### Swung by Serafim

by flamethrower

**Summary**

In 1993, Gilderoy Lockhart points a stolen wand at Harry Potter and Ron Weasley with the intent to Obliviate them.

The wand doesn't backfire. Gilderoy's "discovery" of the Chamber of Secrets is a short-term success.

Other consequences are not short-term at all.

**Notes**
I was watching the Chamber of Secrets movie with the podlings several years back when the scene in question began to play...and immediately I wanted to know what would happen if the wand had done what it was supposed to do. The answer got very complicated, very, *very* quickly. (Then the story decided to bugger off for a while, leaving me with 70 pages and no clue what to do next. That particular train finally came back last month.)

*Serafim is too spelled correctly. (Well, it's more like Srfim, but still.) Blame Edgar Allan Poe for the title.

Betas performed by Norcumi, Jabberwockypie, and Mrs_Stanley at varying times. I do my best at sticking with British spelling for the universe in question, but sometimes I might miss a word or three after-beta is done. Doin' my best to keep track.

**I use the first 7 books and the Tales of Beedle the Bard as primary canon, but there are a few moments I use from the films because I thought they were an improvement or left me with fun things to play with.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Severus Snape has been waiting for this opportunity since the term began. It’s made him almost happy to have such a simple, delightful plan lurking in the back of his thoughts.

Lupin is “ill,” and Snape has Lupin’s Defence Against the Dark Arts students all perched warily in front of him. He’s had time to plot; he knows exactly how to proceed.

Words have always been his favorite weapons.

“Now. Which one of you can tell me the difference between an Animagus and a werewolf?” Snape asks, while pretending to study the projected image in front of him. He doesn’t expect an answer, not from a class that has yet to study either subject.

Well. Unless it’s Granger.

“An Animagus learns it. A werewolf is bitten.”

It isn’t Granger.

Snape turns back around to regard Harry Potter, who still has his nose in his third year textbook. Granger is beaming at Potter, who doesn’t seem to notice.

Snape wants it to gall him. He wants to accuse Potter of cheating, or Granger of whispering the answer he knows he didn’t hear.

Instead, Snape asks, “And how do you know that, Mister Potter?”

“I read everything.” Potter still hasn’t looked up. “This textbook is complete rubbish, by the way.”

Weasley gasps and turns a shade redder than his usual. “Harry!” he hisses in warning.

“You would be correct,” Snape says in response to both statements, watching with amusement as Weasley promptly turns white. All of that blood rushing back and forth cannot possibly be healthy.

“I don’t see why we’re bothering with this, anyway,” Potter continues. Weasley begins to look faint. “We already know that Professor Lupin’s a werewolf.”

Snape twitches. He simply cannot help it. “What?” It’s his least brilliant retort in twelve years.

Potter looks up. “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it?” He still has that same unconcerned, emotionless look on his face. “Besides, who cares? He’s made a point of not eating any of us.”

This is a mixed class of all Houses, which means Snape can gain insight from four different perspectives. For the most part, the Gryffindors are nodding. The Ravenclaws look sanguine. The Hufflepuffs don’t seem to have an opinion one way or the other. His Slytherins appear to be unconcerned, which tells Snape that even they must have had some advance notice.

There are a few white faces (strangely, not Weasley now) and nervous, darting eyes, but otherwise, the uproar is nonexistent.

They knew already. They all knew.

Harry Potter has just sabotaged Snape’s revenge so perfectly that it couldn’t have gone better if
Snape had planned it himself.

_Gilderoy Lockhart, _Snape seethes, _if you weren’t already dead, I’d kill you myself._

He relates the class incident to Albus later, over tea. He threatens to shove lemon drops into orifices in which they don’t belong when they are offered.

Albus thinks that Potter’s unexpected participation in class is an encouraging sign.

Snape has to agree, though he loathes Potter’s timing. “It is the first time he’s taken an interest in speaking during class activities since Miss Weasley’s unfortunate death,” he admits. “But still. _Lupin._”

“It is a fine solution to the problem Remus’s situation could have caused,” Albus says in a thoughtful voice. “Outed by the Boy Who Lived. Lucius Malfoy might have complaints, but I think he may be the only one who dares, the current political climate being what it is.”

Snape gives him a disbelieving look. “No students complained? Not one?”

“Two Slytherins,” Albus says, and then adds, “Not Mister Malfoy,” which is a surprise. “Offended Pure-blood sensibilities, in Mister Zabini’s case. Miss Bulstrode asked me if I thought it a good idea to allow a potentially dangerous creature loose in the school.” Albus smiles. “I asked her if she thought I would intentionally bring harm to the student body.”

“What did she say?” Snape asks. Millicent Bulstrode is a very pragmatic girl.

“She pointed out that I hired Professor Quirrell. And Professor Lockhart, for that matter.” Albus looks grieved. “I awarded her points.”

Snape raises an eyebrow while making a note that he needs to pay more attention to Miss Bulstrode. “Thank you.”

Albus nods. “It was true, however painful the truth was to hear. However, I reassured Miss Bulstrode that her own Head of House supplied the potion to make our werewolf professor docile and harmless during the full moon.”

Snape glares at him.

“You may feel free to say, of course, that I ordered you to do so,” Albus says with a faint smile. He resists the urge to grind his teeth. “You _did_ order me to do so.”

“Did I?” Albus affects surprise. “What a wonderful coincidence. Now you can tell them nothing more than the truth.”

“Are you _certain_ you weren’t a Slytherin?” Snape asks, amused in spite of himself.

“Of course not.” Albus pops a lemon drop into his mouth. “I do not allow myself such a limited point of view.”

Snape flicks his fingers in Albus’s direction, dismissive. “That was a blow beneath you, Headmaster.”

“Mm,” Albus agrees. “You and Minerva are the definitive results of your own Houses—which is as it should be, for a Head of House. I only wish that you both would stop viewing the other Houses as the enemy.”
“They are the enemy,” Snape says. He wants the House Cup back where it belongs, thank you very much. He gets to his feet. “Good evening, Albus.”

That is not the end of his day. Potter, of all beings, is waiting outside Snape’s office. Snape opens his mouth to shout, and Potter interrupts him with a quiet, viscerally polite, “Good evening, Professor. Might I have a word?”

The shout dies on his lips. Snape scowls and motions Potter to a seat. He shuts the door, wondering what the Brat Who Lived has in store for him this evening.

That isn’t quite fair. The Brat Who Lived hasn’t been the Brat for many months.

“What can I do for you, Mister Potter?” he asks after sitting down behind his desk.

Potter rests his clasped hands across his stomach, the gesture almost, but not quite, natural. He’s been learning manners—or perhaps just observing them. “I’d like to know why you hate Sirius Black.”

Snape’s stomach tries to turn itself into a stressed knot. He lets his eyes flicker over to linger on Potter’s face. No, there is no hint of defiance in those jewel-green eyes. He looks further with a quick *Legilimens* and finds only honest confusion.


“Oh,” Potter says, as if there is an actual difference. “Why?”

Snape does not want to explain his history to this child. Still, he can, perhaps, exert some influence. It is an idea that he can sell to Lucius, or to Voldemort, if it becomes necessary. He worries about Voldemort more often now. It’s only a matter of time before the Dark Lord discovers a way to regain a physical form, now that the truth of his continued existence has been revealed.

He thinks about all of that, and then says, “We were the same year in school, but not the same House, obviously. Black was a bully and a lout. I was his primary target.” Not the only one, no, but Black restrained himself to general mischief unless it was Severus Snape.

“Ah. He does seem to be a bit…” Potter’s head sways gently back and forth, as he considers. “Brash.”

Perhaps there is not as much influence to exert as Snape might have wished. Potter seems to be capable of noticing Black’s foibles on his own.

“I thought it might have been Azkaban,” Potter says.

“No.” Snape resists the urge, and then asks anyway. “And how is life with your Dogfather?”

Potter doesn’t blink at the term. He only considers the question, and gives an answer. “Dog-like.”

Snape smiles; he can’t help it. The tragedy here is that Potter is unaware of his own joke.

“It’s interesting, at least,” Potter says. “I’m allowed to study magic all that I like.”

Something about that statement gains Snape’s full attention. It’s almost as if… “Were you not allowed to, before?”

Potter shakes his head. “Doesn’t look like it, no. We went to visit them. My Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, Cousin Dudley,” Potter explains.
Snape relaxes. Potter is telling him of a new discovery, not an old memory. “A fruitful visit, I’m sure.”

“Sirius insisted, since she is my mother’s sister, that it would be a kindness if I told them I was going to remain in the wizarding world instead of returning home to Surrey.”

“What happened?” Snape wonders if Albus knows about the boy’s trip to Number 4 Privet Drive.

Potter frowns, a spark of real emotion flashing in his eyes. It’s too faint to be anger, but it is, at least, discontent. “They didn’t want to see us. I could tell right off that they couldn’t stand the sight of me. I thought that was an odd reaction from family, but…I’m just guessing,” he says, glancing away.

_I read everything._ Snape hears in his mind. “Go on.”

“Sirius tried to argue with my Aunt Petunia that I was her nephew, and deserved consideration, but all she did was shriek.” Potter seems nonplussed. “Sirius got angry and told her that we’d just be getting my things and leaving, then. The fat man—I mean, my Uncle Vernon—he showed us a bedroom with ten different exterior locks on the door.”

Snape stops breathing. “Ten?” he says diffidently, to cover up the lapse in control.

Potter thinks. “It might have been twelve.”

_Dear God and Great Merlin._ “And?”

“The bedroom wasn’t mine,” Potter says. “I mean, it had a bed, and a dresser with two drawers missing. I could smell leftover owl, like Hedwig had been shut up in there too long. But it looked like no one actually lived there, not like the bedrooms at Grimmauld Place, or even the dorm rooms here.”

“Where, pray tell, was your bedroom, then?” Snape asks. He drawls the question in one of his more dangerous tones. It’s a lost effort in Potter’s case, but he sees no reason to disregard the habit.

“It wasn’t a bedroom. I did a locating spell for my essence,” Potter says, with no awareness whatsoever that he’s talking about using seventh-year magic. “I lived in a cupboard under the stairs. It looked like I was there until I came to Hogwarts. The upstairs bedroom must have been some sort of…” His eyebrows draw together. “Concession, I think. Or maybe it was staged.”

Snape doubts that Petunia Dursley is capable of that much foresight. “Oh? Did they think you were a Muggle broom, then?”

“I suppose. Sirius—” Potter makes wand-waving motions, “—he asked my Uncle Vernon what that meant. Apparently, I was their house-elf. Though I have to say, I don’t think anyone is stupid enough to hit an actual house-elf with a frying pan.”

“No, that is not generally considered a wise course of action,” Snape agrees, keeping his tone mild while his fingernails dig into his palms. He has to distract himself. Otherwise, he is going to lose his bloody temper, walk out of Hogwarts, Apparate to Little Whinging, and blow up a house full of stupid, idiot Muggles. “And your Dogfather has not managed to get himself thrown back in Azkaban, so your unpleasant family must still be intact.”

“They are. Sirius wanted to…do something, I think,” Potter says. “I told him not to. I mean, there was no point. I don’t remember any of it, so I don’t care.”

“And if you did suddenly remember?” Snape asks, staring at Potter. He wants to think that the old
Potter would have huffed and shouted and cried for attention for not being pampered as his due…but he never had. Potter had told no one that his relatives were likely starving him and treating him as their personal slave. Snape had suspected the Dursleys were not properly feeding their nephew from that very first Start-of-Term Feast, but it is hard to tell with boys Potter’s age. They grow so fast that they often look rangy and underfed.

Potter looks unconcerned. “It wouldn’t change anything.”

“How very noble of you,” he sneers, but his heart isn’t really in it.

“Sirius hates you, too, by the way,” Potter says, in a sudden shift back to their original topic. “I keep asking him why, but he can’t give me a satisfactory reason.”

The sneer is more genuine, this time. “Oh? And what does he say?”

“He says that you’re a ponce, a git, and a greasy bat,” Potter says. “But those aren’t reasons.”

Snape huffs a breath that is almost a laugh. Sirius must have been watching his language, if that’s the worst of it. “What are acceptable reasons, then?”

“Deciding to kill off a young married couple because you don’t like the fact that their baby might give you competition in twenty years,” Potter says with a frown.

Snape reels back in his chair, stunned. “What?”

“I don’t mean you.” Potter gives him a curious look. “Unless you have magically become Voldemort in the last five minutes.”

Snape sighs. “No, I have not ‘magically become Voldemort.’” It’s a disturbing thought, especially after Quirrell.

“Well, that’s good, then.” Potter smiles. Snape is shocked by it; he had no idea that Potter had re-mastered any emotion other than blank, creepy stare. “So, why do you hate Professor Lupin?”

He is jolted into surprised honesty. “Because he’s a bloody werewolf!”

Potter tilts his head. “Species prejudice, Professor? I would expect that from Trelawney.”

It doesn’t escape him that he has been granted the honor of his title, and Trelawney has not. “Some prejudices are…hard to dismiss.” Snape is not going to explain the nightmares he still has of being in that dark tunnel. It makes him want to hex James Potter and Sirius Black into oblivion all over again, every time after.

The boy in front of him no longer makes Snape want to hex him. There isn’t enough animation in the boy’s face to remind Snape of James, who was always boisterous and bright-eyed and grinning. In fact, he hasn’t wanted to hex Harry Potter yet, not since the term began. Life is not fair.

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. “Just get out, Potter.”

“Okay,” Potter agrees, not offended in the slightest. “Good night, Professor.” He hesitates at the door. “Well, just one more thing.”

Snape glowers in Potter’s direction. “Yes?”

“Did we ever talk like this? Before…before my accident?” Potter asks.
“No,” Snape replies. “We hated each other.” Granted, Snape had instigated their mutual animosity. On purpose.

“You don’t hate me now,” Potter says, after a quick glance at Snape. “I have no reason to hate you, either.”

Snape inclines his head. “No, I do not hate you, Mister Potter. However, it would be politic for others to continue to believe that I do.”

Potter frowns again. Snape waits in silence as the boy discerns the meaning of his words. Without the anger and the combative temperament he previously bore (a gift of the Dursleys, Snape now realizes) Potter seems to be a very intelligent boy.

It’s nice to see that part of his mother shine forth.

“I understand, sir,” Potter says, and slips out of Snape’s office.

Snape waits until Potter is well on his way. Then he goes to the fireplace, tosses in Floo Powder, shouts, “Headmaster’s Office!” and shoves his head in just as the flames turn green. “Albus! I don’t care what instructions I gave you at the end of last term. Give me the damned bottle.”

Albus laughs at him. Snape threatens him within an inch of his life, but he does get his bottle of good Firewhiskey back. He isn’t foolish enough to drink himself into a stupor, but this day requires a stiff indulgence.

Snape has had to consider the possibility for months, but tonight confirms it. Every single plan laid out for the next five years has just become useless. He doesn’t know how to replace them, and he has to.

Potter’s life is not the only one at stake if he does not.

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It’s nearly Christmas break, and the entire term has been quiet. No Voldemort, no threats, no Ministry baboons spoiling his days. The worst of it has been making the obligatory Wolfsbane potion every month. Snape has even given some thought to improving it, something that every other Potions Master in the Western World has said to be impossible.

Unimaginative imbeciles.

In class, Snape has been not quite as vicious to Potter as he was the first two years of their acquaintance. It is gruff deference to the fact that Potter is, technically, a spell-wounded child, and even Snape would risk his job to act otherwise. This does not mean he is kind—far from it.

Potter ignores Snape’s diatribes and turns in potions that are always consummately correct. There is no experimentation, not yet, but Snape is starting to wonder if it will happen soon. This makes Snape want to tear out his hair, because where was this skill two years ago?

Granger and Weasley—especially Weasley—make quiet comments about Snape’s cruelty to their friend when they think Snape isn’t listening. Potter lets them talk, but doesn’t disagree, or make them stop. It looks as though Potter understands the meaning of politic very well. Snape wonders if Potter
learned it from a book, or if he learned it from living with Sirius Black.

Draco Malfoy tries only once to resume his juvenile rivalry with Potter. Professor Flitwick, close enough to observe the altercation, tells the rest of the faculty that Potter didn’t respond to the taunts at all, which incited Malfoy to draw his wand.

Potter leaves Malfoy tied up like a baked pretzel treat in the hallway. Flitwick takes points from Slytherin and then spends three weeks squeaking excitedly about Lily Evans’s talent with Charms, and the passage of prodigious skills from mother to son, until even Minerva McGonagall is sick of hearing about it.

Snape is suspicious of the lack of drama in his life. The universe has a way of making him suffer if he is complacent.

When he goes to Albus’s office with his list of Slytherin students who will be remaining behind for the holiday, he finds Arthur Weasley standing in front of Albus’s desk. Snape knows at once that this is not a casual visit. Arthur’s face is too grim, too annoyed, which always means Ministry business.

“Arthur,” Snape says in greeting. “Albus, I have my list of students for you. It’s a bit longer than usual this year.”

“Thank you, Severus,” Albus says with a smile. “Lemon drop?”

Snape stares at him.

Albus shrugs, his smile fading. “Civility is not yet overrated, dear boy. Also, I’m afraid there is news. Arthur?”

Arthur Weasley nods. “They’ve scheduled the final part of Peter Pettigrew’s trial for the first day of the winter holiday.”

“Oh, for—” Snape bites back a scathing flood. “Has anyone told Potter?”

The senior Weasley looks surprised. “Not yet. I’ve just been to inform Sirius, so he’ll be telling Harry when they go back to London the night before.”

“Convenient timing.” Albus exchanges a quick glance with Snape. “Many families will be abroad during the holidays.”

“Yes, I know.” Arthur sighs. The man is still upset that there was a literal traitorous rat living in his household. “There is no doubt that the slimy bastard is going to be found guilty, but they’re still smarting from being forced to exonerate Sirius at the beginning of summer, when we presented them with a still-living Pettigrew. Maybe they think people will pay less attention.”

Snape almost smiles. The manner in which Pettigrew was discovered still provides vast amusement. Black had quite literally smelled a rat the first time he had been in the company of Potter’s friends. There had been a mad scramble of black barking dog, squeaking, terrified rat, and red-faced, shouting Weasleys before Albus managed to get a clear shot with his wand to deliver a well-cast Revertere Vera Forma.

“There is more,” Albus says, a warning for Snape that he isn’t going to like what he will next hear. “The Wizengamot has declared—no, sorry,” Arthur shakes his head. “To be accurate, Fudge has declared that the testimony of Albus Dumbledore is not acceptable due to his standing as a member of the Wizengamot. They want yours, Severus. They want to view your memory of that night.”
“And they’ll trust my Pensieved testimony?” Snape is pleased when the question emerges like warning smoke.

He has no love for the Wizengamot. None at all.

“They’re not as afraid of you as they are of Albus Dumbledore,” Arthur says with a smile. “It doesn’t seem to occur to them at all that you probably have a potion for every contingency. I imagine you’ve always got an antidote for Veritaserum on your person.”

“Of course,” Snape says in a curt voice, except now he is itching to actually have one. It’s a shameful oversight, considering what he does always carry. For a Weasley, Arthur is adept at plotting for potential fallout. “Please excuse me; I must go be appalled and shocked that Minister Fudge has decided that our initial spoken testimony, not to mention Pettigrew not being deceased, is no longer enough to send a rat to the Dementors.”

It’s a valid excuse, but he has other plans. Black has the tact of a brick. Snape goes to find Minerva instead.

Minerva fetches Potter on the grounds that she gets to stay in the room when they speak. Snape agrees. He doesn’t care if Minerva thinks he’s soft-hearted or not, because unlike Flitwick, Minerva McGonagall knows how to keep her silence.

“Yes, Professors?” Potter looks like he threw his school robes on in a hurry. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“That’s all right, Harry,” Minerva says, and motions for Potter to take a seat. “Professor Snape has something he would like to tell you.”

Potter gives them both a wary look. Snape suspects it’s because Minerva used his first name, a school trigger for bad news if there ever was one. “What is it?” he asks, the moment he is settled onto a chair.

“The news has just reached your godfather, and the school, that the last segment of Peter Pettigrew’s trial is to be the first day of winter holiday,” Snape tells him.

“Ah,” Potter says, and uses his hand to adjust the position of his glasses. Snape may as well have declared the Earth about to be obliterated, for all the shock Potter displays. “Will you be there, then, Professor Snape?”

Minerva gives Snape a glare that could fry an egg. “I have no choice in the matter,” Snape answers, doing his best to ignore her. “There will be Pensieved testimony on display before the court. It is my opinion that some warning is in order.”

“And you think my godfather will be too busy seething about Pettigrew to remember to give it.” Potter looks thoughtful. “Yes, that’s probably a very good idea. Thank you.”

“Are you all right, my boy?” Minerva asks, giving him a motherly, concerned look.

Potter blinks at her, puzzled by the question. “I’m not the one they’re going to hand over to the Dementors.”
The day of the trial, Snape Apparates to London with Albus and Minerva. She dithered for a bit before finally deciding to go, both as a show of support for a student of her House, and to pay her final respects to a traitorous rat that used to be.

The pathway into the Ministry is still displeasing. For the love of God and Merlin: commodes, of all things! Not subtle, or hygienic.

Sirius Black is waiting in the atrium when they arrive, looking angry, anxious, and perhaps wanting to bite something. Snape should have brought him a bone to gnaw.

Harry Potter, by contrast, looks as collected as if they are going to be discussing beneficial weather patterns. “Good day, Professors;” he says. He seems more animated today, or at least not as emotionally blank as usual.

“Yes, hello,” Black says, and then shoves a hand through his hair. “I don’t suppose any of you brought a Calming Draught? I feel like I’m about to come unglued.”

Snape sighs, reaches into his pocket, and hands one over. “You’re utterly hopeless.”

It’s a point of evidence for the state of Black’s anxiety that he only smiles and drinks the potion. Not an insult exchanged at all, no accusations of poisoning. It’s disappointing.

“We go down as soon as Remus arrives,” Black says after the tense set of his shoulders begins to relax. “I thought he’d be traveling with you.”

“I’m afraid Remus cannot join us through the primary public route,” Albus says in a neutral tone.

A moment later, Black gets it. “Hypocritical fucking bastards,” he hisses.

“Language, Sirius,” Minerva says in a sharp voice. She glances at Potter, who is too busy staring at the fountain sculpture’s supreme ugliness to pay his dogfather’s language any mind.

“I’m here,” Lupin says a few minutes later, jogging up to them and looking disheveled. “My apologies for being late. I had to…” He glances at Potter, who still seems to be ignoring them. “I had to strip naked and get a fistful of aconite shoved in my face,” he confesses in a quiet voice. “Any halfwit with a working brain can look at a calendar and see that it’s weeks before the next moon.”

“If they had brains, they would not be manning the doors,” Black says, and claps him on the shoulder. “Are you ready?”

Lupin nods. “Yes. I think so. As much as I wish we weren’t bearing witness to this at all.”

“Harry, are you ready to go?” Black asks.

Potter nods and rejoins the group of adults. “With that, let us be off,” Albus says, and leads the way to the elevators. When they disembark several floors down, he leaves them, tapping his robes as he walks until he is wearing the proper, gaudy garb of the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

“This way,” Black says, putting his hand on Potter’s shoulder to guide him to the courtroom. Number Nineteen is cavernous, and despite the holiday, public seating is crammed full of wizards and witches. Cameras flash as their small group enters the court room, doing their best to blind them all.
“Bloody reporters,” Black grumbles, and follows the court adjunct to their appointed seats. The adjunct conjures an extra chair for McGonagall, and then takes up a position behind their row of chairs.

“All right there, Harry?” Lupin asks.

Snape thinks the two men are acting like hovering, ridiculous matrons, but Potter doesn’t seem to notice. “Yes, Professor,” he says, his eyes studying the assembled Wizengamot with keen interest.

“I’m not your Professor right now, Harry,” Lupin says, which catches Potter’s attention.

After a moment, Potter nods. His eyes are tracking Albus as he takes his place up in the stands next to Cornelius Fudge. “Oh. Right. Sorry, Remus.”

Lupin smiles. “Quite all right.”

The court is called to order. Snape finds it interesting that Fudge is officiating, not Dumbledore.

The moment the prisoner is brought in, the public gallery loses its collective mind. Fudge shouts for control and then mutes the entire lot of them with a charm.

Pettigrew does not look well at all. Snape had wondered if the long-term effects of remaining in his Animagus form for so long would wear off as time passed, but that does not seem to be the case. Pettigrew’s teeth are still too long and rat-like, and his beard has grown in with a decided whiskery quality. His eyes dart nervously back and forth; his fingernails are more like claws.

When Pettigrew spies Black, Lupin, Snape, McGonagall, and Potter, he quails and tries to run backwards. The guards pick him up and escort him to the chair in the center of the courtroom, and chain him in place over what sounds like faint, frantic squeaking.

“The prisoner will state his name for the court,” Fudge intones, trying his best to look grim and proper.

“P-Peter P-P-Pettigrew,” the prisoner stutters. “P-please, I’m innocent, you have t-to—”

“Be silent,” Fudge orders, and Pettigrew’s mouth snaps closed. “On second June, 1993, this court viewed the Pensieve testimony of Sirius Black, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. Peter Pettigrew, you have already been found guilty of the murder of twelve Muggles on first November, 1981, as well as the crime of framing Sirius Black for that despicable act. Today we will view the Pensieve testimony of Severus Snape, Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The purpose of the viewed testimony is to clarify your guilt—or innocence—in the deaths of James and Lily Potter on thirty-first October, 1981.”

Pettigrew shrinks back in his chair. “Well, they got right to the point, didn’t they?” Black murmurs under his breath.

“Professor Snape, please stand,” Fudge instructs. Snape delays three seconds and then stands, just when Fudge is starting to swell and turn red. “Are you ready to retrieve the memories of the eve of twenty-ninth May, 1993?”

“I am,” Snape says.

“Mister Potter,” Fudge turns his attention to the boy, seated between Lupin and Black. “Are you prepared to view such testimony in its entirety?”
Potter stands up without needing to be prompted. “I am.”

Another member of the Wizengamot, a woman with a haughty face and cold eyes, speaks up. “Are you prepared to offer your own Pensieve testimony, if Mister Snape’s should prove inadmissible in this court?”

Potter nods. “I am, but it might not do you any good.”

“Oh? And why is that, lad?” Fudge asks, in his best ingratiating voice.

“Well, sir, I had just been Obliviated,” Potter says. “There isn’t all that much to see. I only have off-and-on recollections of the first couple of hours after...after Professor Lockhart’s spell.”

There is a low murmur of anger at that. Fudge frowns. “I see, Mister Potter. You may sit down. Professor Snape?”

An adjunct comes forward, bearing the court’s Pensieve, while another waves her wand to lower the large projection screen. They work as a team to connect Pensieve to display in a matter of minutes. Snape steps close to the shallow bowl. After a moment’s contemplation, he puts the tip of his wand to his temple.

He draws out a strong line of memory, cloudy and silver, and delivers it to the Pensieve. “The trigger is still the same, yes?” he asks. He has done this before, but Snape does not think about the final months of 1981 unless he has no choice.

“The very same, Severus,” Albus answers the question before Fudge has the chance. “Three taps of your wand to the side of the bowl, and then give it a good stir.”

Snape taps the side of the bowl with perhaps a bit more vehemence than necessary. His wand is dipped into the bowl’s misty contents; he does, indeed, give it a good stir. The Pensieve swirls into action, and the memory begins to play. Snape steps back to watch, aware that every eye in the courtroom is riveted to the screen.

Snape halts his steps in the girls’ lavatory, his expression furrowing into one of extreme annoyance. There is a gaping chasm in the wall where a sink used to be.

He whirls from the room and finds the closest office with a fireplace, firecalling Albus. He tells Albus quickly about the state of the girls’ lavatory. Albus looks grim, and says that he will be there as quickly as possible.

Albus joins him shortly, as does Hagrid and Minerva. Snape leads them back to the lavatory, where the entrance awaits them.

“There is a slide that goes down into the dark,” Albus says after a brief investigation. “Minerva, if you would wait here to keep the curious at bay, then myself, Severus, and Hagrid will see to discovering just what is going on.”

“Of course, Albus,” Minerva says, her wand clenched in her hand. With the infirmary still full of petrified students (and one cat) they are all tense, on high alert. “Have you sent word to Poppy?”

“I have,” Albus says, and then sits down on the edge of the hole and drops out of sight. Snape goes next; the ride is swift and unpleasant. He is at the start of a dark tunnel, with Albus holding up his wand for illumination.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Professors,” Hagrid calls down from above. “But am I going to fit down
Albus looks around and then shakes his head. “Best to wait up there, Rubeus. In fact, if you could fashion us a way to escape from this tunnel when our exploration is done, that would be a kindness.”

“We don’t need a way fashioned,” Snape says in an undertone. “Unless we find someone in need of assistance.”

Albus’s eyes flick off in the direction of the tunnel. Snape nods.

At the end of the tunnel, there is a door. Two snakes are entwined over it, facing each other. Their tongues move, their tails flicker.

Sitting in front of the door, facing them and blinking like blinded owls from the light of Albus’s wand, are Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter.

Snape scowls. Of course.

Albus frowns. “What do you two boys think you’re doing down here?”

“’I dunno,” Weasley says with a cheerful smile. “I don’t actually know where I am right now. Do you know how I got down here, Professor Dumbledore?”

“Through a tunnel in the girls’ lavatory, and goodness knows what you were doing in there in the first place,” Albus says to Weasley, still frowning.

Weasley nods, and then turns to his companion. “Hey, Harry? Do you remember a tunnel in the bathroom?”

Potter turns his head and looks at Weasley, an expression of perfect emptiness on his face. “Who are you?” he asks.


“No,” Potter says, with no emotion at all.

“He’s been Obliviated, Mister Weasley,” Dumbledore says in quiet explanation. “You both have.”

“It seems to have had a profound effect on Mister Potter,” Snape says. “Perhaps it will be an improvement.”

In the courtroom, Black scowls at him. Snape ignores him. How could he have known how extensive the damage was? At the time, it was nothing more than an annoyance.

From behind the sealed door, there is a horrible, blood-curdling scream. Weasley turns white and shivers. Potter looks to be listening, but otherwise does not react. Albus heads for the door. “Let me in,” he says.

The snakes hiss at him and refuse to budge.

“I am the Headmaster of this school, and as such, everything in its domain must obey my word,” Albus tells the door. “I command you to open.”

The snakes hiss again. Even Snape can tell that they’re laughing, and the door stays shut.
“Blast it all. Harry,” Albus turns to Potter. “What are they saying?”

Potter looks up. “Saying? I only hear hissing.”

The memory speeds up, showing the court a quick scramble of removing the two Obliviated boys from the tunnel. It is quickly determined that Gilderoy Lockhart is missing, as is Ginny Weasley.

“Oh, that poor girl,” Minerva says, her hands clasped to her chest. “Albus, I’m going to send for her parents.”

“Go,” Albus says, waving her on. “It cannot hurt, and they will need to know.”

Weasley seems fine, and is munching on biscuits in his older brother Percy’s company. Snape kneels in front of Potter, who is sitting in quiet stillness on one of Albus’s office chairs. “Potter,” he says.

Potter focuses on him. “Hello.”

“Potter, I would like for you to tell me the last thing you remember.”

The boy nods. “Mummy and Daddy are worried.”

Snape leans away from Potter, a shocked look on his face. “Albus!” he calls in a strangled voice.

“Severus, what is it?” Albus asks, waving off the other gathered faculty, who leave with new instructions to search the school for anyone else who might be missing, and to attempt to find another way through the Parseltongue-sealed tunnel.

“Potter, I apologize for the repetition. Will you please tell Professor Dumbledore what you last remember?” Snape asks, his face a grim mask.


Albus’s eyes grow wide. “Indeed you did. I found it after I returned home from my last visit with your parents.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Snape sees Fudge give Albus a questioning look, followed by words too quiet to be heard. Albus shakes his head in response.

Albus crouches down in front of the boy, peering at him with a kind smile. “What do you remember last happening, young Mister Potter?”

Potter glances at Snape, who nods, and then looks at Albus. “Mummy and Daddy are frightened. They keep saying that the wards on the house are failing. They said…” and Potter begins to look sad. “They said that Uncle Peter must have told someone.”


Potter nods. “Yep. Peter Pet—tigrew,” the boy stutters through the name, just as a young child might.

“Not Sirius Black?” Snape asks in a near-growl.

“No!” Potter looks scandalized. “Uncle Sirius is doing secret things for the Phee-nix,” he says, confiding in a serious whisper. “Uncle Peter’s job is to not tell people.”
“Great Merlin,” Albus says in a soft voice. “Are you frightened, Harry?”

Potter shakes his head. “Mummy and Daddy will take care of me,” he says with absolute trust. “But Daddy’s going to thrash Uncle Peter. He’s very angry with him right now.”

The memory ends there; Snape has no wish to subject Potter, again, to the horrified realization that his parents are dead, and have been for over eleven years. The public gallery’s crowd is on its collective feet in mute outrage. If not for the court wards, Peter Pettigrew would be at risk of being torn to shreds.

Fudge is pale. “Thank you, Professor Snape. That will be all,” he says. Snape inclines his head, retrieves the memory, and resumes his seat.

“I have questions,” an older wizard says, his beard almost as impressive as Albus Dumbledore’s. “For my own clarification. Mister Potter, do you mind?”

“No, sir,” Potter says, and stands again.

“When you were Obliviated by Professor Lockhart, how many years did you lose?”


Half of the imbeciles in the courtroom shiver and quail at mention of Voldemort’s name.

“I don’t remember his arrival at our house. I can remember my parents discussing the failing Fidelius Charm, as you saw. I can remember a few months before that, but then it starts to get fuzzy.”

“Any particulars, beyond your parents?” Fudge asks. The entire Wizengamot practically radiates curiosity.

“I can remember Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, Peter Pettigrew, and…a baby, that I think might be Neville Longbottom, visiting with his grandmother. There’s also a girl, who is probably Nymphadora Tonks.”

“Probably?” the bearded wizard repeats, amused.

Potter has a faint smile on his face. “Her hair color changed every few seconds. I haven’t met anyone else who can do that.”


Pettigrew squeaks and tries to escape the chained confines of his chair.

“Now you will bear witness to the decision of the Wizengamot, which is legal and binding, this twenty-first December, 1993. All those who agree that Peter Pettigrew is guilty of the betrayal of James and Lily Potter, an act that led directly to their murder by He Who Shall Not Be Named?”

Most of the Wizengamot raises arms and fans and signal boards. Some hands rise more slowly than others. The witch who attempted to impugn the quality of Snape’s testimony doesn’t raise her hand at all until she realizes that she is the only one who has not done so. Then her hand sails into the air, and she gives her neighbors a haughty look.

“Very well,” Fudge says with an air of accomplishment. “Peter Pettigrew, you are hereby guilty of the murder of James and Lily Potter—”
“No!” Pettigrew screams, but Fudge speaks over him.

“And you will be remanded to Azkaban, where you will be granted a week’s reprieve to consider your crimes before you are given into the hands of the Dementors.” Fudge nods at the guards.

In the chair next to Snape, Black slumps forward and sighs. “Fuck, am I glad that’s over and done with.”

“They’re giving him to the Dementors,” Minerva says. “I almost can’t believe it.”

“Well, they do regret not doing the same to me,” Black points out with a twisted smile. “If Peter’s dead, no one can come along and make Fudge look incompetent.”

“That is the height of cynicism,” Lupin mutters, but Snape does notice that he hasn’t disagreed. Besides, Fudge doesn’t need assistance to look incompetent. He’s managed just fine on his own already.

They get assailed by the reporters in the corridor just outside the courtroom. “Oh, Mister Potter!” Snape hears, and recognizes the doubtfully dulcet tones of Rita Skeeter. “A word, if you please!”

Potter makes the mistake of glancing in her direction, which is all the opportunity Skeeter needs. “How is it that you have lost so much of your memory, yet are doing so well in your studies at Hogwarts?” she simpers.

“I read,” Potter says, granting her an extra-blank look. “I read everything I could over summer break, in order to be prepared for my third year and not fall behind in school. That included The Daily Prophet.” Potter pauses. “Your articles, Miss Skeeter, are enlightening.”

Skeeter blinks, startled by the response. Black shoves his godson through the crowd before she can recover.

Snape has never been so damned proud of a Potter in his entire life.

In the Prophet a week later, there is a final front-page article that proclaims Peter Pettigrew’s execution by Dementors. Snape keeps that front page clipping mounted on the wall in his private quarters, a reminder not to be fooled by cowardly appearances.
The Chamber Opens

Chapter Notes

Too excited to wait. Bonus weekend chapter!

It is two weeks after the spring holiday when Snape notices that Potter is looking furtive. As this is an unusual occurrence of late, his curiosity is piqued. Snape doesn’t think Potter is up to his old levels of trouble, but he isn’t fool enough to let it pass by without notice, either.

When Potter gets Weasley and Granger to follow him, Snape trails them at a discreet distance. There is nothing going on in the castle right now for this trio of mischief-makers to stumble into, so he wonders about Potter’s intent.

Potter leads them to the girl’s lavatory, the one with the always-broken faucet and dead Myrtle’s obnoxious droning and wailing. The tunnel leading to the Chamber of Secrets closed itself after midnight the same evening Snape and Albus rescued the two Obliviated boys, so they did not have to seal the room, as Albus had contemplated.

Not that it would have mattered. None of the students use the room in the first place. No one likes to be spied upon by a ghost whilst in the middle of relieving oneself.

Snape masks his presence with a silently-cast Disillusionment charm, and lurks just inside the doorway to listen.

“Just…uh, stay over there, okay? I mean, this might not work, but—” Potter is saying.

“What are you talking about, Harry?” Granger asks, but she has wisely pulled Weasley several feet away from the broken sink.

Potter is out of Snape’s line of sight, but the sibilant hissing of Parseltongue is clear and recognizable.

Weasley jumps. “Great Merlin, mate!”

“Bollocks.” Potter sounds discouraged. “Let me try again.”

More hissing. This time there is an answering hiss, but the chasm does not open.

“Can you understand it again, Harry?” Granger asks.

“No,” Potter says. “Not really. But one of the Black portraits in the attic was a Parseltongue speaker. I removed him from the frame and brought him back to school after Christmas holiday. I’ve been trying to get him to teach me.”

“How’s that going?” Weasley asks, staring in the direction of the sink with a worried look on his face.

“He’s a Black,” Potter replies. “How do you think it’s going?”

Weasley makes a face. “Right, yeah. So, are we going down there if you can get it open?”
“No. I’d rather not face a basilisk, thank you very much. I just thought, if I know that I can get it open, we can tell Professor Dumbledore. And… I don’t want to leave your sister—I mean, I don’t think Ginny should be stuck in that chamber. I thought your Mum might like it if we could… you know. Bring her home.”

Weasley looks like he’s going to break down in a sodden heap. “Oh, Harry.”

Granger smiles, a very fierce expression that Snape imagines she must think to be encouraging. “Try again, Harry. You can do it.”

This time, the hissing is loud and demanding. The chasm opens.

_I’ll be damned_, Snape thinks, and slips out of the lavatory to go fetch Albus.

Albus abandons a firecall with the Minister for Magic and joins him at a run. Snape grabs the arm of the closest faculty member and tells Septima Vector to send the students back to their dorms, and to gather the faculty for their pre-arranged contingency plan for a basilisk.

“What—Severus—” she tries to protest.

“Potter can open the Chamber,” he tells her, annoyed by having to explain further. He has been infected with Albus’s need to hurry. “I would prefer we not have a crowd of students in the lavatory, each of them trying to get eaten by what eradicated Gilderoy Lockhart.”

“Oh,” Vector says in a shocked whisper, and then straightens. “Yes. Of course. I’ll—”

Snape leaves before she can finish blithering. Arithmancy instructors, for Merlin’s sake! For teachers of maths, they can bloody well talk things to death. Minerva is much more sensible about following simple instructions.

Potter, Granger, and Weasley are still standing in the lavatory, a respectable distance from the tunnel opening. Only Weasley looks surprised to see Albus and Snape arrive.

