve brought the CIA down on both their heads and ruined everything—

He furiously strode down the street, wrenching his thoughts away from that fucking wizard. Snape was a fuckstick and Sands didn’t need to waste his time on him.

He grunted as he turned too soon down the next street and abruptly bunted his shoulder off of the building on the corner. He stumbled, gripping the side of the wall next to him for stability, his fingers tightening painfully on his cane. Use the goddamned cane, he told himself. It’s all you got right now.

He forced himself to unclench his jaw as he turned down the next alleyway, the one that was only two streets away from Calle del Sombras. He was halfway down the alley when he heard rapid, heavy footsteps coming from the other way. His hand automatically went to his pocket, resting
gently against the reassuring weight of his gun. He slowed, limping more deliberately, looking as innocuous as he could manage as the footsteps neared.

Sands was just thinking that he might need to move over to avoid running in to whoever it was when the big bastard rammed him hard, his shoulder colliding with Sands’s. He had no time to react before a rough, sweaty hand came up and shoved him right in the chest, and he went reeling backwards, his cane flying from his fingers, and he fell heavily on the ground.

“Out of the way, fuckin’ cripple!” came the laughing jeer as Sands landed hard on the ground, his cane clattering against the pavement, his teeth clicking hard over his tongue, and Sands tasted blood.

_Cripple_?!

The gun was in his hand, and he could hear the fucker’s laughter over his receding footsteps—One shot, and he heard the bastard scream and fall, collapsing only a few yards away.

Sands heaved himself to his knees, brushing himself off and flexing his hands a bit—his palms had been skinned a little, and his thigh hurt, but nothing serious. He kept his gun in his hand as he pawed about where he’d heard his cane fall; once he recovered it, he got back to his feet, making his steady and deliberate way over to the moaning, wailing sack of shit behind him. His cane knocked against the heel of a boot, and he carefully dragged the end over the entire shoe—so, the little pigshit was still face-down in the dirt.

“Aww…shit—God…Jesus,” he gurgled. “I…I can’t…I can’t feel my legs…”

Sands smirked. “Then this is what I call dramatic irony, _cripple_,” he drawled. He tapped his cane against the fucker’s leg, tapping his way up before leaning on it again, hand tightening around his gun. “Look on the bright side,” he murmured. “This time I’m doing you a favor.” And he pulled the trigger again, and the pathetic moaning was abruptly silenced.

Sands tucked his gun back in his pocket and walked towards home, a spring in his step in spite of his feigned limp. The day was looking up.

Sands was pacing. Back and forth, back and forth, bare feet padding across the floor. Eight steps to the front door from the kitchen, ten steps to the opposite side of the room, six steps to his liquor cabinet, a detour and five more steps to the bathroom, and then ten steps to get back where he started.


Over the past few months, Sands was slowly being faced with the fact that the cartels may have failed him. He’d been banking on the fact that no cartel in their right minds would go up against El Mariachi. He was a notorious cartel-killer; and even if reality didn’t back that up, the legends more than made up for it. Sands had _wanted_ them to cut and run once they realized that El was in that town—El was _his_, goddammit—but not so fucking _soon_. But they may not have shown quite enough muscle in Guitar Town to put a scare into the inhabitants before they backed out. And that was all Sands could think could have failed, because everything else up to now had worked: people knew where he lived, the people of Guitar Town knew it was him (unless that back-stabbing little shit lied to you again—what then, Sands?)

But not a word. Not a sign, not a whisper, not a hint of El Fucking Mariachi, and here it was, already October. If he was so good, surely he would have been able to find him by now. But maybe Sands
had relied too heavily on him. He’d relied on him on Day of the Dead, too.

Sands snarled furiously, his hands leaping into his hair and tugging impotently. He turned short, and went down the middle of the room this time, detouring around the coffee table before spinning on his heel and going back the other way again, and then spun around once more and stalked back in the opposite direction. Back and forth. Back and forth.

He wished he knew what was going on.

He wished he could go find out for himself.

He wished he could see. He wanted to see the floorboards of his house. He wanted to see the coffee table in the middle of his path. He wanted to see what his house looked like. He wanted to see his boots and his shirt and his jeans. He wanted to see what he was eating. He wanted to wear a color other than black. He wanted to see something—anything.

But there was nothing. He had nothing. Just himself and a vast black expanse of nothing.

He resisted the urge to throw something—anything—it would do no good, because it would just mean a mess that he’d have to clean up, and there was no way he could get it cleaned up adequately. There wouldn’t be anyone but him to hear it. There wouldn’t be any one to come and clean up after him.

But he didn’t care—he didn’t need anyone else but himself.

He threw himself down into his chair, leaning forward and pressing his palms against his temples, barely missing trying to press them against his eyes (what eyes, Sands?), something he hadn’t done in years. He didn’t want to think about that stupid shit next door or that stupid shit fucking his bitch in Guitar Town. He didn’t want to think about anything. But everything was so damned quiet in here, the silence pressing hot and heavy down upon him, every whisper and creak magnified a hundred fold, and the sound of his own thoughts like thundering boulders in his brain.

And without warning, his unvoiced prayer for noise was suddenly answered.

His ass started vibrating even as the tinny, absurdly cheerful little notes of the ring reached his ears. He jerked his butt up in the air and yanked the phone out of his pocket, flipping it open.

“What?” he growled into the phone, angry and suspicious and eager and tense.

“Andrews?!” It was Marco—and he sounded like he was about to wet himself.

“Yeah, what is it?"

“I—I don’t know what happened—it wasn’t me, I swear to God—but you’ve gotta get out of here, man—I’m leaving, I’m getting out of town as fast as I can, because if he finds me—Oh, God—”

“Get a grip, Marco!” Sands snapped, a glimmer of hope flaring inside of him. “Slow down and tell me what the hell is going on!”

“El Mariachi, that’s what’s going on, you stupid shit! He’s here! It’s him, I swear on my mamma’s name, it’s motherfucking El Mariachi, and he’s coming! God, you’re in trouble, man—El Mariachi, he’s looking for you—”

“I saw him, Andrews!” Marco wailed over the line. “He’s here, in Culiacán, and he’s *looking for you*!”

“Well—thanks for the heads up,” Sands said pleasantly. “You enjoy your trip,” he added to the stunned silence on the other end, and then he snapped the phone shut.

A feverish smile spread across Sands’s face. It was *happening*. It had *worked*. He’d set up his shapes, and now he was watching them—*seeing* them fall.

El Mariachi was coming, and when he did, Sands would be ready.
The Place of Turning Roads

Chapter Summary

The end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cheap little Muggle alarm clock on Snape’s bedside table went off with a horrible clattering din as if the very chariots of hell were beating down upon him, a sound that raced up his spine like a bolt of lightning to burn inside his brain. He shot up in bed and immediately regretted it; his head was pounding like a cannon, the light seeping beneath the drawn curtains stabbing into his eyes.

He picked up the wretched clock and threw it, smashing it against the wall with a horrific clattering crash that drove railway spikes into his ears.

He groaned in agony and nearly fell back into bed before he realized why he’d set his alarm in the first place—it was Wednesday.

It was also the Day of the Dead, and if he wanted to get out early enough to buy the pickled murtlap essence that he needed later this week (to his fury he’d discovered the day before that the stocks he’d bought from Fernando were not merely water-thin, but were also contaminated) before the revelling started, he would have to get up and go out just after sunup.

But the fact that it was Day of the Dead meant that yesterday had been Halloween—and so it was that this morning, like the morning of every November the first for the past twenty-five years, Snape had a raging hangover.

He stood, wishing he hadn’t, tottering on his feet and doing his level best not to vomit all over the floor—or worse, in his bed—and he lurched out of his room and across the hall into his workroom. He’d had the good sense to set out a vial of potion for himself the day before, and so he picked it up with trembling fingers and forced the contents down into his rebellious stomach.

Oh, thank God… The throbbing pulse of the kettledrums in his head eased, and the light no longer hurt him so.