“Oh, my,” Albus says, as he contemplates the gaping hole. “Can you close it, Mister Potter?”

Potter walks forward; the sound of insistent Parseltongue echoes off the walls. There is a hint of movement around the opening of the chasm. Snape notices that the broken faucet, now in the form of a silver snake, is curled up on a pipe. The snake hisses in response and turns its face away.

“Okay, look, even I know that was rude.” Potter glares at the snake-faucet and hisses again.

The tunnel closes with a regretful groan of magical moving parts. Albus nods. “Very well. I assume you had a good reason for wanting to open this tunnel once more?”

“To get Ginny Weasley out,” Potter explains.

“Mm. And what of Professor Lockhart?”

“Fuck him!” Weasley sputters, and then bows his head. “Sorry, Professors.”

“Don’t worry, my boy. I understand your feelings,” Albus says. Snape, for once, is in agreement with both of them. “The three of you, come with us. We will discuss this further in the corridor after the others have joined us.”

Potter nods, unconcerned, and follows Albus. Granger looks curious; Weasley is still hanging his head, his face bright red, but is doing an admirable job of controlling his feelings.
Minerva, Flitwick, Argus Filch, Vector, Lupin, and Aurora Sinistra join them in short order, though Vector is red-cheeked and out of breath. “Rolanda, Charity, and Pomona are making sure the students are all actually in their dormitories,” Minerva informs them with a faint sniff. “Three Slytherins were caught trying to sneak out of this afternoon’s sudden curfew.”

“They would,” Snape agrees, and then looks at Filch. “How many Gryffindors tried to do the same?”

“Two,” says Filch with a cackle. Minerva sighs and looks put upon.

“Is my House the only one that knows when to behave itself?” Flitwick asks, amused.

“It does seem that way sometimes, Filius,” Vector agrees. “Trelawney is refusing to come out of her tower, Albus. We’ll not have her assistance.”

“That is for the best, I think,” Albus says. “Sybill’s constitution is quite delicate. Is Poppy standing by, in case there is an incident?”

“Poppy is waiting for us all to arrive bleeding and near-death, I think,” Minerva says. “I’m not certain I disagree with her assessment, Albus. Are you actually proposing we go into that chamber?”

“I am proposing that we explore, in a most cautious manner,” Albus clarifies. “Mister Potter has learned enough Parseltongue in recent weeks to open and close the chamber entrances. Though, that is the extent of your capability, I believe?”

Potter nods. “I think the rest of it is just crude language. I’m learning from Adolphius Black’s portrait, and he isn’t very polite.”

Hagrid arrives with a sack cloth in his hands. The cloth’s contents are wiggling in protest. “Got the roosters, Professor Dumbledore,” he says with a grin. “Nice and fussy they are. Crow at a drop of a hat, they will.”

“That’s brilliant,” Granger breathes. “That’s why there are suddenly chickens on the grounds.”

“It was your brilliant deduction, Miss Granger, that allows us to be prepared at all,” Albus reminds her. “Now then,” he turns back to the gathered teachers. “Once our feathered friends have crowed, it should be a simple matter to subdue Salazar’s basilisk. However, we don’t yet know what else we will face in the Chamber of Secrets. Anyone who wishes to remain behind may do so, with no judgment from me.”

“If you get eaten, I have no job,” Sinistra says tartly. “We’re all going, Albus.”

“Mister Potter will accompany us to the second entrance, the door that confounded us last spring,” Albus says, and is interrupted.

“They should go, too,” Potter says.

Snape glares at him. Absolutely not, he thinks, hoping this isn’t going to be a resurgence of the Gryffindor foolishness that characterized Potter’s first two school years.

“Why is that?” Albus asks. He is not quite frowning, but he is not pleased, either.

“Not to actually go in,” Potter clarifies. “But Hermione figured it out, so she should get to see the door. And Ron should go, because it’s his sister.”
Weasley lifts his head. “Yeah. I mean—you can’t fill the tunnel with every Weasley in Hogwarts, but one of us should be there.”

“And if something does go wrong, you have messengers on the outside that can warn everyone else,” Granger suggests.

Albus allows it. Snape wants to seethe, but even he has to admit that Granger’s notion of messengers is a good one. Minerva is the one who protests, vehemently, and is voted down.

Potter has a hissing argument with the sink again before the chamber entrance re-opens. Hagrid brought ropes, which he secures and then tosses down into the darkness. “Not the fastest way out, but better than none at all,” he says, some of his eternal cheer dampened by the somber mood in the lavatory.

Just before she slides down, Minerva says, “There has to be an easier exit than this. Whoever opened the Chamber last year would have had a terrible time getting out quickly!”

Her reminder makes Snape pause. He shares a glance with Flitwick, who looks thoughtful. “We never did discover who was opening the Chamber of Secrets,” Flitwick says. “We only know the petrifications stopped after Gilderoy went inside.”

Potter doesn’t even turn around. “I can’t be the Heir of Slytherin, Professor. Wrong bloodline.”

“Oh?” Snape watches as Granger sits gingerly on the lip of the chasm and drops out of sight.

“Potters are Peverell-descended, Professor. That’s about as far from Slytherin’s line as you can get and still be in Britain,” Potter says, and then sits down and disappears into the tunnel.

Flitwick blinks, nonplussed, and looks up at Snape. “I think I would kill something to have a crack at Sirius Black’s family library, if little gems like that are lurking inside.”

“Volunteer to stuff and mount Kreacher, Black’s house-elf,” Snape suggests. “Black would pay you your weight in gold.”

Flitwick narrows his eyes, recognizing the subtle dig. “Perhaps if it’s Hagrid’s weight in gold, I might consider it.”

Hagrid remains behind, citing his size and a willingness to retrieve anyone who pulls on the escape ropes. The trip through the tunnel is uneventful, but Snape takes note of a shredded basilisk skin and plans to collect it on their return.

It takes Potter even longer to open the second door, which is more inclined to argument and mockery than the sink. Albus peers through the open doorway, but does not yet lead them forth. “Everyone, remember: you must not meet the eyes of a basilisk. To do so is fatal. You all have your mirrors for emergencies, and there is Mandrake Restorative Draught waiting in the infirmary in case of accidents.”

“But we can’t fix accidental dead, so please try to avoid that,” Lupin says. His chin is high, his nose almost quivering in interest. The full moon is only six days away.

“Does it smell delightful?” Snape can’t resist asking.

Lupin doesn’t rise to the bait. He shakes his head. “It smells like a snake’s den. And like…” His eyes flicker over to Weasley. “There are bodies.” Weasley nods, his face pinched.
“Mister Potter, when we enter the Chamber, you are to close the door after us,” Albus instructs. “There will be no arguing about this. We cannot allow the basilisk the opportunity to escape, as it will endanger the lives of everyone in this school.”

For his part, Potter just nods. “I understand, sir. And when you would all like to come out?”

“Four knocks should do it,” Albus says, and goes inside.

The Chamber of Secrets, Salazar Slytherin’s final contribution to Hogwarts, is massive. Snape is impressed at the scale of it, but it is also further proof that towards his final years, Salazar Slytherin had lost his damned mind. It is a shrine to the reptilian, yes, which Snape appreciates, but it also houses a basilisk capable of killing them all, which Snape does not care for.

His fellow teachers cross the room in a half-circle, with Albus at its center, wands at the ready. There is no sign of the basilisk, but Snape can feel its presence, like a warning chill on his shoulders. It is reminiscent of standing before Voldemort.

“I’ve found Gilderoy,” Flitwick says. “What’s left of him, at least. Poor lad isn’t much to look at anymore.”

“Miss Weasley is over here,” Lupin says, and increases the light of his wand. Snape glances in that direction, prurient curiosity overriding civilized sensibility. Ginevra Weasley looks surprisingly well-preserved.

“Strange.” Minerva bends down to pick up something from the floor. “There is a book here, Albus.”

Snape notices the motion behind the two of them, and when he speaks, his words are clipped. “Minerva. Lupin. Keep your eyes down,” he instructs, and then drops his own gaze.

“Oh, dear,” Minerva says in a whisper.

Lupin is less calm. “Albus, there is a very large tongue far too close to my backside. Please, any time you would like to bring forth the chickens…!”

Snape watches from the corner of his eye as Albus pulls both roosters from the bag and flings them in Lupin’s direction with a whispered command. The roosters hit the floor, spread their wings, and begin crowing for all they are worth.

The combined racket of crowing roosters and dying basilisk is horrendous.

“Well,” says Vector, as they all listen to the gigantic creature suffer its death throes. “I didn’t know it was instantaneous. I thought we would have to subdue the thing once the roosters had done their bit.”

“There is an ancient rule written in the school guidelines that says chickens, particularly roosters, are never to be kept on Hogwarts grounds.” Albus says in a musing voice. “Once Miss Granger deduced the true nature of Salazar Slytherin’s creature, it seemed obvious as to why. It is a rule I have since changed, of course. Roosters are a very effective means of defence.”

“I will put up with roosters cock-a-doodling at dawn for ever more,” Sinistra mutters.

“When is it safe to gaze upon it without…incident, Albus?” Vector asks.

“Probably not until its eyes have rotted from its sockets,” Snape murmurs. It is best to lean towards paranoia with such creatures.
If Albus has an answer, it is cut short by a scream of protest that comes from the tunnel.

“Damn,” Lupin swears, and runs for the entrance, with Snape a hairsbreadth behind.

The tunnel door is standing open.

“Potter,” Snape growls, and bolts into the tunnel with his wand at the ready.

He almost collides with Lupin, who has halted in surprise.

Potter is on his feet, his wand pointed at a male student that Snape finds vaguely familiar. The student is bound in two different types of rope from Incarcerous spells. Weasley is on the ground, unconscious; Granger is bleeding from a slice across her forehead, but she is fuming, her wand also aimed at the bound student.

“The door opened and he came sneaking out of the chamber,” Potter explains. “I don’t think he expected anyone to be standing here.”

“Good job, Harry,” Lupin says, and lowers his wand. “Who is he?”

“Never seen him before,” Potter replies, but he, Snape is glad to see, is not foolish enough to lower his wand. The mysterious boy doesn’t seem very angry about being bound, which is making Snape’s instincts shriek in warning. Someone who is unconcerned about being imprisoned is someone who still believes that escape is a certainty.

“His robes are seriously out of date,” Granger says, brow furrowing. “1950s, maybe?” The boy smirks at Granger and then turns his head.

Snape meets the boy’s cold blue eyes and almost drops his wand as his left arm suddenly throbs with sharp, agonizing pain. He grasps his wand tighter but cannot help letting out a shocked gasp of recognition.

The boy smiles with utter cruelty before turning his gaze on the students. Potter steps back and grimaces, his free hand coming up to rub the infamous scar on his forehead.

“Well, well.” Albus emerges from the doorway to stand beside Snape. “Tom Riddle. This is a surprise.”

“You!” the boy spits, his eyes filling with venom. “Haven’t you had the graciousness to die yet, old man?”

“I’m afraid not, Tom,” Albus says. Snape has rarely seen Albus look so grave. “I always suspected that you were the one who opened the Chamber. It seems as if our return gave you enough energy to attempt to finish what you began last year.”

“You were less of an idiot than Dippet,” Riddle says in disdain. “Imagine it, though, Dumbledore—here I have been waiting so long to meet the famous Harry Potter, and when my chance arrives, he doesn’t even know who I am.”

“He’s—he’s Voldemort?” Granger asks, wide-eyed. She stabs at him with her wand; the paler set of ropes binding Riddle tightens at the gesture.

“Smart little Mudblood, isn’t she?” Riddle sneers.

“Miss Granger, he is, and is not, Voldemort,” Albus says. Snape realizes that Albus is holding the
book that Minerva found in the Chamber. It is lying open in his hands, its pages blank. “Tom Riddle is a part of Voldemort only, though he is no less dangerous for it.

“Remus.” Albus turns his attention to the werewolf. “If you would, please go and fetch me a basilisk fang. As long as you do not touch the pointed tip, they are quite safe to handle.”

Snape understands what this means at the same moment as Lupin does. The werewolf’s eyes go wide before he nods and retreats into the Chamber to do as asked.

Riddle goes pale. “You wouldn’t dare,” he snarls.

“I would dare very well,” Albus replies, unconcerned. “You’re nothing but a ghost, Tom, and we will dispense with you in short order.”

Riddle begins to struggle in earnest, but before Snape or Albus can impede him, a third set of ropes joins the others with a bitterly-spoken Incarcerous from Ronald Weasley. “You’re the bastard who killed my sister,” Weasley rasps from his awkward sprawl on the tunnel floor. “You can shut it any time you like.”

“Oh, yes; dear, sweet Ginny.” Riddle’s smile makes the tunnel seem colder. “She poured her little heart out to me in my diary, without a bit of concern for a book that talks back. She was a fool, and fools deserve to die.”

Potter smiles, an expression which is not pleasant at all. “Well, I was told that you’ve been dispensed with twice, and it’s about to be a third time. What does that make you, Riddle?”

“Voldemort is immortal,” Riddle replies in a soft, chilling voice that makes that hated spot on Snape’s left arm hurt even more. “No matter what you do to me, he will triumph. Even now, you fear to kill me, Harry.”

Potter tilts his head. “Did you know that you can kill someone with Incarcerous? It’s not that hard to turn it from a binding spell into a strangling spell. If Professor Dumbledore didn’t seem certain as to how to deal with you, I don’t think anyone here would mind terribly if you were throttled out of existence.”

“I don’t know if I’m impressed or terrified that you have learned to be practical,” Snape says. Potter’s detractors would be babbling like idiots to hear their precious savior speak thus. Snape is just glad that Potter—or worse, Granger—isn’t trying to prattle on about redeeming the irredeemable.

“He wouldn’t do it,” Riddle declares. “He’s a hero. He has ethics.”

Potter’s wand twitches. The darker-colored ropes around Riddle constrict, much more than Granger’s accidental tightening. “Your information about me is out of date.”

“No protests from me, mate,” Weasley says.

“That won’t be necessary, boys,” Albus says as Lupin returns with an oozing, pointed tooth borne carefully in his right hand. “This will be far more effective, and permanent. Isn’t that right, Tom?”

Riddle begins to thrash against his bonds in earnest. “This isn’t the end. You stop nothing, Voldemort will—”

Albus sighs, shakes his head, and plunges the basilisk tooth into the open diary.

Riddle disintegrates in a flare of ash and light. They all stare and watch the shade die, and not even
Granger turns away as Riddle screams out his last.

Inside the Chamber of Secrets, Ginevra Weasley sits bolt upright and begins to shriek.

* * * *

There is a knock on Snape’s office door late that evening. He frowns and goes to answer it, wondering if it is one of his Slytherins, seeking company while hoping for gossip. The seventh years are not above bribery, and Snape is not above accepting, depending on the offering in question.

The hallway outside his office is empty. Snape scowls, thinking it late for pranks, when he hears the gentle swish of fabric.

He stands back and holds the door open without a word, waiting as the footfalls of socks on stone have entered his office before shutting the door. “This is getting to be a disturbing habit, Potter.”

“I know.” Potter pulls off his Invisibility Cloak. He looks rattled and tired. “I just needed a break, and no one in their right mind is going to come and look for me here.”

“Very politic of you,” Snape comments, which brings a faint smile to Potter’s face. “How is Miss Weasley faring?”

“She’s taking turns being indignant and crying. They had a funeral for her and she wasn’t dead.” Potter sits down in a chair without being asked. The breach in manners is irritating, but after the day’s events, Snape is willing to overlook it. “Everyone is very grateful that I decided to be gallant and fetch her. ‘Good old Harry’ and ‘Just like he used to be.’ Oh, and Professor McGonagall heard me threaten Riddle. Now she’s worried that I have lost the moral path, and is desperate to put me back on it proper.”

“She is a Scot,” Snape says, settling on a neutral response. “They have a very set idea of a proper moral path. Did you discuss this with your Head of House?”

“I tried to, at least,” Potter answers. “I don’t think she liked my argument.”

“Tell me.”

Potter looks up at Snape. His eyes are slowly losing the blankness that characterized much of the past year, but what is filling them is nothing like before. “I asked her if any of you had voiced regret for planning to kill the basilisk, or for actually killing it. A basilisk is rare, and that one was owned by Salazar Slytherin, making it a historic creature. She said that she didn’t regret the necessity of its death, and no one had voiced any such concerns.”

Potter sighs. “I told her that the way you dealt with the basilisk is exactly how I think of Voldemort. Killing him is a necessity.” He frowns. “Besides, I asked Hermione a few months ago if she was worried I was going to be another Voldemort.”

“You’ve heard the rumors, then,” Snape says.

“ Heard the rumors? Had them shouted in my face, more like,” Potter replies. “I believe Hermione over them, anyway. She says that even if I don’t really get emotions and emotional input like I used to, I’m still at least learning how to care about things. Voldemort never learned to care about
anything but himself.”

“That is true.” Snape is impressed, even though he doesn’t want to be. He wants to retain his old anger with the son of James Potter, and the boy is making it an improbable task—perhaps an impossible one. “What is my role in this, Mister Potter? When you have a school full of people who wish to be in your presence, why are you invading my office?”

“Hermione, Ron, the Weasleys—even Professor Dumbledore—they all look at me, and I can tell that they’re seeing who I used to be. They want that Harry back. It’s not happening. I’m not him, and I don’t know how to be that person anymore,” Potter says, his hands disappearing as he bundles up his cloak on his lap. “You’re the only person I know who doesn’t look at me like I’m defective.”

Defective? Oh, certainly not. “I prefer to think of you as the new, improved model of Potter,” Snape intones dryly. The smile on Potter’s face holds far too much relief for Snape to be capable of regretting his words.
Triwizard Tournament

Snape’s summer is a quiet one, but it feels like the calm before a storm. Being that he is fully aware of what that storm will be, he takes the time to make sure all of his legal paperwork is up to date. Goblin ingenuity ensures that even if he is convicted of a crime while living or dead, the Wizengamot will have no claim on what property he possesses, and his carefully hoarded savings in the Prince family vault is secured against government claims. He has no heirs, but Snape would rather let that small pile of gold sit in Gringotts until it is a lump of moss and mold before he’ll let the Wizengamot take it.

He thinks idly about getting rid of the house on Spinner’s End and decides not to. It’s been useful, and also serves as an excellent place to store potion ingredients that are technically banned in Britain. One would like to hope the rules regarding Wizarding Britain’s Restricted Register are updated one day. Bloody tomatoes are still on the list from the days when it was firmly believed that the fruit was poison. Just because he can make poison with the plant is no excuse to be so paranoid about a fruit that also makes excellent sauce. He can make poisons out of most acceptable potions substances in the world, no matter how “safe” they are supposed to be.

The only whisper he hears about the summer being less than peaceful occurs when he receives the *Daily Prophet* the day after the Quidditch World Cup in Dartmoor. Rita Skeeter’s articles are informative as long as one skips the surfeit of language, and that woman does not know when to cease embellishing.

The fact that Ireland defeated Bulgaria, one hundred seventy over one hundred sixty, is of only vague interest. Snape is far more concerned with the group of Death Eaters that stormed the event after the game concluded to torture Muggles and Muggle-borns. No Death Eater was apprehended, though Skeeter reports that the Dark Mark was witnessed in the sky by anyone with the sense to look up towards unexpected bright green light.

This is cause for concern. He received no communications from any Death Eater who chose to go on such an interesting rampage—and it must have been some twit’s idea, not the Dark Lord himself. If Voldemort were in contact with his Death Eaters, Snape would have been informed and ordered to participate in the raid. It would have been considered a first test of his loyalties of old.

The Ministry is useless, as usual. Minister Fudge proclaims the Dark Mark and “the so-called Death Eaters” to be the actions of vile-hearted pranksters, not any sort of sign of You-Know-Who’s return. It is Skeeter who informs readers that Bartemius Crouch, Senior’s house-elf was found in possession of the wand that created the Dark Mark, and was immediately sacked by Crouch, which is sublime levels of stupidity. House-elves do not need wands if they wish to make mischief.

Snape doubts Crouch is culpable in the acts of that night—it was his dead son who preferred the life of a Death Eater. Crouch’s decision to fire the house-elf was nothing more than a political move to distance himself from the Mark’s appearance.

Snape shakes his head, folding the paper before subjecting it to a muttered *Incendio* in disgust. He hopes there are others who understand the seriousness of what this resurgence in Death Eater activity will ultimately mean.

In hindsight, he should have taken the events in Dartmoor to be a warning for the impending school year. Triwizard Tournament?

Triwizard *nonsense.*
Snape grinds his teeth for a solid week. He is sick of the nonstop speculation, the plots to cross the Goblet’s age barrier, the rapid birdsong of French, the distracting ups and downs of the flowing northern languages. He prefers last year’s quiet, the lack of concern that he was going to have to pull Harry Potter by the scruff from one foul escapade or another.

Alastor Moody’s additional presence is no help whatsoever. The retired Auror is terrorizing the school in his position as secondary Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, certain that Voldemort sympathizers lurk even amongst the first-years.

On the night before the competitors for the tournament are to be drawn, Snape finally gives in. “Merlin, why?” he asks Lupin. The curse on the Defence position does not seem to apply to werewolves, possibly because the teacher in question is already cursed. Lupin is the only professor in decades to successfully manage a second year of teaching the class.

Lupin, to his credit, looks just as pained. “It was Albus’s idea. Even with your potion, Severus, I’m still nigh-useless for days during the full moon. This year, I shall teach for three weeks, Moody has the other, and the children get ‘a unique perspective on defence.’”

Snape restrains a sigh. Moody has just been given a lecture by Minerva about not threatening to poison students who giggle at him. “Our Headmaster is insane.”

“Oh, he must be,” Lupin agrees. “He hired you, after all,” he adds with a smile.

Snape inclines his head in recognition of the barb. “And you, also. Perhaps Sinistra is a succubus in disguise?”

The Astronomy teacher glares daggers at them from across the faculty lounge. “Leave me out of your nefarious plans. I’m the only sane person that Albus ever hired.”

Minerva sniffs and rattles her newspaper in a great show of turning the page.

The process to select the Tournament’s champions is remarkably uneventful until the damned goblet spits out a fourth name. Albus catches the scrap with a frown of concern, a frown that quickly becomes a thundercloud of displeasure.

“Harry Potter,” he reads.

Potter, who stopped paying attention to the proceedings once Cedric Diggory’s name was called, looks up from the book on his lap with a startled expression. “Sir?”

Albus holds up the slip of paper. “Your name has been drawn.”

The response is astonishing. Potter stands up, a furious expression on his face. “Absolutely not!”

“Harry,” Granger hisses, tugging on his sleeve. “It’s binding!”

“I don’t care,” Potter spits the words like a rabid cat. “I didn’t put my name in that thing!”

Albus studies him before giving Potter a terse nod. “Come with me, Mister Potter. It will have to be discussed.”

Potter bites his lip and then follows the Headmaster, leaving shock and derision in his wake. Snape lingers just long enough to hear Weasley declare, “Of course he put his name in, Hermione!” and departs the Great Hall in disgust. Even if Lockhart hadn’t performed a final act of damaging stupidity, this is perhaps the one thing Snape is certain pre-Obliviated Potter would not have done.
“It doesn’t matter whether it was the boy or not,” Bartemius Crouch informs the staff in a solemn voice. “His name was taken from the Goblet of Fire. It is a binding magical contract. He must compete.”

Karkaroff and Maxine explode, shouting out accusations of unfairness and cheating. Snape tunes out their whinging; the goblet will not give in to their demands, no matter how much they shout at it.

“I’m fourteen years old,” Potter says in a low growl. “You said competitors are supposed to be seventeen!”

Crouch blinks a few times, as if startled by the question. “Well, yes, but young man—that is a Ministry-imposed rule. The Goblet of Fire is old magic which does not recognize Ministry decrees. That was the purpose of the age barrier.” He peers at Potter, narrow-eyed. “Are you certain you didn’t put your name into the goblet, young man?”

Potter glares at Crouch. His green eyes are full of the same fire Lily’s gaze held when she’d just heard someone say something particularly stupid.

“I’m afraid we have no choice,” Albus says, and gestures for Potter to join Cedric Diggory, Fleur Delacour, and Viktor Krum.

Snape expects Potter to visit his office that evening, especially after it is announced to the Great Hall that Hogwarts, however unwillingly, will have two champions competing for the Triwizard Cup. The anger from three Houses was nearly palpable; even the Gryffindors have mixed feelings about the matter.

It’s not a knock he hears after curfew, but the scratching of nails on his wooden door.

Snape goes to the door, opens it, and looks down. A belligerent, furry mammal is staring up at him. The creature has short, stumpy legs with claws that look positively lethal, black, bristly fur, intense dark eyes, the barest hint of ears, and a broad white stripe that extends from its cranium to end of its short tail.

“Well,” Snape says, struggling to remain expressionless against his amusement. “Won’t you come in?”

His visitor walks in with a curious, speedy gait, nose lifted in the air as it looks around. Snape isn’t certain it’s Potter until the brat shifts and is standing before him, wearing dark trousers, an old gray jumper that looks like it was borrowed from a Muggle-born student, no shoes, and missing his glasses.

“There are severe fines for unregistered Animagi, you know,” Snape observes dryly, which makes his guest snicker. “What have you done to yourself now, Potter?”

“I’m a ratel,” Potter says, looking pleased.

“A what?” The word sounds familiar.

“A honey badger.” Potter’s smile cracks into a wide grin.

“Great Merlin, you’ve become a Hufflepuff.”

Potter shakes his head, still grinning. “No, not an English badger. Honey badgers are closer to weasels, or pole cats, or wolverines. They’re tough little things. They also,” Potter adds, as if confiding in Snape, “eat cobras for lunch.”
“Hmm.” Snape watches Potter fish his glasses out of his pocket, putting them back on his face. “And what happens if this *badger* of yours is bitten during its feast?”

“Takes a nap,” Potter says. “Gets back up. Goes looking for dessert.” He is holding himself still, but Snape senses the boy’s dreadful need to prance in place. He is truly happy with what he’s accomplished. Snape blames Sirius Black.

However, Potter’s excitement is the first strong emotion Snape has seen the boy display since the spring of 1993. He just doesn’t have it within his black heart to dismantle Potter’s joy in his success. Considering their mutual enemy, Potter couldn’t have chosen a better animal’s form to take. “What if you had gone through these no-doubt-suspect Animagus lessons with your Dogfather and wound up an insect, instead?”

“Then I’d be beneath anyone’s notice, and I’d finally be left the hell *alone!*” Potter retorts in a renewal of that temperamental spitting.

Snape gives him a level, unruffled stare.

“Er, sorry, Professor Snape. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Potter looks contrite. “The Animagus thing is new, and I’m still getting used to certain…side-effects.”

“Ratels have a temper, I take it?” Snape asks, deciding that they both need tea. Shifting animal forms is supposed to be tiring. He wants Potter refreshed and gone from his office. He firecalls down to the house-elves in the kitchen, and has a tray in short order.

Potter looks relieved at being handed something to drink. Snape wonders if he’s had a moment to himself at all this evening—Gryffindor Tower is probably in a complete uproar.

“There are stories in Africa that ratels will go after beehives for the honey, but if they get stung, they’ll tear apart the entire hive in retaliation,” Potter says, after downing nearly half a cup of tea in one swallow.

Snape nods. Immunity to venom and a desire to consume dangerous snakes: beneficial. Severe, retributive temper: not beneficial at all. “You will have plenty of opportunities to vent your newfound frustrations in the coming year, I imagine. Congratulations, Hogwarts Champion.”

Potter scowls. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted, Potter.”

“You’re a bastard.”

Snape smiles. “It is high time you came to that realization, Mister Potter. Who else knows of your brilliant legal lapse?”

“Just you and Sirius,” Potter says. “Remus would want me to register, and I don’t think that’s a good idea until after Voldemort is dead. I’ll pay the stupid fines if they want me to afterwards, but right now I’m not handing out anything that could be useful later.”

“And yet, you have given this information to me,” Snape says in a low voice. “What if that is your eventual downfall, Mister Potter?”

Potter gives him a serious look. “Would you tell anyone, sir?”

Snape hesitates. “There may come a day, Mister Potter, when I might not have a choice.”
After a minute’s quiet reflection, Potter nods. In possession of a new skill—and a new temperament—he remains an intelligent young man. “I’ll keep that in mind, sir.”

“Good.” Snape feels a desperate need to change the subject. “Some of your teachers will be tempted to release you from the academic standards expected of fourth-year students. I am not one of those idiots. Your coursework will be the same as everyone else’s.”

Potter smiles. “I would expect nothing less, sir.”

* * * *

With Potter far more emotionally receptive and responsive to both teachers and students, Snape dares to start pushing again. He can’t pull the great Bloody Bat out in full form just yet—thank you, Fred and George Weasley—and he doesn’t quite want to, either. Still, it will not hurt Potter to see Snape’s “true” personality begin to emerge in classes again.

Potter’s response to hints of the great Bloody Bat is to ignore them entirely, or be utterly polite in response. It takes Snape far too long to recognize that the boy is participating in the process in the way others would still expect him to. Except for the moment when the Goblet of Fire spat out Potter’s name, Potter has kept his ratel temper to himself.

Snape knows that Potter’s participation in the Triwizard Tournament has been staged for a purpose, though he cannot discern what that purpose will be. He goes so far as to ask Albus if he dropped Potter’s name into the Goblet of Fire. Snape does not put it past the old man to use the tournament as another method for training up their resident Voldemort-slayer.

Albus admits to the fact that he would have encouraged Potter’s participation, if Potter were of age, but he is still angry at the manner in which it occurred. Alastor Moody believes that a powerful Confundus charm could have fooled the goblet, but there is an entire staff of Hogwarts teachers and seventh years, along with their Beauxbatons and Durmstrang guests, who might be capable of performing it. The list of suspects is not easy to narrow down.

The First Task takes place at the end of November. Four dragons are imported from Romania just for the occasion.

It is complete insanity.

Snape holds his breath throughout Potter’s entire broom-based confrontation with the Hungarian Horntail. He is in a position he cannot tolerate, a place where he can’t protect the idiot Gryffindor child. Jinxed brooms in Quidditch games are one thing, but tampering with contests bound by magical contracts are circumstances beyond even Snape’s ability to meddle with.

Potter survives and is judged well, tying with Krum in second place. Oliver Wood, still de facto Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team thanks to the Triwizard Tournament’s interference, offers Potter the Seeker’s position again, ready and waiting at the start of his fifth year. Potter declines.

Snape, already on approach to stage a most necessary argument, overhears Wood’s dramatic dismay. “But Harry!” he almost yells in shocked response. “It’s Quidditch! You’re the best Seeker the team’s ever had, and if you rejoin for fifth year, the House Cup is as good as ours!”

“Why do you care?” Potter asks in honest puzzlement. “You graduated last year, Wood!”
“Because it’s my team, and I’ve got to look out for them, even if I won’t be here to see it,” Wood retorts. “Honestly, Harry. Some days I don’t think you’ve any idea of the proper priorities in life.”

Potter gives Wood a look of pure disbelief. “Wood. Oliver. I was almost eaten by a dragon today. Right now, my priorities lie in surviving this stupid tournament.”

To his credit, Wood grimaces in apology. “Right. Yes, okay, sorry, there is that,” he admits. “But will you just think on it, Harry? Most of the team graduated last year. We’ve still got Fred and George and Angelina, but we’ll need good players to keep fighting off the Slytherins, the Puffs, and the Ravenclaws.”

“You do remember that I have absolutely no memory of playing Quidditch with you at all, right?” Potter asks with a wry smile.


“I shall have to send you a thank you card, Mister Wood,” Snape says, a deliberately cruel smile on his face as he steps into Wood’s line of sight. Wood pales. “Putting an amnesiac on what will be Gryffindor’s rag-tag disaster of a team next year will ensure the House Cup returns to Slytherin, where it belongs.”

While Wood beats a hasty retreat, Snape turns to Potter and raises his voice. “Someone is stealing from my potions stores. I wonder who that could be?”

Potter, with no prompting at all, plays along beautifully. “And you’re asking me, then?” he asks with a rebellious glare. “I haven’t been in your potions stores, Professor Snape. Perhaps you’re being burgled by your Prefects?”

With plenty of curious witnesses drifting closer, Snape looms over Potter. This is not as easy as it used to be; the boy is getting taller by the day. “One warning, Mister Potter,” he says, his voice full of malice and loathing. “I am watching you. Sooner or later, I will discover this culprit’s identity. You should be…cautious. Perhaps a bit of Veritaserum in your pumpkin juice?”

Potter steps back a pace. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Professor Snape!” Moody calls, a very ill-timed interruption to the confrontation. “I need a word with Mister Potter. If you don’t mind?” he asks, snaring Potter and making off with him without waiting for Snape’s answer.

Snape leaves the Great Hall early that evening. When he approaches his office near the dungeons, he hears a peculiar kya-ha-ha-ha sound from the shadows. Just before he can draw his wand, the ratel trots into view.

“Subtle,” he sneers, and gets them both inside. The ratel walks over to the storage cupboard, nosing along the floor and up the wooden paneling. Then he rears up on his hind legs, claws clicking on the cupboard door, as he sniffs near the inset handle.

“Would you like me to open it?” Snape asks, watching the proceedings.

The ratel shakes his head, and then Potter is standing in its place. “No. I’d never smell anything except frogs and eyeballs and herbs. I almost didn’t smell anything but that, anyway.”

“To the point, Potter: who is stealing from me?”

Potter sneezes and then gives him a baffled look. “I’ve no idea. All I can smell is Polyjuice.”
Right at that moment, the Dark Mark on Snape’s arm begins to burn.

He had thought it to be a student, a miscreant filching the supplies to make Polyjuice Potion for some bit of mischief. To find that the thief is already under the spell, seeking the ingredients to make more of the same? That is cause for immediate concern.

Snape tells Albus both bits of news, of course, because he is not foolish. “The timing is interesting, yes,” Albus says in a pondering voice.

“You suspect someone already.”

“I suspect that there is a situation brewing,” Albus counters, “though I assure you, the pun was not intentional.” Snape rolls his eyes.

“I do not like that this thievery coincides with Harry’s forced participation in the tournament,” Albus says. “And then there is Barty.”

“His Weasley assistant seems intent on telling everyone in shouting distance that Crouch is ill,” Snape says. “Is that false?” Percy Weasley would have been a perfect Slytherin—not that Snape would have enjoyed the prospect of that shade of ginger in his House. Still, the boy has an ambitious drive, and a desire for authority, that the rest of his clan lacks. Slytherin could have refined that where Gryffindor did not, resulting in honed skills, not pompous windbaggery.

“I know that Percy believes it to be true,” Albus replies. “But whether or not it is? I don’t know; Barty isn’t taking visitors. Considering his work ethic, and the efforts he undertook to ensure the Triwizard Tournament took place, I find it very odd that he is largely indisposed.”

“You mean that even if he were suffering the Black Death, Crouch would be standing out there to witness the fruits of his labors,” Snape infers.

“We will continue as we have been. We will be patient, and we will keep watch,” Albus decides. “Though I am impressed by the manner in which you and young Mister Potter worked together. The two of you are well-matched when you choose to put animosity aside.”

Snape gives him a narrow-eyed look and adopts a bland tone. “I haven’t the faintest idea of what you’re speaking of,” he says, and has to resist the urge to throw his tea in the Headmaster’s face when Albus mocks him with nothing more than a smile.

* * * * *

It’s Minerva who decides that Snape needs a date for the Yule Ball.

“No,” he grits out, and resumes marking scrolls with prodigious amounts of red ink. “I’m not attending that foolishness, anyway.”

Minerva McGonagall does not take the hint. “Severus, aside from the fact that Albus has declared that faculty attendance is mandatory—”

“I’ll kill him,” Snape grumbles under his breath. Albus is inferring too much about Snape’s attitude of late. Perhaps he hasn’t issued enough threats, terrified enough idiot children.
—all faculty and adult guests are expected to complete the first dance with the Triwizard Champions.” When he glances up at her, Minerva is smiling. “And I know you can dance, Severus Snape. I taught you myself. That pitiful excuse will not aid you. As it stands, there are not enough of us to complete the faculty pairings.”

He is tempted to scowl at her. “I’ll dance with you, then. Problem solved.” Minerva doesn’t prattle. Vector doesn’t know when to stop.

“The Headmaster and his Deputy Headmistress will be dancing together,” she informs him.


“Good evening, Severus,” she says, and leaves with a triumphant smirk on her face.

Snape wants to do nothing more than to make her eat that expression, but that requires finesse. Or, perhaps, a figurative brick to the skull.

The idea that immediately comes to him is so absolutely ludicrous that Snape has no doubt that it will fail. Still, he consumes three shots of Firewhiskey and then firecalls 12 Grimmauld Place.

The infamous Black house-elf responds. “A bat in the fireplace!” the elf cackles at the sight of him. “What should I do with the great bloody bat?”

“You should fetch Sirius Black, or you’ll never get to join the other stuffed heads on the staircase,” Snape retorts. “House-elves have their uses in potions.”

Kreacher’s eyes widen, and then he laughs again. “The bat speaks to Kreacher like a proper wizard should!” he proclaims, and then he goes to find Black.

“What do you want?” is Sirius Black’s greeting. He stands several feet away from the fireplace in his kitchen, his hands tucked into his trouser pockets and looking very much like he wants to close the flue.

Snape studies him for a moment. Black is finally losing the appearance of gaunt skeleton that marked his time in Azkaban. His clothes fit instead of just hanging off of him, as his robes did at Pettigrew’s trial. His hair is groomed, not scraggly. The old Muggle clothes Black wears at the moment suit him, in a teeth-grinding sort of way.

“Might I come through?” Snape asks. “I have a proposition for you, and I’d prefer not to shout it from a fireplace.”

Black hesitates before nodding. “If you were going to kill me, you would be more subtle about it.”

“Quite,” Snape agrees, and emerges into the kitchen. The house is much improved since his and Albus’s initial, cautious exploration, attempting to make certain that it was safe for Potter and Black to inhabit. The house no longer smells of decay, but cobwebs still hang from the kitchen ceiling. Snape suspects that some Black ancestor spelled it so that cobwebs are always present.

“Harry is all right, isn’t he?” Black asks the moment Snape has finished wiping soot from his sleeves. “There is no trouble?”

“Potter is fine,” Snape answers. Black always asks after Potter’s well-being before anything else, which is completely at odds with the self-centered boy that Snape remembers from Hogwarts. “Why have you not attended the tournament, if your concern for him is so far-reaching?”
Black scowls at him, but there is no shouting. Instead, he sits down at the massive kitchen table, gesturing for Snape to do the same.

Snape sits, cautiously. He is uncertain what to make of a world without Sirius Black’s explosive temper.

“Harry worries about me,” Black says after a moment. “Given the nature of the tournament, I didn’t want to be present during the Tasks and chance distracting him at a crucial moment.”

Snape lifts his head in surprise. “I believe that is the most sensible thing I have ever heard you say, Black. What brought on this fit of maturity?”

Black grins at him, an expression with no humor in it whatsoever. “Prison.”

“Of course. I suppose it was a nice alternative to going stark, raving mad.”

“Oh, I did that, too.” Black waves his hand dismissively. “But even insanity gets dull after a few years. Besides, I’m still nigh useless, Severus. If you must ask who runs this household, it isn’t me. I’ve only just reached the point where I can handle daily life. I would have stuffed Kreacher rather than keep him around, but Harry has damn near domesticated him.”

“Mister Potter would be the reason you’re both still alive and reasonably odor-free?” Snape asks, amused.

“He is,” Black says, a proud smile lighting his features. “He’s even managed to get Mother’s portrait to shut itself up. Mostly, anyway.”

Snape lifts both eyebrows. The shock of that portrait’s raging howls had been one of the few things ever to reduce Albus Dumbledore to speechlessness. “He silenced the harpy horror? How?”

“Told her if she didn’t shut it, he’d light a match and burn the house down with her portrait trapped in it,” Black says with no small amount of glee. “Said even if the Wizengamot hadn’t released the Black fortune to me yet, he had more than enough to rent a decent flat for us, one with a lack of portraits screaming obscenities. Most effective silencing method I’ve ever seen.”

“Do not relate that story to Minerva, not unless you want your ears full of how your godson has lost the moral path.”

Black looks scandalized. “Harry, lose the moral path? Merlin, has that woman lost her mind? He may look like James, but he acts like a less screeching version of Lily!”

“Mm,” Snape says, momentarily discomfited. He had managed to forget Lily Evans’s temper, allowing the memory to be clouded by grief. There is no doubt, however, that Potter has inherited her finely-honed sense of justice.

Bugger it all. He likes the Potter brat; he must, if he is now concerned of what future revelations will do to their late-evening office chats.

“Anyway, you had a point to showing up in my fireplace, I’m sure,” Black is saying. “What is it?”

“The Yule Ball is on the eve of Christmas Day,” Snape says. “Had you planned to attend?”

Black nods. “I was thinking of showing up, at least for the beginning of it. There isn’t a danger to distract Harry from—unless you count herds of adoring females.”
“I am required to attend with a date, at least for the start of the festivities.” No, not even being a man of thirty-four is enough distance from his youth to make this any less awkward. “I am asking you to attend it with me.”

Black stares at him for a full minute before throwing back his head and roaring with laughter. “Oh, that’s rich! I should have checked before—are you actually Severus Snape, or just Remus, Polyjuiced into looking like him?”

“Remus Lupin has more sense than to ask a pardoned criminal, especially an ill-mannered cretin such as yourself,” Snape retorts, crossing his arms. No wonder his social life is lacking. It isn’t worth these pointless moments of exposure.

“All right, all right—no, don’t leave in a huff,” Black gasps, stilling Snape with a hand on his arm before Snape can make his escape. “I’m sorry. I am, really. I swear that I thought you would rather jab out your own eyeballs and eat them than to ever ask me a question based upon social niceties.”

“Is that still an option?” Snape asks. “I am not here in fawning adoration, Black. There is an ulterior motive to my asking you.”

Black wipes his eyes, which are bright with mirth. “That’s more like it, then. What’s the plot, Severus?”

He can’t let it pass by. “That’s the second time you’ve called me by my actual name. Are you ill?”

“Harry has threatened me with severe retaliation if I continue my bullying ways,” Black says. “After hearing his willingness to set our house on fire just to shut up my mother’s portrait, I decided it was best not to chance it. And… I decided I can let it rest. Twelve years in Azkaban has to be suitable revenge for my stupid childhood.”

Snape decides to proceed without acknowledging that statement. This evening has involved enough discomfort. “Igor Karkaroff is a raging homophobe,” he says. “He has also managed to irritate me years ago in a way that requires a special sort of retaliation. Your presence during the opening dance for the Yule Ball will hopefully inspire him to storm out in dramatic fashion.”

“Huh. I always figured your lack of dates was because women wouldn’t give you the time of day,” Black says, but he does not seem to be mocking Snape outright.

“Gender has never been a concerning component in someone I would be willing to socialize with,” Snape grates out the explanation. He loses almost nothing by admitting it; he has very strict ideals for dating, and so far, very few individuals have ever met his exacting standards. Lily had understood his preferences, but never found anyone that Snape didn’t want to hex into spending the rest of their days as a wooden wardrobe. She’d considered the task to be her greatest challenge… right until he’d gone and bolloxed everything up.

“Well, I doubt I’m your type,” Black says with a sharp smile. “This will end up in the Prophet, you know.”

Snape glances at his fingernails, still stained by that morning’s walnut grinding. “I do not care. Do you?”

“No, that’s the fun part,” Black says. “I can show the paper to Mother’s portrait and listen to her sputter indignantly for hours, especially as I haven’t yet done my duty to knock up some poor daft Pure-blood girl.”

Snape can’t help the pained expression he makes at the thought. “Please, spare us all and do not ever
“You and Remus are both of that opinion.” Black looks put upon for a moment and then changes the subject. “What are you going to do if your Dark Lord notices you cavorting around with the enemy?”

Snape wonders if Potter’s presence in his life has made Black more intelligent. It is a question he did not expect from this quarter. “I will tell him that I’m attempting to convince you to join in our nefarious ways, of course.”

When Black nods in acceptance, Snape asks, “I do trust that I won’t have to dance with you again after the first required turn around the floor?”

Minerva suffers a violent twitch when Sirius Black arrives the night of the Yule Ball to act as Snape’s companion. She gives Snape a look of pure, thwarted vexation, whereupon Snape indulges and smirks at her.

“If you turn him upside down in front of the entire student body and rifle his pockets for trinkets, I will have your head, Severus Snape!” she declares.

Snape affects surprise. “Would I do that, Minerva?”

“Yes,” says Black.

“Absolutely,” Vector agrees.

“I now have money riding on it,” adds Flitwick.

This time, his smile is more genuine. It is nice to have garnered such a Slytherin reputation.

The Triwizard Champions’ choice of dates is indicative that the hopes for inter-school cooperation, at least, are progressing. Viktor Krum is in attendance with Miss Granger, who looks strangely less beaver-like, for some reason, and has tamed her wild, bushy hair into a good semblance of braided, bejeweled beauty. Cedric Diggory has brought a Ravenclaw, a smiling, well-coifed Miss Chang. Fleur Delacour ensnared the captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team, Roger Davies, who seems to have lost the awareness of anything that does not involve Miss Delacour’s cleavage.

Harry Potter attends the Yule Ball with Luna Lovegood on his arm. The choice is a surprise, as is the realization that Miss Lovegood is capable of wearing jewelry that is not composed of foodstuffs.

The first dance begins with the Champions and their companions sliding out onto the dance floor in order of their current ranking. Then, with Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall leading, the adults venture onto the dance floor, one set after the other. Only Lupin is absent, kept from the holiday and its associated festivities by the full moon. Snape is still torn between sympathy and utter envy that the werewolf gets to skip this nonsense.

Igor Karkaroff has Aurora Sinistra on his arm. It is a pairing that seems to be going well until Karkaroff spies Snape and Black, who joined the dancing after brokering a deal to trade the lead of the dance back and forth after each completed set of step-and-twirl.

“I lead better than you,” Black is saying, while Snape observes Karkaroff out of the corner of his eye.

“You are a dog,” Snape retorts. “You are therefore a natural follower, and should accept your lot in life.”
“Aw, Severus, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s said to me in fourteen years!” Black says, a huge grin on his face. Karkaroff is starting to turn red.

“You were in prison for twelve of those years,” Snape reminds him. “An Auror’s read writ of arrest would sound like ambrosia.”

“As long as it’s not from cousin Tonks,” Black admits after they switch to his lead again. “I may be a Black, but I’m not incestuous.”

Karkaroff storms off of the dance floor, leaving a bewildered Sinistra behind. “That took longer than I thought it would,” Snape says, ignoring the other baffled dancers and the murmuring from the student body. It is a subtle thing, but he knows there are students in Durmstrang with preferences for the same gender. Snape has just sown the seeds of distrust in their Headmaster; Karkaroff’s dramatics will make the other students think twice during their dealings with him. As far as Snape is concerned, the evening is now a success.

Miss Lovegood, the most adaptable child in existence, steers Potter and herself close enough to Sinistra to ask a question. Soon enough, she has convinced her partner and the abandoned teacher to join together in a three-way waltz. Potter seems pleasantly resigned to Lovegood’s plot, but Sinistra looks less emotionally distressed. The entire effect is ridiculous; the other students start laughing and cheering the spectacle on.

Albus and Minerva dip, twirl, and come up beside himself and Black. Snape does have to admit, twelve years in prison has not dulled Black’s ability as a dancer. If there were a complete working brain inside the dog, Snape would almost be tempted. He could easily do worse than someone who only tried to feed him to a werewolf out of childish naivety. Snape’s last attempt at dating tried to do him in with the Killing Curse.

“Do you know what is wrong with Igor?” Albus asks. His eyes are nearly aglow with amused twinkling.

“Haven’t the foggiest!” Black says in a cheerful voice, and his dip is far too extravagant.

Snape glares at him when he is rightened, and resumes the lead. “I am not responsible for Headmaster Karkaroff’s strange behavior. Perhaps the music is not to his taste.”

Minerva is smiling. “Like a brick to the face, Severus.”

“Nonsense,” he replies, and spins Black just a bit too strenuously. “I’m all out of bricks.”

Black, true to their arrangement, does not ask him to dance again. He asks Sinistra instead, which allows Snape to escape the floor. He takes a seat at a table closest to the wall, and quenches both remaining nerves and thirst on the house-elves’ iced cider.

Potter and Lovegood settle themselves at a table nearby, and within moments they are engaged in intense conversation. Snape watches for a few minutes before curiosity overrides common sense. If Miss Lovegood is talking with enthusiasm, it no doubt involves the dubious existence of some strange creature.

“Mister Potter; Miss Lovegood,” he says, making both of their heads jolt upright in surprise. “I trust that I will not find you out doing inappropriate things this evening?”

“Oh, no,” Lovegood says in her breathy voice. “Of course not, Professor. Tonight is the full moon, a positively horrid time to be among the roses. The nargles will not appreciate it at all.”
“Besides, we’re here as friends. We’re not actually dating ,” Potter explains. “And I believe her about the nargles, considering she managed to get a flock of them to attack me.”

“Piecemeal of nargles, Harry,” Lovegood corrects him.

Snape decides that he does not want to know what a nargle actually is, or how Potter managed to incite a…a piecemeal of them to assault him. “How did this friendship come about, then?” he asks, realizing too late that he sounds like a concerned, interrogative guardian.

“We got to know each other at the beginning of third year,” Potter answers, “when I saw the thestrals leading the school carriages.”

“None of the other students can see them but us,” Lovegood adds. “There was some concern that Harry was not mentally stable.”

“Then you told me all about them, and thus it was confirmed to everyone that I’m crazy,” Potter says with a smile.

Snape stares at Potter. “No one can see a thestral unless they have witnessed death.” He is almost certain that the destruction of Tom Riddle’s shade does not count.

Potter averts his eyes. “I am aware of that, sir.”

Snape cannot decide if he is furious or impressed that Potter lied to the Wizengamot. He settles for feeling uncomfortable and vaguely ill that Potter can remember his parents’ deaths with enough clarity to see the school thestrals.

“I find I am overcome with the desire to canvas the gardens,” Snape says, more than ready to depart. “If there are trysts, they must be interrupted, lest they attract Miss Lovegood’s vicious nargles.”

Lovegood smiles up at him. “That’s a very good idea, Professor Snape. No one would like such a nice dance to end with injuries.”

Snape scares the gracious blue hell out of Davies and Delacour, taking extreme pleasure in parting Ravenclaw from fifty points for that foolish indiscretion.
Two days after the winter holiday finally begins, Snape finds Lupin wandering the halls. “What in the entire bloody hell are you still doing here?”

Lupin gives him an odd look. “I could ask you the same question, Severus.”

“I live here,” Snape retorts. “What’s your excuse? You have a dog and a godchild to go haunt like a proper wandering spirit.”

Lupin’s expression morphs into supreme discomfort. “It seemed wiser to stay away this holiday.”

Snape might not partake of the activity himself, but he is observant enough to recognize the painfully obvious. “In all seriousness: what in the bloody blue blazes do people find so attractive about that ill-mannered cretin?”

The werewolf gives him a crooked smile. “You’re the one who invited him to the Yule Ball. I have pictures, bless Minerva’s devious heart.”

“That was for a singular purpose. One that succeeded, I might add.” Snape glares at Lupin. “Is there a reason you haven’t told him?”

“I know it has not escaped your notice that I’m a damned werewolf,” Lupin snarls. Snape can’t help it; he takes a step back and then inwardly curses himself for showing that sort of weakness. Lupin’s immediate apology makes it even worse. “Sorry, I really am. I’m still—”

“It’s fine,” Snape says in a flat voice. “Go flirt with the dog, Lupin.”

“Well, I’d actually like to, but there are complications!”

Snape quietly indulges in the sort of words that his dead father would spew on most evenings at home. If he doesn’t figure out how to get the man out of Hogwarts, Snape is going to spend his entire holiday trapped in a castle with a werewolf. That leaves him in the unwanted role of playing idiotic matchmaker. “Talk. Your reasons had best make sense, or I’m mixing liquid silver into your next batch of Wolfsbane.” Silver will not kill a werewolf, but it does burn. Burnt insides are not pleasant.

“If Sirius were interested and something…came of it…” Lupin actually manages to look more uncomfortable than Snape felt while sitting in Sirius Black’s kitchen. “It would reflect negatively on Harry.”

Snape raises on eyebrow. He’d expected something emotionally ridiculous, given what the four self-proclaimed Marauders had once been like. “Sensible.”

“Once Harry is an adult, it wouldn’t matter, but right now…it would.” Lupin shoves his hands into his ratty coat pockets. He saves the best of his wardrobe—not that there is much improvement—for teaching. “That’s assuming Sirius is open to the idea. In the meantime, his younger cousin has a crush on me, and it’s making things even more awkward.”

Snape quickly goes through the short list of Black family members who would not immediately try to murder Sirius Black. “Nymphadora Tonks?”

“She of the currently magenta hair, yes.” Lupin sighs. “Aside from yesterday’s Christmas dinner, I
can’t do it this year. I’m just worried they’ll decide to track me down at Hogwarts and drag me back to London.”

Blast it all. He has an idea, and he hates it. “Come with me,” Snape orders, and turns around without waiting to see if Lupin will actually do so. It isn’t his job to make Lupin’s decisions for him.

When he gets to his classroom, it’s to discover that Lupin did actually follow him. Snape gestures for Lupin to go inside before shutting and locking the door.

“Oh, so we’re murdering me after all?” Lupin asks with a smile.

“Do shut up.” Snape draws his wand from his sleeve and touches it to a specific indentation on the wall. “The wards don’t work unless the door is sealed.”

Lupin watches in academic fascination as green fire traces along the walls in questing patterns. By the time the process is complete, the room is encircled from floor to ceiling. “Fascinating.”

“Quite,” Snape drawls, securing his wand once more. He isn’t worried about the werewolf recreating the idea; the incantation is simple enough, but one has to be willing to perform certain sacrifices to create these wards. “I have an offer to make, but it cannot be where any curious ears might hear.”

Lupin turns serious. “I’m listening.”

“I have a house that I absolutely despise.” If Snape’s voice emerges as a growl, there are good reasons for it. “There is nothing structurally wrong with it, but the memories associated with it, for me, are unpleasant. I use it only when I have to meet with those who are…unsavory.”

“When you must spy,” Lupin clarifies. “How often?”

“At the moment? Hardly at all. The Dark Lord is not active—at least not for most of us.” Snape realizes he’s rubbing at the Mark and stops. The burn is most often at low ebb, an inconvenience, but pain has flared twice since Potter’s revelation about the Polyjuiced thief.

“You don’t think that will last. Not with Harry’s forced participation in this stupid tournament.”

Snape appreciates that his opinion of the Triwizard Tournament is shared, no matter that Lupin is a werewolf. “No. The rest of the holiday, however, the house should remain safe. It is under a Fidelius Charm, the secret of which is currently held by very few individuals. There is an area behind the house safe to use for unseen Apparition. You won’t be disturbed, as everyone is aware of the fact that I choose to live here. If that changes before the holiday ends, I can send you word of warning to vacate before trouble might arrive.”

Lupin frowns. “Why? Why would you make this sort of offer?”

“So that I do not have to worry about stumbling over a werewolf at every breakfast.” Snape glowers at him. “I do try to relax during these holidays, the better to not murder one of these young idiots when they return to class.”

“I see.” There is something in Lupin’s eyes that is trying to imply that he knows better, but no, he does not. Snape is quite serious about the necessity of relaxing before the bratlings return. He learned in his first years of teaching that were it not for the necessity of his role as spy, he might actually enjoy instructing the older students, those who want to truly understand the fine art of potion-making. He can’t stand the young ones, who only concern themselves with the basics and care nothing for the rest. He really does need to spend at least a fortnight in a state of calm, or he’ll end up poisoning the lot of them and happily running off to Azkaban just for some peace and quiet.
“I accept, but I can’t pay—”

“Idiot,” Snape interrupts. “Did I mention anything of payment? Just make sure the place isn’t destroyed and the firewood is restocked before you leave. Otherwise, I do not bloody well care.”

Snape waits for Lupin to pack, which takes all of three minutes. Once outside the gates, he Side-Along-Apparates them both to the road in front of his hated childhood home.

“Charming,” Lupin says of the neighborhood, in a tone that speaks of quite the opposite.

“It used to be worse.” Snape means most of Cokeworth, not just the blasted house. “The word is temptation.”

“Temptation,” Lupin repeats, and the house reveals its grey-boarded, shabby existence.

The front door is a decoy, crafted by Snape after the property became his sole, pathetic inheritance. The back door in the rear garden is the only true entrance; he unlocks it with a key that is tied to the heavily warded house.

“Are there any rooms I should leave alone?” Lupin asks, after a cursory glance around the dusty parlor.

“If it has a silver doorknob, it’s warded against werewolves and pretty much everything else in existence except for myself,” Snape tells him. “Don’t take it personally. I hate Fenrir Greyback far more than I despise you.”

“None taken. I don’t care for him very much, either,” Lupin says in a low voice. “Thank you.”

“Thank me by leaving me alone until the first day of the term,” Snape counters. He leaves Lupin with the only spare key and then departs so the werewolf can enjoy the utter lack of charm that is Spinner’s End.

The day that the hooligans return to Hogwarts, Snape is hiding in his office. Ostensibly he is preparing for the first day of classes tomorrow, but he completes all of his lesson plans for the year over summer break. This is time he sets aside for the prefects, but none have come to see him save one, who offered only her usual bribe of freshly-harvested mugwort. In return, Snape politely overlooks the fact that she is dating a boy that her parents would sooner stake out in the garden to be eaten by birds than allow their daughter to have relations with.

What draws him out is a commotion from the hallway. “Oi! What’s the Gryffindor ghost doing in Slytherin territory?”

“My dear foolish child: surely you must realize that I am far too dead to give a whit of concern as to your silly territory?”

Snape rolls his eyes at the sound of Nearly Headless Nick’s voice and emerges from his office in a quiet whisper. Nicholas notices him, but says nothing; the third-year Slytherin named Greely does not.

“What the hell is that metal box you’re carrying around, anyway?” Greely asks rudely, pointing at the box in question. Snape recognizes that it has speakers on either end, but cannot yet discern anything else about it.

“I am carrying around a box that is a significant improvement in technology that your foolishly outdated family would never recognize, given that the Greely family gave up on such things the
moment the gramophone was invented,” Nicholas returns, a wide smile on his face that does not reach his eyes. “Perhaps if you educated yourself properly, you need not ask such a silly question. Now, please be on your way.”

“Not doing it ’til you tell me what the bloody hell that is!” Greely huffs back.

“Oh, you’re not, hmm? Well, I do hate to ask, but…oh, dear Baron! I do believe one of yours is out and about on the verge of curfew!”

Greely pales as the Bloody Baron emerges from the nearest wall. He stares down at Greely in complete disapproval before pointing in the direction of the Slytherin dormitories.

“Yessir!” Greely squeaks, turning around just in time to collide with Snape’s chest. He falls back and lands on his backside, staring up at Snape with eyes that are performing an excellent impression of dinner plates. “Sir!”

“Five points from Slytherin for rudeness,” Snape says in his favorite quiet, lethal tone. “Just because one is dead does not mean they are to be treated with disrespect. One does not win allies in such a fashion, but one does irritate castle guardians that might have to choose whether or not to save your worthless hide.” Snape considers it. “When your House notices the loss of points, it might be prudent to hide until your housemates find a new distraction.”

Greely scrambles up from the stone floor, says, “YessirsorrysirI'msorrySirNickandBaron!” in a single rushed breath. The Baron shakes his head as the child flees.

“A fool,” the Baron rumbles. Most believe he does not speak, an idea the Baron goes to a lot of trouble to cultivate. Threatening silence, as Snape well knows, works very well as a deterrent.

“Still young enough to grow out of it,” Nick says more optimistically. “Thank you for the assist, Baron.”

The Baron’s eyes flicker down at the shadows behind Nicholas. “The one you’re escorting has a purpose for being down here, I assume?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Nicholas replies. “In fact, we’ve already reached our destination. No safer place to leave a student than in the hands of a professor, is there?”

The Baron looks unimpressed. “It depends upon the professor. Good evening, Nicholas; good evening, Professor Snape.”

“Good evening, Baron,” Snape replies. “Sir Nicholas, I suppose I am inviting you inside?”

“No, not at all! Not as long as you’re willing to take this. Carrying physical objects becomes quite tiring after a while.” Nicholas thrusts the mysterious speaker object at him and looks relieved when Snape accepts it. It’s lighter than Snape expects, plastic instead of metal, and while the language on it now makes sense, the accompanying buttons and alterations in design do not. The second object hidden in Nicholas’s coat is small a paper sack with several square objects rattling around in it. Odd.

“Thank you. Have a good evening!” Nicholas says and floats off. His head flops over to one side when he rounds the corner.

Snape uses his elbow to nudge the door to his office open again. “Hurry up and explain all this,” he hisses.

The ratel trundles out of the shadows, giving him a smug look, before scuttling into Snape’s office.
Snape wonders if ratel can be used in potions. He’ll have to research the idea.

Snape shuts the door; a moment later, Potter is standing where the ratel had been, wearing a new black jumper, dark blue denims, and black trainers with dark red etching. It’s all very modern and very Muggle, which hadn’t previously been the case for Potter’s wardrobe choices.

“Hello, Professor.”

“Mister Potter, I see you’re now corrupting the ghosts into sneaking about on your behalf.” He’s trying for snide, but all he can manage is curious. Maybe that’s for the best; he’ll have to be snide and disdainful for hours after breakfast tomorrow.

“I didn’t want to, but I’ve gotten tall enough that if I try to carry something larger than a scroll underneath my Invisibility Cloak, people can see my feet,” Potter replies, putting his glasses back on his face. Those are new, as well, but he’s abandoned round lenses for oval ones that give him a greater viewing range. A distant, annoyingly persistent part of Snape relaxes at the sight; it makes the boy look that much less like James Potter. The boy is only halfway through his fourth year, and he’s already almost as tall as his father. If this trend continues, he’ll be of similar height with Lily’s father, instead.

*I suppose being fed and watered on a regular basis makes quite the difference,* Snape thinks, and once again has to remind himself that he’s not allowed to murder Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Albus had believed that Lily’s gift would only work if Potter lived with Petunia Dursley; now he thinks that someone of Lily’s line has to survive for that protective magic to persist.

Snape privately thinks Albus is still incorrect. That sort of forced binding isn’t the kind of magic Lily would create. She was too smart for that.

He puts Potter’s things down on his desk and then seats himself. “And this contraption is?”

“Well, Sirius finally felt he could handle a trip out into Muggle London. It’s been a while, 1981 through 1994, right?” Potter says, adjusting his glasses again before using a gesture to ask permission to sit.

Snape nods, intrigued. His role as a spy requires proving to Voldemort and his remaining followers that he hates anything Muggle, just as a proper Death Eater should. Snape hasn’t been into a Muggle town since late 1979.

“Well, everything made him jumpy except the music store we found. They were playing records by someone called David Bowie loud enough that we could hear them from across the street. It was something Sirius recognized, so I was dragged into my first Muggle record store.”

Potter rests his hands over his knees, a vague reflection of what must have been overwhelming bafflement on his face. “Sirius wasn’t sure what to make of the fact that records aren’t really records anymore, and he missed when things called 8-tracks became cassettes. I think if it hadn’t been for that Bowie music, he would have been afraid to go in.”

“Sirius Black is afraid of a Muggle record store. This does, you know, make my entire day,” Snape says in amusement.

Potter just smiles. Unlike Lupin’s attempt at pretending to understand Snape’s motives, Snape has the disconcerting feeling that Potter *does* understand him. “They switched from Bowie to a band the clerk at the desk said just got popular in the United States, and they only got the imports in last week. One of the songs, it…I thought you might like it.”
Snape raises both eyebrows. “I do not have the option of traipsing my way into Muggle London at
the moment, Potter.”

“Of course not, Professor.” Potter gives him an odd look. “That’s why I brought it here.” He stands
up and pokes at the very odd reconfiguration of a portable Muggle stereo. One of the buttons on top
causes a lid to pop open, revealing a black cavity inside with a spindle far too large to accommodate
most vinyl. Potter pulls items out of the bag, reflective squares with decoration and printing that
could rival any 1970s album cover for being eyesores. Like the metallic-colored box, the squares are
not glass, but a pristine clear plastic.

Snape could have sworn there were only three items in the brown sack, but by the time Potter is
done, there are nine of the plastic cases stacked on his desk. “I see you’ve been playing with the
limitations of space.”

Potter shakes his head, frowning down at the cases. “No, that was Hermione. She learned it in third-
year when she said we should try every single class available.”

“Except Divination,” Snape points out dryly.

“Well, I don’t blame her for leaving, but I wanted to see the class through. I wanted to understand
why Trelawney is a professor here.”

“And?” Snape prompts when Potter says nothing. He’s already aware of the fact that Potter is not
fond of Trelawney, but this is also the most talkative the boy has ever been. It could be more
informative than even Potter realizes.

Potter pauses in the midst of removing liner notes—folded to fit into these new types of record cases.
“I think she has…something. I don’t know what that something is. I do know that everything I’ve
read about Divination says that it’s different for everybody, but she’s teaching us all the exact same
lessons. Charlie Weasley confirmed that Trelawney was doing it the same way when he was a third-
year, and that was a while ago. When she stumbles across genuine talent, she doesn’t even recognize
it.”

“Genuine talent?”

“Ron,” Potter says, to Snape’s surprise. “It isn’t really obvious unless you write down what he’s
predicted, but usually it comes true within six to eight months, at most.”

“I’m not sure the wizarding world is ready for a fortune-telling Weasley,” Snape mutters.

Potter shrugs. “He doesn’t believe me, so I wouldn’t be overly concerned, Professor.”

Thank God, Snape thinks, and then taps the plastic case on his desk. “Please inform me as to what
you’re about to subject me to against my will.”

Potter grins. “If you weren’t curious, you would have already told me to go away, sir.”

“You do not win points for being correct, Mister Potter.”

“So, this is the band from the States. They call themselves Live,” Potter says, grasping the not-record
by its edges and pulling it from its case. He flips it over, revealing reflective silver with a rainbow
hue. The not-record is placed picture-side-up into what has to be some sort of record player. Bloody
fucking hell, Snape hates being ignorant of such things.

Potter notices his scowl. “Right, sorry. I had to have this explained to me, too. This is a compact
disk; they call them CDs for short. Sirius says they’re similar to vinyl records in that you can’t get fingerprints or scratches on the side that holds the music. This device is a CD player, but it also has a radio band in it. There’s a little laser thing—no, I have no idea how it works, you’d have to ask Hermione—that reads the information written onto the CD, and then you get music. We spent a week figuring out how to make it work in Hogwarts.”

“And you must have succeeded,” Snape says. He’s impressed; Hogwarts and Muggle technology often disagree with each other to the point of colorful, messy destruction. Snape was still a student when someone tried to bring in a magicked television. That had been a spectacular explosion of glass shards and internal circuitry.

“Well, we’re going to find out.” Potter closes the lid to the modernized stereo and pushes PLAY before Snape has the chance to wince, retreat, or possibly toss the thing across the room before there is a repeat of the television incident.

Instead, all that happens is that music begins playing. Snape releases his held breath, but before he can decide if he likes or hates the first song, Potter presses a button with arrows pointing forward on it until it’s on one of the later tracks. Immediate fast forward; he already approves. “I thought maybe you’d like this one.”

“Warm bodies I sense
are not machines that can only make money
Past, Perfect, Tense,
words for a feeling and all I’ve discovered
I’ll be along, son
with medicine supposed to designed to
make you high
I’ll be along, son
with words for a feeling and all I’ve discovered
Old bad eyes
Old bad eyes
Old bad eyes
On loneliness comes
go see the foreman go see the profiteer
On loneliness drives
we’re taking our time movin’ shit for this holy slime
Old bad eyes
Old bad eyes

Old bad eyes, almighty fear

The shepherd won't leave me alone

he’s in my face and I

The shepherd of my days

and I want you here by my heart

and my head, I can’t start ill I’m dead—"

Snape finishes listening to the song, feeling nonplussed. It’s the sort of thing he would have liked back when he had the luxury of spending time in both worlds. He’s missed a lot, given the sound changes—especially considering the next track, dear Merlin what the hell—but the first kind of sound always suited his mood.

He’s always been a miserably depressed bastard. This is not a new revelation.

Potter rewinds the compact record back to the beginning simply by pressing a reverse arrow button until a display on the front says 01 again, but this time doesn’t pick any particular track. He lets it play as he points at each compact record. “These blokes are British who made it in the U.S.,” Potter explains. Snape is a proper adult and does not give in the urge to make jokes about a band that calls itself Bush. He is not thirteen; he has just turned thirty-five.

“Mazzy Star—pretty sure they’re American, though. I don’t actually know much about any of these people. I just asked the clerk to toss CDs at me from bands who weren’t horrible.”

“David Bowie is still recording?” Snape asks, pointing to the only plastic rectangle case that’s thicker than the others.

“Yeah. That one is supposed to be a greatest hits compilation, whatever that is.” Potter flips it open and reveals that it holds four compact records, not one. “I have no idea what you used to listen to, but Sirius insists that if your musical education was lacking, then you had to have this one, at least.”

Snape finds himself leaning back. “Have?”

“Yes. These are for you—shite,” Potter blurs, and then looks appalled. “I’m sorry, sir. I forgot to even—I’m still really bad at this. Happy Christmas, sir. This is all for you.”

Snape stares at Potter. “Are you out of your bloody mind?” he asks, startled into far too much honesty than is appropriate.

Potter stops and considers the question. “Well, aside from the memories I have before Hallowe’en in 1981, I’ve lost my entire life except for June of 1993 until now. So…it’s entirely possible, yes.”

Snape can’t stop staring at Potter. Except for polite gifts among the staff, and Dumbledore’s utterly ridiculous socks, he hasn’t received a holiday gift since…since…

Lily. Lily gave him his last holiday gift in fifth-year, the spring before he ruined his only friendship and offended her in a way she would never forgive.
He falls back on viciousness, his only defence for a very long time. “And what will you be doing once you’ve given up all of your shiny new records and the means to play them?”

Potter reaches into a front pocket of his hooded jumper and pulls out a small case with a set of headphones—much smaller than the old stereo cans—attached on a thin wire. “It’s a compact CD player. It means I can listen to what I picked out while I’m in the dorms without bothering anyone.”

Snape resolves two things in that moment. The first: he is going to stop gawping like an idiot. The second: the moment this spy nonsense is finally over and done with, Snape is going into Muggle London. He is far too behind on the technology that once supported him through the worst parts of his childhood. Lily helped so much, but Lily also had her own family, her own responsibilities.

“This is still quite a lot for a single holiday gift, Potter.”

Potter shoves the compact record player back into his jumper pocket. “Well, I haven’t ever given you anything before, I don’t know when your birthday is, and…I wanted to thank you for something. I thought maybe I should get all of this out of the way before that. You probably won’t like it, and I wanted to give this to you before you never speak to me again.”

“I see you’ve re-learnt how to be nervous,” Snape observes. “Spit it out, Mister Potter. Unless you’ve been shoving my Slytherins off of rooftops, it can’t be that bad. Honestly, it might even depend upon the Slytherin in question.”

“Right.” Potter swallows. “You already figured out I could remember Mum dying. I could tell on the night of the Yule Ball.”

“I had, yes. I’m just not certain why you recall it now when you did not the night the Obliviation occurred.”

“Oh.” Potter glances up towards the ceiling, but it’s not avoidance; Snape has seen him doing it in class. It seems to be a habitual gesture the boy uses when mentally digging for information. It is an evident tell, one Snape will need to help Potter deconstruct.

“Hermione found a book that is useful for explaining that. Muggle science says the brain has a finite amount of storage for memories. After the Obliviation spell, I suddenly had eleven years and seven months of empty space, so my brain overcompensated and filled it with everything it had available—which wasn’t much,” Potter says. “I can remember as far back as January, on Mum’s birthday. That stuck because she was sad, and I didn’t understand why. Dad asked her, and Mum said she was sad because someone else should have been there. I don’t—I don’t know who she meant, sorry,” Potter apologizes. “Then I think Dad and Remus were sharing a birthday party in March because they kept making fun of each other for being twenty-one and old. Things get clearer and clearer until Hallowe’en, and then…”

Potter looks at Snape in visible distress. “I don’t just remember Mum dying. I remember that afterwards…you were there.”

Snape goes utterly still. “I see.”

“I haven’t told anyone that. Not Hermione or Ron, or Professor Lupin, or Sirius. Just—I don’t think any of them would take it well. I don’t think they’d understand. Some days I think you and Sirius are the only people who realize I’m an amnesiac, not bloody stupid.”

Snape glances at the items Potter just claimed to have gifted him. Most Slytherins would consider this a bribe worthy of murder, if they understood its value. “Perhaps you should tell me what you recall.”
“You came into my bedroom, and you went straight to Mum,” Potter says, glancing away. “I knew right away that you wanted to help her. At least someone was there, someone who knew, just like I did, that something was wrong. And then you started to—I knew you couldn’t help her. But you wanted to. You wanted to help her. I’d never seen you before, but you wanted to help. You wanted that to—to not have happened. I think it’s why I talked to you just after Gilderoy Lockhart’s spell. Recognition.”

“I see,” Snape repeats, even though he’s not certain he does.

“Then you came to me. You didn’t try to comfort me—I think maybe you understood that there was no such thing, not for that. You just said you were sorry that you couldn’t help her. Then you told me I’d go to sleep, and I’d wake up when someone who could help arrived. Or something—I might not have that part right,” Potter admits, brow furrowing up in either concentration or bafflement. “If you used a spell for that, it might explain why things end there, and not…not earlier.

“Anyway. That’s—that’s why. Aside from everything else.”

Snape waits for a painful amount of time before he realizes that Potter doesn’t have anything else to say. “You don’t even wish to know why I was there?”

Potter looks back at him. “I know that there is a lot going on in this school that no one wants me to know, sir. I figured if you wanted me to know, you’d tell me.”

Snape realizes he has a decision to make. It’s not one he ever wanted to make, either, but if Potter recalls this much, then eventually there will be questions. If he holds back now…

Snape feels a block of ice settle in his gut as he realizes that if he does this, he’s going against Dumbledore’s orders. Secrets have been kept for a reason, as Potter surmises.

You said you’d tell me if he hit you again! You promised!

It’s supposed to be a secret, Lily! I don’t want anyone to know!

You dumb nitwit! Some secrets aren’t supposed to be kept!

“Wait there,” Snape instructs Potter. His voice is steady, as are his hands. If he can survive the worst of Voldemort at the height of the madman’s power, then he can certainly handle this.

When Potter nods, Snape pulls his wand from his sleeve and calls forth his Patronus. She prances gracefully into being, a slender doe of white mist that pauses long enough to nuzzle at Potter’s jumper sleeve.

“Hello,” Potter says, letting his hands drift along the mist that makes up the top of the Patronus’s head. “You’re a lovely Patronus. Remus taught me,” Potter explains, when Snape eyes him. “He says, given two instances of dangerous fools teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts, that it’s something I might need sooner rather than later.”

“What you managed one yet?”

Potter frowns while still stroking the doe. “Yes, and it’s corporal, but the form keeps changing. Remus—Professor Lupin says they’re not supposed to do that.”

“They typically do not, but it isn’t unheard of,” Snape replies, and turns to his Patronus. “Please go to the kitchens and have the elves send up tea for two. I’ll need the fireplace for another matter.”
The doe dips her head and darts off through the wall while Snape goes to his fireplace. A pinch of Floo Powder gets him green flame; a sharply worded request gets him Minerva. She is less than impressed to hear that Snape has Potter in detention for hall-wandering after curfew. Snape reminds her, once again, that he has yet to dismember the child, and after a bit of cauldron-scrubbing, he’ll be returned to her in proper working order.

Minerva rolls her eyes. “If he’s scrubbing cauldrons, you’d better not take points. Good night, Severus.”

“You needed an alibi,” Snape explains after Potter gives him a curious glance regarding the falsehood. A moment later a tea tray pops into existence on Snape’s desk, almost knocking one of the new plastic cases onto the floor.

“I suppose this is better than being tossed out, but…what’s going on, sir?” Potter asks.

Just as there is one specific part of the wall in the classroom to activate the wards, there is another in his office. Snape touches that spot with his wand. “Hoc loco tueri contra omnia.”

Potter watches the green fire emerge from that spot, spreading out to coat the walls, floor, and ceiling like twisting vines. “This is the place to protect against everything.”

“Against all,” Snape corrects tiredly, sitting down across from Potter. He’s been struggling under this weight for a very long time, and in this instance, he’s found that he can’t stand the idea of that one secret being held. Not here. Not anymore. “I’ve always kept strong wards on my office, classroom, and personal quarters. When you started to visit, I strengthened those wards to their utmost extent.

“I know Black and Lupin have no doubt filled your ears about my past as a spy, working with Albus Dumbledore against Voldemort, and that I am probably not to be trusted.”

“They’re rather opinionated on the subject, sir,” Potter says wryly. “Not as bad as they used to be, though. And…I am capable of making up my own mind. Of being politic.”

“If I thought you weren’t, I’d have made certain these little visits ceased at once,” Snape tells him in utter seriousness. “Miss Granger and Mister Weasley’s opinions?”

“Neither of them likes you very much,” Potter replies in blatant understatement. “Ron might never get it, which is weird considering his skill at chess, but Hermione—Hermione, I think she’s starting to suspect, given the lectures on strangers and danger and candy I’ve been getting. Not sure I understand the candy reference,” Potter adds. “But if she’s not saying anything to me, she’s not saying anything to anyone else, either.”

Snape inclines his head. “Miss Granger is highly intelligent and observant, though she can become mired in the smaller details. Mister Weasley can see the overall picture and miss the smaller details entirely. Unless circumstances change, the things I am about to tell you are details that you must not share with any of them. You’re intelligent enough to know if I’m asking you to be foolish and to respond accordingly, but otherwise, certain things must remain hidden.”

Potter nods. “I understand, sir.”

“If Voldemort suspected that we were holding court like this, he would demand I use the opportunity to attempt to convince you to join him—that being an obvious lie. He wants to destroy the perceived threat, not ally with you.” Potter gives him another somber nod in response. “I have also never told Albus Dumbledore that you and I have spent countless hours in this office for similar reasons. He suspects, but I refuse to confirm. I judged the situation, especially after the incident in the Chamber
involving Miss Weasley’s rescue, and decided that you needed a sane adult more than you needed an overprotective old wizard keeping you isolated among the Gryffindors.”

“Tea, Potter,” Snape instructs, and waits for Potter to pour for them both. His motions are similar to his teacher’s; it’s like being served by Minerva herself. Snape is tempted to add Firewhiskey to his tea, but dismisses the idea. It sets a terrible precedent, and it seems wiser to be sober for this, much as he’d prefer otherwise.

Instead, he settles in with a steaming cup. “Your mother,” Snape begins, “was my first and dearest friend.”

Potter doesn’t ask questions about his mother that Snape can’t answer. He only listens to Snape speak without interruption, a tale that lasts far into the night. Snape had forgotten that there was so much, and Potter is the only person in his entire life who has ever wanted to understand Snape’s relationship with Lily Evans. It wasn’t a romantic interest, as so many busybodies and fools assumed. Snape loved her, but never once did he declare an intention to woo her. He’d never wanted to, not after watching too many of his peers blunder their way through romantic entanglements and ruin entire friendships. Lily and Snape had even discussed it, just once:

Are we... are we trying to date each other?

Lily, we’re thirteen years old. We don’t know how to date anyone.

She’d laughed, bright and clear, and agreed with him. She hadn’t tried to date until fifth year, which had been a disaster that she’d cried over with him during the holiday break.

Then came the end of their fifth year, and Snape had just... bloody well ruined his entire life in one stupid moment.

“I’m sorry,” is the only interruption Potter offers.

Snape is so lost in the past that it takes him a moment to realize what’s been said. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Potter repeats. He takes a moment to clean his glasses with his shirt before putting them back on his face, magnifying his brilliant green eyes. He looks a great deal like his mother in that moment, despite the lack of fiery red hair.