He staggered down the stairs and into the bathroom, and leaned heavily on the toilet tank as he pissed for what felt like an hour. When he was finished, he splashed water on his face and ground the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to make himself feel even the slightest bit like a human being again, and not like something picked out from between a giant’s toes.

It didn’t work. His mouth tasted like something vile had crawled in it and died, and he grabbed his toothbrush with still-shaking fingers and tried in vain to scrub away the sour taste of sleep and stale whisky.

When he was finished in the bathroom, he dragged himself back upstairs to get dressed. He’d slept in most of his clothes, and he didn’t bother with anything new, just put back on the rumpled shirt from last night and slipping on his shoes before crossing the hall to collect the bottles to be returned.
He went back downstairs and didn’t stop in his kitchen; the thought of food made him physically ill. He didn’t even want any tea, although the caffeine probably would have helped him at this point. But he couldn’t muster the energy or the inclination to make any, so he just crammed a peppermint tablet in his mouth as a substitute, grabbed his high-collared coat and his hat, donned his sunglasses against the stabbing forks of sunlight in his eyes, and let himself out into the still-cool quiet of the morning under the soft periwinkle sunrise sky.

At least, it was quiet near his house. It was barely seven, and yet he found that the revellers had already started nearer to the centre of town. He would never understand this country and their obsession with this macabre holiday glorifying death. Everywhere he looked, great hideous skulls grinned down at him, from the huge creations of paper mâché that leered from the tops of buildings, to the horrible, horrible, lady skeletons, dressed in flowing veils and gowns and clutching bouquets of lilies in their bony fingers, that stared accusingly from store windows.

Dear God, how he hated this place.

Despite how utterly wretched he felt this morning, he made it to the chemist’s in record time, such was his desire not to be outside any longer than he had to. He knew it would still be open early, as were most shops on this holiday, hoping to do a little business before they closed up shop and went out to join the festivities. Snape clattered through the door, the tinny little bell hanging above him jarring his aching head abominably, and he briefly considered cursing it into smithereens.

Fernando was slouched behind the counter, the very image of the slovenly, oily, stereotypical Mexican sleaze; how ironic that Fernando was really the only wizard he knew in this country. He grinned greasily around the toothpick in his mouth when he saw Snape standing there.

“Buenas dias, amigo,” he said, turning to put his hands on the counter, facing the door. “What can I get you today?”

Snape slammed down the three bottles of murtlap essence that he’d only just bought last week. “You can stop trying to cheat me by watering down what you sell me, you four flushing crook!” he snarled at the man. “These are as diluted as the beer they serve in that bar across the street—not to mention that what you thinned in the first place was full of murtlap hair! How do you expect me to work with this rubbish?” he demanded.

Fernando’s grin was a little on the hard side, but he held up his hands. “Calm down—lemme see.” He picked up the brown glass bottle and held it up to the guttering light bulb over his head while Snape crossed his arms and glared at him.

“I know when my ingredients are quality—just as I know when they are utter trash,” Snape said frostily. “And if you want me to keep you in Pepperup and Wit-sharpening potions, you had better provide what I need for my own brewing.”

Fernando sighed, clearly having realized that he’d been found out yet again, and he scooped up the little bottles and trundled into the back of the store—where he kept his magical items. Snape stood impatiently out in the shop proper, under the cold, empty stares of the skulls that were hanging in his windows.

He turned at the rattle of the beaded curtain that separated the two halves of the shop; Fernando was back, clutching three new bottles of murtlap essence. Snape snatched them up the moment he set them down on the counter, taking care to inspect each one, holding them up to the light and uncorking them to smell for the strong, sour scent of properly pickled essence at the appropriate concentration.
They were passable, he supposed, and he tucked them in his pocket. “You don’t expect me to pay for this,” he said coldly.

Fernando looked like he wanted to argue, but he was half-afraid of Snape, for all the trouble he put him through, and so he just shook his head in the negative. “Good,” Snape said shortly. “And I’ll have your next batch of rust-repellent next week.” And he spun on his heel and left the shop.

He hurried home through the growing throngs of party-goers in Deaths-head masks, feeling progressively worse as he went. It was too crowded even for him to find a place where he could Apparate—although even if he could he probably wouldn’t. Few things in this world were more horrible than Apparating with a hangover.

He finally made it home; Calle del Sombras seemed eerily silent after the shouting and celebration across town, and it was with a rush of relief that he let himself back into the quiet dark of his house.

He went upstairs, his eyes hot and his head full of broken glass, and put his fresh murtlap essence away on his stock shelf. He paused, and then grabbed a vial of his own personal, more potent headache cure, and the bottle of the double-strength sleeping draught that he favoured when his head was too crowded with memories and regrets to sleep.

He trudged wearily into his bedroom, swallowing down the headache cure as he went, and then tiredly peeled off his shirt and kicked his shoes in the corner. He aimed a half-hearted Reparo at the pile of cogs slumped sadly by the skirting board, but there wasn’t enough force behind it to do much more than pull them into a jumbled wad of metal that was vaguely clock-shaped. He gave up after the first try and tossed his wand on the bedside table with a clatter. He didn’t bother undressing; he just took a long swallow of the sleeping draught and fell into his bed.

Snape woke up hot and sweaty and out of sorts. He sat up; his headache was gone and he was ravenous. He got up and went downstairs, still in his stocking feet and his undershirt (the air was nice and cool on his skin but felt odd on his atypically exposed throat) to go to the loo.

When he emerged and went into his kitchen to make himself a cup of tea and some lunch, he was shocked to see that by the clock on the wall, it was nearly eight at night, and a glance outside at the gathering darkness confirmed it. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so long, even under the effects of alcohol or a potion. He just stared at the clock for a moment, and then lit the stove under his kettle and opened the icebox.

It was getting pretty thin in there, honestly; he’d planned on waiting and going out for his weekly supplies on Friday morning, when the furore of the holiday had died down, and while he’d deliberately purchased enough for a few extra days on top of his regular rations, times were definitely lean.

It looked like he was back to his old staple, and with a sigh that was more weary than angry, he got out the cheese and the pickles and, after a moment’s thought, the margarine. He could at least have a hot meal, even if it was just a sandwich.

He put a pat of margarine in his skillet on the stove and laid out the bread for one sandwich—and then another. He was hungry, dammit—he hadn’t eaten all day. He put the sandwiches together in short order, the way his father had taught him, and he had them browning in the pan just as his kettle began to whistle. He flipped the sandwiches to toast on the other side as his tea steeped, and he pulled out a plate to receive them when they were done.

He set his meal out on the table and went out into the living room to retrieve the paper than he’d
take to having delivered, ever since Santiago moved away with his young wife. It cost extra, but it was a luxury that he felt he could afford these days, particularly if reading between the lines kept him abreast of any particular unpleasantness that would warrant active measures on his part to avoid.

He opened the door, and there was his paper, resting on the porch where it should be. It never got here early in the mornings, like a proper paper should, but it didn’t really matter—he preferred to read in the evenings anyway. He did have it stolen once or twice, until he’d put a mild hex on his doorstep. He’d been just sitting down to his breakfast one morning shortly after that and had heard a loud crackling pop and a howl of pain; he had thrown open his door to find some young hooligan flat on his arse in the street, dazed and faintly smoking.

He hadn’t seen the little miscreant since, and his paper was always waiting outside, no matter what the hour.

He picked up his paper and stood, but paused just before going inside, and he tilted his head. There was a strange quality to the light tonight, and the air was ghostly and still. He looked up at the pink-stained clouds streaking across the purple sky, and listened; beneath the distant sounds of the celebration in town he could hear nothing, just an ear-splitting silence ringing all around him.

Then he went back inside, shutting his door on the hot, humming energy of the night outside.

Snape sat and ate his usual quiet, solitary supper, reading the paper and doing his best to ignore the prickling feeling the heavy, stagnant atmosphere was raising on his neck. He didn’t like it, but he was used to feeling horrible—one way or another—on All Souls’ Day, so he did his best to ignore it.