“Why are you apologizing?” Snape asks with a frown. He tries to refill his tea and discovers that they’ve drained the pot. He also realizes that it’s after two in the morning. Minerva is going to flay him alive for letting a “detention” run this long.

“Because I don’t think anyone else did,” Potter says. “Maybe you were wrong in Mum’s eyes for hanging out with people who had... well, terrible ideas. But refusing to never have anything to do with you again was childish. Maybe that’s why she married my father.”

Snape feels a headache blooming as he realizes he’s going to have to exonerate James Potter for the sake of Lily’s only child. Damnit. “Your mother might have made a childish decision that year, but I also made a childish, foolish decision, Potter, one that I cannot take back no matter how much I might wish for it. I need you to understand: I agreed to bear Voldemort’s Dark Mark before I agreed to be a spy.”

Potter shrugs, undeterred. “From what I’ve just heard, it’s not like you had anyone around to tell you otherwise. People have to learn not to be jerks, and there has to be someone about demonstrating why it’s a bad idea. I wouldn’t be anywhere near this…” His expression twists up in an amusing way as he searches for words. “I may not understand a lot, but at least there have been people around
to tell me these things. She left, Professor. The only person demonstrating why following Voldemort was a bad idea left you alone, and she knew you would be. I’ll forgive her because she’s my Mum, but you both had two school years left. She could have fixed that at any point, even with a war beginning, and she didn’t.”

“Gryffindor,” Snape sneers at Potter. “Not everyone is so willing to believe in another’s potential for good.”

“She was a Gryffindor,” Potter reminds him, which just makes Snape’s scowl deepen. “She had people around to tell her she’d made a mistake, but since it was you? Nobody cared—and that’s fucking wrong, Sir.”

That is not a comfortable statement. “And you would have, in the same situation? I notice you’re not extending overtures of friendship to any of my Slytherins.”

Potter rolls his eyes. “That’s because they’re afraid of me, though Sirius thinks it’s more like they’re afraid of what their parents might say or do if they decided to be friends with the kid who sort-of-killed Voldemort by accident. I actually think Dumbledore’s House unity thing is a good idea. It’s just not working very well because we’re sitting on hundreds of years of tradition that tell us we’re supposed to do the exact opposite. That’s Hermione’s opinion, by the way. I’m pretty sure she has Hogwarts: A History memorized from cover-to-cover at this point.”

“Hmm.” That has also occurred to Snape, but he is far more intrigued by the fact that Mister Potter, who still has excellent manners despite growing up among teenage cretins, didn’t use Dumbledore’s title. The only other teacher whom he still does not refer to by title is Professor Trelawney.

Snape will ponder that later. In the meantime, he needs to bring this evening to an end so that Minerva won’t kill him. “Your mother and your father might have been childish, once upon a time, but war changes everything. James Potter had many failings, but he strove to defend Muggles, Muggle-borns, Half-bloods, and magical beings alike during the war. So did Lily. You remember your parents as the good people they became. You know Black as the less detestable being he’s learned to become. You know Lupin as the defender he learned to be instead of the silent, lurking watcher he once was. You witnessed Peter Pettigrew choose a betrayal even greater than mine. Lily Evans and James Potter were good people, and in that matter, no one is telling you falsehoods just to spare your feelings.”

**song credit: Pillar of Davidson, Live, 1994**
Potter never brings up that late night conversation as the term progresses. He is, however, far more politic than ever. Snape feels that Potter has found some newfound maturity from an unknown source—Merlin knows that source is not Sirius Black—combined with a greater understanding of where, exactly, the danger lies.

Snape isn’t certain if that will ultimately make his life easier, or much, much more difficult. Things are complicated enough because of this stupid tournament.

Potter is very polite in his public, classroom request for gillyweed for the Second Task. Snape rants about his hypocrisy in asking when he could have just stolen it, as he has stolen everything else, and then turns a blind eye when a sealed jar of it goes missing from the conveniently unlocked cupboard.

Snape doesn’t care if they are all wizards and witches. That is a Scottish lake in February. There is not enough gold in Wizarding Britain to convince Snape to toss himself into that frigid water. The fact that the children jump in anyway proves that teenagers are biochemically insane.

The Black Lake is ultimately less ulcer-inducing than the damned dragons, but the subject of rescuing people brings out Potter’s annoying Gryffindor tendencies. He almost forfeits the entire contest just to “save” Delacour’s sister, along with Luna Lovegood, who would really rather prefer to go and speak to the merpeople again.

“No, Luna!” Potter insists. Miss Lovegood sighs and gives up on the notion.

Snape thinks that a forfeit would be easier on his nerves. Potter would likely prefer it, also, but then the judges decide that his actions are meritorious. Instead of placing third—last if not for Delacour’s failure—Potter is now tied for first place with Cedric Diggory.

Karkaroff corners him that evening, the first time he has spoken to Snape since the Yule Ball. At first, Snape thinks the man wants to rant about the tournament, but then he realizes Karkaroff is in a near-panic. “It’s happening again, like before, and soon neither you nor anyone else will be able to deny it.”

“Could you please be more specific, Igor?” Snape asks, restraining his frustration. Karkaroff used to be a man of sterner quality than this.

“You don’t fool me, Severus,” Karkaroff retorts, and bares his left arm for Snape’s perusal. The Mark is dark and pronounced on Karkaroff’s flesh, though it is still only a faint outline on Snape’s arm. The difference is…startling.

“You are scared. Admit it!”

Snape gives him a dismissive look. “I have nothing to be scared of, Igor. Can you say the same?”

“If you have no fear, then you are a hero of legend, or you are a fool—and my friend, we both know that you are not a hero,” Karkaroff says with a grim smile.

For some strange reason, that is enough to shatter his patience. “Get out of my office!” Snape shouts, and then glowers at the man in rage until Karkaroff gains wisdom and flees.

The moment Karkaroff is gone, Snape lets out a breath and rests his head against his closed door. There should be no difference between the Marks. None. The only thing he can surmise is that the
Mark is more pronounced for those who fear Voldemort’s wrath if he returns.

Snape is not concerned with Voldemort’s wrath. He fears failure, and that feeling grows with each passing day as they come no closer to discerning the reasons behind Potter’s involvement in the Triwizard Tournament.

The weeks after the Second Task do not proceed in a serene manner at all. Snape’s arm suddenly hurts all of the time in a dull throb. It isn’t knifelike, not as it was in the tunnel when facing the shade of Tom Marvolo Riddle, but the outline is getting darker. He still is not afraid, but the timing concerns him.

Karkaroff is paranoid and muttering about fleeing the castle, which swiftly becomes annoying. The students of Durmstrang, cautious after the spectacle at the Yule Ball, now try to avoid Karkaroff as much as possible. It is another flaw in the man’s character that he doesn’t seem to notice.

Moody is completely insane, but that’s almost normal. He demonstrates the three Unforgivables to his classes, fourth-years and up. Lupin threatens to skin him alive if Moody ever does such a thing again.

On the one hand, Snape can almost see Lupin’s point. On the other hand…

No, there is no other hand. Snape wants all of these young idiots educated and capable of surviving. That involves knowing what they might face at the other end of a Death Eater’s wand.

He does, however, overhear Draco Malfoy speaking about the lesson as if they had been granted a rare, delightful treat. It makes him want to strangle the boy and scold him; Snape doesn’t want Draco to be able to mean it. Draco Malfoy is arrogant and leans towards cruelty, but he is not evil. Snape fears the day when he might learn how to be.

By May, the Third Task is being prepared for, leaving a large chunk of Hogwarts’ grounds roped off and hidden from view. Snape wants the (relative) peace and quiet that comes from trying to force knowledge into the skulls of a bunch of dunderheads. Instead, he watches Potter begin to develop a certain disconcerting listlessness. He participates in class, but it looks to be practiced repetition carrying him through rather than direct attention.

By June, dark circles form under Potter’s eyes with every day that passes. It can’t be the Third Task concerning him—none of them know what the damned Task is going to be. The final run for the Cup is the only one where the traditional ideas about cheating do not apply.

He wonders what is going on, but isn’t granted sufficient time to puzzle it out on his own. On the eighth day of June, Potter comes to class looking like death warmed over.

Snape scowls in displeasure. When he reveals the day’s instructions on the chalkboard, he waits five minutes. Potter seems to be playing with his ingredients more than using them, but he is not much aware of what he is doing.

That is enough to anger Snape, no matter which House or idiot child is involved. “Potter!” he yells. “Fifteen points from Gryffindor for the complete idiocy of—”

He halts his speech; Potter’s cauldron is empty. Snape peers down at the young man, who is almost swaying with exhaustion at this point, and amends what he was going to say. “Because you had the rare sensibility to not attempt potion-brewing while in such a state, I will not take further points for your failure to participate in class,” he says. The Slytherins, who had been waiting with glee for such a thing, all let out a sharp sigh of disappointment.
“However, make no mistake,” Snape addresses the class at large. “Were anyone in Potter’s delicate condition—” Draco smirks. “—to have attempted this difficult potion, and caused an incident due to your inability to concentrate NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM, DON’T YOU DARE ADD THAT HOLLY!”

Longbottom squeaks in shock and drops the sprig of holly from his fingers, a twig that bears a single red berry. Granger’s hand snaps out and catches it in reflex. She puts the holly down on the table, away from Longbottom. Only then does fear cross her face.

Snape stares at them both, fighting against overwhelming dismay. He’s been spoiled by Potter’s lack of foolishness, and now he’s faced with two instances of Gryffindor stupidity in one day. Holly is not one of today’s ingredients for very good reason.

“Fifteen points from Gryffindor for almost killing everyone near to you,” Snape tells Longbottom, who pales. “Great Merlin, you idiot! Why do you even have holly in the first place?”

Longbottom trembles under his gaze. “I don’t—I don’t know, sir, I—”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Granger says, and points her wand at the holly. The twig has a berry that is not quite red. “Finite Incantatem!”

Snape isn’t sure what prompted Granger’s action, but it yields results. The holly sprig with its single, damning red berry becomes a sprig of juniper—one of the actual listed ingredients—and then returns to being a holly again. This time, it stays that way.

Snape raises an eyebrow, taking in the small pile of juniper next to Longbottom’s cauldron. A strong but failing transfiguration spell. Interesting. “Perhaps the mistake was not yours, after all. How fortunate for you, Mister Longbottom. Did you select that suspect juniper sprig from my stores, or is it from your own trove?”

“S-S-Store, s-sir,” Longbottom whispers.

Snape is consumed by fury. It is one thing to be stolen from, but this level of—of deliberate interference is not to be tolerated.

When he looks from one student face to the next, most cringe back from his gaze. “What are you fools waiting for?” he hisses. “Is a Gryffindor the only sensible student in this classroom today?”

That gets their attention. There is a rush of murmured or shouted Finite Incantatem that fill the air. “I’ve got one, sir,” Draco says, and his cheeks flush red with anger. “I selected today’s juniper from stores. My own supply molded despite the preservation spells.”

“It won’t bloody stop swapping back and forth,” Weasley mutters, prodding the berries with his wand. “I know I’m not the greatest wizard in this school, but this is ridiculous.”

“I’ve got three.” Potter is staring down at his potions ingredients. “Stores. I was out of juniper.”

“Three?” Snape repeats in disbelief.

Draco understands the implications even before Granger. “Potter, might I just say on behalf of all of us: thank you for being a worthless, lazy cretin today. I am very fond of being alive.”
“Yeah,” Potter says in faint agreement. He prods the shifting sprig before slapping it with his wand. It behaves, finally, and remains a holly sprig with its cluster of bright red berries. “It’s either a very good transfiguration spell, or a very bad one.”

Snape decides that he’s had enough. “Vanish the contents of your cauldrons. I need time to inspect the potions stores, and I can’t do it with you miserable louts hanging about. We will attempt this again during the next class if possible; if not, it will be the first potion attempted in your fifth year. For homework, you will each give me two feet on the dangers of adding holly to any sort of potion that deals with camouflage, particularly a vanishing potion.”

While half-formed brews are vanished and supplies are packed up, Snape adds, “Inspect your potions ingredients. If anything is missing, or, as Mister Malfoy has found, become damaged under strange circumstances, report the losses to me on an additional scroll. Be specific about your methods of storage, spells performed in the area, and the nature of the damage.” He eyes Longbottom. “Very specific.”

Potter stands, and though he does his best to hide it, there is a definite wobble. “Potter!” Snape barks. “Immediate detention. Miss Granger, inform Professor Lupin as to the reason for Potter’s absence.” There is no doubt that Granger would do so anyway, but right now he wants to snarl and break things. Ordering Gryffindors about is the only outlet he currently has.

Juniper sprigs. Merlin. “Also, tell the werewolf that I need to speak to him before dinner.”

“Sir,” Granger says, and almost drags Weasley out with her while he is still mid-protest at Potter’s “unfair” detention.

At least the idiot got over his ridiculous belief that Potter entered himself into the Triwizard tournament. Weasley is often foolish, but he is also loyal. With Voldemort somehow gaining strength, Potter will need that sort of loyalty.

When all of the students are gone, Snape pulls out his wand, gestures the door shut, and then activates the privacy wards that wrap the classroom walls, floor, and ceiling in bright green fire. “Now, Potter. Would you mind telling me just what on earth is wrong with you?”

Potter, whose chin has slumped almost down to his chest, raises his head. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m just tired.”

“That part is blatantly obvious,” Snape replies angrily. “Why?”

To Snape’s relief, Potter does not try to misunderstand, or protest the question. “I’ve been having nightmares.”

Snape huffs out an annoyed sigh. “And it did not occur to you to tell anyone?”

“Well, Ron knows, because I woke up everyone in the dorm the other night,” Potter says. “Hermione thinks they’re just stress-related because of the tournament, and because of what happened in the tunnel last year.”

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. “I will reiterate: did it occur to you to talk to your Head of House, or to another adult about these nightmares?”

Potter looks confused, and perhaps a bit distressed. “Well, no. I mean, everyone has nightmares, sir. There isn’t anything special about that.”

Snape sits down opposite Potter. Normally, he would stand and glower and shout, but he is suddenly
contending with the realization that there are still many things that Potter has yet to re-learn. Some of the lack might even be his own fault, but if so, it’s a fault he is going to bloody well rectify. “Usually, that is true. But you, Mister Potter, are the target of the Dark Lord Voldemort, who is an accomplished Legilimens—one skilled at invading another’s mind. While there are some who might scoff and disregard your dreams, you cannot afford to take that chance.”

The boy slowly nods. “I hope you’re wrong, sir. I’d rather they were just bad dreams.”

Snape raises an eyebrow. “It is good to hope for the best, but far wiser to plan for the worst possible outcome, Potter. Now, tell me about these nightmares.”

Potter gets as far as describing the massive stone engraved with the name of Tom Riddle, at which point Snape holds up his hand. He is pleased when it does not shake or in any way betray his shock. “Enough,” he says. “The imagery is no longer important. How do you feel during these nightmares?”

“I—I feel more than I usually do,” Potter says, a realization that manages to penetrate his exhaustion. “Anger. Far more anger than my ratel form creates. That’s just temper, not rage.” He thinks on it, frowning. “Determination. Frustration, maybe. Eventually, it turns to fear. Maybe it’s supposed to be terror. It’s—it’s a lot like someone’s taunting me, sir. I can’t figure out if I’m actually afraid of these dreams, or if…”

“If someone is attempting to make you feel so?” Snape asks, fairly certain he already knows the answer.

Potter nods before removing his glasses long enough to rub at his red-rimmed eyes. “Yeah.”

“Very well.” Snape leans back on the stool, crossing his arms. “This will be a two-fold approach, so listen closely. You’re going to the infirmary, where you will spend the next week recovering—”

Potter’s head jerks up. “I don’t need the infirmary!” he yelps, which confirms that yes, at some point, he has indeed been subjected to Poppy Pomfrey’s tender mercies. “I just need to sleep!”

Snape glares at the boy until Potter winces and lowers his head. “Sorry, sir. I really don’t need the infirmary, though.”

“I did mention this was a two-fold approach, didn’t I?” Snape asks caustically. “That aside, you seem to have another misconception that requires correction.

“Potter, every student has the right to visit the infirmary when their health begins to interfere with their ability to complete their school work. Even I am not so odious as to ignore the very real fact that you dunderheads get ill. However, your situation is also unique.” Potter looks like he’s about to protest again. “If you say that you’re fine, I will hex you within an inch of your life, Mister Potter. Students who are falling asleep while standing up are not fine. Sometimes this is due to their own stupidity, but that still does not make them functional.”


“Potter, for all that you are fourteen years old, you have only two years of real scholastic experience to draw from due to Gilderoy Lockhart’s idiocy. Given those limitations, you have done exceptionally well. Don’t damn yourself for one misstep.” Because we can’t afford it, Snape thinks.

“In more logical terms: I cannot teach you what you’re going to need to know if you’re sleeping in your dorm.”

“Two-fold. Right.” Potter scrubs at his eyes again, this time without even bothering to take his
glasses off first. “Okay, I think I’m following you now, sir. The infirmary is usually empty at night, so we can talk and it won’t be observed or overheard.”

“Even Madam Pomfrey understands the need for privacy. The infirmary has wards that are almost as good as my own,” Snape tells Potter. “Don’t forget that, either. It’s information you might one day need.”

“Yes, sir. Orders, sir?” Potter asks, a weary smile on his face.

“Go straight to the infirmary. I will be firecalling ahead, so Madam Pomfrey will be waiting for you. Go to sleep. I’ll see you this evening after curfew, where we will begin a set of lessons that will help keep certain kinds of nightmares at bay.”

“Yes, sir.” Potter slings his bag over his shoulder. He stumbles to the side, rightens himself just before Snape worries he’ll have to use his wand to keep Potter from falling, and shuffles his way out of the room.

Snape is seated again at an empty workbench, his face resting in his hands, when there is a knock on the door. He flicks one finger in a signal for the wards to allow entry. “Shut the fucking door,” Snape orders through his hands. “Who the hell did you leave in charge of your class?”

“Christ, Severus,” Lupin says in response to his profanity. The classroom door clicks shut; the latch drops a moment after. “I got Filch to sit in and terrify them into doing the writing already assigned for the day. What the hell happened? Miss Granger said you needed to see me, but I think Mister Weasley was ready to explode about you giving Harry detention.”

“No, I sent Mister Potter to the bloody infirmary!” Snape retorts, and drops his hands. “We have a situation, Lupin. I can’t even kill anyone to fix it because I don’t fucking well know who’s causing it!”

“Hmm. Stay there,” Lupin instructs, an intractable expression on his face. He cracks open the door that leads into Snape’s office and returns bearing the Firewhiskey bottle. Snape has rationed his doses, and still over half of it is gone. “Take a swig of this, and then perhaps you will start making sense again.”

“I have class in a half-hour,” Snape protests, but does it anyway. It burns all the way down. He didn’t actually need it to recover his senses, but…

But he’s just been rattled. Badly.

“Potter went to the school infirmary suffering from severe exhaustion,” Snape explains. “You would have noticed today, had he made it to your classroom without collapsing on the way.”

“I noticed he looked unrested yesterday, but I’m assuming today was far worse,” Lupin says. “What else?”

“Someone went to a great deal of trouble to create chaos.” Snape eyes the Firewhiskey and pointedly shoves the bottle away. “I suspect that every student’s remaining supply of juniper sprigs have molded or rotted under circumstances that are as yet unexplained. I checked after Potter left, and my own juniper sprigs are missing. The thief didn’t even bother with subtlety, either. They took the entire blasted jar, sometime between midnight last night and ten this morning. Every holly berry sprig in my stores was then treated with a faulty transfiguration spell that caused them to all appear as juniper sprigs for anyone seeking potion ingredients.”

Lupin’s jaw drops, but rage is sparking in his eyes. “You’re working on camouflage spells—
Severus, that could have killed a student!"

“No. If the transfiguration hadn’t failed at just the right moment, it would have killed many students,” Snape counters, feeling tired. “The more berries added, the greater the spread of damage, remember? Potter found a sprig that held three, and he’s now the swiftest student I have for potion-making. If he hadn’t chosen not to participate today due to his exhaustion, we would be preparing for multiple funerals, his included.”

“God wept.” Lupin sits down on a stool a few feet away. “Someone has decided that stealing from your stores isn’t enough. Now they’re sabotaging them as well.”

“I think it’s more than that,” Snape says. “I need juniper sprigs for Wolfsbane, Lupin.”

“And the Third Task takes place two days after the full moon. Without Wolfsbane, I won’t just be ill. I’ll be bloody useless.” Lupin scrubs his face with one hand. “Is it possible to get more in time?”

Snape grits his teeth before answering. “I could get it, but it needs to be treated and dried. It works better if it’s an early spring harvest, too. I can’t rush that process, Lupin. I might not like you very much, but I refuse to kill you because I brewed a half-arsed potion.”

Lupin snorts. “Thanks. What are we dealing with, Severus?”

“I don’t think today’s saboteur wanted Potter dead. If that was the point, there would have been multiple previous assassination attempts, not today’s near-disaster.” Snape realizes he’s rubbing at the Mark through his sleeves. It’s still throbbing, and that makes him uneasy. “Potter is dreaming of the grave where Voldemort’s father is buried.”

“Sent nightmares.” Lupin grimaces. “Please, I know you don’t like him very much, but—”

“Secret Keeper,” Snape says.

“What?” Lupin gives him a startled look.

“Secret. Keeper,” Snape gets out, even though the words want to lodge in his throat. “Will you act as my bloody Secret Keeper or not?”

Lupin’s startled look becomes suspicious bafflement. “Why?”

“Because what we will next discuss must never become known by anyone aside from us and Mister Potter.” The words feel like individual drops of acid. “Perhaps when Black is stable, it will be discussed with him as well, but not yet.”

Lupin is still frowning. “What about Albus?”

“Albus has known for the entire school year that someone is causing trouble, and that they are not benevolent pranksters.” Snape realizes his face is set in a dark glower. “He refuses to act upon this knowledge, preferring to let the culprit out themselves by their actions. After today’s events, I find that I prefer to be far more proactive.”

“Secret Keeper,” Lupin repeats musingly. “Not often used for people, though it works well enough. An Unbreakable Vow would be more effective.”

Dammit. “Yes. It would be.”
Snape has an Unbreakable Vow with a werewolf. His life has become a spectacle of ludicrous irony.

Potter spends a full week of nights in the infirmary under Pomfrey’s delightfully manufactured excuse of Potter’s need to recover from the terrible migraines that were causing his nightmares and sleeplessness. She even posits (correctly) that a possible gillyweed overdose might be the culprit.

Pomfrey has always been dear to Snape’s twisted black heart. All it takes is a simple request, and the wards for the school infirmary give off a brief flare of strong magic as they’re fully activated. A moment later, it’s as if they don’t exist at all, a subtle piece of work meant to keep the injured from being disturbed by noisy magic.

“Originally, these were lessons that you would not have been given until next year, per the old traditions,” Snape tells Potter that first evening. He is sitting on a chair at the boy’s bedside. Potter, to his relief, looks better than he had that afternoon. They are alone except for Pomfrey, who is in her office with the door firmly shut.

“Old traditions?”

Snape scowls. “There are many subjects in the wizarding world that are no longer taught at Hogwarts, per the many foolish decisions of the school governors. One of them is Occlumency. It is the magical defence of the mind against the external penetration or attack of a foreign mind. The Board of Governors decided it was too obscure a branch of magic to continue offering it as a subject of study, but Occlumency is one of the more useful forms of magic a wizard or witch could ever be taught.”

“That does sound nice,” Potter says with tired enthusiasm. “I’d really like to stop dreaming of bloody tombstones, sir.”

“You might also receive these lessons in an officially directed capacity in your fifth year,” Snape says, and Potter nods, understanding that “official capacity” means “Dumbledore.”

“If that happens, don’t let on that you’re aware of this subject’s existence,” Snape frowns. “Mere paranoia, perhaps, but I do not want him to think you’ll then be free for other things. I’d prefer we use that time to refine the skills I’m teaching you now, and to also work on the other end of the coin for this skill—Legilimency. That involves reaching into the mind of another.”

Potter blinks at him. “Seems rude.”

Snape nods. “It can be. It can also be a dark necessity in harsh times. I am a master of both, Mister Potter. Take from that what you will.”

“Good at my job,” Potter translates, smiling.

“When you Occlude, the point is not to be solid, but slippery.” It’s a lesson Snape reiterates often over the week. “Solid things are walls; walls give way. Slippery things are harder to grasp. The more you try to grab hold, the more likely a slippery thing is to escape you.”

“My shields are pond frogs. Got it,” Potter responds. Snape has to admit that frog shielding would certainly confuse the hell out of anyone trying to use Legilimency against him.

“While your ratel temper may be useful in other respects, I strongly suggest that you not use it as
your focus for Occluding. Aside from the very real fact that emotions are still new for you, most teenagers do not understand their emotive strength even when they have been coping with their emotions for years.” Snape ponders it. “Use your distance. The way that you felt during that first year as you recovered—you recall what that is like?”

Potter nods. “Yes, sir. It’s really easy to slip back into that. I try not to, but if it’s going to be useful…”

“Save it for the Occlumency. You don’t want to lose the progress you’ve gained. You worked too hard for it,” Snape says, and frowns; he once again sounds like an overprotective guardian. “Use that distance as part of your protection. In the games of the mind, it is not a figurative element, but a literal one. If a Legilimens cannot find your mind to enter it, then you are most definitely succeeding at keeping them out.”

Snape doesn’t want to use his Legilimency against a boy who is still recovering from exhaustion, but after Potter reports nightmares despite his attempts at fending them off, Snape realizes he has no choice. Neither of them like the process, though Potter is grim in his understanding that he needs to be capable of basic self-defence.

When Potter is cleared by Pomfrey at the end of the week, Snape has to tell himself that it will be enough. It even seems to be working; Potter turns up to class looking bright-eyed and alert. His latest potion, the last assignment before final exams, veers from the traditional instructions. It is no longer textbook perfect, but instead approaches a true brewmaster’s ideals of potion perfection. Snape’s only regret is that he has no one to gloat at over this new development. He’s not even certain that he should point out the improvement in skill at all.

The Third Task is at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June, the last official day of the school year. As Snape feared, he couldn’t get the juniper to the right consistency in time. Lupin is so ill post-transformation that Snape wonders how the hell the man has survived this long. It also makes him wonder how werewolves like Greyback seem to thrive, while Lupin only seems to suffer.

It does not escape Snape that the former flourishes on the Dark magic of the curse, and the latter does his best to avoid it. The discrepancy doesn’t make Snape hate werewolves any less, but it’s a puzzle that he wants to bloody well solve. This summer will definitely be devoted to Wolfsbane potion. He is going to deconstruct that concoction and put it back together again. If it works for easing the intensity of the wolf, then perhaps there is other potential hiding within the formula.

“That’s the Task?” Black asks, staring at the giant green hedge maze once it’s revealed. “How the hell is anyone supposed to watch? They may as well have waited and told us all the results in the morning.”

Snape gives Black a brief nod of agreement before joining the rest of the faculty on the lowest tiers. The family of each competitor sits just behind them. Diggory has a set of parents; Delacour has only her sister; Potter has only a Dogfather.

There is no way to see into the maze. Snape has no way to ensure Potter’s safety, which makes a deep scowl settle onto his features. He can only hope that Potter’s stubbornness, intelligence, and ingenuity will serve to protect him. God knows that foolish good fortune served well enough in the past.

It takes an hour for results to manifest. Delacour is removed from the maze after a failure, followed not long afterwards by Krum, who doesn’t seem to be having a good reaction to a trap sprung in the maze. Snape begins to feel uneasy when neither Diggory nor Potter appears, and no winner is declared.
Snape is suddenly bent over at the waist, his hand wrapped so tightly around the Mark that he’s losing circulation in his left hand. It burns, God and Merlin, he’d forgotten how much the damned thing hurt!

Somewhere, something has gone terribly wrong.

“Severus?” Albus murmurs.

“He’s calling,” Snape answers in a soundless hiss. He has no idea what could have happened to allow Voldemort enough strength to call his followers to him. It’s a summons that Snape can’t answer; he has to keep up appearances on both sides. He’ll need to present himself to Voldemort later, and potentially pay for the delay in pain and blood.

Diggory appears in front of the maze in an abrupt sprawl of limbs as he collapses to the ground. He’s holding the Triwizard cup in one hand, and is clinging to Potter’s prone form with his other.

The ridiculous band starts to play, and there is cheering. If Snape weren’t seated so close to the place where the boys landed, he wouldn’t have been able to hear what Diggory is shouting.

“HELP!” Diggory rasps out. “It was him! It was him!”

There is a stir among the faculty at Diggory’s words, but Snape knows at once what the Hufflepuff means. The smell of blood magic arrived with them. Not all blood magic is corrupt, but this stinks of the gutted, poisonous reptilian, and is as foul as a rotting corpse.

Potter isn’t moving. He doesn’t even appear to be breathing.

Snape learned certain aspects of flight a long, long time ago. He probably gives more credence to the rumors of his transformation into a bat by the swift manner in which he gets to Diggory and Potter. A black dog races up behind him, and then Sirius Black is standing there, panting and white-faced. He drops down next to Potter and places his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Black’s expression twits into horrible pain, like someone has just gutted him. “No,” he croaks in a broken voice.

No, Snape thinks in blank shock. No, absolutely not.

“Mister Diggory. Cedric. What happened?” Albus asks. The rest of the faculty, as well as Diggory’s parents, are pouring down from the bleachers and crossing the field to join them. The band’s horrific racket is starting to become a harsher mishmash of off-key notes as the players recognize that things are not going according to their script.

“It was…him. He Who Must Not Be Named,” Diggory whispers, staring up at them with shock-wide eyes. “He—he was going to kill me, but Harry—” Diggory gulps. “Harry dove in front of a Killing Curse. He saved me.”

Minerva puts both hands over her face. “Oh. Oh, Merlin, please no.”

Snape feels his heart drop somewhere down near his feet. His throat is trying to close up with rage.

He can’t have failed Lily. He has not broken his promise. He will not fail her, not again!

Half of them jerk back in surprise when Potter sits bolt upright and sucks in a lungful of air. “FUCK!” Potter shouts. His eyes are just as wide as Diggory’s. “THAT HURT!”
After that, things happen very fast.

Snape doesn’t know what Potter and Diggory see, but they both act as one body to stop the threat. They lift a wand—Diggory’s wand—and shout “Incarcerous!” in the same breath.

He whirls around to discover that Alastor Moody is struggling against a wriggling, confining rope that is glowing pale green, a trait that Snape has never witnessed before. Moody’s wand is clenched in his hand, pointed at the ground due to his bindings.

“What in the world, young Misters—” Flitwick begins to sputter.

“He pointed his wand at us first!” Diggory retorts, his jaw hanging open. “Potter—”

“Where the hell is my wand?” Potter is asking in bafflement, realizing he and Diggory are sharing one.

Diggory’s father points at Moody. “Why the hell is that rope green?”

“Because he was about to cast a Killing Curse,” Dumbledore announces calmly, but quiet anger lurks in his eyes.

“Is—is that man’s face moving?” Mrs. Diggory asks faintly.

“Oh. Well, I do believe we’ve found your Polyjuice thief, Severus,” Albus says. Snape grimaces but says nothing, watching someone go through the mutilated throes of ending a long-term stint of Polyjuice.

“Barty Crouch, Junior.” Minerva identifies him before the potion fully ends, her voice full of distaste. “I do believe you’re supposed to be dead.”

“Oh, yes, died in prison.” Crouch grins at her, the bright shine of madness in his eyes. Bloody hell, no wonder he’d done such a good job of imitating Moody. It takes one mad bastard to pretend to be another. “That was poor, dear, sweet Mother. I’m sure Father is enjoying eternity with her right now.”

“What—he’s—ohshit,” Percival Weasley squeaks. “He didn’t answer the door yesterday, but there was a note, said he’d be back soon—”

“Oh, well, if you mean ‘back soon’ like you mean ‘dead in the woods,’ then yes,” Crouch tells them, his grin even wider than before.

Snape feels the intention, an instinct honed by terror upon terror. “Look out!” he shouts in warning, but harming them isn’t Crouch’s goal. Instead, the wandless magic disintegrates the rope that held him prisoner. Crouch doesn’t point his wand at them, but instead aims it at the sky.

“The Dark Lord has returned!” Crouch declares in a mad howl that carries across the school grounds. The Dark Mark blossoms into flaming green existence in the sky while Crouch runs off into the darkness. A lot of people follow with their wands drawn, but it’s a feint. There are easier ways to the school gates, and Crouch has had time to learn them all.

Snape takes in a quick breath, glances down at Potter once more to ensure that yes, the boy is still alive—somehow. Then he turns and runs in the opposite direction.

“Severus!” Albus calls after him.
“He’s mine!” Snape declares, and takes one of the twisting paths that shorten the distance. He doesn’t have to beat Crouch to the gates.

He already knows exactly where Crouch is going.

His Apparition is so fast it is almost painful. Crouch is still turning around in a victory circle, a wide smile on his crazed face, when Snape’s fist impacts his jaw and sends him down onto the dank, musty ground.

“You utter fool!” Snape yells, resting his boot over Crouch’s throat before leaning down, letting the tip of his wand dig into Crouch’s cheek. “You would go against the Dark Lord?”

“What? Don’t be—I set this entire thing up!” Crouch shouts back, rage finally replacing manic cheer. “It was my effort that led to this moment! And you! What were you doing, spy?”

“My Job.” Snape presses harder with his wand.

“Severus.” It is a pleasant whisper, but also a warning. “Severus, my friend. I do not think this is how comrades should greet each other.”

Voldemort sounds like he has just crawled out of a tomb. It is Snape’s duty to turn and bow, to recognize his Lord, but he is busy making an example of an idiot.

“Perhaps it is not, My Lord,” Snape responds, and presses down a little harder with his boot until Crouch starts to emit choking noises. “Who has claimed the right to kill The Boy Who Lived, Crouch?” Crouch glares at him, so Snape adds just a little more pressure, enough to damage the man’s windpipe but not crush it.

Snape softens his voice. “Who, Bartemius?”

When he lifts his boot, Crouch all but screams the answer. “THAT WORTHLESS WHELP DOES NOT DESERVE TO DIE BY OUR LORD’S HAND!”

“Oh, Bartemius.” Snape refuses to flinch at the sound of Voldemort’s voice, now so much closer than before. He smells like an old grave, like a dying snake. He smells like death. “Bartemius, perhaps Severus is correct.”

“My Lord!” Crouch shouts, giving Voldemort a look that is equal parts joy and fear. “I did all for you! Potter does not deserve—”

“Silence.” The tall figure is at Snape’s shoulder now. “You disobey me already, and we have only just begun, Bartemius. Do you recall what happens to those who disobey?”

“HE disobeyed!” Crouch glares up at Snape. “He did not answer your call!”

“And did you?” Voldemort sounds amused.

“No, I was—I had to remain—” Crouch scowls. “He was ALWAYS your favorite! ALWAYS! When it was I who ensured your resurrection! ME!”

“Actually, another did the true work,” Voldemort informs Crouch. His voice turns chill. “Severus.”

“My Lord,” Snape answers, and wonders that he can still play this role so well. Perhaps spycraft truly is his only real talent.

“While I understand your need to appear as Dumbledore’s kept pet, Bartemius has a point. You
“I will accept whatever punishment My Lord sees fit to give.” Snape presses his wand-tip back into Crouch’s cheek when the latter tries to retreat.

Voldemort’s amusement deepens. “If you dispose of this…this problem for me, there will be no punishment.”

Snape does not have to manufacture a smile. “That will pose no difficulty at all.” He lifts his wand, and the Unforgivable that Crouch taught to Hogwarts students this term falls easily from his lips. “Avada Kedavra.”

“Is it true?” Voldemort asks after the flash of green light fades away. Crouch gives one final twitch and lies still. “Did Crouch really try to kill my prize?”

“Twice over, My Lord,” Snape replies, finally turning to kneel at Voldemort’s feet. They are bare, the same color of a corpse left out to cool too long. Otherwise, all Snape can see of Voldemort is a weighty black wool robe.

“When?”

“Once by foolishness, an explosion that would have killed Potter and others, Slytherins included.” Snape ignores the feel of ice approaching his shoulder, and doesn’t move when a hand grips him there. Claw-tips dig into his skin but do not break it. “The second attempt was when Diggory and Potter returned to Hogwarts.”

“He does live, then. I thought so. I could feel it, Severus. I’m not sure I’m fond of the sensation. Stand, my friend. Let me see my most loyal of Death Eaters.”

Snape buries any remaining hint of emotion, strengthens the shields that hide all that is truly important to him, and rises to his feet.

Voldemort seems to have returned to this world lacking a nose. It would be amusing if it weren’t for the stark aura of evil Voldemort emanates. His eyes are the only part of him that retain humanity, but they are a weaker, watery color, not the deep jewel blue that female Death Eaters once whispered about in charmed glee. The pupils of those blue eyes have the barest hint of a reptilian slit.

Snape dips his head. “My Lord. Bone of father, blood of thine enemy, yes?”

Voldemort’s smile is lipless and thin. “I thought you would recognize the brilliance of old. Well done, my friend.” He pauses. “I’m surprised you did not think of it yourself.”

“It had occurred to me,” Snape returns in complete honesty, “I’d simply thought your father too decayed to be of any real use.”

Dammit. He had considered it, and had dismissed the danger for that very reason.

“A femur often outlasts all else.” Voldemort rests his hand on Snape’s shoulder again. “Come. We will join all the others who were wise enough to answer my summons.”

Peter Pettigrew is the first man to cross their path. Snape allows himself a moment of private seething to see the traitorous rat still alive. Peter isn’t even wearing the garb of a Death Eater—only old, tattered clothes. His left hand is no longer flesh, but a moving mechanism of solid silver. There would be the third aspect of the spell, the flesh of the servant. “It appears that Crouch is not the only one to avoid the Dementors.”
“It’s your fault I was there in the first place!” Pettigrew jabs his finger at Snape. The end of it still looks more like a rat’s pointed nail instead of a human fingernail.

Snape turns his head and gives Pettigrew a withering look until the idiot finally shrinks back, uttering faint, pathetic squeaks as he does so. “Rethink your words, Pettigrew. Perhaps you will recall your own failings.”

“Oh, don’t kill this one. He’s proven quite useful, Severus,” Voldemort instructs, his voice false in its gentleness. “Haven’t you, Peter?”

“Y-yes, My Lord.” Pettigrew retreats again after Snape subjects him to another flat, unimpressed stare.

“And that is one of the many reasons why you were always my favorite.” Voldemort lets out a hollow laugh that sounds like the whisper of dying snakes. “You also understand how to cause others to submit without needing to speak a word.”

“I learned it from the greatest of us, My Lord,” Snape offers, and tries not to be annoyed by Voldemort’s repeated laughter.

Snape performs the dance with the ease of old, unforgotten habit, committing names and their aging faces to memory. The Carrows are not a surprise, nor is Avery, Crabbe, Dolohov, Malfoy—but not Narcissa, which is an interesting lack—Goyle, Greely—dammit!—Mulciber Senior, Nott—bloody hell—Macnair, and Yaxley. There are new faces: Travers, Gibbon, Rowle, Selwyn, and Jugson, two of whom have children in Slytherin House, attending Hogwarts right now.

More faces than Snape expected to see, but not exactly a crowd. The numbers will come later, once Wizarding Britain can no longer deny Voldemort’s return.

For his sins, Snape gets to endure this all over again.

Bloody hell, shite, and fuck all of this for a damned lark.

* * * *

It is well after midnight by the time Snape is able to extricate himself from the evening’s disaster. He is just about to Apparate when Voldemort asks him a question, still caressing his first war trophy—one he hadn’t blasted earned. “How did Potter survive?”

“I don’t know, My Lord.”

“Hmm.” Voldemort lights Potter’s stolen wand with a murmured word and sights down the end of it. “What is so special about you, I wonder?” Voldemort muses before he glances at Snape. “Does Dumbledore know?”

“If he does, I will find out,” Snape promises. “Good evening, My Lord.”

“Good evening, Severus.”

Snape arrives and puts one hand on the castle gates, grounding himself within Hogwarts’ clean magic. She always welcomes him home. Sometimes he thinks this barmy old castle understands him
more than anyone else in the world. Not that many have tried.

Behind the first tree he comes to, Snape sicks up what had been that evening’s dinner. He buries it politely so that none of Rubeus’s questionable pets try to stick their noses in it, straightens his robes, performs a basic cleaning spell, and goes inside.

The castle’s Entrance Hall is quiet, but there is a palpable air of wakeful watchfulness. Curfew might have been evoked and obeyed, but it didn’t make the dunderheads actually sleep.

The gargoyle doesn’t even ask him for the password when Snape arrives at the stairwell. Snape goes up to the Headmaster’s office and finds the Diggory family, Potter, Black, Lupin, Minerva, Dumbledore, and the Minister for Magic, whose nightcap is peeking out from beneath his large bowler hat.

“Severus,” Dumbledore greets him, stilling whatever was about to come out of the red-cheeked Minister’s ridiculous mouth. “How are you?”

“Terrible,” Snape replies flatly, and goes straight to Cornelius Fudge. “Please tell me exactly how it is that Peter Pettigrew is still alive.”

Fudge starts to bluster at once. “Now, you cannot go merely on the word of these two young boys! They’ve had quite a shock, Professor Snape!”

Snape stares at Fudge until sweat begins to form on the shorter man’s forehead. “I was not here when Misters Potter and Diggory apparently informed you all of Pettigrew’s continued existence. I had to stare at that imbecile with my own eyes to learn he still lived. Now: how?”

Fudge takes off his hat to scratch his head and flushes an even duller shade of red when he encounters his nightcap. He immediately puts his hat back on. “I have no idea, but the claim that Pettigrew is alive is just as ludicrous as Mister Diggory’s insistence that He Who Must Not Be Named has returned—”

“He. Has.” Snape glares at Fudge. “You seem very inclined to disbelieve the testimony of two adults, Minister. Have you decided to side with the Dark Lord this early in the game?”

“What—I—how dare you!” Fudge sputters. “When you are the one with the history of—”

“Minister. Professor Snape. I think that tempers run too hot at the moment,” Albus interjects quietly. “Perhaps in the morning we will all be able to discuss this in a civilized manner.”

“Civilized. Yes. That seems wisest. I shall be returning home, Albus,” Fudge declares. It is only moments from Floo Powder to departure, and it feels like Fudge takes all of the stupidity in the room with him when he goes.

“He forgot to ask about Crouch, Junior,” Black observes.

“You’d think he’d be more concerned with the genuinely confirmed mad Death Eater,” Lupin adds, both of his eyebrows riding high on his face in a show of mock-innocence.

“Especially given that the man’s father was found dead after the search parties went out.” Diggory’s father stands up and helps his wife to her feet. Given the glassy state of her eyes, she’s been given more than one dose of Calming Draught. “I’m going to take my wife home, Headmaster. Cedric, you’re certain you won’t come with us?”

Diggory shakes his head. “No, Da. I’ll see you in London in a couple of days, all right?”
“Until then,” Diggory senior replies. The couple is gone in another green flash of flames.

“It is exactly as Mister Diggory told us, then?” Albus asks, giving Snape a sober look.

“Exactly,” Snape confirms.

“And Bartemius Crouch, Junior?”


Potter blinks a few times. Snape realizes that Potter’s glasses are still missing, and wonders if they’re crushed into the ground in the cemetery, or in some Death Eater’s pocket as yet another early war trophy. “Then he’s stupid, considering how badly he botched the job the first time.”

“Harry, please do not directly challenge the resurrected madman on his very first day in his new body,” Black says. He’s trying for humor, but the expression on his face is too distressed for it to really succeed.

“I suggest, Harry, that bedtime is in order. We’ll have more to discuss in the morning,” Albus instructs, giving Potter a gentle, grandfatherly nudge in the direction of the office door.

Potter’s eyes narrow, but then he smiles. “Sure. Sleep sounds wonderful. Have fun talking this to death.”

“That was a terrible pun. I should take points,” Lupin muses.

“Apparently, I died again tonight. I think that should be punishment enough,” Potter retorts, a flare of the ratel’s temper appearing in his eyes before he turns and leaves the office. He has to feel his way along the wall and run his hands down the door to grasp the doorknob, but then he’s out, the door closing behind him.

Snape refuses to allow his heart to plummet again. He knew it had happened, but wasn’t yet ready for the reminder. “What about Moody? Is he dead?”

“Fortunately, no. We recovered Alastor from a spelled trunk in the rooms set aside for him. I asked Poppy to take him to St. Mungo’s,” Dumbledore says, looking troubled. “A year under the influence of the Draught of Living Death while imprisoned in a charmed trunk was not kind to his health, and he will soon be needed.”

“Are we reconvening, then?”

“Not yet.” Albus looks down at Diggory. “Cedric, your parents were both in the old Order of the Phoenix during the first war against Voldemort.” To his credit, the young man doesn’t flinch at hearing Voldemort’s name. “They will not thank me for asking you, but you’re a legal adult who is graduating from this school. Do you wish to participate in what will, for now, be quiet resistance against whatever Voldemort is planning?”

“Oath of secrecy, right?” Diggory runs his hands through his hair. “After what I witnessed tonight? Headmaster, I’m terrified, but I’d be stupid not to try and stop it. I’m in.”

That part doesn’t take very long, nor does the recitation of names that Snape gives them of the Death Eaters who responded to Voldemort’s call. Diggory’s face falls after the first three names match students in Hogwarts, and by the end of the list, he looks shocked and grim.
“New followers already? He must have been using Peter to collect converts as well as to prepare for the Blood-and-Bone ritual,” Albus muses.

Snape recalls spying a bandage on Potter’s left hand. “Was Potter’s injury cursed?”

“No. I believe it was just a knife, though Cedric specified that it was silver,” Albus answers, and Diggory nods. “Did Voldemort know that Harry survived?”

“He did. He…” Snape hesitates, but he has no idea why he’s not willing to share the information. When no sufficient reason arises, he speaks the words. “Voldemort claimed to have felt it.”

“Did he?” Albus’s expression holds the briefest flicker of what Snape uncomfortably has to label as triumph. Then it’s gone, and the Headmaster’s pensive frown remains.

Snape escapes as soon as possible. He can tell that Black is still torn on whether or not to truly trust him, but he doesn’t care. It isn’t Snape’s job to make Black like him, it’s his job to keep Black from killing him until Snape can assist in making Voldemort very, very dead.

There is an impatient ratel waiting for him outside his office, regarding him with a beady-eyed stare that reflects green in the torchlight. Snape looks further down the corridor, where the Baron is watching in imposing silence. “Guarding children from other Houses, are we?”

“It was my task to watch all long before the Houses became so divided,” the Baron intones. “I watch and guard, especially when the child in question is so important to the future of our world.”

Potter appears in his office the moment the door is closed behind them. “Bloody hell, I can’t see a blasted thing,” Potter says at once, and uses his hands to feel his way over to a chair before collapsing down on it. “At least a ratel has decent eyesight. Oh, and if the Bloody Baron is trying to be inspirational, he is doing a poor job of it.”

“The Baron has a rather grim worldview, for very good reasons,” Snape replies. He wanted to curl up with the rest of his Firewhiskey, just enough left in the bottle to put some true warmth back in his limbs, but instead he has Potter.

He has a boy who was fool enough to—“You jumped in front of a Killing Curse!” Snape bursts out in sudden rage.

Potter looks in Snape’s direction, trying to focus on his face. “When Peter cast the Killing Curse with the intent of murdering Cedric…well, if it didn’t work the first time, there was no guarantee it would work a second time, either.”

“And it also might have!” Snape yells back, realizing that fear is thudding in his breast along with his heartbeat.

Potter looks distressed. “Professor, I—nobody’s supposed to die because of me.”

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose, willing himself to calm. “Mister Potter, if anyone dies in the war that is coming, it will not be because of you. It will be because of the Dark Lord, and the decisions he and his followers make. And before you make the argument, self-defence is not the same thing.”

“I wasn’t going to argue with that one. Incarcerous, remember?” Potter asks, a tired smile crossing his face.

Snape finally realizes what’s bothering him—what’s been bothering him for almost a year now. He
tried to explain it to Lupin after the Unbreakable Vow, but couldn’t articulate it well enough to satisfy either of them.

Potter has no reason to think otherwise about the Killing Curse…because no one has told him. No one has told him anything, not really. He’s been given just enough information to understand Voldemort is a danger, and nothing more.

Snape went along with that plan, in full agreement with Albus’s reasoning. Potter is a child; a child should be allowed to have a childhood, especially when a war looms on the horizon.

Snape has overlooked a critical detail: Potter hasn’t been a child since he placed his hands upon Quirrell and burnt the betraying bastard to ash. Potter hasn’t been a child since Lockhart’s spell stole the worst parts of his life from him. Potter hasn’t been a child since, perhaps, he recalled his mother’s death.

Potter is not yet fifteen, but he is no child.

“Harry,” Snape says.

Potter gives him an odd look. “Sir?”

“I need you to fetch Remus Lupin, and no one must see you do it. Bring him down here with you. There is…there are things you need to know.”

Potter arrives with Lupin almost a full hour later. The kitchen elves pop a tea tray into existence the moment the office door closes. Snape gets up from his chair long enough to activate the full extent of the wards that protect his office and the adjoining classroom, then sits down again.

“Sorry it took so long. I had to convince Sirius to go for a run. He’s so agitated he won’t sleep or sit still,” Potter explains. “Remus is having the opposite problem.”

Snape glances at the werewolf. He wants to think that the man looks dead on his feet, but as of tonight, the joke is no longer funny. “Sit down. The tea is the strongest blend the house-elves know how to find.”

Lupin treats him to an odd look that is almost exactly like the one Potter used earlier. Lupin must be who he learned it from. “I hope this doesn’t take long. I managed to drag myself up to the Headmaster’s office, but even tea is only going to help so much before I simply fall over, Severus.”

“I needed a witness. A minor can only be involved in an Unbreakable Vow if at least one legal guardian is there to oversee it.”

Lupin almost spits out his tea. “You want to do what?”

“I need to ask your godson to accept an Unbreakable Vow,” Snape reiterates, annoyed.

“The lunacy of that idea aside, I’m not a recognized guardian—”

“Oh, shut up,” Snape interrupts. He pours tea and mixes it to Potter’s preferences before making sure to carefully place the cup directly into the boy’s hands. Potter grasps it and nods his thanks. Snape again wants to kick a Dursley; his father’s eyesight was never this terrible.

“Remus Lupin, I don’t give a damn what the Wizengamot thinks. You were named as one of Mister Potter’s godparents and legal guardians. The Wizengamot might not consider it a binding agreement, despite the documents the words were penned on, but Lily and James Potter did.”
“Fine.” Lupin sits the teacup down hard enough that the china saucer cracks. “Why does Harry need to accept an Unbreakable Vow?”

“Because Albus Dumbledore is wrong,” Snape answers quietly. “Mister Potter figured it out even before I did. Didn’t you?”

Potter nods when he realizes that both of them are looking at him. “I practice Occluding almost all the time,” he says. Snape is glad he already informed Lupin of those lessons, else that would be yet another bombshell interrupting the proceedings. “It…I don’t think he’s doing it on purpose. I really don’t. But when I Occlude, I step back emotionally. Like the first year,” he tells Lupin, who seems disturbed by the idea. “Without emotion in the way, it’s…Dumbledore says a lot while not actually telling me anything.”

“What Albus did not tell Potter could literally have gotten him killed today. Yesterday,” Snape amends, remembering that it’s now early morning. “That cannot happen again. Potter needs to know every fact, even the parts we’d prefer to leave out. Ignorance has not once protected him, Lupin. Knowledge may well become the only weapon Potter has against Voldemort.”

Lupin looks like he would desperately prefer to disagree. “When did you realize this, Severus?”

“Tonight. When Albus had confirmation that Mister Potter and Voldemort are linked, he was pleased. It means he has a plan in mind already due to a pre-existing theory.” Snape frowns at the tea he made, realizing he doesn’t want it at all. He drinks it anyway, doubting he’ll have the opportunity to sleep before breakfast. “If Albus is wrong about how to proceed with Mister Potter’s preparation for dealing with Voldemort, then the plan he’s relying on might also be doomed to failure.”

“You’re right.” Lupin sighs and leans back in his chair, rubbing his forehead with his free hand. “I knew it when I discovered how Harry dealt with Quirrell. I knew it when I found out how hard Albus fought against Sirius becoming Harry’s legal guardian, which was his right as Harry’s godparent. Albus didn’t relent until he was reminded that the Dursleys were not capable of caring for a spell-damaged child.”

“All right, this part I don’t understand,” Potter complains.

“Albus claimed that the sacrificial magic that your mother performed, that protective spell, only functioned if you spent time with one of your mother’s relatives,” Lupin says.

Snape wants to smash a stupid teacup, but it wouldn’t help. “Albus never told me that he’d given you to Petunia Dursley, of all people, to act as your guardian. He claimed that it was, as Lupin says, an act of protection. If I’d ever discovered this, it was a situation that I would have rectified at once, even if I had to volunteer to raise you myself—and Potter, I hate small children. As it was, by the time I did find out, the damage was long done.”

“I didn’t know, either,” Lupin says quietly. “I do recall that Petunia was not at Lily’s wedding. I don’t understand the entirety of Snape’s hatred of Lily’s sister, but Sirius told me about his only visit to Little Whinging. I think the mildest term he used was ‘unpleasant.’”

“Petunia hated Lily,” Snape says bluntly. “If any of you four idiots had looked beyond your own noses, you’d have realized that during our second year of school. When Lily received a Hogwarts letter and Petunia never did, she decided that the best course of action was to hate Lily, Hogwarts, and anything associated with magic.”

“How would you know all of this?” Lupin asks.
Snape gives him a baleful look. “Some days I wonder if you’re even half as intelligent as you claim to be.”

“They were friends, Remus,” Potter says, before Lupin’s puzzled look can grow to ridiculous proportions. “Until the end of their fifth year, and you know why.”

Lupin grimaces. “Oh. Oh, no. Severus, you were right to insult me, and…God, Severus. Do you hate me because I’m a werewolf, or because I stood by and let them do that to you?”

“It depends upon the phase of the moon,” Snape replies. “And yes, I mean that literally.”

Lupin nods in regret. “Then I’m very sorry. I can’t remember if I ever said it before.”

Snape almost drops his damned teacup in surprise.

Lupin doesn’t notice. “Well, then. First, an Unbreakable Vow, and instead of sleep, we will all trade terrible secrets. Who shall it be with, Severus?”

Long years of spying serve him well; Snape recovers without letting on that he’d been startled in the first place. “I’d insist that it be with you, but the legal guardian of the minor has to be the witness, so no one can accuse the guardian of trying to take advantage of their ward.”

“Right.” Lupin turns to Potter. “You’re all right with this, Harry?”

“I think it would be a mistake not to do this,” Potter answers. “I’ll need to borrow your wand, Remus.” Then he holds out his bandaged hand for Snape to grasp.

* * * *

“I’m sure, by now, that you’ve all heard the rumors of Voldemort’s return,” Albus says at the conclusion of breakfast. He waits for the din of young voices to die down.

“Those rumors are true.”

Snape refuses to grant the student body any expression that’s not stoic, unimpressed silence. It isn’t as if Crouch didn’t shout the very same thing last night.

Albus holds up his hands to request silence. “I don’t know what the days ahead will bring. Given how this morning’s discussion with the Ministry went, I believe Minister Fudge will correctly declare Bartemius Crouch, Junior to have been insane, but I’m almost certain they’re going to publicly declare that Mister Diggory is incorrect. They will deny the return of He Who Must Not Be Named.

“All I ask of anyone here is that you listen and observe. Draw your own conclusions, though time will eventually bring about undeniable proof. If you are concerned for your safety, this school will be a haven, just as it was for others during the last, terrible war. No matter your parentage, family, or House, you will shelter safely at Hogwarts,” Albus says, and gives the Slytherin table a brief, pointed look.

Slytherin’s Head Boy, Head Girl, and the Prefects all glance at Snape without turning their heads. Snape nods by looking down at the table and back up again: yes, the Headmaster’s words are true. He knows they’ll pass the word along to the rest of the Slytherins. Some might take shelter at
Hogwarts because their parents side with Voldemort, but others may ask for shelter because their parents do not.

“Despite Voldemort’s return, last night could have brought about even worse outcomes. I’m glad to be able to say it did not happen that way,” Albus continues. “Despite the plot of Bartemius Crouch, Junior, the Triwizard Tournament has concluded with two champions to stand before you. They agreed to take the cup together for Hogwarts, and for all of you. Mister Potter, Mister Diggory: please stand.”

Potter and Diggory share identical looks of unhappiness before pushing back their chairs and standing up. “Hogwarts, congratulate your champions!” Albus shouts.

The resulting applause makes Snape’s ears hurt, but at least it seems to be meant for Diggory and Potter in equal measure. Snape glances at Potter in time to see him mouth, “You’re lucky you’re graduating,” at Diggory, which causes the other to grin in apparent relief.

Theodore Nott stands up from the Slytherin table as the applause begins to taper off. “Is it also true that Potter threw himself in front of a Killing Curse?”

Potter winces and looks abashed, but doesn’t avoid the question. “Uh—yeah.”

“How the hell does that work?” Fred Weasley asks.

“Why aren’t you dead?” George Weasley adds, staring up at Potter in near-worship.

“I don’t know, and I’m not going to be throwing myself in front of any unnecessary Killing Curses to find out,” Potter replies, which earns him a smattering of uneasy laughter. “But I happen to like Cedric alive, and so do most of you, and…well, not even Voldemort could get it right. Why should someone like Pettigrew have been capable?”

That sets his Slytherins to muttering amongst themselves. The Gryffindors seem proud, worried, or somehow manage to have both expressions at once. The Hufflepuffs are thrilled and will probably try to adopt Potter for saving one of their own; the Ravenclaws look to be on the verge of launching into a months-long debate on how immunity to a Killing Curse could even be possible.

Snape knows how it’s possible. It’s the one thing he and Lupin both chose not to tell Potter.
It’s only two days after the students leave for the summer that Snape gets a letter from an owl at breakfast. He recognizes Hedwig and puts on the proper sort of glare one should have for receiving a message from Potter.

He tears open the envelope with far too much vigor, almost ripping the single-page message it contains. It takes only a whispered sentence to reveal the letters on the page, which to all others would remain blank. It’s a brilliant bit of magic that Lupin introduced him to. Snape suspects it’s also the basis for the stupid map that Lupin gave to Potter midway through his third year, but at least Potter doesn’t use it for mayhem. He just uses it to avoid people and visit Snape’s office completely unnoticed.

Not long ago, Snape would have declared that to be an exceptional act of delinquency from Potter. Now he just considers it to be of great convenience in regards to the continued necessity of being politic.

*Professor Snape,*

*Why is Borage’s 6th-year Advanced Potion-Making textbook in my trunk?*

*Yours,*

*Harry Potter*

*P.S. YES, next time I’ll find a different owl, but Hedwig needed a good flight. Set the note on fire and be delighted about it, all right?*

Snape doesn’t have to fake the smile on his face. The hard part is making sure it has the right sort of dark edge to it as he crumples up letter and envelope, tossing both into the air before incinerating them with a wandless spell.

“Really, was that necessary, Severus?” Minerva asks in complete disapproval.

Snape glances in her direction. “Necessary, and enjoyable.”

“What was that about, anyway?” Flitwick wishes to know.

“I do believe it was a complaint about what awaits a fifth-year potions student if they wish to attain any sort of decent letter on their O.W.L.s.”

Minerva rolls her eyes. “The content of an O.W.L. is not up to you, Severus.”

“It bloody well should be,” Snape mutters, and leaves the table.

“Order me to shelter Remus Lupin in Cokeworth for the summer,” Snape tells Albus later that morning.

Albus lowers his spectacles to peer at Snape. “That’s quite an interesting request, Severus.”
“If there is a war on our doorstep, placing two members of the Order at the same residence is foolish, especially if one of Voldemort’s followers figure out how to locate Black’s dreary house. We also do not need a potential spy among the werewolves to be homeless, destitute, and ill. If anyone finds out about Lupin’s new location and chooses to inform Voldemort, then I need to be able to tell the Dark Lord the absolute truth: you made me do it. How could I refuse Albus Dumbledore without losing my good standing in his eyes?”

“I see.” Albus taps his quill tip against his mouth. At least he hadn’t yet dipped it in ink. “You raise a valid point. Come back this afternoon and I will inform you, so that you can keep the two memories separate.”

Snape inclines his head. “Headmaster,” he says formally, and departs.

He goes into his office to find parchment, quill, ink, and the bespelled envelopes that owl talons can’t pierce. He’d wondered if Potter unpacked his school trunk the moment he returned home, or if he had the lackluster teenage habit of putting it off as long as possible. Merlin knew that Snape himself had put the task off at least for a few days upon getting home, though a great deal of that involved hiding its contents from his father.

Mister Potter,

You have received not just any 6th-year textbook, a fact I’m certain you’re now aware of. The limits you place upon yourself are sensible; thus, your curiosity has served you well. After the final potions you composed this year, I decided you were ready for the next stage.

Practice anything you like from the book, though your Dogfather might have to purchase some of the ingredients for you due to your age. Then again, if you have concerns about Black being too curious as to why you have an advanced textbook, ask Lupin to procure them, instead. Make certain you give him the money for every purchase, no matter how much the idiot protests.

Sincerely Yours,

The Half-blood Prince

* * * *

The next letter he receives a week later is dropped from the talons of a barn owl typically used by the standard Wizarding Post. Snape regards the blank envelope before tucking it into his robe to read after breakfast.

After checking it for poison, traps, and various dangers, he slices it open with a warded blade. To his relief, it’s nothing more than a brief missive from Potter, revealed when he whispers the charm over the blank page. He even likes the words: “I solemnly swear that I want Tom Marvolo Riddle to become exceptionally dead.”

Dear Professor,
How did you figure out even half of the new methods in this book without making something explode?

Yours,

Harry

Snape bites back a snort of amused laughter before he writes a swift response.

*Mister Potter,*

*They’re called shields, you idiot.*

*Regards,*

*Professor Snape*

He has a reply from Potter by evening, but the letter is more complex than he expected.

*Dear Professor,*

*Shields. Yessir. I am a dunderhead, sir.*

*I’m also writing because I have, apparently, caused Garrick Ollivander of Ollivander’s Wands to have a minor fit of despair. Or maybe professional unhappiness? I don’t know. All I know is that I needed a wand to replace what that the noseless arsehole stole—*

Snape has to stop reading and concentrate on maintaining a neutral expression. That is not a term that he ever needs to be considering when in Voldemort’s presence.

*All I know is that I needed a wand to replace what that the noseless arsehole stole, but none of the wands in the front of the shop liked me at all. Ollivander told me that it took a pile of wands last time, but this didn’t seem like the same thing. Sirius said the man looked like he wanted to tear out his hair.*

*Eventually, Ollivander gave up and told us he’s been toying with blending woods and experimenting with new core combinations in his spare time. He just never intended to sell any of the results, not when they’re all so new and untested. Oh, and “unconventional” is the word Ollivander used. He was more than a little upset when one of those new and unsellable combinations worked for me.*

*I’m now the proud owner of a thirteen inch ebony wand with natural coloring instead of a varnish coating. The wood is grey and pale gold lines from handle to tip. It’s also been wrapped in carved silver lime wood. The silver lime is one solid piece, but it’s definitely individual glyphs. Ollivander admits even he doesn’t know what they mean. When he’s wand-making, he does a lot of his work in*
a magical trance state. (Sounds inconvenient.)

The core is a single thestral tail hair. The end of it at the wand’s base is wrapped around a cutting from a basilisk horn. Apparently, you gave him a few at his request after you went chopping at the dead basilisk in the Chamber and started selling the excess. Thanks, I guess? I think? It’s a neat wand, but none of us have any idea what it’s capable of beyond “likes Harry Potter.”

After dinner, I will probably be spending the night in this library trying to figure out what I’m going to be pointing at people. I’d like to know that before it becomes a necessity.

Yours,

Harry Potter

Snape is glad he is in his quarters, officially retired for the evening. It means he can turn the air blue without being observed. Giving Potter, of all beings, an experimental wand! Ollivander has gone bloody senile.

He puts his robe and boots back on and tromps his way to the school library, already aware of the fact that his own quarters do not have the right books to answer the questions he now has. “Madam Pince,” he greets the librarian.

“Professor Snape,” Irma Pince replies, eying him up and down. “Are we off on one of your old late night adventures in research?”

“Perhaps,” Snape admits. Memories are filtering in of the many times Madam Pince had to order him out of the library as a student, but also of the many times when she stayed to help him find the information he was seeking. It’s easy to slip into the role of hated teacher, and that has always affected his interpersonal relationships with the school faculty…with only two exceptions. Irma Pince and Poppy Pomfrey both refuse to let his role as a spy, or his temper, to color their memories of who Snape was, and who he has to be now.

“Actually, that would speed my search,” Snape says. “I need books on wand wood—lore, superstition, fact, or all of the above. Then I need the same on wand cores, common and uncommon both.”

Irma raises an eyebrow. “That is quite a departure from your usual fare, Severus.”

Snape doesn’t have to manufacture a distasteful grimace. “Ollivander has been experimenting, and a student will be returning to Hogwarts in September with one of his new creations. It is not to any standard we have experience with.”

“Blast the man, is he insane?” Irma wonders aloud, tutting and shaking her head. “I’d expect him to have the sense to leave that sort of experimentation to an adult!”

“It seems to have been a last-ditch effort to match a student with a wand,” Snape informs her.

Irma nods, using one finger to push her narrow-rimmed glasses back up her nose. “You will, of course, inform the entire faculty as to your findings? That is not the sort of magic that any of us should be ill-prepared for.”

Snape watches her walk away, feeling his heart beat too hard for a moment before he regains his self-control, regulating its rhythm back to unaffected calm. Great bloody fuck; he hadn’t yet thought
of that in his panic over experimental damned wands. He refuses to hand that advantage over to Voldemort—or to anyone else.

He wonders if Potter has been politic enough to refrain from telling the entirety of London. It’s all but a certainty that he informed Granger, but Granger has indeed retained her habit of keeping her opinions of certain events tied only to discussions with Potter and Weasley. Black and Lupin will know. Lupin is probably having impossible little werewolf kittens.

Irma returns after about fifteen minutes of waiting, in which Snape does nothing more than perform an upright, waking meditation while he considers plans and options. He never wastes his spare time with useless fidgeting.

“Here you are, Severus,” she says, placing three surprisingly thin volumes into his hands. “There isn’t much, no. Wandmakers tend to be a secretive lot.”

“I can see that.” Snape ignores the burn of regret in the back of his throat. “You’ve never taken vows to the Order of the Phoenix, have you?”

“I haven’t, no,” Irma replies, frowning at him. “It’s always been my belief that I need to be neutral. All our children need access to knowledge, even if they sometimes make foolish choices.”

“Then I apologize most profusely,” Snape says in utter sincerity. The wand is in his hand and the mild Obliviate spell is performed before Madam Pince has the chance to realize her danger.

The next day, he writes to Potter before breakfast. He hasn’t slept, but his calendar is, thankfully, empty for the rest of the day but for one trip into London.

**Mister Potter,**

*You have in your possession a wand that may provide a distinct advantage, or a distinct disadvantage. No matter which it comes to be, you must not allow your wand’s true properties to become public knowledge. If Miss Granger and Mister Weasley know, then yes, Lupin or Black will have to perform an act of minor Obliviation upon the pair. Neither of your companions have an Unbreakable Vow. With Death Eaters active once more, the torture of others for desired information is indeed a possibility, and they are young and untrained in resisting such things. Think of it as a necessity for their safety, which is true.*

*Lupin will possibly have to do the same to Black; he will be able to judge the situation. I will make certain Ollivander knows to keep his silence. The ancient wand-making family of London has long been known for their discretion, and I doubt Ollivander wishes everyone to know of his experiments as of yet.*

*Bollocks, Potter, do you realize what you’re carrying about?*

*The primary element of your wand, ebony, is a wood excellent for combative magic and transfiguration. Ebony has often been the wand of choice for the stubborn and courageous.*

*I cannot imagine where you possibly procured either affinity.*

*I wish to study the runes on your wand—if Black reads this, tell him to stop being puerile. In the meantime, silver lime is an excellent wood for a practicing Legilimens or Occlumens. I doubt Ollivander could have invented a better combination for your position if he’d bloody tried.*
Thestral hair is a rare wand core in these past centuries. It fell out of favor when rumors arose that the legendary Elder Wand of the Deathly Hallows had a thestral hair core. It is regarded as an unstable element, but it is quite the opposite; when wielded by those who understand the nature of death and mortality, it is near-unrivaled strength.

I have no idea what the damned basilisk horn will do. No one in recorded Wizarding history has used such an item as a wand core except Salazar Slytherin himself, and he was a useless bastard when it came to recording his own accomplishments.

Bloody hell, just tell anyone who asks that your wand is made from ivy vine, which will give you the excuse of having a wrapped wand. Perhaps mention a unicorn hair as its core. Being underestimated is often exceptionally useful.

Sincerely Concerned,

Professor Snape

He looks over the letter, scowling. It’s perhaps more personal than it should be, but he’s too irritated to write another draft, especially when swift action is necessary.

*          *          *          *

Aside from this strange new correspondence with Potter, Snape’s summer is a busy one. He doesn’t need to do much to arrange next year’s coursework aside from restocking on ingredients and ordering a few replacement textbooks for those ruined during brewing accidents. Voldemort is starting to amass a power base, though, and suddenly his role as a spy is eating up his life. There are now days when Snape can’t decide who he hates more—Voldemort, Dumbledore, or himself.

When he’s not reporting to both sides in careful, guarded sentences, Snape tinkers with the Wolfsbane potion. The more he studies it, from stage to stage, the more he’s certain that it could easily have been improved upon.

Who cares about werewolves, though? Snape thinks idly. To the crafter of this potion, a docile wolf would have been their only concern.

“Shoddy, shoddy work,” Snape murmurs under his breath, Vanishing the latest bubbling liquid from his cauldron. It doesn’t matter what the original goal of the potion had been. This is an idea that was not taken to its fullest potential, and the Potions Master who left the task unfinished doesn’t deserve his bloody title.

He goes to see Lupin in the middle of July. At least Snape hasn’t needed Spinner’s End for meeting with the unsavory, and Lupin has been able to conduct his own spying tasks in relative safety.

“Do you know of any werewolves you dislike that would also trust you enough to accept a drink from you the day of the full moon?” Snape asks.

Lupin looks up from the mug of cheap Muggle-crafted coffee he’s sipping on. “Severus, I am not poisoning werewolves just for you to test a new potion. Besides, dead werewolves in my wake would most certainly not convince any of them that the Order is benevolent towards our kind.”
Snape crosses his arms and stalks his way across the parlor, resting his chin on his hand. “It isn’t right,” he finally says.

“What?”

“The potion. If it were, I wouldn’t be asking for test subjects. I’d bring you a sample and order you to drink it,” Snape clarifies.

Lupin is unimpressed. “I’m also not going to poison myself just for you to test a potion.”

Snape glares at him. “It wouldn’t be poisonous, idiot. If the potion is right, I’ll know.”

“How?” Lupin asks.

Snape looks away, discomfited. “I’ve always known when I’m right.”

“What’s the point to all this? Why go to this much trouble, Severus?”

That is easier to answer. “Lupin, we aren’t going to have the luxury of having a back-up Dark Arts teacher in the fall. Moody is in—forgive the pun—no mood to take on the job, especially after living in a damned trunk for most of the school year. The students need someone who is capable of teaching them what they need to know in the years to come, and they need you as often as possible.”

“Severus, you know as much, or more, about the Dark Arts than I do. If I need a substitute for the full moon, we already have one,” Lupin points out.

Snape grinds his teeth together. “No, we don’t. I won’t actually have time.”

“I see.” Lupin sips his terrible coffee. “You think it will be that bad?”

“At first?” Snape nods. “Tired spies slip and make mistakes. If Voldemort decides to test the strength of my loyalty, that’s the first method he’ll use.”

“Of course.” Lupin sets the mug down on the scarred wooden tabletop next to his chair. “Crouch subjected Harry to the Imperius curse last year.”

Snape tries not to clench his fists. “If it weren’t for the results, I’d have been locked up for punching an Auror.”

“You and me both,” Lupin says dryly. “But Harry threw off the curse, Severus. I’m wondering if it’s possible to teach others how to do the same.”

“Teaching the dunderheads Occlumency is your best shot of that. Afterwards, it’s about strength of will.”

Lupin grimaces. “Oh, that will go over well with the school governors. I’d have to get permission from Albus. Then he can deal with the fallout instead of me.”

“The current Board would accept it better if I was teaching those lessons.” Snape feels like banging his head against the nearest wall. “I need to look into how many Restorative Draughts one can ingest without accidentally dying.”

“Three hundred and five,” Lupin says at once. When Snape turns to look at him, Lupin is giving him a mock-innocent stare. “If you’re a werewolf, anyway.”

“If you bite me, I’m stabbing you in the heart with a sterling silver ice pick.”
Lupin laughs. “I have to be in wolf form for my bite to be any danger at all.”

“Oh, please do go fuck off,” Snape grumbles, and slams his way out of the house.

* * * *

**Dear Professor,**

After reading through your book and its interesting notes, I’m experimenting this summer to pass the time, and in hopes of making better than an E on my Potions O.W.L. at the end of the school year. Oh, and I’m almost certain that if you really were the mastermind behind the Potions O.W.L., most of the student body would wet themselves in sheer academic terror.

Well. Not Hermione.

If I were to attempt to create a Memory Projection Potion, but swapped out the associated marigold for a mourning dove’s feather, what could I do to keep the entire mixture from exploding before it has a chance to finish brewing?

Yours,

Harry Potter

Snape considers the matter for a few hours and then crafts a response in the privacy of his own quarters. It hasn’t escaped him that it’s Potter’s birthday, but he is out of practice at gift-giving. What does one give to a fifteen-year-old boy who has literally been the savior of the wizarding world, and might still be trapped in the role?

He knows what he would have wanted.

Information.

Acknowledgement.

**Harry,**

When doing experiments of any questionably explosive nature, one’s cauldron is the first element you must look to for stability. A student’s typical pewter cauldron is most often used because of its resistance to corrosion, though it is susceptible to damage from acidic or alkaline fluids. It is an excellent catalyst for most basic brews, accelerating chemical reactions between ingredients for more effective blending without requiring the use of specific tools. The copper mixed into the tin that make up pewter increases its ability to distribute heat evenly. Pewter is the least likely element to impart no extra qualities to a potion, and the brews performed by young students are chosen because they do not react to pewter in an explosive manner. (Neville Longbottom is, as in all things, the dreaded exception to this accepted rule.)

In short, pewter cauldrons do their work quickly, and you need a material that will slow that reaction time down significantly.
A gold cauldron, in the magical sense, is used for potions when you wish to impart the qualities of the day—brightness, light, cheer, joy, infectious emotive qualities, luck (such as Felix Felicis) and in some instances, masculinity. In terms of the physical, gold is the least reactive of all elements and resistant to most acids (no cyanide, please). However, it is also easy to change the shape of gold, and certain potions will utterly obliterate the structure of a golden cauldron.

Pure silver has the best thermal and electrical properties of any chosen metal for brewing and is less easily changeable than gold, but like pewter, it is a catalyst for chemical reactions between potions ingredients. A silver cauldron is used for potions that most often contain elements of the night—quiet, stillness, darkness (not evil; I am speaking of a lack of light) calm emotions, and femininity. The phases of the moon, as well as lunar eclipses, should always be taken into account when working with silver.

For that matter, one should avoid using a gold during an eclipse of the sun.

Cures for love potions perform best when brewed in silver, which is yet another hint that those stupid potions were not originally created by the fairer sex. As silver is also an excellent water purifier—retarding the growth of bacteria—many potions for the health of the body are brewed in this type of cauldron.

Brass is a standard cauldron sold in many establishments for those who cannot afford silver or gold, and is the required cauldron students are to purchase for 6th and 7th-year Potions, but it is an alloy of copper and zinc. Brass is most often used for the brewing of medicinal potions due to its bacteria-retarding properties, accompanied by a natural ability to prevent or assist in the curing of certain diseases due to its copper content. The zinc helps to bond potions ingredients for a more stable brew, though care should be taken, as zinc reacts strongly with acidic and alkaline ingredients if they are the first items introduced to the cauldron. Some of the potential results of that blunder are toxic.

Copper on its own has more limited uses. It is best for brewing a Restorative Draught for the above reasons, but also because, in trace amounts, copper is a necessary part of the human diet that is often found to be lacking in the wizarding world. (No, I have no idea why. It is irritating.) It is second only to silver for heat and electrical qualities, but it is hard to keep copper pristine due to the way it reacts with oxygen. A copper cauldron requires an obnoxious number of Preservation Charms to keep it from becoming a useless green pot.

A bronze cauldron is almost the complete opposite of a pewter cauldron. Pewter is primarily tin with traces of copper; bronze in a wizarding cauldron is a 90/10 ratio of copper to tin. It refuses to react to magically generated lightning while still conducting heat very well. Thus it is recognized for its earth-bearing qualities, which impart stability to a potion, and is best for many potions that might otherwise bear explosive tendencies. It also has acoustic properties for potions that involve sound: think in terms of larger bells and gongs—rich, deep sounds. Brass does, as well, but only if you wish to brew potions whose sounds are meant to cause pain.

Do not ask Madam Pomfrey why I came to her entirely deaf one day during my fourth year. It’s not worth the effort; she won’t stop laughing long enough to tell the story. Needless to say, I did not write that potion down. Anywhere. Not even a hearing protection charm negates the effects of that disaster.

If you didn’t gather that dove’s feather yourself, consider its source to be suspect. A naturally shed feather and a plucked feather will create different results in a potion. Also, study your feather types before you proceed, for a pin feather is different from a primary, and yes, impart different qualities.

Do not use primary feathers in your potions. I will beat you senseless, even on the date of your birth.
Sincerely,

Professor Snape

After a moment’s hesitation, he adds two postscripts.

I do not care for my given name. I’ve heard it fall too often from the lips of the enemy.

Why in the names of all the Greek gods are you attempting to brew some sort of projection potion?

Snape does not receive an answer right away. He assumes that the lack of news means that Grimmauld Place is still standing, else Albus, Minerva, and the Weasleys would all be clucking in concern. He would dearly like to know where Potter got the idea for trying to create the potion-equivalent of a Pensieve, but he is a patient man who is skilled at out-waiting and out-lasting all else. Perhaps it is something the boy read in one of the Black library’s tomes. Sometimes the fact that Black doesn’t have a proper catalogue of his family library makes Snape want to put the fear of God and Madam Pince into the man by literally shoving Madam Pince in Black’s direction.

He makes the foolish mistake of considering Voldemort and his followers the summer’s only threat to Potter’s safety. It’s not until the Daily Prophet is delivered on the morning of the third that he discovers he was almost fatally wrong.

Snape is expecting nothing more than the Ministry’s continued insistence that the Dark Lord has not returned. The Diggory family has merely been infected by their son’s tournament-created fears; Potter is a fear-mongering attention-seeker. It’s all very tiring, especially as Minister Fudge has avoided answering the oft-posed question: how can the Ministry prove that Voldemort has not returned?

Instead, Snape discovers a full front-page article detailing an attack on Potter by Dementors.

He frowns while reading the account of Potter and Black’s assault from creatures that should never have been outside the bounds of Azkaban. The Dementors must have recognized Black from his long-term imprisonment, as that is whom the Dementors concentrated the attack upon—but Snape can tell they were not ignoring Potter, either.

Potter faces a disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August for the use of underage magic. Snape’s frown deepens into a scowl of displeasure. Since when is magic performed in obvious self-defence the subject of disciplinary hearings, especially when even the Prophet itself is reporting the event in full?