When he was finished with his supper, he washed his dishes and put them away, as he always did, and then took his paper and his teacup into the living room. There was still a record sitting innocuously on the turntable where he’d left it the night before, and an empty whisky bottle was sitting on the table next to an overturned glass.

He looked at them, and then set his paper down and picked up the bottle and glass; binning the former and washing the latter so that he could put it away in the drinks cabinet; he put Zeppelin away while he was there, and then sat back down to finish his paper.

He was just contemplating trying his hand at the crossword when he heard it.

The wards that he’d erected around his house to keep out the racket from that contemptible pig in Number 15 were cast so that he could still hear anything out of the ordinary—like the heavy thud and wooden slam of someone kicking the door open next door.

He looked, up, wary, and eased his wand from his pocket. His wards kept out any sounds of speech, so all around him was silent as he listened.

And then the shooting started.

He was on his feet with the first gunshot—the familiar sound of Sands’s favourite weapon, the one that he had on or near him at all times, like some kind of security blanket (or a wand). Snape’s own wand was drawn and ready, and he was tense and waiting when the second shot rang out, a resounding BOOM that was nothing like any weapon he’d ever heard Sands use—that one had to have been from a shotgun.

The bloody fool had done it now! With a furious snarl, Snape raised his wand, ready to lower the side wards to find out just what in the devil was going on over there.

He never got the chance.
The spell that was on his lips emerged as nothing but a strangled shout as two men came crashing through his wall in a tangle of limbs and a hail of debris, shattering his lamp and plunging the room into darkness, sailing through the air and landing right in the middle of him. Snape was crushed beneath their flailing weight, and he heard his wand clatter to the floor and skitter away, out of sight and beyond his reach. Snape coughed painfully, the wind knocked out of him and his throat clogged with dust as he tried to claw his way out from under the combatants to find his wand. Sands was snarling curses; Snape could hear him laughing and swearing and baying threats to whomever he was fighting—and all the while the other man didn’t say a word.

_Dammit, where is my wand?_! Snape thought furiously as he struggled to free his legs from the tangle of fighting, flailing limbs that had him pinned to the floor. He kicked violently, and the two finally rolled away, off him and to the side, giving Snape the time and room he needed to heave himself across the floor and scramble through the pile of plaster and laths on the floor as he coughed and choked, desperately looking for his wand.

“Get out of here, Snape!” Sands suddenly bellowed. “Leave him to me! He’s mine!”

Snape bared his teeth, looking under his tables and chairs in the dust-filled darkness as Sands launched himself at the other man; they crushed his coffee table beneath the heavy fall of their combined weight, Snape barely managing to get out of their way, falling backwards as he threw himself out of their path. Snape saw stars as the back of his head collided with the end table; he heard a great grunt of pain as the more slender of the two forms was thrown to the side, slamming painfully into Snape’s drinks cabinet. The bottles inside rattled and clanked angrily, and his record player was thrown to the floor with the impact, snapping the arm in two and sending the turntable wheeling crazily across the floor before spinning to rest in the corner.

Dragging himself to his knees, Snape rubbed at his burning eyes full of grit and dust, trying to clear his ringing head, trying to hear, to _breathe_, when his arm was suddenly seized in a grip like iron and he was hauled to his feet as if he weighed nothing. He had the briefest glimpse a face shadowed behind long locks of dark hair before he was spun around like a rag doll, and a powerful arm snaked around his neck and shoulders and pinioned him in an impossibly strong grasp.

Snape grappled futilely with the arm around his neck—where was his wand, dammit?! But the powerful noose of bone and sinew just tightened around his neck, pulling him hard against the wall of muscled chest behind him, and he could hear his breath whistling down his throat as it squeezed tighter and tighter, constricting like a snake, crushing his windpipe and throttling any fight out of him.

He hissed with what little breath he had and went perfectly still when he felt the sudden, bruising press of the cold steel of the barrel of a gun jam painfully into his kidney.

“Where is he, Snape?” Sands howled, his voice wild and joyful and desperate and mad. “I want him! He’s _mine_!” He had staggered to his feet again, a gun in his hand. His face and hair were bone-white with plaster dust and his sunglasses were gone, the blank holes in his head yawning black in the darkness.

The gun dug harder into Snape’s back—and he got the message.

“He’s behind me,” Snape managed to wheeze.

Sands whirled to face him at the sound of his voice, his gun swinging upwards, and Snape found himself staring down a different kind of blank black eye, this one just as deadly.

“Where?” Sands barked, no longer smiling.
“Right behind me,” Snape rasped.

A low, impossibly smooth voice growled from behind him. “Put your gun down, Sands.”

Sands jerked as the man spoke, his gun flicking to the side, but still trained on his opponent—on Snape.

“Put it down,” said the man behind him with a voice like steel, his grip tightening again in the face of the barrel of the gun. “Let this go—or else you’ll have to kill your friend as well if you want to kill me.”

He’s no friend of mine! Snape wanted to shout, but now he barely had enough air to breathe, let alone speak.

“I don’t care what you do to him!” Sands roared. “Hiding behind other people, letting them take the fall—that’s what you do best, isn’t it! But not this time! Let him go and face me—look me in the eyes when I kill you!”

“But I’m already dead, Sands.” The voice was soft and cold and unwavering, like silk-wrapped stone. “And I’m finished. If you follow this, the only ones to die will be all those you care about—and then finally you. But I’ll have no more blood on my hands. You’ll kill them—you’ll kill him—yourself.”

“I don’t care about him!” Sands snarled, but Snape could see that the hand holding the gun was shaking. “You did this to me! I’m blind, you motherfucker!”

“Yes. You are blind—and you cannot see.”

Snape realized that half the reason his throat was burning and that his lungs were screaming for air was because he was holding his breath.

“Let go, Sands—leave me and mine alone, and I’ll do the same.” A pause. “Or kill us both—and we’ll see you in hell.”

Sands was taut and shaking, his gun aimed at Snape’s heart.

Snape hitched what little breath he had; his eyes were trying to close, but he forced them open, to look Death in the eye, staring down into those fathomless empty sockets glaring back at him, and the last thing he would see not those beloved green eyes of his Lily, but the empty holes in the face of his killer.

“Fuck,” Sands whispered.

His arm went limp, flopping at his side as the gun fell from his nerveless fingers, clattering amidst the debris and destruction of Snape’s house.

Sands staggered backwards, his feet catching in the piles of plaster heaped up around him, but caught himself before he stumbled into the wall. His hand came up, the fingers limp, slowly feeling their way along the cracked and splintered wall, back to the gaping hole that led back to his own house. Snape watched wordlessly as Sands crawled back through, nearly falling as his foot caught on the splintered laths, climbed the stairs, and, a few moments later, Snape heard the door to the bedroom slam shut.

Only then did his captor let him go.
Snape jerked away, sucking in a huge lungful of air as he whirled to face him, only to find the man holding up his hands placatingly, his gun pointed harmlessly skyward.

He wasn’t very big, given his strength—only about as tall as Snape himself. His hair fell in dark curtains around his face, and his eyes were dark and intense. His face was expressionless, and he and Snape regarded each other in silence.

The other man spoke first. “I apologize,” he said quietly. Snape would have voiced his incredulity if his throat hadn’t hurt so much. “It was never my intention to bring anyone else into this,” the man went on.

A hoarse, barking laugh wrung itself out of Snape’s throat. “But he always finds a way to involve me in his affairs,” he grated bitterly.

The man inclined his head briefly. “All the same, I did not wish you ill—nor do I now.” He looked up, and their gazes met, eye to dark eye, and Snape stared into them.

“I am finished with fighting,” the man said. “I have paid for my freedom with my own flesh—and that of my wife and daughter. I want no more bloodshed—only peace.”

And Snape looked at him, looked into him, and he saw.

“I understand,” Snape said quietly.

And he did.

The man—the mariachi—nodded once. “Then I would once again ask for your forgiveness for this,” he said gesturing to the disaster that was Snape’s living room, and Snape nodded curtly, “and I will bid you farewell.”