It also does not escape Snape’s notice that it was Potter’s Patronus charm that saved both of them. Rage is his first, consuming emotion; Black failed in his duty to protect his godson.

Black also spent twelve years in Azkaban, half-mad and tormented by Dementors.

Dammit. Snape can’t muster enough hatred and spite to keep hold of that rage. He is a terrible, black-hearted bastard, but he isn’t stupid, either.

However, Snape is a consummate actor. “A disciplinary hearing? It’s about time,” he says,
deliberately allowing his voice to carry.

Minerva glares at him. “For this? Severus Snape, even you know better!”

“If the story is true? Then yes, of course.” His tone is just shy of mocking. “We will have to see what
the disciplinary hearing brings.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I do not transfigure you into something a cat will happily consume,”
Minerva retorts, leaving the table in a snit.

Snape folds the paper, ignoring the glares that other summer-residing faculty members are aiming in
his direction. He’s too busy thinking to concern himself with them, but ignoring such things is his
usual response, regardless.

Only a Ministry employee of sufficient rank can send a Dementor after someone who has been
demed a threat to the wizarding world. This was not an attack on Black. He merely distracted the
Dementors from their primary target.

Lupin comes to Hogwarts that afternoon for lunch, claiming school business as his cover when other
faculty members ask about his sudden appearance. Others express their concern for Potter. Lupin
gives them a strained, unhappy smile and says that all is well.

When Albus invites Snape up for afternoon tea, Snape knows he’s about to get werewolf-provided
information. “The Ministry’s first response was to eject Harry from Hogwarts!” Lupin bursts out the
moment the office door closes.

That gives Snape momentary pause. “Only the Headmaster or the Board of Governors has the
authority to take that action.”

“Exactly,” Lupin growls, and stalks across the office.

Albus sits in calm repose behind his desk. “I had to act quickly to make sure that order was rescinded
at once, citing far more laws than I expected to be necessary,” he says. “And while I know you enjoy
putting on a great show of hatred for Harry Potter, it should calm you to know that he is fine.”

Snape treats Albus to cynical irritation. “Firstly: it is not a show. Secondly: if they’re holding an
inquisition, then that information is blatantly obvious.”

“They’re not just holding a damned inquiry, Severus. They’re putting Harry on trial before the entire
Wizengamot!” Lupin shouts.

Snape raises both eyebrows. “Perhaps Potter has finally managed to rattle them, if they think a trial is
in order for a mere Patronus charm.”

“Yes, but Cedric and Harry both have been saying all summer that Voldemort has returned, and no
one has attacked the Diggory family.” Lupin frowns in a way that somehow enhances the old scars
that mar his face.

“That we’re aware of,” Snape counters, feeling uneasy. “Dementors are a blatant, dangerous
spectacle. The Diggory family could have been subjected to other dangers, ones too subtle to be
obvious unless one is accustomed to noticing them.”

“Quite.” Albus removes his spectacles so he can polish them on his robe sleeve. “I’ll send
Nymphadora Tonks out to speak with the family. She’s a brilliant Auror, and she has also been all
but hounding the Order for the chance to do something useful beyond random bodyguard duty
Snape receives a very short note from Potter that night. Unlike the neat, clear handwriting Potter maintains, this is a scrawled mess.

_Snape,_

_We’re fine, Dementors are terrible, I did not need to relive my parents’ deaths, Sirius is a wreck, what the hell is wrong with the Ministry?_  
_Yours,_  
_Harry_

Snape writes back at once and allows Potter’s gentle snowy owl to take the envelope in her beak. “Stay out of trouble. You’re a much more obvious target at night.”

Hedwig might possibly have rolled her eyes at him before flying away with his response:

_Mister Potter,_  
_Politics. The answer to your question is politics._  
_Sincerely,_  
_Professor Snape_

*   *   *   *

“Drink this,” Snape orders.

Lupin lowers his newspaper and glares at him. He’s gotten used to ignoring Snape’s loud traipsing in and out of the house, but apparently Snape has finally pushed the werewolf too far by arriving before breakfast.

“Severus Snape, I am not drinking whatever the hell it is you’re selling unless it contains caffeine.”

“Then you’re in luck. It actually does contain caffeine,” Snape returns with a grim smile. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to get pure caffeine by Owl Post?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just dump coffee grounds in it,” Lupin grumbles, and takes the corked glass phial from Snape’s hand.

“Nonsense. Then it would be toxic. Or it would cause you to sprout an extra pair of limbs. I’m honestly not sure. Tea, though—that would kill you.”

Lupin pauses in his examination of the violet, glowing potion to look up at Snape. “When is the last
time you slept, man?"

“What day is it?”

“The tenth. I’m guessing that tonight’s full moon is part of your reasoning behind this early social call,” Lupin says.

“Oh.” Snape does a quick mental count. “Then it’s been three days or so, but I brewed this before that time. It just had to sit and age properly before use.”

Lupin stares at him. “Severus. Please sit the hell down before you drop to the floor.”

Snape sits down at the kitchen table, even though he hates this room. He overheard too many fights between his mother and father while seated in this very spot.

He takes the Muggle-branded and brewed coffee Lupin that offers, swallowing it down while ignoring how vile it is. Muggles do not understand true coffee at all—at least not British Muggles.

“Now that I’m less afraid you’ll pass out: what am I holding, Severus?” Lupin asks.

Snape gestures until Lupin understands him and puts the phial down on the table. “That, Lupin, is the fucking cure for lycanthropy.”

Lupin’s frown is intense enough that his eyes flash werewolf gold. Snape is too tired to react to what is normally a terror-inducing sight. “It is far too early for jokes, and today is the worst choice for that sort.”

Snape glares back, annoyed when he sways a bit in the process. Merlin, he needs to sleep. “Do I look like I’m fucking joking, you daft bloody idiot?”

“No.” Lupin leans away from the table and its glowing, accusatory phial. “No, I suppose you don’t. Are you—are you sure?”

Snape presses his fingers into the corners of his eyes. “Am I certain that it’s a one hundred percent, permanent cure? No. Am I certain that it will keep you from transforming with the rise of the moon? Absolutely.”

“How? A cure is supposed to be impossible—”

“Oh, that’s such utter rot,” Snape growls. “They said the same of Wolfsbane until it was proven effective almost a hundred times over, when its potency should have been recognized after the first five successes! They stopped exploring the potion’s potential when they got the first results that didn’t kill anyone, Lupin. The world is stocked full of hopeless idiots, and my field of study is no exception.”

“Oh, shite,” Lupin whispers, staring down at the phial. “Shite, shite, shite. I have no idea what the hell to do.”

Snape scowls at the idiot living in his house. “Drink the fucking potion!”

“Oh, God. If I die, I’m haunting you, Severus Snape,” Lupin promises, pulling out the lead stopper. The potion eats through every other kind. It’s an interesting side-effect.

“Drink. The. Potion,” Snape bites out. “If you die, it won’t be because of this. It’ll be your own stupid fault for an unrelated reason!”
Lupin glares at him again and then downs the potion in one swallow. “Oh, that’s probably the worst thing I’ve ever tasted in my entire life,” he gags.

“Oh, please.” Snape rolls his eyes. “I know from chemical composition alone that human semen has to be so much worse.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Lupin grumbles back. He taps his fingernails against the tabletop. “Well?”

“Well, what?” Snape retorts. “You’re not dead. Congratulations. You can sleep through the night without running around in the fucking woods.”

“We won’t know that until the moon rises,” Lupin snaps back. “And even then, we won’t know if it’s a cure unless I take no potion whatsoever on the ninth of September.”

Snape shakes his head. “No, idiot. You can’t be incapacitated during the school term. We’ll confirm that on the first of July, next year.” He waits and realizes that Lupin is watching him expectantly.

“Oh, for—fine! I’ll be here this evening to oversee your traumatic lack of transforming into a horrific beast. I’m sure it will be fascinating.”

Lupin finally looks like he’s starting to relax. “Thank you.”

“Oh, shut up,” Snape mutters, and wobbles his way out of the house. He nearly Apparates himself into three different pieces, but dammit, he gets back to Scotland without dying.

Snape gives his bed a look of absolute longing before pulling out a fresh handful of Restorative Draughts. Number eight is taken, and then he’s on his way to Malfoy Manor, where the Dark Lord is being hosted for the week. Next week, the Notts will have that dubious distinction.

At least Voldemort does not ever ask to reside in Snape’s pathetic excuse of a house.

* * * * *

One day, Snape is going to figure out how to cause Lucius Malfoy to insert his head into his own arse. He is setting a terrible example for his only child. Right now, Draco’s saving grace is that he is rightfully terrified of the Dark Lord.

Voldemort accepts the waxing, creepily poetic praise as his due, but Snape knows that Lucius is laying it on too thick when even Narcissa begins to look annoyed. They share a single, mutually irritated glance. In that moment, Snape knows that Narcissa Black Malfoy did not want Voldemort to return, and is less than pleased by his presence in her home.

It could be a sign of a potential alliance. Snape just has to wait for the right moment to cultivate it.

* * * * *

That night, the moon rises, and Lupin doesn’t transform. Snape grins at him with all of his teeth showing. “I told you so.”
Lupin is busy unchaining himself from the old cellar wall, but he takes the time to offer up the traditional British gesture of heartfelt irritation.

“Are we going to tell anyone?” Lupin asks later, rubbing at a red mark on his neck. The light is better upstairs, but the coffee hasn’t improved at all.

“I’d love to, but everyone will immediately demand to know the formula. Then you lose the only weapon in your arsenal that might convince the werewolves to avoid siding with the Dark Lord,” Snape replies. “I just hope to live long enough to become famous for it.”

“Right.” Lupin sighs. For a man who might have just been cured of a lifelong curse, he looks exceptionally dour. “When did our goals become so short-term, Severus?”

Snape gives the man a dry look. “When we were seventeen and stupid, Lupin.”

Lupin doesn’t disagree. “We’re staring down the oncoming storm of a second magical civil war, and we’re not fleeing for the hills. I posit that we’re still stupid.”

Snape blames exhaustion as the reason why he can’t figure out how to counter that statement. “Perhaps a miracle will happen, and Voldemort will Apparate himself into an active volcano.”

Lupin makes a disparaging noise. “As if that would even be enough.” He turns to look at Snape. “We’ve told Harry the things that we know to be true. When do we tell him what we also suspect?”

Snape frowns and resists the urge to place his hand over the Mark. This is the one piece of information that Voldemort must never, ever realize they’ve stumbled upon. “When Potter proves his skill in Occlumency, Lupin. Not a moment before.”

Snape is not in attendance for the inquiry, which has been oddly placed on a Saturday morning. It confirms his suspicions that someone high-ranking in the Ministry wants Potter removed from the picture. Fudge is too cowardly to be behind the assassination attempt, but aside from Albus Dumbledore, the whole of the Wizengamot is now suspect.

Regardless, the hearing is called in Potter’s favor. The fact that Dumbledore had to interfere by bringing in an Auror to provide testimony, one who’d been undercover nearby and witnessed the attack, does not speak well as to the Ministry’s overall regard towards Potter. Albus informs Snape that there was a particular spike of anger over the fact that Potter dealt with the Dementors before a trained Auror could get to the scene to act in Potter and Black’s defence.

Lupin tells Snape that Black wants to sue the bloody Wizengamot for punitive damages, including damage to his own sanity. Snape considers it and tells Lupin that Black should proceed. It will give the dog something to do aside from becoming consumed with worry over his godson.

Two days after the hearing, Snape receives an owl at breakfast that bears a thick, padded envelope in its talons. The large black owl has a foul disposition and steals all of Snape’s bacon before departing in a molting flap of wings.

Snape collects the feathers. He is a sensible Potions Master, and black owls are uncommon.

Inside the envelope is a brief note from Potter, and three photos.

Each one is of Lily Evans Potter.

Snape stares at them, watching the moving photos in shocked fascination. She is smiling and happy, bearing the maturity that marked her final year of life. He has never seen any of these pictures before,
never glimpsed a photo from 1981 that did not also include James Potter in some way.

Potter’s note is brief and to the point: *Because if I create a Memory Projection Potion, I can take pictures of memories. By the way, it’s neck feathers and a single fresh marigold blossom.*

Snape smiles the rest of the way through breakfast, which makes Vector so nervous that she excuses herself without first having her precious coffee. Snape goes back to his quarters and selects quill and parchment. These results require a proper response.

*Potter,*

*Search Black’s household for a copy of a potion that will be titled Oculus Maxima or, more properly, Visu Acutissimo, whose original formulation has been lost for at least two centuries. It wouldn’t surprise me if that inbred cesspool has a hidden copy for their own personal use, as no Black has been caught in public wearing spectacles in at least as many years. It may correct some of your myopic tendencies, whereas the standard Remedium Oculus spell has proven itself useless for your terrible blasted eyesight.*

*In Gratitude,*

*Professor Snape*
Regulus Arcturus Black

Snape receives one more letter from Potter before the new term begins. It’s delivered again by the overweight, molting black owl. Snape hides his bacon and sacrifices the breakfast sausage in order to bribe the crotchety old owl into giving up its letter.

Dear Professor,

We seem to have accidentally stolen one of the Malfoy house-elves.

Snape feels his eyebrows drawing together in bafflement. One does not simply steal a house-elf.

Well, maybe stealing is the wrong word. It’s a weird, long story, and to make things worse, most of it happened in my second year at Hogwarts. I don’t bloody remember second year!

According to Dobby the house-elf, Dobby knew about Lucius Malfoy’s plans for Tom Riddle’s diary. There; at least we all now know how Ginny Weasley got ahold of the stupid thing. Malfoy placed it in her schoolbag during a shopping trip in Diagon Alley.

Dobby also believes it was Draco Malfoy who planted a torn page from a book discussing basilisks in a place it was most likely to be discovered and understood. I asked Hermione, and she said she’d found the torn page in her school bag, tucked into the back of Hogwarts: A History. That’s how she knew about the basilisk. She just didn’t find it until it was almost too late.

I don’t know if Draco was being altruistic, or if he just didn’t want to get eaten. I’m not even sure it matters. Also, Draco Malfoy would be much easier to figure out if he didn’t have something uncomfortable lodged up his arse.
(Ron’s words, not mine. I’m not disagreeing, though.)

Dobby came to the house at Grimmauld Place because he wanted to apologize to me. He claimed he wanted to do so earlier, but since he failed to keep me from attending Hogwarts in second-year (?) he was busy serving his punishment. The elf also explained how he used to be a Black house-elf, and that he went with Narcissa Black to begin service under Malfoy employ after the marriage.

Professor, the poor bugger cried about how the Blacks were cruel, but at least they didn’t routinely make Dobby bash himself in the face with hot irons. I do not need to remember Lucius Malfoy to really, really dislike him.

Sirius heard all of this, took off his shoe, and threw his sock at Dobby. I didn’t realize house-elves liked socks, but Dobby just about lost his mind when he caught it.

Sirius sat down in front of our now hysterical house-elf guest and explained that Dobby had accepted clothes from the Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black (I’m quoting) and now he was a free elf, capable of deciding who he wanted to serve.

We now have a house-elf who is wearing eight different socks, and whose existence offends
Kreacher like nothing else. I think it’s only Dobby’s chanted mantra of promising to “serve Master Harry Potter forever and ever” that’s kept Kreacher from enacting violence against the other elf.

Freedom for house-elves is wrong? Why do I not know this? Why do I not know that house-elves are treated like slaves? History of Magic is the most useless class in the whole of Britain!

Your confused student,

Harry Potter

P.S. Sirius wishes to know if you have encountered a missing family member of his during the summer. He won’t say who, but considering there is an empty bedroom in this house still decorated in Slytherin colors, it might be easy for you to find out.

Snape puts down the letter, glowering at nothing. He hasn’t thought of Regulus Black in years. He has suspicions as to Regulus’s fate, but to send them in letter form offends even his dubious sensibilities.

Once safely in his quarters, Snape firecalls Grimmauld Place. A house-elf with bulbous large green eyes and wide, wobbling ears answers him. “Is yous bein’ Master Snape?”

“You must be Dobby,” Snape replies, eying the timid creature. There must be some sort of backbone hidden in the elf, else he would never have dared leave the Manor. “Tell Sirius Black that I need to speak with him, please.”

“I’s be doin’ that right nows!” Dobby proclaims, and disappears.

Grammar. This one desperately needs lessons in proper grammar.

“You must be Dobby,” Snape replies, eying the timid creature. There must be some sort of backbone hidden in the elf, else he would never have dared leave the Manor. “Tell Sirius Black that I need to speak with him, please.”

“T’s be doin’ that right nows!” Dobby proclaims, and disappears.

Sirius’s expression dims. “I see. Well…bollocks. Come to the parlor, Severus. Kreacher! I need tea, and maybe every single drop of alcohol in this house!”

Snape sits down in the aforementioned parlor. Compared to previous visits, the room is pristine. “Kreacher seems to be more motivated now that there is competition around.”

“It does seem to be effective,” Sirius agrees. He sits down heavily in the armchair across from Snape. “My brother’s dead, isn’t he?”

Snape hesitates when he hears noise, but it’s only Kreacher bearing a properly laden tea tray. All of the Black house-elves are sworn to silence in regards to family secrets. “Yes, I’m afraid Regulus has to be dead,” Snape replies, and then is startled nearly out of his wits when Kreacher throws the tea tray across the room and begins to bawl.

“What the fuck?” Sirius blurts out, looking as confused as Snape feels. “What’s wrong, Kreacher?”

“Master told me to go!” Kreacher wails, clutching at some sort of lump hidden beneath his tea towel.
“Master Regulus made me, Master Sirius!”

“Oh, fuck. Oh—bollocks! Calm down, Kreacher,” Sirius manages. “It’s all right. If he ordered you to do it, then you did the right thing.”

“Not the right thing! Not at all!” Kreacher shrieks. “Master Regulus is dead because I obeyed, but I obeyed because Master Regulus told me to!”

Sirius looks too floored to be of further assistance. “If he demanded it of you, he must have had very good reason to do so,” Snape tells the house-elf. “What happened?”

“You is not a Black,” Kreacher sniffs, giving Snape a disdainful sneer. “You is a very distant cousin, and a Half-blooded Bat at that.”

“My godson is a Half-blood and the legal Heir to the House of Black,” Sirius growls. “Remember that before you cast aspersions, Kreacher. Now answer Severus Snape’s question. I’m ordering you to tell me what happened to Regulus Black.”

Kreacher worries at the lump on his chest some more. “Master Regulus, he turned against the Dark Lord.”

“Son of a bitch,” Sirius breathes in shock. Snape doesn’t outwardly react, but if Regulus betrayed Voldemort, it would certainly explain his disappearance and death.

“He says the Dark Lord doesn’t act as a proper Pure-blood wizard should, that he is abusing and cruel. Master Regulus tells Kreacher that there is enforcing proper station, and there is slaughter. The Dark Lord is caring only for the slaughter. Master Regulus says he is going to stop the Dark Lord, and he needs Kreacher’s help.”

They listen to the house-elf speak of the journey across the ocean to an isolated, rocky island. Snape feels his skin crawl as Kreacher talks about the trap Voldemort created that held the locket at its base. Black has to excuse himself and rush to the nearest lavatory after he hears how Regulus ingested the cursed water from the fountain. It was Kreacher’s attempt to bring water from the lake that caused the Inferi to surge forth, ready to consume all who were foolish enough to disturb the trap.

Black sits back down on the edge of his chair and listens as Kreacher tells of how he obeyed Regulus’s instructions, retrieving the locket from the now-empty fountain and replacing it with the fake one—and of how Regulus told Kreacher to leave.

“I tell Master no,” Kreacher says, stomping his old foot down on the carpet. “Master Regulus ordered me to go. There being no time for both to escape the creatures coming to rend and tear us. Master Regulus…” Kreacher draws in a great, heaving breath as fresh tears roll down his hideous face. “Master Regulus asked me to destroy the locket. If Kreacher can’t destroy it, then Kreacher is to wait until Master Sirius comes to ask for it.”

Black is still shell-shocked. “Kreacher, why the hell didn’t you tell me about any of this before?”

Kreacher looks offended. “Master Sirius did not ask.”

“Right. You’re right.” Black scrubs his face and wipes at his eyes. “Kreacher, I’m asking you now. Will you please give me the locket that Regulus sacrificed himself for?”

Kreacher gives Black a long, searching look. Then he grudgingly lifts out a gaudy-appearing golden locket on a gold chain from beneath his tea towel. It glimmers in the light in a way that suggests either truly old gold or terrible Muggle fashion jewelry.
“Careful, Master Sirius should be,” Kreacher mumbles as he places it into Black’s outstretched hands. “Master Regulus said it was bad magic.”

While Black examines the locket, frowning, Snape looks at Kreacher. “Could Regulus not Apparate out of the cave?”

Kreacher shakes his head, still sniffing pathetically. “Master Regulus said there was magic blocking it. The way out was to walk, and the Inferi…they was everywhere, Master Bat. House-elves have strong magic, but it was doing nothing to the Inferi.”

“But it didn’t interfere with a house-elf’s ability to Apparate,” Snape guesses, and Kreacher bobs his head. “You could not take him with you?”

Kreacher yanks on both of his ears and lets out a sound of pure, retched despair. “Tried! Master Regulus said that the same wizard Apparatin’ block was keeping Kreacher from taking him away from there!”

“Severus, I don’t know what the hell this is, but I think my brother was right about it being Dark magic. Do you mind?” Black holds out the locket by its golden chain. There is an ornate green S on the front made from individual emeralds that glow in the parlor’s candle light. The locket is less gaudy upon closer inspection, and its design signifies great age.

Snape takes it, surprised by the heavy weight, far more than the heft of mere gold. He knows at once he’s holding an object of truly vile Dark magic, but not what kind.

He hates not knowing things. Ignorance increases his chances of dying before Voldemort is defeated.

All of his prying, incantations, and wand-prodding reveal that the latch is not cursed. Snape throws up several magical wards between himself and the face of the locket before he opens it.

He has a brief impression of a single, jewel blue eye. Then it feels like his hands are on fire.

Snape’s next conscious thought is that the Black parlor’s ceiling has a great deal of cracked plaster needing repair. That’s when he realizes that he’s lying on the floor, and his head is pillowed in someone’s lap.

Oh, that is entirely unacceptable. Snape tries to rise and fails miserably. He hurts, all over. His head is pounding, and his heart is beating far too fast to be healthy.

“How still,” Lupin orders. Snape looks up to find the other man glaring down at him. Lupin’s lap? Lupin hadn’t even been in the bloody house!

“What the hell—” Snape breaks off, concerned by the scratchy, damaged sound of his own voice. It requires a lot of shouting to create that sort of rasp. He knows this from old, consistent experience.

“Oh, good. You’re awake.”

As if this could not be any more baffling, Poppy Pomfrey is suddenly standing over him. There is even a blasted velvet blanket from the ancient couch tossed over his legs. This is ludicrous.

“I raided your office. When Remus came to fetch me, I knew I’d need something specific,” Poppy continues, retrieving three separate phials from her robe pocket. One holds a Restorative Draught, for which he is already nearing his tolerance limit; the second is a Calming Draught, which he feels is genuinely unnecessary; the third is his own adjusted version of a Pepperup, where he discerned how to add chocolate to the recipe without turning the potion toxic or useless. He hates the sugary mess,
but wizarding chocolate has always been oddly effective against Dark magic.

“At least let me sit up,” Snape grumbles. Lupin does so in an exceptionally impersonal manner, which is gratifying. “You are not going to pour those down on my face, Poppy.”

The matron smiles at him. “Of course not, dear.”

Snape reaches out for the first one she’s willing to give him, alarmed by how badly his hand is shaking. “What the hell happened?” he asks after the Calming Draught takes effect and his hands finally stop shaking. He was wrong; he really was in dire need.

“You had a very strong reaction to that damned locket,” Black says, finally putting in an appearance. Lupin leaves Snape to slump uncomfortably against a wall, but Snape prefers it. The fact that they felt the need to fetch Poppy is bad enough. He doesn’t need a blasted werewolf prop.

He also vows, once again, that he is going to figure out how to create a Pepperup that can do its job without the annoying side-effect of self-created steam. “How strong?”

“It’s been three hours since you opened the fucking locket. You didn’t stop screaming until I stunned you. It was the only way I could get you to let go of the locket to close the damned thing.” Black bears a tired frown, but Snape suspects the expression is not for him. “Then I sent a Patronus to fetch Remus; Remus decided Poppy was going to be more useful.”

“I’m far more used to emergencies happening after school term begins,” Poppy says in a dry voice. “Then again, some of you have always proven to be exceptions.”

“Screaming,” Snape repeats, not sure if he wants to know. He also doesn’t want Poppy informing these two idiots of the number of times he’s already visited her in the school infirmary this summer, moments when he didn’t trust his own hands to administer the right potions.

“Let’s just say that I’m very grateful Harry is spending the last of the summer holiday with the Weasleys,” Black says grimly. “What little I could make out was…unpleasant.”

Snape notices the locket, closed and sitting in a puddle of golden chain on the low parlor table. “It’s a bloody Horcrux.” He’s relieved when his voice sounds much closer to normal, but it’s going to take another potion from his quarters to heal the rest of that damage.

“We figured that part out, thanks,” Lupin returns absently, looking at the locket. “We have to destroy it.”

“We can’t.”

Lupin glances over at him, startled. “Severus—”

“He’ll know,” Snape hisses back. “He’ll know, and any attempt at subtlety on our part…it’s a similar situation to our other problem, and you know it.”

“You’re right.” Lupin collapses into the nearest chair, the one Sirius was sitting on before Snape decided to open a stupid blasted Horcrux.

Snape uses the wall to push himself onto his feet. “Poppy, you know that I trust you implicitly, but what you’ve just learned here…you can’t know this.”

“Grave danger, hmm?” Poppy shakes her head. “I’ve taken the Order’s vow, Severus.”
“Knowing would make you a target, and the school will need you.” Lupin stands back up and gestures towards the fireplace. “I’ll do it. I’ll even explain to you afterwards why you’re missing a few hours, but in this instance, Severus is correct. This is a subject so dangerous that even I don’t want to bloody well know about it.”

Poppy hesitates. “You’ll tell me when it’s safe, then?”

“By the time it’s safe, everyone will know,” Snape answers. That’s enough to convince her, thank Merlin. This is not the first time Snape has had to ask her to forget something exceptionally dangerous.

Black reclaims his chair while they both wait for Lupin to return. Snape leans against the wall, willing to retain his silence. The potions only pushed the headache away, turning it into background noise. It will rear up again later, and likely be worse.

Lupin finally comes back into the parlor, dusting soot from his threadbare coat. “I hate doing that. I know there are varying levels of secrecy that the Order practices, but I’ve never liked it.”

Snape is in no mood for whinging. “Try sharing afternoon tea with the Dark Lord.”

That earns him a dual set of glares. “No, thank you,” Lupin mutters. “If you were trying to put my actions into perspective, you went too far in one singular, terrible direction.”

“My sincerest apologies,” Snape drawls out.

Black leans forward and regards the Horcrux with an intent stare. To Snape’s quiet relief, he doesn’t seem inclined to touch it again. “That’s three Horcruxes now.”

“You told Black about Potter?” Snape asks, scowling.

“I had to,” Lupin replies, but at least he seems unhappy about the decision “Time for another Unbreakable Vow, Severus?”

Snape lets his head thump back against the wall. “I hate you.”

“Yes, three,” Lupin answers Black’s question. “The destroyed diary, this locket, and our godson.”

“No wonder the bastard didn’t die in 1981.” Black sits back and shoves his hand into his hair. “Are living things even supposed to be capable of being Horcruxes? I might have turned up my nose at most of my family’s interest in the Dark Arts, but I know what one of the fucking things is, and I didn’t think it was possible to create one within a person.”

“Everything I’ve read says no, but I think it only means Voldemort was the first one cracked and vile enough to succeed. But, if we can destroy the other two Horcruxes—” Lupin begins, but Snape cuts him off.

“Aside from the fact that alerting the Dark Lord would be a terrible idea, we still don’t know how to destroy one of the remaining Horcruxes without killing the person it’s attached to.”

Black starts shaking his head. “That isn’t even the worst problem. There are more than three.”

“Deduced how?” Snape asks, too tired to continue with any attempt at snide mockery. He’ll get plenty of practice at being an utter bastard once the new school term begins on the first of September.

“Because he’s fucking Voldemort,” Black responds, like it should be obvious. It’s doubly irritating to
realize that Black is correct. “If he’s split his soul three times, why would he stop there? The man never wants to die! He’d do his best to ensure that there are so many pieces, no one will ever find them all.”

*Perhaps that explains why Voldemort retains such corpse-like qualities,* Snape muses.

Lupin frowns. “There must be a limit to how many times someone can fracture their own soul.”

“Maybe, but…” Black rests his chin on his clasped hands. “Grand gestures. Voldemort was always one for grand gestures. He would have made an excellent member of the Black family, the rotten bastard. My uncle liked his Dark magics to be grandiose, too.”

“Sirius?” Lupin glances at Black.

“An enemy. A bespelled but very personal item. A locket that belonged to a Hogwarts Founder.” Black looks up when Snape makes a questioning sound. “It seemed familiar, but I had to go look it up in the library. That ugly damned locket belonged to Salazar Slytherin.”

“He can’t get to anything of Godric’s. One is goblin-made, and the hat would just laugh at him,” Lupin says. “And Ravenclaw’s Diadem of Wisdom, as well as Hufflepuff’s famous golden cup, have both been missing for almost as long as the two original owners have been dead.”

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. This cannot possibly get any worse.

“Severus.”

Of course it can get worse.

Snape looks at Black to find that he is being subjected to somber pleading. “Remus tells me that your Unbreakable Vow is to ensure the survival of my godson. Please.”

“I thought you didn’t trust me,” Snape says in a half-arsed attempt at escape. He can’t see a way out of this. Being trapped in an Unbreakable Vow with the werewolf is bad enough!

“Some days, I’m still not sure,” Black admits. “You told Albus that Voldemort was the one who ordered that mad Barty Crouch was to be killed for disobeying him. What really happened to Crouch, Snape?”

“I killed him, though it genuinely was on Voldemort’s order,” Snape replies in blunt honesty, a bit surprised that this elicits only grim satisfaction from Black. Lupin is less pleased, but he’s always preferred that people play nice with their toys. “It was an excellent opportunity to convince Voldemort that I still felt the way I did during the first war, but mostly, I did it for me.”

“Why?” Lupin asks.

“He endangered my students,” Snape snarls back, and nearly tips over when he finds he’s not ready to finish using the wall as a support just yet. “He almost killed Potter three times over. I would have crushed Crouch’s throat in and saved my wand the trouble if it wouldn’t have meant a ruined boot.”


Snape glares back for a full minute before he realizes it’s a waste of time and energy best spent in other ways. “Perhaps…a demonstration.”

He fishes his wand out of his robe sleeve, making sure it’s pointed away from both Black and Lupin.
It takes a ridiculous amount of effort to lift it; he’s not actually sure he’s going to be able to cast the spell.

He closes his eyes and focuses on the sight of Lily’s face. It’s the year they’re going to attend Hogwarts. They’ve shown each other their letters. She’s giggling in delight as she floats above the ground, her green eyes bright and full of joy.

Lily was the one who taught him to fly.

The words emerge in a soundless whisper, but when Snape opens his eyes, his corporal Patronus is investigating the room. The doe lifts her head and regards Black in polite curiosity when he gasps in recognition.

"Your Patronus used to be a runespoor. I remember seeing you cast that spell, Severus," Lupin says.

Snape feels familiar, heavy weight settling onto his shoulders, one he’s borne for a very long time.

"Things change, Lupin."

Black reaches out to touch the doe when it wanders over to investigate him. “This is Lily’s Patronus.”

“I couldn’t save her,” Snape finds himself saying. It’s a weakness, admitting this aloud, but if he’s about to be trapped in an Unbreakable Vow with Lupin and Black, it cannot be secret. They have to understand and trust in the words he speaks, or the Vow will fail.

That, Snape thinks tiredly, would be a very stupid reason to die.

“She was my friend, and I couldn’t save her. Every attempt I made to prevent her death—all of those efforts failed.

“I went to the graveyard after their funeral. I promised Lily that I would protect her son. Lily’s doe has been my Patronus ever since.”

After a long, tense moment, Black nods, but his mouth is set in a grim line. “I might not trust you in other matters, Severus, but in this? My trust is absolute. Help me save my godson from that fucking mad bastard.”

Snape gives up. “Very well. Can you Occlude, Black? Can you protect your mind from others?”

“Of course.” Black offers him a bitter, crooked grin. “Learned how in prison. How else do you keep the fucking Dementors out?”

* * * *

Snape collapses onto his own bed at Hogwarts that evening, still feeling wrung out after his encounter with Voldemort’s Horcrux. It has to be an early creation to have had such a detrimental effect on him. Black and Lupin tried to spare Snape his dignity in not telling him what he’d been screaming about, but Snape isn’t stupid. He knows what his primary concerns are.

He pops the lid on the stereo, putting in a new compact record that Potter sent him earlier in the summer. The band is called Portishead, and the singer’s breathy voice reminds him of Miss
Lovegood. Snape suspects that’s why Potter chose to purchase it.

“Oh, can’t anybody see

We’ve got a war to fight (but)

Never found our way

Regardless of what they say.

How can it feel, this wrong?

From this moment

How can it feel, this wrong?”

Snape stares up at his ceiling as the verse repeats again. By God and ancient Merlin, he has no idea what to do.
There is an unfamiliar, pink-garbed witch sitting at the faculty table in Charity Burbage’s usual seat. Snape gives her a vague nod of polite greeting, which earns him a smile that is far too wide and bright to be genuine. He dislikes her immediately.

Snape frowns as he sits down, wondering what in the hell Albus Dumbledore has gone and done now. At least Burbage is tolerable.

The Sorting is nothing unusual, but it earns him new and fearful Slytherins. Snape restrains a sigh; no one has forgotten that Voldemort came from Slytherin House. The poor idiots are probably scared witless.

The meal goes well, though Snape spends most of it studying returned students and new arrivals. Potter meets his eyes for a brief moment before pretending the moment never happened, returning his attention to Ronald Weasley. Every Weasley ginger at that table has sprouted again during the summer, even Miss Weasley, competing with Ronald Weasley for height. Snape has paid a bit more attention to her than any Gryffindor aside from the Weasley twin troublemakers and Potter. It was a private relief when she came back to school able to take her place among the second-years instead of being held back to repeat her first-year. If current academic trends continue, she’ll earn an O on her Potions O.W.L. next year with little difficulty.

Albus stands at the conclusion of dinner and greets everyone, as usual. He’s barely begun his opening remarks when the pink-garbed witch starts false-coughing for attention.

It’s reassuring that Snape is not the only to turn a disapproving stare in the witch’s direction as she stands without waiting for Albus to acknowledge her. “Well, then,” Albus says in a slow, thoughtful voice. “Students, this is Ministry Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, who will be standing in for Professor Burbage as Muggle Studies Professor for the foreseeable future due to—”

The witch interrupts Albus by standing to give the students a speech that borders on fascism, her false smile never once slipping. Albus gets back up to try and get on with things; then Umbridge stands and does it again.

Snape no longer merely dislikes her. Now he also wishes her dead just so that she will remain quiet. He gives Umbridge another irritated glance. Whoever sent this clueless, impolite witch to teach at Hogwarts, when she has probably never met a Muggle in her entire life, is beyond intelligent comprehension.

“As I was saying…” Albus gives Umbridge a stern glare when she looks as if she’s going to try to stand for a third time. Where is a Weasley twin’s sticking hex when one is actually necessary? The Ministry has declared that Muggle Studies is now a compulsory subject for all students. If you have not yet spent a year in the class, you may very well find that this year is your turn in the figurative barrel.”

Draco Malfoy comes to see Snape in his office the moment the first years have settled for the evening, his Prefect’s badge still a shiny totem on the front of his robes. There were other, better
prospects, but that badge is Snape’s last-ditch effort at trying to teach Draco some sense of responsibility. “Potter is playing at politics!” he declares.

“Congratulations: You have mastered the art of alliteration.” Snape pauses over the letter he is writing, a request for more dragon’s teeth. The school is running low, even after the free samples left behind from last year’s foolish tournament. He went through quite a number of them to make a true Wolfsbane potion.

“You don’t understand,” Draco says, which Snape finds laughable. “He’s…he’s…” The boy abruptly sits down in one of Snape’s office chairs, running his hands through his hair.

Snape lifts one eyebrow, a subtle display of disapproval at Draco’s lack of manners. “Perhaps, one day, you might elucidate further.”

“He spoke to me on the train—just me, after asking for a few moments’ private conversation. I was intrigued,” Draco says. “He hasn’t really spoken to me since leaving me a waiting victim in the hallway.”

Snape puts down his quill. “And I told you that you’d gotten what you deserved for making foolish assumptions about Potter’s abilities. You may continue to use that tired excuse in front of your compatriots in your House, but you and I both know the truth, Mister Malfoy. Honor me with it.”

Draco flushes. “Sorry, sir. You’re right. I failed in a duel that I instigated. Then there was that stunt with the hippogriff when he grabbed my hand and healed the damage before telling me to shut up, since some of them were there to learn.”

Snape gives him a dry look. “How entirely vile and unforgiving of him,” he drawls out. There had, at least, been the pleasing side-effect that Draco suddenly started paying a bit more attention in Care of Magical Creatures.

“But he’s Potter!” Draco scowls, saying this in the same tone that someone would declare an enemy, or perhaps an odious insect that has just been squashed underfoot. “He’s not supposed to be so blasted capable!”

“I am still waiting for this conversation to make sense. Do I need to sedate you?”

“No, sir.” Draco takes a deep, calming breath. “Potter asked me on the train if I supported the Dark Lord because I really believed in what he stood for, or if I was afraid of the consequences of not standing with him.”

Interesting. Potter hadn’t given Snape any indication that he was still trying to gain Slytherin allies. “And what did you tell him, Mister Malfoy?”

“I told him that of course I believed,” Draco answers, brow furrowing in confusion. “I have understood the truth of it all since I was a child. Then Potter asked me a question that I will admit, I hadn’t yet considered.

“Potter asked me…what if the Dark Lord loses?”

Draco looks away from Snape. “I scoffed at him. I told him that’s impossible.”

“In which you reveal your own foolishness once more;” Snape says, his voice sharp. “Or do you forget that the Dark Lord did fail? The war was lost, Mister Malfoy. The very fact that you were speaking to Harry Potter is proof of that. Or did you not notice the popular scar on his forehead?”
“I thought of that. I did,” Draco insists, when Snape does nothing more than look at him. “It’s—Father has always been so certain—”

“Your father,” Snape emphasizes, “was entrusted with a magical object that was sacred to the Dark Lord. Your father then decided, in the height of arrogance, to ‘accidentally’ give that object to young Miss Weasley, a mistake that led to the object’s destruction. What do you think will happen to your father when I am forced to reveal the truth of the object’s loss to the Dark Lord?”

Draco pales. “You can’t. Father will—”

“Be punished,” Snape finishes, “just as Voldemort punishes all who fail him. He rewards loyalty, but make no mistake, Mister Malfoy: the Dark Lord is swift to extract payment for any transgression, no matter how many favors you have granted him in the past.”

“Whose side are you actually on?” Draco blurs in frustration. “I thought you belonged with us—Father thinks you are our ally! If you truly followed the Dark Lord, Potter would be dead already! And then there was that stunt with Black last year—”

Snape decides he has had enough of the conversation. “Unlike you, or your father, I know how to keep my options open. That is the trait of a good Slytherin, Mister Malfoy, something I have been attempting to teach you since your very first year. It galls me that you have yet to learn the lesson. Perhaps your blind loyalty would have better suited you in Hufflepuff!”

There is one thing about both Lucius and Draco that Snape enjoys. It is almost too easy to make them turn red with apoplexy. “It is late, Mister Malfoy,” Snape says in dismissal, turning his attention back to his correspondence. “Go to bed.”

Draco stands. “Sir,” he says in a stiff, angry voice, and leaves.

Snape tries to pick up his quill, but is almost as quick to throw it down again in disgust. Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger are named as Prefects for Gryffindor this year. Between those two, Mister Malfoy, and Pansy Parkinson, it will be all but open war in the school hallways. Albus Dumbledore has lost his bloody mind.