Then he turned and walked to the door; Snape followed him, and they looked at each other for a moment more, and when the man held out a scarred and dusty hand, Snape took it.

The mariachi’s hand dropped back down to his side; he turned and walked out, the chains on his trousers jingling merrily in the stillness of the street. Snape stood in the open doorway and watched, watched as he knelt down and tucked his shotgun away in the guitar case that rested on the porch next door before snapping it closed and hefting it onto his shoulder. He reached forward and pulled Sands’s door shut before turning and walking away, walking down the dusty cobblestones of Calle del Sombras, silhouetted against the horizon with his guitar case in hand.

Snape couldn’t find his shirt.

He was sure that he’d tossed it in the general direction of his desk chair yesterday morning when he’d gone back to sleep after visiting Fernando, but this morning when he’d gotten up, it was nowhere to be found.

Scowling, he turned back to his chest of drawers after scanning the empty floor again and thumbing through the thin stack of shirts in the second drawer, counting them—no, one was definitely missing. That was unacceptable—he didn’t have a vast wardrobe to begin with, nor the money to be constantly replacing things.

Annoyed, he pulled another from his drawer, sliding his hands into the sleeves and working it up over his shoulders so he could button it up.
A flicker of movement in the doorway caught his eye, and he jerked around—and there was that cat.

He was standing just by the edge of the doorjamb, his body tense, his eyes fixed and watching him where he stood. Snape glowered down at him. “Don’t you dare come in here,” he said severely. “It’s bad enough that you’ve just made yourself at home downstairs—you can just stay out of my bedroom.”

The cat, of course, ignored him, and without warning ran like quicksilver along the edge of the room and shot under his bed.

Snape didn’t even bother cursing—it wasn’t as if he expected any less from the little bastard, so he just blew an exasperated breath through his nose and went back to getting dressed as usual.

At least, until he heard the noise.

The chorus of tiny, squeaky mews coming from under his bed.

He froze, utterly disbelieving, and then was beside his bed in two steps and dropped to his knees.

There he was, curled up as neat as you please in a nest made from Snape’s missing shirt.

He was a she.

And she was nursing two kittens under his bed.

He stared, utterly appalled; the cat, obviously not at all pleased at having him so near her spawn, laid her ears back and hissed. *Hissed* at him, in his own room, under his own bed, with *kittens*.

That was *it*.

“Don’t you hiss at me, you flea-bitten *bitch*!” he snapped, and stood furiously up and stormed out of the room, his shirt half-unbuttoned and fluttering around his waist.

*Of all the useless, miserable, ungrateful, deceitful*… He stomped down the stairs, passing angrily through the living room (that he’d spent all night putting back in order, and it was a testament to both his patience and skill that there was now virtually no sign of the mayhem that had taken place the previous night) and into his kitchen for a cup of tea, slamming the kettle on the stove and yanking open his cabinets for a teacup.

*Of all the unadulterated gall.* That wretched thing had *kittens*. In his *house*. Right under his bloody *bed*.

Snarling, he jerked a teabag out of its paper wrapping so forcefully that he tore off the tab stapled to the end of the string, and it was with a hiss of frustrated fury that he just threw the whole thing into his teacup.

Oh, this morning was already shaping up to be just *splendid*.

And, of course, he jinxed himself with that thought, because in the next second there came a knock on his door.

*Oh, for God’s sake!* With an inarticulate snarl, he strode across the room and jerked the door open.

“What?!” he bellowed, ready to send whoever it was packing post haste—and then realized who was standing on his step.
It was Santiago.

The boy still cringed when he first opened the door, as he had since Snape had first spoken to him five years ago, but he straightened up quickly. “I—good morning, sir,” he said.

“What the devil are you doing here?” Snape demanded.

Santiago didn’t answer, but the furtive way his eyes cut to the side told Snape all he needed to know, and he rolled his eyes in exasperation. “May I come in?” the boy asked.

*Impudent wretch.* Snape grunted and went back into his kitchen, where his kettle was just beginning to boil; he left the door open, and he heard Santiago follow, closing it behind him.

He poured the water in his teacup and stared at it, watched as the water soaked the paper ensembling the tealeaves and darkened to amber as it steeped, and only then did he realize that he’d never buttoned up his shirt. God knew what Santiago had thought of that; he angrily cinched up the remaining buttons, but didn’t bother to tuck the tails in. Then he picked up his teacup and turned; Santiago had sat gingerly down at his kitchen table, and Snape scowled at him.

“How—how have you been, sir?” he asked.

Snape eyed him; even if he had the desire to do so, he’d never been good at exchanging mindless pleasantries, so he put a stop to it by saying, “I’ll ask you again, Mr. Santiago—what are you doing here? You don’t expect me to believe that you came all this way to swap inane platitudes with me when you have a new wife at home.”

“Well, no,” he admitted, and then brightened. “But I did want to tell you—I—I mean, we’re going to have a baby!”

Snape raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Was there a shotgun involved in this wedding?” he asked dryly.

Santiago reddened, but he was still beaming. “No, no—nothing like that. I mean, we didn’t expect one so soon, but we just—”

Snape snorted roughly. “I am well acquainted with the manner by which children come about, Mr. Santiago,” he sneered, “so I’ll thank you to keep the details to yourself.” He swirled the teabag in his cup with his spoon before sarcastically asking, “When do you expect the blessed event?”

“January,” he said proudly. Snape shook his head as the boy went on. “I did want to ask you if you had anything to take for swelling, though—Belicia’s ankles hurt her terribly.”

“You are well aware that I do,” Snape said coldly. “You’ve spoken to me and seen what I sell enough to know exactly what I have for sale. Now, why don’t you stop this poor attempt at misdirection and tell me why you are here?”

Santiago wilted a little in his seat. “Well, I—” he paused, and worried at his lip for a moment, and then went on. “I was worried about Señor, sir.”

Snape rubbed a tired hand on his forehead as the boy kept going. “I—it’s Day of the Dead, and Señor—he doesn’t like that day—sure it was when—” he pointed two fingers vaguely at his eyes, “—and he—I was worried that he was going to—do something,” he finished lamely.

Snape growled in his throat. “Oh, he did something, all right,” he said, and Santiago looked up, alarmed. “The great idiot got into a huge fight and smashed right through my living room wall!”
Santiago swung his head around to the living room and then looked back at Snape, his eyes wide. “Sir, was it—was it El Mariachi?” he asked hoarsely.

“It was someone with a guitar case,” Snape said dismissively, but Santiago’s mouth dropped open in horror and he bolted out of his seat.

“What happened? Did he—is he—?”

“Sit down,” said Snape crossly. “Sands is fine. The guitar player—” he paused and scowled, “—subdued Sands and then left.” He jerked his head to the side, in the direction of Sands’s house. “As far as I know, he’s still holed up in there—and he’s perfectly all right.”

Santiago let escape a huge breath, sinking back into his chair and leaning his forehead down on the table. “Gracias a Dios,” he muttered, and Snape rolled his eyes. Santiago looked up. “El Mariachi—he’s a legend in México,” he said softly. “The greatest fighter there ever was. And Señor, he—I think he wanted to kill him. I don’t know why—I think it was about his eyes, but he—no one can kill El Mariachi—no one who crosses him lives. And I was—I was afraid that El Mariachi would come and kill him.”

“Well,” said Snape dryly, “fortunately for Sands, this mariachi of yours was feeling generous and merely put him in his place, rather than take things to that extreme.” He scowled. “They simply decided to destroy my house—again.”

Santiago raised his eyebrows and looked behind him. “It looks fine now,” he said, his voice neutral. Fishing the sodden teabag out of his cup, Snape glared at him. “I’m very handy with home repairs,” he said icily, and turned to toss the bag in the bin.

“And gunshot wounds?”

Snape turned and regarded the boy with narrowed eyes. “And what is that supposed to mean?” he asked dangerously.

The boy didn’t shrink under his glare this time, but rather gazed evenly back at him. “That day in the café,” he said. “When Señor shot that guy who was trying to steal his wallet.”

Snape stared at him.

“You said he just nicked that little girl,” Santiago went on, his voice serious and his eyes bright, “but he didn’t. I saw it. She was shot to pieces when you took her in that room—and when you came out, she wasn’t.”

Snape felt his stomach tying itself in a knot. He had missed. He would have hit himself if he could have; in lieu of that, he vented his fury at the idiot in front of him, crossing the floor and grabbing him by the collar and jerking him forward. “Who have you spoken to about that?” he demanded, shaking him.

The nosey brat was not cowed; he just shook his head. “No one, sir—not even Señor.”

Snape released him, marginally relieved, at least with regards to Santiago, but still furious. Just how many others had he missed in his years here? That kind of negligence was a sure-fire way to get him caught by the wrong people—by Potter, if the interfering little ape took it into his head to show up again.

He glowered at the boy, who just looked steadily back. “How did you do that, sir?” Santiago asked.
With a weary sigh, Snape leaned back against his worktop. “Magic,” said he tiredly.

“…Really?”

“Really.”

Santiago looked at him, biting his lip, and then nodded. “Okay, sir.” Snape looked up, incredulous. “I believe you,” the boy said simply.

Never in his life had he met a Muggle who just believed it.

Then again, with everything that Santiago had seen from Sands, a little magical healing was probably not all that outlandish. “I’ll thank you to continue to keep that to yourself,” he said severely, and Santiago grinned.

“Don’t worry—I will,” he said, and Snape snorted.

“I find it hard to believe that you’ve kept anything from your precious ‘Señor’,” he sneered, and went on before the boy could say anything, “but you needn’t let your conscience bother you on the front—he knows as well.”

Santiago chuckled, a little wistfully. “Well, Señor can be pretty smart,” he said, and when Snape gave a rude snort, Santiago grinned ruefully at him and added, “When he isn’t being stupid.”

The boy sat silently for a while after that, as Snape drank his tea. It was a few minutes before he spoke again. “Don Greene, sir?” he asked tentatively, picking at the wood grain of the table. Snape looked at him. “Do you think—that maybe you could—sort of, keep an eye on Señor for me?” he asked.

Snape sighed. Why did it always fall to him to look after that idiot? “Mr. Santiago,” he said wearily, “rest assured that I will not sit idly by and let harm come to anyone if it is in my power to prevent it—and that even includes that pinheaded Yank next door.”

And Santiago smiled at him. “Thank you, sir,” he said earnestly.

Snape shook his head. “Why on earth you feel compelled to stand by that wastrel is beyond me,” he informed the boy.

The boy just shrugged. “He’s Señor,” he said, and Snape couldn’t argue, could only tiredly pinch the bridge of his nose, because once upon a time he’d used a remarkably similar argument with his mother about why it was all right to spend time with a Muggle-born, and a Gryffindor at that.

“Well—I’d probably better be on my way—since I know Señor is all right,” Santiago said as he stood to go. “And you too, sir,” he added, and it didn’t sound like an afterthought. “Oh—and while I’m here—do you need me to go out and pick up anything for you? For old time’s sake,” he added hastily at Snape’s look.

“It’s Thursday, Mr. Santiago,” Snape told him.

The boy just shrugged. “I’m here,” he offered. Snape snorted again, and then turned to retrieve his list from its usual place on the blackboard.

“Here,” he said, giving it to him with the necessary cash. Then he added a few extra notes. “Pick up something for that nitwit next door as well, will you? He’s more than likely to sit in there and starve if someone doesn’t feed him—he already drove off the boy he hired to replace you. And I’ll have
that potion for swelling for you when you get back.”

Santiago beamed. “Yes, sir—thank you, sir,” he said, and he dashed out the door.

Snape shook his head and stood, taking his empty teacup back to the sink to wash it and put it away. He needed to get to work; he had potions to brew for tomorrow’s day in the square.

He paused at the foot of the stairs, suddenly remembering the unwanted gift he’d found in his bedroom this morning, and his brows lowered like rain clouds. With a series of angry mutters, he ducked into the kitchen and retrieved one of his more tattered tea towels from the linen cupboard before going angrily up to his workroom. There he retrieved an old cardboard box originally destined for the rubbish heap and tossed the towel in it.

He met the cat in the hallway as he came out, and he fixed her with a fiery glare before sweeping past the deceitful mongrel and back into his bedroom. The cat, of course, followed him back in, but he ignored her and knelt down beside his bed and grabbed a fistful of his crumpled shirt, tugging out into the light.

The wiggling contents of the shirt started howling immediately, their little pink maws opening wide while the slits of their eyes remained tightly shut. Their ill-begotten mother was hovering around them, standing in the way, trying to stand over them—not hissing or clawing, at least, but definitely making things difficult. “Get off,” Snape told her crossly, and went about untangling the miserable rat creatures from his shirt. Their tiny white claws stuck in the material, and their wobbly legs and curly tails seemed to go everywhere; he finally managed to get the black one off his shirt, and he stuffed it unceremoniously in the box. The mother went in after it, and as such his job of wrestling his clothes out of the grasp of the tortoiseshell and white one was considerably easier, and it soon joined the rest of its wretched family.

“There,” Snape spat at them, shoving the box and its mewing contents roughly back under the bed, clutching his shirt, which was stained with all manner of ungodly animal filth. “You stay out of my clothes! And I’ll thank you to keep your whelps out of my sight for the duration and have them out of here as quickly as possible!” he snapped at his dubious houseguest, who just looked back at him over the lip of the box.

Grumbling, he stood up and stalked into his workroom. He had potions to brew.

And he had to launder his shirt.

November came and went, plodding along much like all the months before it, and now Christmas was fast approaching. Poinsettias were the order of the day again, and Inez’s flower cart was no exception. He’d found her swimming in a sea of the red and green plants when he came to the square this early this morning to make his delivery.

For nearly a year—ever since he’d cured her father’s illness—the stupid girl had refused to accept any payment when he came to her cart to procure flowers for his brewing. He’d glared at her, shouted at her, levelled all manner of dire threats—and was duly ignored. He had a good mind to put the brat over his knee for such disrespect. Barring that course of action, he’d decided to beat her at her own game. She wouldn’t take direct payment? Fine. He’d go behind her back—with the added bonus of ridding himself once and for all of both toting around all that horrid cosmetic claptrap and dealing with the empty-headed clientele who purchased it.

He’d pulled her aside one day and given her a proposition—she would provide the flowers, and then he would provide her with creams and bath salts and what have you for her to sell alongside her
flowers so he wouldn’t have to, and he would give her a cut of the sales for her time.

And if her cut happened to cover the cost of the flowers in addition to a salary for her work in selling the stuff, well, then, that was that, wasn’t it?

She’s agreed, of course—the daft little idiot seemed to think his word was direct from God himself these days, and he hated it, but he wasn’t above using to his advantage. So he’d dropped his stocks of creams and whatnot off on her and congratulated himself on a job well done.

And his plan had gone just swimmingly—right up to the point where it backfired horribly.

Whether it was simply because he was so off-putting as to run off potential customers for that particular humiliating line of his work, or that Inez was just that much better a salesman, the sales of his cosmetic endeavours had skyrocketed, and he’d found himself buried under the demand, his standard mixtures and special orders alike, almost to the point of being unable to keep up with his usual medicinal brews.

He knew that somehow this was all that stupid girl’s fault.

But it was hard to complain in the face of the stacks of money she would hand over to him twice a week for what really wasn’t very difficult work. So he’d had no choice but to scale up his workroom and expand his business. He was so pressed for time, space, and materials that he’d broken down and bought a new cauldron, repaired his window boxes in the dark of night and filled them with pots of aloe, sea buckthorn, and jojoba, and was paying two of Inez’s little sisters to label the jars and pots and bottles of whatever he made. And if that wasn’t enough, Inez had been hinting that she might like to rent the now empty building that had once housed a pottery seller’s next to the café, retiring her handcart in favour of opening a store to sell all of the ridiculous things he was now making.

God help him, he’d just delivered for sale his first batch of shampoo.