After Snape makes certain that his Slytherins are all in their dormitories but for the new Head Boy, Head Girl, and Prefects out on curfew patrol, he returns to his office. It isn’t much of a surprise to see the ratel lurking in the shadows.

Snape pushes the door open, pausing just long enough for the ratel to scamper ahead into the room, before he shuts the door, locks it, and leans against it. “Potter.”

“Hullo, Professor,” Potter responds, putting his oval-shaped glasses back on his face. “May I sit?”

Potter learned more manners in three years than Draco Malfoy has managed in his entire, spoilt, Pure-blooded life. “Certainly. We need to talk.”

“For more than one reason, I’m guessing.” Potter stretches out his legs while crossing them properly at the ankles, an effort spoiled by the fact that he’s wearing denims and trainers instead of proper robes. “That woman, Umbridge. The one Ron says looks like a pink toad.”

Snape feels an unwilling smile pull at his lips. “Pink toad, indeed.” He finally goes to his desk and sits down, trying to ignore the pile of correspondence still remaining. Voldemort definitely attempted to test his spy over the summer.

Snape has played the game for a very long time. He does not and will not slip.
“I’ve seen her twice, and both times, she’s made it pretty clear that she doesn’t like me,” Potter says.

“When?” Snape asks.

“Pettigrew’s trial,” Potter answers at once. “She was the witch who didn’t want to vote for Pettigrew to be sent to the Dementors, and only voted yes when she realized she would be the only Nay vote.”

Snape thinks back. Yes, he recalls that moment, but he hadn’t matched that shadowed, Wizengamot-robed witch with the pink-garbed toad the school received. “And the other?”

“She was at the trial that everyone kept pretending was just a hearing.” Potter heaves a sigh, the ratel’s temper making his eyes appear to glow green in the candle light. “She was pushing, hard, for me to be stripped of my wand and…I don’t know. Sent off to wander the desert or something. Umbridge was not happy when I was exonerated.”

“I did theorize that it would take a high-ranked person in the Ministry to direct Dementors to go after you,” Snape says.

Potter just seems annoyed by that. “Do you think it’s her?”

“I don’t know. This is one of those times where the Headmaster’s typical wait-and-see policy is the only one available. Neither of us can make such accusations without proof, and your reputation is already burnt to ash by the Prophet’s nonsense over the summer.”

Potter bites back a smile. “I actually thought it was all really funny. The others think it’s not the reaction I’m supposed to have about character assassination, but they can’t exactly force me to be angry about it. Why should I care?”

“Because it may soon be politic to do so,” Snape reminds him.

“I can’t exactly force them to change their minds, either,” Potter says. “They’ll write whatever they want.”

“For now, yes. But if or when that changes, and the tide of belief turns in your direction? You must be ready to speak to Prophet reporters as a well-mannered, properly educated young man, even if it’s someone as odious as Skeeter.”

Potter abruptly changes the subject. “Dumbledore won’t meet my eyes. At all. He won’t even speak to me—I tried to visit him before I came here. Trying to be politic and all that.” He pushes his glasses back up his nose. “Do you know why?”

Snape feels a faint sense of nausea, but he nods. “Yes,” he says, and then performs a silent Leglimens without lifting his wand or uttering a word, driving a wedge straight through Potter’s mental shields. He catches a flash of Dementors blocking out the light of the sun before the boy gathers himself and kicks Snape back out again.

“That’s why,” Snape says in explanation, while Potter gasps for breath and clutches the side of his head. “It’s also why we needed to speak, aside from your concerns about the pink toad.”

“Understood, sir. Sort of.” Potter’s face is twitching in a way that suggests a headache is brewing.

Snape tosses him a corked phial. “Wait until you’re about to leave,” he instructs, and then settles back in his chair. “Out of dire necessity, this is the last time we will be able to meet like this.”

Potter’s expression turns sober. “Because of Voldemort.”
Snape inclines his head. “Yes. His return changes everything. My role, and his trust in it, must be absolute.”

Potter lifts his chin. “I’m listening, sir.”

“We will have time alone for further lessons in Occlumency and Legilimency. The Headmaster has ordered me to do it; I have put up a very impressive show of protest.” Even better, Snape is all but certain Albus believes all of those reasons to be true this time. Snape is a very private man, and the idea of anyone digging into his head is almost enough to make him panic. Potter might well be the only child that Snape could teach to use the *Legilimens* spell without bolting for the blasted mountains.

“No more letters by owl, not until Voldemort is confirmed to be truly defeated,” Snape continues. “I do not mind the idea of further correspondence, but use your stolen house-elf to send your missives. Grant me verbal permission to call for him so that I can send any replies, but bear in mind that answers may not be swift. I am going to be…” Snape hesitates. “Busy does not do justice to the sheer horror that is my schedule this year.

“The next part will strain your acting abilities, Mister Potter. I know you have them, so don’t even try to protest,” Snape says, cutting off Potter’s attempt to speak. “It is now vital that the entire school, along with the whole of Wizarding Britain, is convinced that we are enemies in truth, not just vague contemplation. Voldemort must never have even the slightest idea that we are anything else, or he will use that potential connection against you. To this end, you are going to see a return of the utter ruthlessness you experienced from me during your first and second years at Hogwarts.”

“I don’t actually remember any of that,” Potter says. “How much of a shock should I be in for?”

“I earned my foul reputation for a reason, Mister Potter,” Snape replies. “That fit of temper during the holly berry incident is but a small fraction of the black-hearted man I can be.”

“Pretend to be,” Potter says, but Snape shakes his head.

“No. I will mean everything I say, Mister Potter, and when you respond in kind? You must mean it, too.”

Potter grimaces. “I don’t understand.”

“In life, masks are sometimes necessary. You put on a mask to be what is required, and take it off again when it’s safe to be yourself.” Snape frowns; he’s not sure he knows how to properly explain this. “Whether or not the real you would care about being shouted at is irrelevant. The mask you wear must react in a way that expresses your extreme displeasure. Anger. Push back as hard as you dare.”

“As I dare—detentions,” Potter realizes. “Is that for a time without masks, or a time for further lessons?”

“Both,” Snape answers. “I told you that my schedule was terrible, but yours will not be much better. It’s O.W.L. year, Mister Potter. Your course load will be significant. Do not push hard enough to gain a detention unless you’re certain you have the time to complete it without falling behind in your studies. There may also be times when you push on the wrong day, and I won’t be there for your detention. In those instances, I will be certain that others know you’ve been assigned to Lupin, since I can’t stand him, either.”

“Of course you can’t.” Potter is trying to smile and failing at it.
“You will hear of my loathing of the werewolf at full volume.” Snape lets dark, pleased anger slip back into his voice. It’s like his favorite rolling smoke. “You will never come to harm at my hands, Mister Potter…but I will most assuredly convince you that I wish it to be the opposite.”

*          *          *          *

That first class goes so well—so poorly—that Snape genuinely considers keeping a bottle near his person to imbibe from after Potter’s classroom time is over for the day. To his credit, Potter responds as brilliantly to the great Bloody Bat’s return as he did to last year’s sudden accusation of potion-ingredient theft.

Potter’s first class with Professor Umbridge does not go well in any sense of the word. Snape calls for Dobby, who is still far too into the bowing and scraping habits of life at Malfoy Manor.

Potter,

Detention? In your first bloody class with the toad?

Potter’s response is not swift, though it arrives before Snape retires for the evening. Snape frowns, feeling a sense of pain emanating from the paper that puts him on edge.

Potter has been around Dark magic. Recently.

Professor,

She fucking started it. For a class on Muggle Studies, she does seem to really like blithering on about how the Ministry is the greatest thing on Earth, and that the Ministry is wise, the Ministry is all-knowing, and that silly boys should not tell such lies about You-Know-Who’s return.

If she doesn’t actually start teaching this stupid subject during the next class, I am going to make her eat this fucking quill.

Harry

Snape realizes both of his eyebrows are trying to climb his forehead. “That, Mister Potter, is removing a mask with a vengeance,” he murmurs. He goes to bed, but something about the letter leaves him so unsettled that rest is a long time coming.

It seems to be of good fortune that Muggle Studies is considered both an easy subject, a class to coast through the year on, and that Potter attends it only once a week. He earns a detention from Umbridge every single time.

By the third week, the entire blasted school is talking about it. Snape overhears a mixture of terror and pride that Potter appears to be standing up to the two most loathed teachers in school. Not even
detentions are stopping him from responding in kind to the Ministry nonsense he receives from one, or the unreasonable hatred Potter gets from the other.

Snape is still trying to figure out how Umbridge managed to replace Binn’s ghost as Hogwarts’ second-most-hated teacher in less than two weeks. That breaks even his record, and Snape started teaching with the intent to earn his title.

“You know, you could actually try to get through one of Umbridge’s classes without earning a detention,” Snape tells Potter, once he’s in his first official Potions-earned detention. The classroom door is closed and the wards are up, which means the masks can, temporarily, be set aside.

He doesn’t even need to worry about Dumbledore-shaped interference. Snape is doing exactly what he was instructed to do—teach Potter Occlumency under the cover of detention.

Potter just looks grim. “Not this year, Professor. Definitely not for her.”

“Why?”

“Some of it is being politic. Setting an example. Someone should stand up to the rubbish she spouts in every class,” Potter says.

“She’s started to hand out more detentions for classroom disobedience to people other than you. Congratulations; you are setting a very Gryffindor example.”

Potter finally smiles. “I can’t set a Slytherin example, sir. Too many people would be upset if I slipped something into her morning tea.”

Snape finds himself considering the possibilities. “Merlin, please do not tempt me.”

Potter lifts his wand. “Distraction provided, sir. Legilimens!”

Bloody cheating brat, Snape grouses. His return shove is so hard that Potter is knocked onto his back and slides several feet along the classroom floor. Before Snape can even begin to wonder about possible injury, Potter starts laughing.

The second detention has to be spent mostly on lessons, the practice of mental footwork. When that short time is over, Snape feels mentally and physically wrung out. Potter doesn’t look much better.

“You’re doing well,” Snape offers, when silence hangs too heavy in the air.

“Oh. Yeah. Thank you, sir,” Potter replies, sounding distracted.

“Talk, idiot.”

Potter doesn’t even crack a smile. “I just don’t understand why I’m so angry all the time.”

“Masks can be hard to put aside,” Snape says.

“It’s not even the mask. It doesn’t matter. I’m just angry!”

“Perhaps angsty adolescence is catching up with you at last,” Snape replies, but he watches Potter’s fingers rub at the famous lightning bolt scar and knows that isn’t the problem at all. This will definitely complicate matters. “Any nightmares, Potter?”

Potter drops his hand. “If I’ve had them, I don’t remember them, sir.”
The next time Potter turns up to Snape’s class, he’s wearing knitted gloves in garish colors that lack fingers. “Trying to set a new fashion statement, Mister Potter?” Snape drawls in utter mockery. Those are truly hideous creations.

Potter gives him a bland stare that is just shy of impudent. “Miss Lovegood is learning to knit, sir,” he says, using the cover of an upright textbook to offer a fine British salute to Draco Malfoy when the latter starts laughing. “She just hasn’t mastered fingers yet.”

“I’ll bet that can be arranged,” Nott says in a soft undertone.

While the Gryffindors are distracted by trying to protect Potter, Snape turns his head and stares hard at Nott. Once Snape has Theodore Nott’s attention, he shakes his head in a near-imperceptible fashion, never dropping his gaze.

Nott blanches and nods, turning to his textbook so quickly that he knocks it over. Snape rolls his eyes and finds someone else to torture. Longbottom has become such easy prey that it’s just not enjoyable anymore. Weasley, however, turns really interesting shades of red with little provocation needed.

Things blow up in spectacular fashion on the eve of the Hallowe’en Feast. Snape skipped it, citing exhaustion that was not quite feigned. Albus might try to flay him for not putting in an appearance, but Snape does not currently care.

His decision about how to spend the rest of his evening is interrupted by loud scratching upon the door to his quarters.

Snape frowns, drawing his wand as he goes to open the door. Very few know where he actually resides within Hogwarts. He gives up much of his time to his Slytherins, and he values what little privacy he still has.

He has the wand out at chest level, a curse ready on his lips, when he realizes the air in front of him is empty. He lowers his wand and looks down at the dungeon floor.

There is an angry ratel staring up at him. A quill is clenched in its mouth, and the tip of it is red with blood.

Snape checks the corridor for any sort of prying eyes and ears. “I’m not upset that you might have killed her. I’m upset that you may have beaten me to it.” He gestures for the ratel to come inside. It disturbs him to realize that the ratel is limping.

“The door is sealed, Potter, and the wards are active.”

Potter is suddenly standing where the ratel had been…just before he spits out the quill and then falls to his knees, clutching at his right hand. “Sorry. Sorry, I actually couldn’t wait—I couldn’t do it anymore—”

“Do what—I really am going to kill that woman,” Snape whispers, horrified.

Dug into the flesh of Potter’s hand, in Potter’s precise script, is a sentence.

*I must not tell lies.*

“When I said you were presenting a Gryffindor example, idiocy wasn’t what I had in mind!” Snape shouts. He grabs the nearest clean piece of black cloth, wrapping Potter’s hand before the puddle of blood on the floor gets any larger.
Potter grits his teeth when the makeshift bandage is tightened, not bothering to open his eyes. “I think I’ve figured that out, sir.”

“I don’t have the right supplies here. Stay,” Snape orders. He uses a clean handkerchief to retrieve the bloodied quill, wrapping it and placing it into his pocket. Then he goes straight to his fireplace. The office of every faculty member has a fireplace connected to the Floo Network. Snape’s quarters have been granted a rare exception in that his private fireplace is, as well, in recognition of his need to appear as Voldemort wills. He firecalls his own office and makes sure the flames are burning high enough to allow the passage of two people at once.

“IN,” Snape growls, shoving Potter towards the fireplace when the boy is too slow to move. “Why are your eyes still closed?”

“Spell. She blinded me—bright light only, it just still hurts,” Potter explains. “I could see as a ratel, so it can’t be that bad.”

Snape growls under his breath. “I will be confirming that, as will Madam Pomfrey. Hold on, idiot.”

“Sir,” Potter whispers, and gets a firm grasp onto the front of Snape’s robes. Both of his hands are bloody. That distracts him enough that Snape doesn’t realize how tall Potter has gotten until much later; the top of Potter’s head is just beneath Snape’s nose.

Snape shoves Potter back down onto an office chair after they arrive. “Stay,” he orders again, perhaps unnecessarily, and firecalls Lupin. To his frustration, he gets no one, which means the werewolf has already gone to ground for the night. He throws in a fresh bit of powder and tries Minerva, instead.

“Severus, it is very, very late,” Minerva responds crossly. “I was about to retire for the evening.”

Snape convinces himself to stop grinding his teeth. “I apologize, but I need to speak to the werewolf.”

“Remus has a name, Severus.” She gives him a pointed look over the rims of her glasses.

“Fine.” Snape puts on his worst attempt at a charming smile, the one that he uses if he wishes to escape someone’s unwanted romantic interest. “Please ask Remus Lupin to come to my office. I need someone with enough physical strength to keep me from murdering someone on Hogwarts grounds.”

“Dear Merlin, what has that pink toad done now?” Minerva bursts out, incensed. “I’ll send him promptly, Severus. Should I prepare for a long night?”

Snape glances behind him, where Potter is only just starting to blink his eyes open. He winces away from the nearest lit candle like it’s as bright as a sun. Snape turns back to Minerva, who is probably still under the assumption that Snape is enraged on behalf of one of his Slytherins. Even they have lost patience with the toad, and are earning their share of detentions.

“Wake the other Heads of Houses, and then go kick the Headmaster out of bed. We have a significant problem to cope with,” Snape says.

Minerva’s eyes narrow to cat-like slits. “Consider it done. We will meet you and Remus in the Headmaster’s office, Severus.”

Lupin arrives when Snape is still trying to get the wounds on Potter’s hand to stop bleeding. “What in the entire blue blazes!” the werewolf yells.
“Please do shut the door before you start waking the entire castle!” Snape shakes his head as the torn flesh throws off his latest attempt to staunch the flow of blood. He knows it’s a cursed wound, but now he’s fucking angry and taking it as a personal affront that he can’t heal Potter’s hand.

“What happened, Harry?” Lupin asks, sounding only marginally calmer after he shuts the door.

“I couldn’t take Umbridge’s idea of a detention anymore,” Potter admits, his shoulders hunched inwards. “Everyone’s been—well, busy. I didn’t want…I thought she’d get tired of it. I think I underestimated how much someone can hate someone else for really stupid reasons.”

“Yes, you did,” Snape says in a brisk voice. “But that is not entirely your fault.”

Lupin studies Potter’s hand; his eyes are shining bright gold. It’s the first sign of the wolf that Snape has seen since August, and a confirmation that he’s only halted werewolf transformations, not cured lycanthropy. Blast. “Cured lycanthropy” is a much more preferable epitaph than “was a complete prick to everyone.”


“Already being stirred to life by Minerva.” Snape pauses. “Potter, where are your glasses?”

“I don’t know,” Potter answers, still wincing away from the candle light. “She was trying to stop me from escaping with the quill, and I must have lost them in the scramble to get away from her.”

Snape leans back on his haunches. “You don’t actually need them anymore, do you?”

The angry, exasperated expression he gets in response to that statement is almost a work of art. “Pol-itic,” Potter emphasizes, still glaring at Snape.

“Yes, of course,” Snape returns dryly. “My mistake. Lupin, please firecall the Headmaster’s office so that we can be on our way. If we go through the halls and run into that woman, I’d commit murder without a single regret whatsoever.”

“She was pushing anti-werewolf legislation over the summer. I’d help you hide the body,” Lupin growls, lifting the lid from the Floor Powder jar.

“Huh.” Potter is studying the bleeding letters in his skin with a thoughtful expression. Snape shoves a new handkerchief into Potter’s hand to catch the fresh blood before it can finish destroying Potter’s jumper.

While Lupin speaks to whoever answered at Albus’s fireplace, Snape leans in close. “That is the look of a Slytherin plotting great things.”

Potter meets Snape’s eyes. “I was just wondering if maybe Rita Skeeter wanted to write a real story.”

The smile that spreads across Snape’s face has to be positively feral. He does enjoy it when Potter chooses to put the Gryffindor aside.

*          *          *          *

The front page article in the next morning’s Daily Prophet is, for once, a pleasure to read.
Dark Magic and Torture at Hogwarts! Ministry to Blame and a Scandal Afoot!

by Rita Skeeter

Dark deeds have indeed occurred at Hogwarts, but not in the form of mysterious, anti-Ministry armies, or the rumors that will not stop swirling of You-Know-Who’s return.

Last night, this reporter had the honor of returning to Hogwarts, invited by Headmaster Albus Dumbledore himself. I did wonder what could be so interesting, as, unlike last year, we have no curiosity like the Triwizard Cup to delight in! The drama, the spectacle! The dragons! (Along with Bartemius Crouch, Junior’s insanity and apparent death, but that is all an aside, for now.)

When I arrived, I was surprised to find myself in company of all Hogwarts staff, minus Professor Trelawney, and the Minister for Magic himself! Present were the Headmaster, of course, Deputy Headmaster Minerva McGonagall, Professor Remus Lupin, Professor Filius Flitwick, Madam Healer Poppy Pomfrey, Professor Severus Snape, Professor Aurora Sinistra, Professor Septima Vector, and Professor Pomona Sprout. (Gamekeeper Rubeus Hagrid was absent merely so as to not overcrowd the room, while I am told that Professor Trelawney could not be budged from her high tower.) Aside from Minister Cornelius Fudge, his appointed replacement teacher for Muggle Studies was present, Madam Dolores Umbridge.

Remember that name, dear readers!

The only student present for the meeting was our Wizarding savior, the Boy Who Lived, Mister Harry Potter. You may remember that he and Mister Cedric Diggory tied for first place during last year’s tournament, a stunning win that revealed our beloved school’s sense of unity and pride.

Oh, dear readers, if you continue, please be aware that there were things that went on yestereve that are not for the faint of heart.

It was to my shock that I realized that young Mister Potter was bleeding profusely from his right hand. There was a white handkerchief wrapped around the ghastly wound, and he met this reporter’s eyes with the sort of solemnity reserved for our illustrious courtrooms.

Oh, there was posturing from Madam Undersecretary Umbridge, I can assure you of that! The horror of it all, knowing that this particular pink-robed witch, a supposed bastion of our government, has been torturing students with Dark magical objects! Blood quills, dear readers!

Mister Potter, a victim of Madam Umbridge’s cruelty, immediately brought the matter to the Headmaster’s attention. As this reporter watched, Albus Dumbledore confronted Minister Fudge with the evidence of Madam Umbridge’s misdeeds—the very bloodquill that caused Mister Potter’s hand to be in such poor condition.

The Headmaster very kindly reminded our Minister Fudge that blood quills were banned from Hogwarts by a decree the Ministry itself handed down in 1605. I may have heard the Minister declare that he had given Madam Umbridge full warrant to do whatever she saw as necessary during her tenure at Hogwarts, but I could be mistaken.

Either way, dear readers, our young Mister Potter was going to bleed from his wounds until Madam Umbridge’s punishment was declared completed or suspended, and dear me, she refused to consider releasing him from it. Imagine! Denying a direct order from the Minister!

I absolutely could not believe what happened next. Mister Potter picked up the blood quill, set it to
paper, and started to write his abhorrent punishment. I am as full of prurient curiosity as the next
witch, I will admit, but I wished to turn my back on such a display.

Lies, Snape thinks. Skeeter looked positively vampiric at the sight.

_He continued to write, dear readers, and uttered not a sound! Not while his poor, dear hand bled
red onto his scroll. Mister Potter stared at our Ministry representative, Dolores Umbridge, the entire
time._

_Fifty times, dear readers. Fifty times he wrote, “I must not tell lies.”_

_I have never seen a more sickening bit of petty vengeance, dear readers—and I mean Madam
Umbridge, not Mister Potter. Watching that brave young man, I felt no little shame, thinking of a
time or two that I may have embellished my stories, just for the sakes of you, dear readers._

Sinistra, who decided to read over his shoulder at some point, makes a disparaging sound. “Once or
twice? Once or twice per article, she means.”

Snape lowers the paper and turns to frown at her. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Sinistra answers with a grin. “I’m framing my copy of today’s _Prophet_.

What came next, dear readers, I expected _not at all_. Shock enough, to find an educator with such a
willingness to harm our precious children! No, that was not the worst of it.

You may recall when this reporter told you all of Mister Potter’s Wizengamot trial for the use of
underage magic, a charge of which he was cleared of. I may have made comment on how unusual it
was for a child to be tried by a full Wizengamot for such a petty misdemeanor, especially when it
was used in the defence of Mister Potter and a family member against a Dementor! Special people,
special circumstances, I believed, and thought no more of it!

Dolores Umbridge, in a fit of pink, frothy, un-witch-like rage, admitted to sending that Dementor
after Mister Potter and Sirius Black, Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black.

I was not the only magical being in that office who was silenced by shock. The unbelievable nature
of such a thing—that a member of the Ministry would send such a dark creature after a child!

It seems that in her fervor to maintain a society free of rumors of You-Know-Who, Madam
Umbridge decided to stem the rumors at their source—Mister Potter, of course. Why she did not also
assault Mister Cedric Diggory, who has also declared that You-Know-Who is returning, is a
mystery.

Madam Umbridge has been removed from her post at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,
pending an investigation by the M.I.E. Minister Fudge disavows all knowledge of Dolores
Umbridge’s extreme methods, and says he will cooperate fully with the investigation.

Mister Potter submitted to curse scar treatment at the hands of school matron Madam Pomfrey, but
as this brave young man no doubt knows, there is no way to remove a scar caused by Dark magic.

It is this reporter’s opinion that Mister Potter did not really need any more magical scars.

Snape looks up from his copy of the paper, his eyes seeking that familiar figure at the Gryffindor table. Lupin found Potter’s glasses, repaired the damage, and returned them after Skeeter’s delightful time in the castle, so he otherwise looks much the same but for the wounds on his hand. Potter does not seem to be putting the new scars on display, but his right hand is visible more often than usual. The back of his hand is still bright red and angry, though it is not actively bleeding.

The scars should be clean and white, but Umbridge wanted him to write more.
Christmas Charity

Quidditch season resumes the second weekend in November. Potter has still chosen to stay off the team, so Ginevra Weasley joins the Gryffindors as a Beater…and Hermione Granger is their new Seeker. That’s unexpected, but Granger did have a swift hand in preventing destruction during the holly berry incident last term.

Snape remembers a young woman who was not fond of brooms, but something about playing with the Weasley twins, Ginevra, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell, and Angelina Johnson brings out the same fierce, competitive spirit that marks Granger’s academic life. It’s always a wise decision to cultivate more than one skill.

“Hah, they’re mostly girls!” Snape hears some fool from Ravenclaw shout from the stands. “They’ll lose the match in less than fifteen minutes, mark my words!”

Snape glances in the direction of a cluster of Gryffindors, where Potter and Ronald Weasley are sitting. He’s too far away to hear them, but he is adept at reading lips, especially after years of keeping watch on that pair. “Still sorry you didn’t make the team, Ron?” Potter is asking.

“I was a bit, at first.” Weasley is watching as the flyers take their first trip around the pitch while Lee Jordan introduces everyone to the new season and the new team faces. “But there are three Weasleys in the air, Harry. This game is going to be bloody amazing to watch.”

Weasley is correct. The new Gryffindor lineup absolutely thrashes Hufflepuff in a game that ends at three hundred fifty points against a mere forty. His Slytherins are going to need to reconsider their strategies, or the losses this season are going to humiliate the entire House.

After witnessing the Slytherins lose their first game to the blasted Ravenclaws in miserable fashion two weeks later, Snape knows that it’s time to put some of the old traditions aside. He announces a mandatory meeting in the Slytherin common room that evening.

When he arrives, his Slytherins are gathered and waiting. The older students have claimed all of the furniture. The first-years, still learning that their Head of House prefers to protect them rather than eat them, are clustered towards the back.

“Today’s game,” Snape says in a curt voice, “was the most embarrassing spectacle I have witnessed in many, many years. Such nonsense will not earn you the House Cup. It will, however, earn you the derision of the entire school.”

“It wasn’t our fault—” Bletchley tries to say. Snape silences him with a glare.

“It was your fault, and I do not wish to hear tired excuses about how it is not. You cannot bribe the other teams into losing, unlike the methods in which most of you earned your positions on the Slytherin Quidditch team. As of this moment, every single Quidditch position is open and available. If you wish to see if you have the skill to retain your place on the team, you will turn up for tryouts this Saturday morning at dawn. Those with the mental fortitude to play will also have the self-discipline to wake themselves. If you are late, you will not participate. If you lose your position on the team, it will be your responsibility to tell others why, not mine. Understood?”

Snape waits for the polite and sullen blend of assent and gives them a nod. “The House Cup has not been ours since 1992. If you wish to have it back—earn it.”

He gets an impressive crowd of thirty students that Saturday morning, all of them dressed in layers
against the cold weather. Malfoy nearly forfeits his chance by riding the edge of tardiness, but Snape checks his pocket watch, gives Malfoy a warning glance, and allows him to participate.

Malfoy demonstrates that he’s learned enough tactics and skill since his second year to keep his position as Seeker. Snape is pleased by that, glad to see that the young idiot did not solely rely on his father’s bribe of new brooms when he joined the team. It’s every other position that is claimed by new players. He doesn’t have the time available to oversee any other training session with his Slytherins.

“Listen.” Snape waits until all seven remaining faces turn to face him. “Your new Team Captain is Miss Bulstrode,” he announces, which causes the young woman’s expression to deepen into a grimace. She doesn’t thank him; Miss Bulstrode is well aware of the sheer amount of work Snape has just heaped upon her shoulders.

“You will have the pitch for Saturday morning practice from dawn until the time lunch is served in the Great Hall. After lunch, the pitch belongs to the Hufflepuffs until dinner.”

There is grumbled irritation from Malfoy at that. The young man is too bloody spoiled, but he will have to learn to cope with rising early. Snape would just like to have his weekends free of interruptions from further Gryffindor-Slytherin territorial jinxing matches.

“On Sunday, Gryffindor has the pitch from dawn until lunch, and the Ravenclaws take it afterwards.” Snape waits a moment, sees only resigned expectation, and continues. “You will be here for practice, every Saturday morning, or you forfeit your place on the team. Miss Bulstrode will tell me if you are late or absent. Unless Madam Pomfrey informs me that you are dying in her infirmary, I will accept no excuses. Is that clear?”

They all nod, though Malfoy’s expression has become more mulish than ever. It doesn’t suit him at all. Narcissa should possibly do something to correct her son’s impression that such an expression is flattering.

In December, Ravenclaw wins over Hufflepuff, then Gryffindor defeats Ravenclaw. The Slytherins won’t be in the air again until January, which Snape prefers. It gives them more time to learn how to be a team instead of a disaster. Miss Bulstrode reports that the new team has real potential. She is honest enough to admit that they might not see a Cup victory until next year, but they will not see out the close of the season in humiliation.

It’s a relief to get to the winter holiday without any other incident. No pranks, no Ministry officials, no Death Eater attacks. Just dunderheads to teach, Gryffindors to yell at, Potter to infuriate, and Lupin and Minerva to give him disappointed looks.

Most of the students enjoy the fact that they’re free of Muggle Studies for the rest of the year, though some do voice disappointment about not getting to take the class with Professor Burbage, who has still not made herself available. Dumbledore tells the student body that Charity Burbage took an unexpected leave of absence at the beginning of the year—hence the pink toad’s temporary reign—and he doesn’t know when she plans to return. It’s close enough to the truth to be convincing, but no one has any idea what happened to Burbage. Snape has suspicions, but so far, they are unconfirmed.

The blasted scars created by Umbridge’s abuse of a Dark artefact haven’t faded from Potter’s hand, but at least the pink toad is now a resident of Azkaban. In this particular instance, Snape goes to the island to see Umbridge’s incarceration for himself. After Pettigrew’s escape, he takes nothing about that prison for granted.

He does stop by Bellatrix Lestrange’s cell before leaving. “And how are you this evening, Bella?” he
asks in a solicitous tone. He’s well aware of the fact that Voldemort is planning some sort of jailbreak for the Death Eaters who were loyal enough to go to prison for him. It is, fortunately, not a task Snape will be asked to participate in.

However, he is going to suggest to Voldemort that Umbridge is too stupid to be useful, and should be left behind so that the Dementors won’t be lonely. The idea has enough cruelty inherent in it to charm Voldemort, though Snape knows that “charm” is the wrong word entirely.

“Oh, it’s Severus.” Bellatrix gets off of her cot and stands, smiling. She sways over to him in the familiar drunken gait she uses to disguise the grave danger she presents to every living thing around her. “I’m doing so well, Severus. He’s returned, and he’s whole again, and I will see him soon, Severus!”

“I believe you will,” Snape replies, leaning back when Bellatrix takes a swipe at his face with her ragged fingernails. “Behave, Bellatrix. We all serve in our own ways.”

“Traitor,” she whispers, a mad grin on her face.

“Idiot,” Snape counters, and departs.

By the time he returns to Scotland, the Mark on his arm is burning in the particular way that speaks of Voldemort demanding his presence. Snape gives up on the idea of having dinner and Apparates to Voldemort’s current address. The formerly grand Muggle home of the Riddles in Little Hangleton is a rotten wreck, but Voldemort finds it useful when he needs to call all of his Death Eaters together.

Voldemort has not asked for their entire number to gather since his resurrection. This does not bode well—not that it ever does.

The dining room has been set with an expensive table, no doubt a donation from one of Voldemort’s Pure-blood followers. There are multiple new faces gathered, bearing fresh Marks of service to Voldemort. Merlin, how many stupid people in Wizarding Britain can there be?

A lot, Snape thinks sourly as he takes count. Then he drops into a brief bow when Voldemort’s eyes alight upon him. “My Lord.”

“Ah, Severus. So good of you to join us.” Voldemort’s voice has not changed, nor has his body. Blood-and-Bone gave him life, but it is life unchanging. “There are things requiring our attention.”

Snape allows his gaze to travel upwards. Charity Burbage is suspended in a painful contortion of broken limbs, slowly spinning in place above the table. “So I see, My Lord.”

“You seem irritated, Severus.” Lucius is smiling, the old familiar expression of mocking cruelty. “Is there a problem?”

“Her replacement was a fool,” Snape says in a flat, unimpressed tone. “Instead of serving as a distraction for the entirety of the school year, she didn’t even last past Hallowe’en. Now the Ministry is under investigation, which slows our Lord’s plans. Yes, I am quite irritated, Lucius.”

The mask wants to slip when he hears Burbage’s weak, pathetic whisper. “Severus? Help me…” He refuses to allow his eyes to even flicker in her direction again.

“I understand your frustration.” Voldemort is tapping his wand against his hand—no, that is actually Potter’s old wand rather than his own. Odd. “And Severus is correct, Lucius. Our associate in the Ministry sent a poor choice to Hogwarts, and it delays my plans.”
“On a positive note, I spoke with Bellatrix today,” Snape says, ignoring Burbage’s continued pleas for assistance. “She is eager to serve you again, My Lord.”

Voldemort smiles, a hint of genuine pleasure in the expression. “Good, good. I have need of someone of her prodigious talent.”

“Indeed.” Snape finally allows himself a second brief, uninterested look at Burbage. “Are we Obliviating this woman and placing her back into her role as a teacher for the time being, or does My Lord have other plans?”

“Other plans, I’m afraid,” Voldemort replies, studying the wand he holds in a show of fascination. “Hogwarts will simply have to do without their precious Muggle Studies teacher. It isn’t as if the school will need one for much longer.”

“I see. Might I sit, My Lord?”

Voldemort glances up, another lipless smile on his face. “There, you see, Lucius? Proper manners are not hard to master. Your own offspring should consider imitating his betters.”

Lucius ducks his head and does not meet Voldemort’s eyes. “As he has been instructed to do, My Lord. Draco will learn, in time.”

“Of course.” Voldemort gestures gracefully for Snape to choose a seat. “We have much to discuss.”

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Snape skips breakfast the next morning, lunch, and then what is probably the Christmas Feast, given a kitchen elf’s attempts to rouse him when his sense of time tells him it is nearing dinner. No; not interested. He is far more interested in lying in bed with a pillow crammed over his head, desperate to block out the look on Burbage’s face when four different Death Eaters lifted their wands.

He would very much like to stop hearing those screams.

He hates that some of those screams were desperate cries of his own name. If that was some horrific final test of his loyalties to complete what Voldemort subjected him to over the summer, it was well-planned.

Save one life, or save a multitude? He knows, knows, that it could not be hers.

It’s the frantic pounding on his door that finally rouses him. The other teachers would be more polite. No one knocks like that unless something is wrong.

Merlin. What else could possibly have gone wrong in the last twenty-four hours?

Snape pulls open the door and stares at Lupin in surprise, blinking against the bright torchlight in the corridor. “What the hell do you want?”

“There’s been an attack in the Department of Mysteries,” Lupin answers, grabbing Snape by the hand and pulling him out into the corridor. Snape barely has enough time to slam the wooden door to his quarters shut before he’s being literally dragged down the corridor by a half-panicked werewolf.

“What kind of attack?” Snape asks, grabbing hold of his wand long enough to perform a non-verbal
cleansing spell. He can at least look like he did not just fall out of bed.

“Arthur Weasley. He was bitten by some kind of large, venomous reptile, and it doesn’t look good,” Lupin says.

Snape feels the bottom drop out of his stomach. “What was Arthur even doing there, Lupin?”

“Patrol. There have been a series of break-ins, and Albus suspects Death Eater activity.” Lupin gives him a sidelong look. “He didn’t tell you.”

“Albus didn’t, no,” Snape growls. Voldemort has expressed interest in acquiring an item stored within that Department, though he hasn’t yet confessed what that item is. Snape was not aware that anyone in the Order knew of that interest; had he known, he could have warned them.

If Arthur Weasley dies, Snape will happily place the blame for that death at Albus Dumbledore’s feet. Let the old fool know what it’s like to have that sort of blood on his hands.

“Wait. Lupin!” Snape manages to get the werewolf’s attention so that he’ll at least slow down. “How did we find out? If this is the snake I suspect, Arthur would have been dead in minutes without medical assistance.”

Lupin frowns. “Harry. Harry knew. He dreamed it as it happened.”

Snape tries not to grind his teeth. “I can’t tell if I’m glad, or if I want to wring Potter’s neck for not Occluding properly before sleeping.”

“To be fair? It had been a long day,” Lupin says. Snape realizes that he’s been dragged all the way to his office. “St. Mungo’s is keeping him alive, but they’ve already told Molly that they don’t know how to counter the venom. Do you?”

Snape shakes off Lupin’s arm and goes into his office, lighting the candles by glaring at them. He takes a moment to breathe and orient himself. “Yes, but brewing it will take an hour. Go tell the batch of idiots in St. Mungo’s to keep Arthur Weasley alive, or I’ll kill them all myself and save Molly the trouble. I’ll be there as soon as it’s done, Lupin.”

“Thank you,” Lupin whispers. By the time Snape thinks to look up from what he’s gathering, the werewolf is long gone from his office.

Snape is greeted at the St. Mungo’s public Floo by an entire herd of Weasleys. “Either get out of the way, or take me straight to your father,” he orders the closest ginger. William Weasley, the most sensible Weasley Hogwarts ever hosted, nods and shoves his way through his crowd of siblings, St. Mungo’s staff, and public eavesdroppers to clear Snape’s path.

“Will it work, Severus?” Molly asks, once the potion is administered. Snape is looking over the bite marks, lifting bandage after bandage. Great Merlin, Arthur has to be a stubborn bastard.

“Theoretically, yes,” Snape replies, and then realizes that probably sounds callous. “Molly, the creature that attacked Arthur is the relatively new creation of a madman. All I can do is promise you that I’ve done my very best to save Arthur’s life.”

Molly dabs at her eyes and draws herself together. “Thank you. Tell the children I will come and update them if their father’s condition…changes.”

Snape shuts the door to the private room behind him. Once again, he is encircled by ginger. “Yes, he is still alive. Who treated your father’s wounds?”
William, Charles, and the twins act as a living plow to clear the way forward this time, tracking down the St. Mungo’s healer who’d been primary staff when Arthur was brought in. “You.” Snape’s eyes drop down to his nametag. “Gruffolow. Did you save the venom?”

Gruffolow gives Snape a baffled look. “I’m sorry, I—did you just ask if we saved the venom?”

“Yes,” Snape replies, resisting the urge to use Legilimens to just pull the necessary information from this idiot’s skull. “Did you save any of the venom you pumped out of Arthur Weasley’s veins?”

“Oh. Well, yes, I suppose we must have, but I can’t just give—”

Snape decides he’s being far too polite. “Listen to me, you complete fucking idiot,” Snape says, looming over the healer in full Bloody Bat mode. “I am the most accomplished Potions Master in the entirety of Great Britain, and quite possibly the whole of Europe. I do not make these claims in boast. If I have venom from the creature that just tried to kill an upstanding member of the Ministry of Magic, and my current potion fails, then his last chance is anti-venin. Wouldn’t that be useful?” he purrs, so close now that he’s almost nose-to-nose with Gruffolow.

“I always thought it was just because I was a kid,” Gruffolow squeaks out. “No, you are genuinely terrifying, Professor Snape. GLINDA!” he shouts.

A dark-skinned woman in a matron’s uniform looks up from her scrollwork. “Yes?”

“The venom we harvested while treating Mister Weasley’s injuries. Go fetch all of the cleanest samples we have. If anti-venin becomes necessary, I want it ready as soon as possible!”

Charles Weasley snorts as Gruffolow goes to assist Glinda. “I do believe that Edward nearly wet his britches, Professor.”

“Good,” Snape mutters. He’s finally placed Gruffolow as a semi-decent student from several years before Potter’s tenure at Hogwarts.

The twins are the ones to catch him when Snape begins to slump over to one side. “Whoa. I’m touching him. Does this mean I turn to stone?” George mock-whispers to Fred Weasley.