He didn’t think it was possible for him to sink any lower than this—but he didn’t doubt his ability to find a way.

He met a herd of boys on bicycles coming the other direction down the street as he walked home; they parted around him like a wave breaking on a shoal and wheeled by with a chorus of, “Hola, Don Greene!” and were gone before he could reply (if he’d wanted to—which he didn’t).

He abruptly turned the corner a street earlier than his usual route to avoid Señora Macias; the woman had an endless list of improbable ailments, a new one every week, and she always felt compelled to regale him with every excruciating detail and beg him for something to relieve her agonies. He’d taken to mixing up placebos just for her—which always worked, of course.

Halfway home he bumped into Tajo Ceres, who insisted on stopping him to chat about some nonsense about his family that Snape didn’t care about, but he dutifully pretended to listen, because the man had been frequenting his bench on weekends for over two years now, and it wouldn’t do to upset his regulars.

He finally managed to escape to the relative quiet of his own street—relative, because there was someone sitting on his porch, and that someone turned out to be Santiago.

Snape sighed wearily. The boy had been popping in every other week or so, to ask how his beloved Señor was, what he’d been doing, and what Snape had heard from him, and every time Snape’s answer was the same—nothing. Snape had seen neither hide nor hair of his erstwhile neighbour since the Day of the Dead. Which was fine by him, really, except for the fact that Santiago kept
pestering him.

“Young man,” he said severely as the boy jumped up and Snape moved around him to unlock his door, “don’t you have anything better to do than snuffle after that useless imbecile? Such as tending to your wife, perhaps?”

Santiago reddened and kicked the ground, and Snape sneered at him as he went inside and the boy followed. “Actually, she says I’m driving her crazy,” he confessed sheepishly. “She’s out to here—” he held his hand out a ridiculous distance from his stomach, “—and I want her to take it easy, but she won’t, and when I try to help her with anything, she just yells at me for smothering her.”

“As you got yourself into this mess, I have no pity,” Snape said breezily as he moved into his kitchen for his morning tea and to think about making himself some breakfast. He was eager to change the subject, because ever since Santiago had taken to visiting, somehow the little nuisance always managed to twist the conversation back to his incipient arrival, and he seemed to want to vent his spleen concerning all his hopes and fears and worries about impending fatherhood—as if Snape knew anything about it (or wanted to).

While Snape heated his water, Santiago sat down at the table and babbled about inconsequential nonsense; Snape listened with half an ear.

When his tea was steeping, crossed the room and joined Santiago at the table in the opposite chair. They sat in a relatively comfortable silence before Santiago broke it with his usual question as to whether or not Snape had heard anything from Sands.

Snape rolled his eyes before fixing the brat with a glare. “If I had I would have told you,” he informed him, and Santiago slumped.

“I hope he’s okay in there,” he said quietly.

Snape snorted. “Mr. Santiago, I should have thought by now that you would have realized that Sands specializes in looking after himself.”

Santiago gave a small smile; Snape just harrumphed and took a sip of his tea. It really was horrid stuff, what he could buy in this country, but to his disgust he was actually getting used to it. He supposed that after nearly seven years he should be.

A series of small, scrabbling thumps caught his attention; he looked up, and scowled as he saw those two miserable little monsters that had taken up residence under his bed had ventured out, as they were wont to do these days—in clear violation of their contract—and had tumbled down the stairs and were rolling out into the living room, apparently locked in mortal combat.

They came to rest in a fuzzy, wriggling pile on the floor and practically bounced to their feet; the tortoiseshell bounded gracelessly off onto the living room rug to start a fight with the leg of the coffee table, while the black one puffed up to twice its normal size and hurtled into the kitchen, spitting and leaping at its own shadow.

Santiago raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know you had cats,” he remarked.

“I don’t!” Snape replied forcefully. Unfortunately, the black one just then decided that now would be the perfect time to climb his leg, the little bastard, and it was with a growl of annoyance that he shook it off. It landed on the tile in a tangled heap of tiny legs and round belly and wiggled a moment before sorting itself out, and then sprang back up and took refuge under the table before pouncing on Santiago’s shoelace.
The impudent twerp chuckled and scooped up the hairy little fiend and started playing with it. “Don’t encourage it!” Snape snapped. “I want them gone as soon as they’re old enough to leave their mother!”

Santiago looked up at him. “Meaning the mother stays, then?” he asked blandly, and Snape was an inch from cursing the insolent piglet senseless.

“It catches rats—that’s all,” he said grumpily.

Santiago shrugged. “If you say so,” he said, putting the cat back on the floor, where it chased after its wayward sibling.

“I do!” Snape said fiercely, and the smart-arsed prick had the gall to smirk at him.

But then he sighed, and his expression turned morose, and he looked over Snape’s shoulder at the wall he shared with Sands with a dejected expression, and Snape couldn’t take it anymore.

He stood up abruptly and went to his blackboard, snatching up his grocery list. “Here,” he said, striding back to the table and thrusting the list into the young man’s hand, counting out several crisp notes from his pocketbook. “That’s my weekly order—now run along and fetch it, and take your black cloud of gloom with you,” he instructed him.

The boy sighed miserably but nodded, and Snape irritably ushered him out. Then he spun on his heel and went back into the kitchen.

He kept the paper bags from his groceries tucked neatly beside the icebox; into one of these waiting receptacles he put his eggs, bacon, bread, butter, and that old jar of raspberry jam, and he tossed in a teabag as an afterthought. Then he gathered it up in his arms, the milk clutched in his free hand, and he marched outside.

He crossed the way and stepped up on the stoop to Number 15 and beat loudly on the door. “Open up, Andrews,” he sneered through the door. “I know you’re in there.”

There was no answer—not that he expected one—and so he tried to door handle and found it locked, and after a swift look up and down the street for anyone watching, he muttered a quick Alohamora and the door sprang open obediently, and Snape went inside.

As he suspected, there was Sands. He had no trousers on, of course—truthfully, Snape might have been mildly concerned if he had. There was a forest of empty tequila bottles standing silently on the coffee table; the end table was crushed and shoved in the corner, no doubt after his bout with the mariachi.

A dark blindfold was wrapped tight around his head; it gave Snape pause for a moment, because he’d never seen Sands like that, but he put it out of his mind and marched right up to the man.

Sands did not look up. As he neared, Snape got a whiff of the man and wrinkled his nose. “When did you last bathe?” he demanded.

Sands didn’t reply, just sat staring blindly at Snape’s shoes. With a snort of disgust he shook his wand from his sleeve and Vanished the bottles on the table so he could set down his burden. “Go and wash yourself at once, you self-absorbed swine, and stop wallowing here in your own filth.” With a muttered spell, the smashed remains of the end table danced to life and came together into their original whole, scooting itself to where it belonged at Sands’s left, and a second spell did the same to the shattered lamp that had once before and now again sat atop it. Snape sneered down at the immobile lump of flesh in front of him before picking up the bag and taking it into the kitchen.
Sands had been eating the food that Santiago had been buying for him, no doubt, and had at least been cleaning up after himself, but his normally well-stocked icebox was woefully bare at the moment. Snape glanced in at Sands, who was still sitting where he was, before Summoning a frying pan from wherever it was hidden in this kitchen. It flew out of the cabinet at his command, the handle smacking into his hand, and he set it down on the range. He used his wand to light it, as he had no idea where Sands kept his matches, and he dropped a pat of margarine in to melt.

The coffee maker was an arcaneally modern Muggle device, but the buttons were clearly labelled, and after a bit of fumbling and dredging up a foggy memory or two of the buttons and switches on the strange alarm clocks in the Muggle hotels that he’d passed through on this way across Mexico, he managed to start it brewing. By then the butter was melting and sizzling, and so he cracked an egg into the pan to cook.

A soft sound alerted him to movement in the other room; he looked up in time to see Sands disappearing into the bathroom. With a small huff of satisfaction, he turned back to the stove.

As he was filling a mug with water for his tea, he heard the tell-tale rattle of the pipes indicating that the shower was running, and by the time that he’d slid the eggs out onto their plates and was cooking the bacon, he heard Sands emerge and pad up the stairs.

He’d set the table with coffee and milk for Sands, and the jam and the butter were sitting where they usually did on his own table, when Sands reappeared. He was clean, his long hair tucked wetly behind his ears, his familiar sunglasses perched on his nose. He still had no trousers on; one step at a time, Snape told himself as he set a plate at each place, and then retrieved his steeping cup of tea and sat down.

He was hungry, so Snape started in immediately. Sands just sat there. Snape ignored him, buttering his toast but opting out of the jam—he hated raspberry seeds in his teeth. He’d eaten half of his breakfast before Sands moved.

One of his small, pale hands came up and went unerringly towards the slice of bacon on his plate. He picked it up, raised it slowly to his mouth, and took a bite, chewing it slowly.

Then he spat it out on the floor. “That sucks,” he said flatly.

Snape snorted. “Then make it yourself, ingrate,” he sneered, Vanishing the gob of half-chewed meat on the tiles.

“Fuck you,” said Sands tetchily, but he ate the rest of his bacon anyway.

The rest of the meal was silent, but not uncomfortably so, and when they were finished Snape went about tidying the dishes and packing up his food to take back with him.

As he passed to leave, Sands spoke again. “You’d better give me real bacon tomorrow.”

Snape snorted but didn’t answer, just let himself out. And there just down the street was Mr. Santiago, his arms full of provisions, gaping at him.

Snape gestured him over; he came so quickly that he nearly fell flat on his face, and Snape would have taken it out of his hide if he smashed his food. As he didn’t, Snape simply said, “Give me those,” taking the bags from him, and adding, “And if you want news about that useless sack of dung in there, go and ask him yourself, and stop bothering me about him, because I’m sure I don’t care.”

Santiago’s face had lit up absurdly at his words, and Snape had barely finished speaking before he
had dashed around him, thundering up the steps and into the house, slamming the door in his haste. Snape huffed to himself, shaking his head, and then went back home.

Snape finally managed to shut the door on Señora Tolentino, and he regarded the fruity, sugary ring of *rosca de reyes* that she’d pushed on him with a jaundiced eye. The woman seemed to have made it her personal mission to harass him at every opportunity since last summer, when he’d brewed a potion to rid her son of the croup (apparently, she’d heard from Ignacio Rosas that Snape was quite the doctor—the big-mouthed bastard). It hadn’t been a very bad case; just keeping him in a warm room with the kettle on and a mustard plaster on his chest would have been enough. But as the woman seemed prone to hysterics, and given that draught was inexpensive and easy to brew, Snape had been more than willing to make the potion, not so much to cure her boy, but just to shut the woman up.

It didn’t work. After the boy’s sudden recovery—no doubt due to the more mundane care instructions that he’d given as much as to the potion—the idiot woman had got it in her head that Snape had brought her son back from death’s door, and nothing he’d said had managed to convince her otherwise. Now she was always stopping him in the street and giving him food and telling her friends to buy what he sold—he didn’t mind that last one, but the first two were intolerable. And now she had the effrontery to track him down and corner him in his own home—was there nowhere he could get some bloody peace and quiet?

What in the hell was he going to do with all this bread, anyway? Because it wasn’t just that—he was still slowly eating his way through the mountain of dumplings that Inez Rosas had dumped on him when she and her parents had come calling Boxing Day—the second time they had made an unannounced visit on December 26th since he’d mended her father’s kidneys, and a visit that looked distressingly as though it was going to become a permanent Christmas fixture.

He’d been forced to sit and listen impatiently to their twaddle about what their children were doing, how high sales were at Inez’s cart, how much the extra income from her and her sisters’ work with Snape’s lotions was helping, how well Rosas was feeling, and how clever Snape was.

It was horrible, and the only way he’d managed to get rid of them was by telling them that he had something simmering upstairs that he had to get back to—a blatant fabrication, but not one he was above using.

Inez felt it necessary to tell him before she left that her young man had finally proposed—and high time, too; she’d been seeing him for nearly two years, two long years during which she had bent his ear with all manner of details that he’d have been perfectly happy never knowing—and had rather rattled him by telling him that while he’d be getting a proper wedding invitation in the post, that she wanted to ask him to come in person.

He’d said that he would come just to get her out of there, and had hoped to spend the rest of his holiday season in relative peace, but no, a few days later Santiago had descended on Sands, with his new wife waddling along behind him (and as it happened, he hadn’t been exaggerating about how far her stomach was distended), and had then taken it upon himself to invite himself next door to introduce his blushing bride, and Snape had spent an exceedingly unpleasant hour playing host to the little idiot and his wife.

Said wife—Belicia, her name was—was a pretty but surprisingly level-headed girl. Snape wondered how the hare-brained Santiago boy had managed to con her into marrying him (however he’d managed, he was now clearly wrapped around her little finger—the boy seemed to enjoy a subordinate role in life). She was also an impertinent cow, as evidenced by the fact that when he had informed Santiago that his adored employer had all the brains of a pickled toad, she had given him a
pointed look and blandly delivered the old “birds of a feather” saw, and when he’d glowered at her, she’d only smirked.

At least he had been left alone on his birthday, so he could mourn the fact that he was forty-seven bloody years old, living in a hovel in Mexico, and busking on a street corner, little better than an organ grinder with a trained monkey.

But then the Tolentino woman had ferreted him out to deliver a belated Three Kings Day gift only three days later. So much for his safe haven.

With a tired sigh he went into the kitchen to deposit the bread in his icebox after putting a preserving charm on it. He supposed he could have it with breakfast or something in order to get rid of it—maybe he’d feed it to Sands.

Something soft bunted his ankle, and he looked down to find one of those wretched cats twining about his feet, and he glared at it. Muttering, he went to his pantry and reached inside, coming back with a tin of cat food.

When he’d taken his weekly groceries from Santiago and back into the kitchen that morning after he’d gone to see Sands, he’d been outraged to find that the presumptuous little cur had taken it upon himself to purchase provisions for the miserable animals as well. He’d had a good mind to chuck a can of the stuff right at the back of the sorry bastard’s head when he left Sands’s house.

But he hadn’t, and now here he was, feeding the worthless pack of freeloaders.

The other rotten little beast had appeared from nowhere at the sound of the popping top of the can and was now yowling threadily at his feet in chorus with its sibling. Their mangy mother was there too, but at least she had the good manners to wait to the side.

He roughly dropped the plate on the floor; the cats were on it like a shot, gobbling up their shares of the disgusting food that he’d doled out for them. Snape scowled down at them. The minute he saw a rat in his house, all three of them were gone, and for good. They were not his pets—they had to earn their keep. All he’d wanted was not to have to share his space with rodents—he should have specified that he didn’t want to share it with hairy little pests of any kind. In retrospect, the rats were almost preferable—no rat had ever crept into his bed while he slept and tucked itself under his chin so that he woke up with a mouthful of dander.

Snape started where he stood as there came a sudden furious pounding on his front door; the cats were startled too, snapping their heads up and looking warily at the door, their ears quivering, before deciding that the noise wasn’t worth their time and going back to their breakfasts.

The pounding came again, this time accompanied by an irate voice bellowing, “Greene! Open up! Now!”

Sands. It was with a sense of mild curiosity that Snape left the kitchen and walked through his living room, opening the door to find out what all the hullabaloo was about—and what could have possibly happened to blast Sands outside for the first time in months.

There was Sands, clean, dressed, and bespectacled, standing on Snape’s front step—and he was hopping mad.

“If you know what that little shit did?!” he roared in Snape’s face without preamble, throwing his arm behind him.

And standing there in the street was Mr. Santiago, his much slimmer wife next to him, and he was
holding a swaddled blanket in his arms.

“Had a baby?” Snape asked dryly.

Sands snarled, nothing coming out of his mouth but a series of inarticulate sputters. Santiago stepped forward, beaming, holding out the bundle for Snape’s inspection. Inside the blankets Snape could see a wrinkled little face of an angry red peeping out at him, a tuft of black fuzz poking out over its forehead.

“Don Greene,” said Santiago proudly, “I want you to meet my son. Sheldon Jeffrey Santiago.”

Snape took one look at the boy, saw that he was serious, and then one look at Sands, who was bristling like hedgehog.

And he laughed.

It hurt, bubbling rustily through his ragged throat, but Merlin, did it feel good.

“You think this is funny, you turd?” Sands demanded, livid.

“No,” Snape corrected, smirking. “I think this is hilarious.”

Sands bared his teeth but apparently couldn’t think of anything cutting enough to say and just pushed past Snape into the house, stomping inside in high dudgeon to throw himself angrily in the armchair.

Santiago and young Belicia followed in after him, and Snape closed the door behind them and crossed the room to stand near Sands’s chair while the happy couple took the sofa.

Sands probably would have been pouting mightily if he wasn’t so incensed. As it were, he was sitting stiffly with his arms crossed, quivering with indignation and refusing to acknowledge anyone. Snape raised an amused eyebrow in his direction before saying to Santiago, “You do realized that you have cursed that boy to be pantsed in the schoolyard for every day of his life?”

Sands shot up a fist; his middle finger popped out as if spring-loaded.

Belicia smirked up at Snape from where she sat. “I tried to change Jesús’s mind, but he wouldn’t listen.”

“That’s because that little shit never listens!” Sands hollered. “What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded in Santiago’s direction. “Oh, that’s right—you weren’t!”


“Fuck you and the horse you rode on,” Sands said sourly, and Snape snorted.

Belicia was looking amusedly at Sands. Santiago’s attention was taken entirely up by his new son; he was babbling ridiculous nonsense at him, and Snape could practically hear the baby’s IQ dropping as a result. Then he looked up. “We want you to be godfather too, Señor,” he said to Sands.

This was apparently just too much for Sands. “I’m not being anything to that little shit!” he bawled.

Snape snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous; you know full well that he’ll be over at your house every other day, learning swearwords and drinking games from dear old Uncle Andrews,” he sneered from behind him.
Sands turned his furious face to Snape. “Yeah, and all their girls can come over here and learn how to be nagging old bitches from their Uncle Greene,” he shot back.

Snape snorted again; now Sands was pouting, his anger apparently burnt out in that last explosion. Belicia was shaking her head tiredly but smiling, and Santiago looked up from the baby and caught Snape’s eye, and he winked.

Sands kicked his booted feet up on the coffee table as if he owned the place, spilling the newspaper off onto the floor with a *shush*. “It’s lunchtime, Greene,” he said pointedly. “Chiclet, go next door and get that hamburger meat you bought yesterday.”

And Santiago dutifully passed his son to his wife and scuttled out the door, while Sands loudly complained this chair had a sprung seat, that the house smelled like a bordello—had Snape just become a parfumeur, or had he finally come out?—that Snape had better make his hamburger with mustard like it was supposed to be, and could it get any colder in here?

Snape sighed in annoyance; it seemed things were back to normal. He heaved himself up from his bookcase, going into his kitchen to see what he had to feed the hordes; maybe they’d put a dent in all those sweets he had.

Santiago thundered back into the house, his hands full of meat and lettuce and bread. His wife exchanged them for her son and followed Snape into the kitchen, where she came to stand next to him, making patties from the meat as he sliced the cheese and the tomatoes. The sound of Santiago’s laughter floated in from the living room; Sands was loudly venting his outrage at the merest suggestion that he might hold his namesake. Belicia chuckled and looked over at Snape, her dark eyes twinkling, and he snorted in return.

He supposed he could get used to this place.

Chapter End Notes

The character of Belicia was also taken from/inspired by OUaTiM; she’s the young girl in the pink blouse collecting money from El’s guitar case in Guitar Town at the end.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Dennis Creevey goes home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I am home, Mr. Creevey,” Snape said firmly. “I have a job and a life here, both of which are infinitely preferable to anything I ever had back in England, and certainly more appealing than what awaits me should I return.”

Dennis opened his mouth to protest, and Snape cut him off. “Don’t contradict me, Creevey,” he said dangerously, and Dennis shut his mouth with a snap.

Snape moved across the room to stand in front of him, where he regarded Dennis with those dark, unfathomable eyes that he still remembered from so long ago. “The world loves a dead hero, Mr. Creevey,” said Snape, crossing his arms over his chest as he loomed over him. “He’s conveniently out of the way, so that everyone can laud him and praise him, bestow upon him a lot of empty honours—and name their brats after him—and yet not have to trouble themselves with the man himself. The same cannot be said for a living loose end—suddenly, they no longer have a symbol, they have a person. People aren’t the same as rose-colored memories, and you’ll find that they tend to topple from their pedestals.” His eyes glinted. “While world may love a martyr, Mr. Creevey, it resents a survivor.”

Dennis stared at Snape, blinking, and nearly jumped out of his skin when the door suddenly flew open with a bang. “Uncle Greene! Uncle Andrews! It’s—oh!”

A tiny Mexican girl had just dashed into the house but stopped short in the doorway, her eyes wide as she looked at Dennis. “Oh, I’m sorry!” she said, her voice high and clear and her English charmingly accented with just a touch of Manchester.

“Quite all right,” said Snape. “Mr. Creevey was just leaving.”

The little girl looked shyly at Dennis, bobbed a quick curtsey, and then ran across the room. She took a detour to kiss Sands on the cheek, which he endured with ill grace, before dashing over to stand just behind Snape, clinging to his shirt as she peered out at Dennis.

“What is here for me, you ask?” Snape said. “I have a home where I am respected for my abilities, not because Harry Bloody Potter says I should be. Where people speak to me not for the notoriety, but because they want my opinion. Where people don’t look at me and see a symbol, they just see a man. I am here because this is my home, and it is where I want to be.”

Dennis looked at him, and then he looked at the small but neat house, looked at Sands smirking from his chair, looked at the little girl; her small brown hand was clutched in Snape’s shirt as she looked adoringly up at him with wide dark eyes, Snape’s long fingers buried in her short black curls.

And he understood.
“Yes, sir,” he said, and he stood.

Snape nodded curtly, and disentangled himself from the little girl to follow him as he made his way to the door. Dennis swung it open, and Snape spoke again. “The world isn’t divided into Gryffindors and Death Eaters, Mr. Creevey,” he rasped. “Not all of us want fame and notoriety, power and prestige; some of us just want peace and quiet.”

And Dennis felt himself smiling. “I—I understand, Sir,” he said. “But still—thank you. For everything.” And he held out his hand. Snape sneered at him and ignored the proffered hand; Dennis dropped it, but he smiled even wider. “Goodbye, Professor—and I promise that I won’t tell anyone where you are.”

“No, Mr. Creevey,” Snape agreed. “You won’t.” And he drew his wand.

“Obliviate.”

The sun was sinking low in the on the horizon, the pale white shadow of the moon growing brighter as the vivid blue of the late afternoon sky darkened to purple in the east. Lights were flickering on in the houses that lined the street as dusk began to fall. Dennis looked blinkingly around him, surprised—he didn’t think he’d been out walking this long—or this far.

He looked behind him, at the pinks and golds painting their way across the twilit sky; he could hear the sounds of people coming home to dinner after a long day at work. The little bundles of peppers and herbs by the door beside him were swaying gently in the cool evening breeze that caressed his face. The day was ending.

Dennis thought of Colin, his brother—and then he thought of his son. He would be waiting for him back at the house, and his little sister, and Annie, too. He smiled, and started whistling tunelessly to himself as he walked down the street, towards his family, borne away on the sound of laughter from the lighted house behind him.

Chapter End Notes

And that is the end. We would once again like to extend our thanks to the deleterians who inspired this pairing, to our fabulous betas for helping us to get this fic into posting order, and most of all to our readers, for your comments and encouragements and for sticking with us until the bitter end.

While the fic is done, we will be posting some one-shots to show a little bit of what happened after; we hope that if you enjoyed the story, you'll enjoy those as well.

Mervin and Mrs. Hyde

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!