“Shut up.” Snape retrieves two phials of Restorative Draught from his robe. He yanks out the stoppers and drinks both at once.

“Isn’t that inadvisable or something?” Ronald Weasley asks. “I’m pretty sure I remember you teaching us that you’re only supposed to take one of those at a time.”

Snape shakes his head to clear the remaining fog created by lack of rest. “Mister Weasley, the fact that you retained anything from my classes at all is akin to a miracle.” He glances around the group. “You’re missing the only non-ginger from your collective. Where is Potter?”

“His scar, it…” Ronald Weasley turns a bit green. “When Harry had the dream about Dad being attacked, his scar split open and bled everywhere. He’s in another room while St. Mungo’s people look him over to make sure the bleeding’s stopped. Sirius and Professor Lupin are with him,” he adds, and then looks surprised to have done so.

Glinda returns without Edward Gruffolow, carrying a large, sealed glass medical sampling jar that is full of clear liquid. With it is a large phial full of more clear fluid, but that one is tinged red with blood. “This is all there is. I’m entrusting it to you, Professor Snape.”

Snape nods and turns around before pausing. “Bill. Charlie. You both made it into N.E.W.T. Potions
and did well enough. I need assistants.”

“You’ve got it, Professor,” William says in a grim voice. “Fred, George, that means you two idiots are going to be the oldest Weasleys here. Keep Ron and Ginny in line. If Percy shows up, hit him, then sit on him and make him wait for Mum,” William instructs sternly. The remaining Weasley family members all nod in somber agreement.

“Do I even want to know?” Snape asks.

“Oh, Percy’s being stupid again,” Charles says, tossing Floo Powder into the roaring fireplace. “Like that’s anything new lately. Where to, Professor?”

“The Office of Severus Snape, Hogwarts,” Snape barks out. The flames burn brighter just before he steps into the fireplace.

“Huh. I forgot; this is fun,” William is saying sometime later. Snape ignores him, watching the seconds tick down on his pocket watch before he adds a full dose of powdered bezoar to the forming brew. It’s not exactly traditional, but at this point, he’s desperate. He’s not sure Nagini’s venom can be cured at all.

The mixture turns a pleasant shade of sky blue. Snape stirs it with a glass rod and then taps it on the side, three times, with the end of his wand. The sky blue turns darker, much closer to the deep blue of impending night. That feels correct—or as correct as it is possible to get. “Charlie?”

“I think I’ve got another success, too, but I’m worried about the blood contaminant,” Charles responds.

Snape turns around to regard the bright pink formula. Bill’s is a pleasant shade of chestnut brown. Three wildly different potions, all with the same intention.

One unpreventable death. One life he might have the ability to save.

Snape nods at them. “Pour carefully into every phial at your disposal, and put a different type of stopper into each glass. I have no idea which combination will be safe, so shield as you were taught, gentlemen.”

Three of William’s phials explode, and the liquid starts eating through the table. That will be interesting to repair later. None of Charles’s creations explode, but half of them turn black in a way that Snape knows at once makes them useless.

Snape’s lead-stoppered creation explodes, to his irritation. The rest do not explode, but he has only two samples that maintained their color out of six. William and Charles both have three.

“What if these don’t work?” William asks as they prepare to Floo back to St. Mungo’s.

“If he is fortunate, your father will not need these. If he is not? It may sound cruel, but if your father is dying, these potions can’t make the situation any worse.”

“Right. Reassurance and cheer, that’s you, Professor,” Charles says, and then the fire burns bright once more.

They arrive to the news that Arthur is improving. Snape allows the Weasleys to celebrate, gathering up all the samples of potential anti-venin potions before slipping away, unnoticed in the chaos. If Nagini finds another member of the Order to attack, he’ll have possible remedies ready to test. Preservation spells will ensure that he gets that opportunity.
Snape doesn’t get the chance to speak to Potter again until the second week of January, when Potter pushes hard during class and earns a harsh detention for it. “You did not Occlude!” is the first thing Snape says to Potter the moment the wards are in place.

“No, I didn’t.” Potter has a mutinous glare on his face. “I didn’t do it on purpose. I usually set the patterns when I lie down for bed, but I was tired enough that I was out before I had the chance. I refuse to regret it. Mister Weasley would be dead if I hadn’t bolloxed that up, sir.”

Snape sits on the edge of his desk, feeling tired. “You’re right. He would be. It’s the timing that concerns me.”

“You mean, the one night I fall asleep before I can guard my mind, I dream of attacking Mister Weasley from a snake’s perspective?” When Snape nods, Potter’s shoulders droop. “We’re linked, aren’t we? Voldemort and I. That’s why Dumbledore won’t look me in the eyes.”

“Albus says that on the few occasions he’s done so, he is certain that he is also seeing the Dark Lord staring at him from your eyes,” Snape says. “He is not wrong. I’ve noticed it as well.”

If this boy was not missing eleven years of his life, he would be distressed by that revelation. Potter just seems frustrated. “What do I do?”

“You have no choice. You must learn to guard your mind, at all times, without fail,” Snape informs him in a stark, remorseless voice. “To not do so is to risk true possession by the Dark Lord, and that, Mister Potter, is an experience you should avoid at all cost.”

Potter is finally jolted into genuine, unfeigned shock. “He could do that?”

“And you could do the same to him,” Snape adds, watching as Potter’s expression turns to disgust. “No, I really wouldn’t recommend it. Merely being in his presence is unpleasant enough.”

“He does it to the snake, too,” Potter whispers, staring over Snape’s left shoulder at nothing. “It wasn’t the snake’s thoughts that I dreamed. It was him. He was…” Potter shivers. “He possesses Nagini, but it’s both of them working together. She loves him. She’s…she’s valuable to him.”

Snape feels like an idiot for missing something that should have been obvious from his first meeting with the massive snake. “She’s a bloody Horcrux. He turned another living creature into a Horcrux.”

“Another one, sir?”

Snape lifts an eyebrow and gives Potter a level stare.

Potter takes a step back and collapses onto a stool. “Oh. You mean—you mean me. That’s what this stupid scar is.”

Snape nods, but has to swallow before he can speak. “Yes. Hence your immunity to the Killing Curse when it is cast by others. Receiving the Killing Curse from Voldemort himself, however…Lupin and I both suspect that would yield different, potentially fatal results.”

“Oh,” Potter says again. He falls silent, and Snape lets him be. He has no idea what he could even say. How does one reassure a boy who is now aware that he walks around with a soul shard from one of the foulest men in wizarding history lodged in his head?
“That’s why the Obliviation was so complete. Isn’t it?” Potter finally asks.

“The presence of the Horcrux is literally the only reason for that to have happened, yes,” Snape tells him. “If long years of Obliviation had been Lockhart’s intent, Mister Weasley would have been affected in the same way.”

He hears Potter swallow. “What if I get Obliviated again?”

“Shields, you idiot.” Snape lifts his eyes to the ceiling. “Please do not allow that to happen. I believe you would be starting from the same point in 1981 all over again.”

“Oh. Pleasant thought, that.” Potter makes an amused sound.

No. It is not, Snape thinks, wondering that he feels so unnerved by the idea.

“Professor.” Snape looks over to find that Potter’s eyes are on him, his gaze resolute. “We have to know how many there really are.”

“Leaving yourself open to possession is an unacceptable risk,” Snape replies flatly.

“I’m not talking about that. I mean—you’re teaching me Legilimency and Occlumency. Why can’t we create false shields for him to break through, leave bait beneath, and while he’s distracted…”

“I tell you that you do not ever wish to enter Voldemort’s mind, and you’re proposing to do it anyway.” Snape stares at Potter, nonplussed. It seems the Gryffindor is trying to rear its annoying head again. “I’ve already warned you of the danger.”

“You have, but you and Remus have already explained that we can’t kill Voldemort unless we destroy all of the Horcruxes. I don’t know how we’d deal with me without just killing me—”

“NO.”

Potter blinks a few times at Snape’s fierce denial. “Okay, not that, then. But I know you can teach me to build false places for Voldemort to go. You’ve told me he’s skilled at sending false visions. Why can’t we do that to him?”

Perhaps not the Gryffindor, after all. “Stay here,” he says, and goes into his office. His Patronus is sent off to fetch Lupin, something he would have done the night of Umbridge’s revealed torture if he hadn’t been so blasted shocked. Firecalling 12 Grimmauld Place gets him Dobby instead of Kreacher, who quails at the idea of waking Black.

“Trust me, Black will not respond in Malfoy fashion.” Snape tells the elf. “All you need do is mention his godson, and Sirius Black will be far too concerned with jumping into the Floo to care about lost sleep.”

Snape waits until Lupin and Black have both joined them. Black is still dressed for the day, but Lupin looks like someone shoved him out of bed and handed him the most mismatched clothes possible.

“Mister Potter: please repeat for your guardians what you’ve just suggested to me. This is not a decision that can be made without their permission.”

Black listens to his godson’s proposal with his jaw hanging open. “I’m not sure who to blame for that level of insanity—Lily, James, or Severus!”
Snape rolls his eyes. “I don’t want him to do it, Black.”

“But you’re not flat-out saying no, either,” Lupin observes. “Why not?”

“Because, loath as I am to admit it? Mister Potter is correct. We need to know what the remaining Horcruxes are, and how many remain to be found.”

“Bloody hell.” Black sits down on a stool, resting his hands on his knees. “Harry, this could kill you. I don’t mean physically—I mean he could swamp everything you are and mentally destroy you.”

Potter frowns. “You know—I don’t think he can. I’m not saying that possession isn’t a possibility,” he continues, glancing at Snape. “But that spell he used in the cemetery? I looked it up. We could spend the next three centuries fighting, but as long as that Horcrux piece exists in me, and my blood is still active in him? He wouldn’t succeed. I wouldn’t, either.”

“You told him?” Black rasps out, staring at Snape in horrified anger.

“No, I didn’t. He guessed. He’s intelligent, and the pieces have been lying about for quite a while now,” Snape retorts, annoyed. “Stop underestimating your godson’s intelligence, Black.”

“Not without careful preparation,” Lupin says. He’s gazing at Potter. “Not without Severus confirming in absolute certainty that it’s safe for you to offer up this created trap.”

“I think ‘safest’ is probably more accurate,” Potter offers, which isn’t going to help his proposal succeed. “But no—I really don’t think I’d enjoy any of the things that can go wrong, Remus. I believe that we need to know, but if we rush it, he’ll get in, find out what we do know, and then we’re all buggered. No thanks.”

“Have there been any repeats like the incident at Christmas?” Black asks, dancing around the actual event.

“My scar hasn’t started pouring blood, and no nightmares that aren’t my own,” Potter reports, but he looks frustrated. “Sometimes my head—it hurts on that side, like he’s trying to get in. But I haven’t skipped Occluding before bed, and if I start practicing all the time, as Professor Snape insists, then that should get better.”

“It should, yes,” Lupin agrees, and then shakes his head. “Bugger all. Sirius, I don’t think we’re going to have much choice. We have as much duty to save the rest of Wizarding Britain as we do to saving our godson.”

Black gives his grudging, unhappy approval to the plan, demands updates as they happen, and allows Lupin to escort him from the room. “Fuck,” Snape says in a near-soundless undertone.

Potter hears him anyway. “I refuse to die, or be possessed, because of that noseless arsehole.”

Snape turns and gives Potter the most indifferent stare he knows how to muster. “That is getting old. You’ll have to find other insults to tempt my lacking sense of humor, Mister Potter.”

“Don’t have any at the moment. I do have a question, though, sir,” Potter says. “And it’s not related to my being bait, so relax.”

Snape glares at the boy and forces his shoulders to ease down. He had been tensing up, after all. Dammit; when he’s alone with Potter, Black, or Lupin, his control slips. It is a failing that he has to remedy, immediately, or he will make a fatal mistake. “What is it?”
“Neville Longbottom’s parents. I’m assuming you know what happened to them.”

Yes, he is well aware of what happened to the Longbottoms. “I do,” Snape says, wondering at the sudden change of subject.

“Well, St. Mungo’s seems convinced that there isn’t a way to help them. I was wondering if that was actually true,” Potter says.

“The magic that was used against them was Dark and Unforgivable,” Snape answers, frowning. “Their minds broke from it. They suffer from no curse other than the frail limitations of the human body, Potter.”

“Yes, but—the brain is just as much a physical thing as this.” Potter prods at his own arm. “Why can’t the brain be repaired the same way a potion fixes a broken bone?”

Snape considers his readings over the last few years. “I do know that there are Muggle-born wizards and witches who are researching such things, but neurology is not my specialty, Potter. If a cure for their condition is to arise, it may well be from that direction.”

“Yes, but most wizards are so unaccepting of Muggle anything that even if they succeed, it’s a cure Neville’s parents might never see.” Potter adjusts his glasses. Snape does his best to be utterly unaware of the fact that the lenses are now merely for appearances, and do not bear any corrective qualities at all. “I had an idea, but no one would like it very much.”

“Then I am probably the most likely to consider the merits of it before dismissing the idea as foolish.” Snape grants Potter a vague smile, all he’s been able to muster since taking on the full mask of the greasy Bloody Bat once more.

“Why can’t we Obliviate them to the time just before Death Eaters tortured them to insanity?” Potter asks. “They’d be missing the last fourteen years, yeah, but they might actually get to be people again, and Neville would have his parents back. They would have to learn who their son is, but even parents with missing memories would be better than Neville’s blasted grandmother.”

Snape realizes his eyes have widened and schools them back to normal. “The wizarding world considers such an abuse of an Obliviation spell to be abhorrent, Mister Potter.”

“Worse than letting them be insane for the rest of their lives?” Potter asks in bafflement. “That makes no sense at all, sir.”

Potter…has a point. A very valid point. “I don’t know, but it is a logical observation, Mister Potter. I will make inquiries,” he says, though he isn’t sure where to start.

In the meantime, Snape pulls forth his wand. “Tonight is something different. While you do need practice in the arts of the mind, we also must discover what that wand of yours is capable of.”

“Dueling?” Potter looks both intrigued and discomfited. “Will that be safe?”

“Shields, you idiot,” Snape drawls back, and Potter smiles before bringing up his wand. His stance is not traditional, but, Snape soon learns, it is very efficient.

“So, my wand?” Potter asks. He’s still lying in a heap on the floor, staring up at the classroom’s dull and dark stone ceiling.

“You need combat practice,” Snape returns, seated on the edge of his desk again as he considers the last hour. “The wand itself, though? Potter, you are carrying a weapon that is more powerful than
your old wand—yes, I know this from experience. Your previous wand is a twin to the one the Dark Lord possesses. Before, it would have been his power against yours, but now it will be more about learned skill. The moment Voldemort loses his first duel against you, he will immediately seek out a stronger wand. It may be wise to avoid a duel with Voldemort at all costs until the difficulty of the Horcruxes has been dealt with.”

“If I can avoid it,” Potter mutters, and lifts his head. “You think I’m going to have to fight him, don’t you?”

“When he is certain of his new body and his abilities once more? He will seek to do so, yes.” Snape doesn’t want that to happen, but war is unforgiving. Wants and desires are often meaningless. “I believe dueling will have to become a component of your horrendous detentions, Potter, and we’re going to need other accomplished duelists involved. Learning to defend against one enemy does not teach you to defend against all enemies.”

Potter props himself up on his elbows, looking serious. “I don’t think I’m the only one in need of those sorts of lessons.”

“Details, please.”

“Remus is an excellent teacher, but I read, sir, and I listen and observe. The lessons we’re given in Defence class are from the fifth-year textbook, but he’s teaching them the way he’d offer them to students in lower years.”

Snape wants to break someone in half, but all of the idiots in question are dead. “You think the entire student body is still suffering a lack of skill and education due to certain interferences in that subject.”

“Yes, sir.” Potter sits up and stretches his arms above his head. “The thing is, what I’ve heard also tells me that it couldn’t be mandatory. It would have to be some kind of after school activity. Maybe something Voldemort shouldn’t be aware of.”

“A secret class in remedial Dark Arts studies, Potter?” Snape has to admit, he’s entertained by the idea. Secrets attract the interest of those who would otherwise disdain to contemplate certain things.

“Not even remedial, really,” Potter says, leaning forward so he can rest his chin on his hands. Now there is a mannerism that he most certainly learned from Sirius Black, but it is one of serious repose. “Standard textbook studies can be useful, but I know you, Remus, and Sirius are all convinced that there is going to be another war. The Order of the Phoenix—which I am politely pretending not to know anything about, by the way—wouldn’t have been reconvened otherwise. I think students are going to need to learn things that would save them in a pitched battle, not just how to deal with boggarts in closets or infestations of Dark creatures.”

“You would be correct.” Snape is still irritated that the Board of Governors decided that any teaching of Occlumency was formally banned as a classroom subject. He knows who is behind that decision, damn Lucius Malfoy’s foolish hide. Lucius often forgets that a significant portion of Hogwarts students are the very type of people he claims to want in the Wizarding world—Pure-bloods. “However, Lupin is in no position to suggest such a thing. No teacher could do so.”

“The students would have to start it, even if Lupin turned up later to assist.” Potter nods, looking thoughtful. “The other students might not listen to me, either, but I do know people they will listen to.”

“Are you trying to make your life more complicated, Potter?” Snape asks, frowning.
“No, sir. Most of the time, it seems to happen all on its own.” Potter gets to his feet, tucking his wand back into his sleeve.

That is frustratingly true. “This remedial activity of yours. If it happens, no matter what form it takes—I cannot know.”

Potter nods. “That isn’t exactly a surprise at this point.”

Snape tilts his head in agreement. “You need to depart, Potter.”

He is struck by an idea just as Potter’s hand comes down on the door handle. “Potter, your suggestion about the Longbottoms—would you be offended if the suggestion came from someone else?”

Potter glances over his shoulder at Snape. “Well, no. That’s a stupid thing to be concerned with, anyway. Good night, sir.”

Snape bids the boy good evening, and then, after restructuring his outlook, goes to see Albus. There is necessary deception to practice here regarding his frustration with the boy’s failings at Occlumency. For some reason, Snape has no wish for Albus to know the full extent of what Potter has already mastered. He has no idea why this is so, but he’s survived this long by trusting his instincts.

“My boy, you will simply have to hold your temper and keep trying,” Albus says. “Perhaps a lemon drop, Severus?”

Snape doesn’t even dignify that with a response. “I have another concern born of our resident Potter difficulty…or perhaps it might be labeled otherwise.” He then tells Albus about “his” idea for the restoration of Alice and Frank Longbottom.

As expected, Albus gives him a severe, displeased frown. “Severus, that is not a reasonable response to Frank and Alice’s unfortunate situation.”

“Oh? So leaving them imbecilic and unable to attend to their own bodily functions without assistance is a reasonable response?” Snape shakes his head derisively. “You want to win a war, Albus. To do so, you need soldiers. The Longbottoms were excellent at their jobs, which is one of the reasons they attracted the attention of Bellatrix Lestrange. Perhaps they would be missing fourteen years of their lives, but unlike the Potter brat, they were adults when their torture occurred. The Longbottoms would have a much easier time adapting to the loss of the years, and would need very little assistance to become battle-ready members of the Order.”

“It would place them in danger once more,” Albus points out.

Snape gives the Headmaster a flat stare. “They’re currently helpless. Which is worse, Albus?”

Albus finally sits back in his chair, clasping his hands in his traditional posture when he is finally regarding a difficulty with proper, rational thought. “You do raise a valid point, Severus.” Then he changes the subject. “Do you know the whereabouts of Charity Burbage?”

“Incinerated into ash after torture by Voldemort’s Death Eaters.” Snape’s voice is as cold as the wind blowing through piles of fallen leaves. “On Christmas Eve. I do believe Voldemort felt it to be…festive.”

“And you, my boy? I know it must have been difficult to witness. Are you well?”
Snape’s expression doesn’t change as he feels Albus try to slip behind his mental shields. The Headmaster receives nothing more than a brief memory of a classroom shouting match between himself, Potter, and Weasley, who had been allowed to enjoy his evening’s detention with Filch. “I am doing exactly as you’ve asked me to, Albus.”

* * * * *

The only nice thing Snape can say about January is that his rearranged Slytherin Quidditch team wins their first match. It is a surprisingly vicious game against the normally lackluster Hufflepuffs, but the game ends with Slytherin ahead by thirty points.

Snape does not care about the number of points declaring the win. He learned long ago to take what he can get, and his House is in good spirits for the first time in months.

Gryffindor’s match against Slytherin is, as usual, the most looked-forward to game of every season. It is annoying to see that Granger is expertly leading Draco around by the nose as she feints time and time again for a Golden Snitch that is far distant from them, allowing Gryffindor and Slytherin to drive each other into the ground in an attempt to gain points.

By the time Draco catches on and goes after the Snitch, it’s a close broom flight, with Granger literally snatching victory from between Draco’s hands before they can close around the Snitch. Gryffindor wins over Slytherin by fifty points, but by God and Merlin, his Slytherins did well.

The next time he sees Voldemort, it is Imbolc. “Severus. How is my favored Death Eater this evening?”

Snape bows. “My Lord. I am exceptionally tired of young idiots who have no business being allowed near a potion cauldron, but am otherwise well. Have you found entertainment of late?”

When Snape stands, Voldemort’s smile is chilling. “Oh, I have, I have. But we have other things to speak of. What have you learned about Mister Potter’s new wand, Severus?”

Snape falls into step with Voldemort when the latter begins walking along the dark, wooded path that borders the Forbidden Forest. They are not on school grounds, so none of Hogwarts’ defences are aware of the Dark Lord’s proximity.

“It is ivy vine, My Lord,” Snape tells him in the most disparaging tone he can muster. “With tail of unicorn. Potter’s academic studies may be of good quality, but it is my opinion that Lockhart’s spell damaged part of his magic. It is not the wand for a wizard of strong ability.”

“Hmm. Have you any other thoughts to support this theory, Severus?”

Snape nods. “His loss of Parseltongue. There is no explanation for it. I am not privy to all that Potter does, but I suspect his attempts at re-learning Parseltongue have not been successful.” Not long after Miss Weasley’s rescue from the Chamber, Snape ordered Potter not to tell him if the skill returned, improved, deteriorated, or abandoned him entirely. As far as he knows, what he is saying is entirely true.

He was honest with Draco Malfoy, as well. Lucius did not enjoy the full extent of Voldemort’s displeasure regarding the loss of Tom Riddle’s diary.
“And the runes? I find them a fascinating addition. Ollivander does not indulge in such very often. Sirius Black is the only man I am currently aware of that carries a modern wand with translatable runes.”

“Trelawney has such, as does Cedric Diggory, but neither wand bears runes as complicated as Sirius Black and Harry Potter’s wands. The runes confound me,” Snape admits, not needing to falsify an angered frown. “Runes are not my forte, but I’ve found nothing in the library to assist me. Not even Professor Babbling could translate them.”

Snape hates to do it, but if he does not give Voldemort something, suspicion will fall upon him. The scroll he hands to Voldemort contains only half of the runes from Potter’s wand, not all. Without very close inspection, Voldemort will be in no position to realize the deception. “You are most wise, My Lord. Perhaps you might succeed where I have failed.”

Voldemort nods and tucks the scroll into his robes without looking at it first. “That is not the only failure of yours I am concerned with, Severus.”

Snape refuses to allow tension to settle onto his shoulders. He expected this. “My Lord?”

“You saved the life of Arthur Weasley, one who was meant to die. That is not what I expect of my loyal ones, Severus.”

“I could not act otherwise without drawing Dumbledore’s suspicion, and the Order as a whole still suspects that my duplicity is not merely an act.” Lupin and Black have done a remarkable job of helping to recreate that air of distrust in Albus Dumbledore’s known double-agent. Continued werewolf-hood and prison have done wonders for increasing some remarkably Slytherin-like tendencies in that pair. “Forgive me for not finding a way to avoid the situation, My Lord.”

“Severus, you are, of course, forgiven…but punishment has not yet been administered.”

The silent, wand-casted Cruciatus is like agony and glass in his bones. Snape grits his teeth throughout, refusing to let out a sound even as the curse drags on and on. Shouting, yelling, tears—weaknesses. He learned not to reveal them in 1977.

* * * * *

“Merlin, what the fuck happened to you?” Black asks the moment he opens the door to Number 12 Grimmauld Place.

Snape shoves past him so that Black will actually shut the fucking door. “Adventure,” he says scathingly.

“Sit the fuck down,” Black retorts. Snape collapses into the nearest parlor chair, which does not actually do much to alleviate the great deal of pain he’s in. “Voldemort?” Black asks. Snape nods, closing his eyes. “Why the hell did you come here?”

“Because I could not get back into Hogwarts without someone noticing,” Snape answers, trying not to let his hands claw into the armchair’s plush fabric. Voldemort has to have also been displeased by more than just Arthur Weasley’s survival. This is a punishment far more intense than what should have been warranted by that simple affair.
Or perhaps he’s merely getting old. “I could also not recall if I restocked the proper restoratives in Spinner’s End during the winter holiday.” His hands turn into claws of their own accord, gouging holes in the expensive fabric. Blasted *Cruciatus*. He doesn’t blame the Longbottoms for choosing insanity in the slightest.

“Is this something that I can fetch Poppy for without anyone needing to *Obliviate* her afterwards?”

Snape considers that for a minute before nodding again.

“Right, then. Stay the hell in that chair,” Black says, and Snape hears him walk away.

When he wakes up, it’s to Poppy’s quietly cast, “*Rennervate!*” He glances up at her and immediately grits his teeth. God, he hates his job.

“Dear Severus,” Poppy murmurs, quickly retrieving exactly what is needed. “You must do something to avoid this. If this happens much more often, there may be permanent damage that no one will be able to repair.”

“Death is a form of avoidance,” Snape replies, trying not to melt into the chair as the first pain elixir begins to take hold.

“Yes, but not exactly the proper response to this predicament,” Poppy says sternly. “Don’t try to Apparate, or even use the Floo tonight. Don’t kill Sirius Black, either, as that would also be too strenuous for you at the moment. Rest here. Do you have a class in the morning?”

It takes him a disturbingly long time to recall. “Yes, but they are first-years, and the lesson is already prepared. All that would be required is that a professor sit in the room and watch over the dangerous little brats.”

Poppy pats him on the head, which makes Snape scowl at her. “Come to my office tomorrow and allow me to be certain of your restored health. Good night, Severus.”

“Good night, harpy,” Snape grumbles in response. Poppy ignores him and allows Black to escort her back to the kitchen fireplace.

“*Cruciatus,*” Black says when he returns. “What did you do to anger Voldemort?”

“Ostensibly?” Snape shifts in his chair, still feeling like there is far too much that is broken in his own body. “It was punishment for failing to allow Arthur Weasley to die. It was excessive, though, even for the Dark Lord. I suspect he is angry about something else, but I’m not privy to what that is.”

“Still testing you, is he?” Black asks, settling into a different chair.

“Possibly.” Snape thinks upon it. “Killing a Death Eater to prove my loyalty is one thing. It might literally take my killing of someone on our side, publicly, to finally convince him of my loyalty.”

Black grimaces. “I’d really prefer it not be myself or Remus. I’d hate to see Harry orphaned again.”

Snape shakes his head. “Voldemort is convinced as to our animosity, Black. No; it would have to be something regarded as a betrayal, not a killing that other Order members already expect that I am on the verge of performing.”

“What are you going to do if Voldemort demands it?” Black asks.

“I don’t know. I suppose it will depend upon the victim, the reason why, and how dire the situation
has become.”

“That’s a bloody terrible outlook.” Black hasn’t paled; if anything, Snape almost suspects that Black is concerned.

“I’m very much aware of that.”

Snape falls asleep in the chair not long after that, which is just as well. He realizes after blinking awake the next morning that he wouldn’t have been able to manage the stairs, anyway.

There is also a bulbous-eyed house-elf staring up at him. “The Master Snape is awake!” Dobby declares in a quiet, deferential voice that ensures Snape’s impending migraine doesn’t spike into full bloom. “Would the Professor of Hogwarts be liking breakfast?”

“Your grammar is improving,” Snape slurs out, and Dobby beams. “Tea, if you don’t mind. Horrify Kreacher: add five sugars and far too much cream.” Dobby bobs his head and vanishes with a house-elf’s typical pop of displaced air. He returns in short order with the tea, which has been reheated to make up for the application of cream. “Thank you.”

“You is welcome,” Dobby replies, his voice still soft. “Master Black warns Dobby about your head needing quiet, Master Snape.”

“That is astonishingly thoughtful of him,” Snape says, and sips the tea. It’s far too sweet for his preferences, but food is currently an abhorrent thought. Sugar and cream will have to be enough to get him home.

“Master Black is always thoughtful, when he is not being very sad,” Dobby tells Snape, his voice going even quieter. “Kreacher is thinking the Master is not acting like a proper wizard. Dobby is thinking that Kreacher be havin’ some odd ideas about proper-actin’ wizards.”

Snape has already Apparated to the front gates of Hogwarts when he figures out exactly why Voldemort is angry. The Department of Mysteries. Seeking. Sending Nagini in to assess the possible dangers of entering the Ministry.

Voldemort wants the only existing record of the original Prophecy that foretold his defeat.

Snape grips the iron bars of the gates with both hands, almost shaking in realization. If Voldemort ever discovers that Snape has the entirety of the Prophecy memorized, his time left on this planet will be brief—and very, very unpleasant.

It also explains some of Voldemort’s remaining distrust. The Dark Lord believes that Snape has not told him all of the Prophecy, when in truth, Snape had once foolishly told Voldemort the entire damned thing. Not the whole of the prophecy at the time, no, but all of what he’d overheard.

“I’m afraid so, yes,” Albus confirms for him later that morning, once Snape has assured himself that Minerva is sitting in with Snape’s first-years and treating them all to a glower of consistent disapproval. She might not appreciate Snape’s temperamental methods, but she doesn’t put up with an ounce of classroom mischief, either. Thus, she is one of the few people in the school for whom that dungeon door will open.

“I suspect that Voldemort believes the Prophecy that foretold his defeat will inform him how to overcome Mister Potter’s apparent immunity to the Killing Curse,” Albus says. “He must believe you have not told him all of it.”

“I discerned that on my own,” Snape replies, a deep scowl on his face. “The only way to prove
otherwise is to let him have it.”

“Mm. I’m planning on letting him believe he will do exactly that.”

Snape glares at the Headmaster. “And we should let Voldemort roam around the Department of Mysteries unmolested…why, exactly?”

“The Department of Mysteries has very few entrances and exits, and is now under constant watch of Aurors hiding under illusions and Polyjuice brews to seem as mere cleaning staff, house-elves, and other creatures Voldemort considers harmless. The moment Voldemort and his followers enter the Department…”

“A sprung trap.” Snape does like the idea, but it seems far too simplistic. “That could go badly.”

“It could,” Albus agrees, “but I do not believe Voldemort should know the Prophecy, regardless of the fact that it will not answer his current concerns.”

Bollocks, Snape thinks wearily, and leaves the school grounds that evening instead of having dinner. He touches the Mark on his arm once he’s on the outermost bounds of the Forbidden Forest, far from the school. He’s never confirmed to Albus that the Mark is just as capable of sending a summons as it is at receiving them.

Voldemort appears just moments later, scaring away a few unicorns that had begun to wander close. Snape has no idea why the foolish creatures like him, but if he goes into the Forest alone, it isn’t long before he has at least two unicorns following him around.

“Severus. You must have news,” Voldemort says. When one of his own dares to call him, he wastes no time on false pleasantries.

“I do, My Lord.” Snape offers Voldemort a brief incline of his head in a show of respect. “Dumbledore is aware of what you are seeking in the Department of Mysteries.”

Voldemort scowls. “I see. I’d hoped it would take the old fool a bit longer to figure it out.”

“I’m honestly not sure when he did. He did not confide in me until today.”

“What is he doing to ensure I never acquire it?” Voldemort asks in his soft, unforgiving voice.

“Aside from being on the watch for the presence of other dangerous serpents? Nothing, My Lord.” Snape lets derision cross his features. “Dumbledore believes that the Ministry’s security is sufficient.”

“And Weasley’s presence in the area?”

Apparently, a true chance meeting between Nagini and an unfortunate, foolish ginger,” Snape says. “I don’t know if I believe him, but I think this time if he plans otherwise, he will be sure to tell me.”

Voldemort’s smile is cold. “He told you nothing of his concerns last time, and one of his precious Order members almost died for it. He has learned that lesson.”

Snape nods. “I do believe so, My Lord.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Severus. I will not forget your loyal actions in this matter…especially given what this very Prophecy once cost you.”

Snape drops to one knee in the dirt and bows his head. “Lily Potter might have rejected your offer, My Lord, but Dumbledore also did nothing to ensure her safety. I will consider what is to come as
part of my vengeance.”

“Ever the Slytherin, Severus.” Voldemort’s clawed hand comes down on Severus’s shoulder, but without the warning squeeze. Then he steps back and Disapparates.

Snape waits, using the Mark to discern if Voldemort has truly departed. Then he says, “He’s gone. You can come back out now, you idiots.”

Three of the unicorns from the Forest herd appear from their hiding places and meander over to him. The oldest, a mare with chips in her horn from fending off unwanted suitors, trots right up to him and thrusts her face against his chest in clear demand.

Snape gingerly touches her head and is surprised when she keeps shoving her way forward, until he has no choice but to wrap his arms around her or be forced off the edge of a boulder. He rests his head against silken hairs, trying to figure out why in the hell his face is damp.
The rest of February is otherwise sedate, with only the Quidditch Finals to break up the academic monotony. Ravenclaw and Slytherin go at each other for the elimination game, and while they do well, it does not surprise Snape when the Ravenclaws win the game. What does surprise him is their win against Gryffindor, putting the Ravenclaws in true contention to claim the House Cup for the year.

March proceeds apace. Then April arrives in a torrent of horrible weather that suits Snape’s mood and makes his joint hurt. He can’t decide if that proves his theory of his advanced age of thirty-six, or if it’s just far too many sessions of Cruciatus in one lifetime.

Potter reports that he’s Occluding successfully every night, and thinks that he’s almost got it down at all times during the day. He also tells Snape that Dumbledore still won’t look him in the face, and barely says five words to him in a month’s time. Snape has to roll his eyes at that; Dumbledore is sending a clear, telegraphed signal that he fears the Dark Lord. It isn’t as if the old fool can’t successfully Occlude.

That afternoon is Double Potions class, the one he dreads most—fifth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors, which means he is either antagonizing Potter or ignoring him entirely. Potter refuses to change the swift nature of his potion-brewing, though he is currently presenting them exactly as textbook-instructed since his discovery that this truly irritates Snape. Not only is the brat being politic, he is being highly sarcastic without saying a word.

Once again, Potter is the first to complete the day’s assignment and bring a corked bottle up for Snape’s perusal. “A rushed job, Potter?” Snape purrs, Vanishing the bottle’s contents. To the young idiots in the classroom, it always seems as if Snape didn’t even examine the potion, but it took only a glance to see that it was well-done. “You should know better than that at this point in your scholastic career. I expect that your O.W.L. grades will be abysmal.”

“They would be, if you were giving the exam. Sir,” Potter adds, as if just barely remembering that he’s supposed to be polite. What truly makes Snape want to go have a screaming match with a Sorting Hat is how perfectly blank Potter keeps his expression during those rebuttals.

Snape waves him away. “Try it again, Potter. Do be certain to take the time to get it correct this time.”

Potter huffs and turns away, but Snape saw the brief glimmer of excitement in Potter’s eyes. Snape has just given him permission to experiment until the class period is over. As long as he does it in safety, Snape doesn’t care.

The more foolish of his Slytherins mock Potter for erecting a shield charm around his cauldron. Potter retorts that it’s to keep any of them from adding things to his brew that might cause it to be failed—again. Snape ignores them, the better to keep an eye on those students whose brewing skills are still sub-par enough that an explosion is a distinct possibility.

Class is almost over when Draco Malfoy alerts him to the danger. “Oh, what’s the matter, Scar Head? Headache?” he asks mockingly.

Snape turns around to see Potter clutching at his scar with one hand, lips drawn up in a grimace. “Fuck off, Malfoy!” he snarls.
Draco actually leans back in surprise while the other Slytherins turn as one body, like a hound that’s just scented fresh meat. The Gryffindors are on the verge of drawing their wands in instinctive reaction.

Voldemort. The timing of the Dark Lord’s attacks has been random, but this seems more intense than usual.

Snape stands up in slow deliberation. “Mister Potter,” he drawls out. “Must I remind you to keep your mind on your academic responsibilities once more?”

It’s a code-phrase, a reminder to bloody well Occlude. Lupin has convinced the rest of the faculty to use variations on that theme if they think Potter is having difficulties, which leaves Snape free from suspicion as to his involvement in the matter.

It worked three weeks ago. It does not work today.

Instead of recovering, Potter lets out an ear-splitting shriek of pain. Snape is around his desk and halfway across the room before he realizes it, rage a thundercloud on his face. His Slytherins think they know what’s about to occur.

They do not.

Snape doesn’t even get his wand out before a single drop of fresh blood spills from between Potter’s fingers and falls directly into his cauldron. Granger, demonstrating the same quick-thinking that saved Longbottom’s life in fourth-year, jerks Potter back from the workbench.

She’s just in time. Whatever Potter was brewing does not mix well with blood. A jet of what looks like solid white fire bursts forth from the cauldron. It strikes Potter’s surrounding shield charm and then bounces upwards to scorch the ceiling.

Snape realizes he’s staring with his mouth hanging open. It takes a great deal of self-control to collect himself, but he is used to doing so. Before any student aside from Granger realizes what’s happened, he is the Bloody Bat once more.

“Mister Potter. Did you manage to botch this potion even worse than your first example?”

Potter glares at him, but at least it is only Potter that Snape observes in his gaze. Voldemort caused him a great deal of pain, but Potter ultimately forced him out. Thank God. “You didn’t mention that blood would be a dangerous addition to today’s assignment. Sir.”

“As always, Mister Potter, you do tend to be the ridiculous exception,” Snape replies in a venomous voice. “I suggest you stay to clean up the mess you’ve made…and everyone else’s mess, as well. The rest of you may turn in your completed potions and leave.”

“That’s not fair—” Weasley starts to shout and is cut off mid-sentence when someone stomps on his foot.

“Just go on to the tower, Ron,” Granger says in sharp demand. “I’ll get Harry to the infirmary. You know Madam Pomfrey will just kick me right out again afterwards, so we’ll go visit him before dinner this evening if he’s still stuck there.”

“Yeah, yeah. All right,” Weasley says unhappily. “Grab your bags?”

“Please.” Granger manufactures a convincing smile for Weasley’s benefit.
Snape isn't fooled. Granger is up to something devious.

Why couldn’t Snape have had two of the most intelligent students in Hogwarts placed in the House they clearly belonged in?

Snape waits until everyone has left except for Potter and Granger, who is giving Snape a challenging stare. “Miss Granger.”

“Professor,” she returns, her hand resting on Potter’s shoulder. Her entire stance screams defiance and stubborn protectiveness. “Should I fetch Professor Lupin?”

Snape gives up. Granger has clearly reached the end of her tolerance for secrecy in regards to Potter. “You should, yes. He does not have class at the moment; you will find him in his office. Go in, close the door, and suggest that Lupin’s office could only be improved if he were to acquire a dog to fill the space.”

Granger’s eyebrows go up. “Sir,” she says, and then looks at Potter. “Are you all right, Harry?”

Potter is pressing someone’s gifted handkerchief to his scar. The bleeding has to have stopped, or it would be a sodden mess instead of a stained white square. “I am now, Hermione. Go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“You know, I actually believe you,” Granger replies, and leaves the classroom. Snape notes she is careful to seal the door behind her. He wonders when she figured out that the classroom door will only open if Snape allows it to do so.

He gets a Restorative Draught and gives it to Potter after removing the stopper for him. “Drink it.”

Potter doesn’t argue. He looks better in moments, but he’s still seated in a tired slump.

“What happened, Mister Potter?”

Potter slowly shakes his head. “I really don’t know, sir. That’s the hardest Voldemort has ever pushed.” He frowns. “It’s like he wants something.”

Snape refuses to grind his teeth in irritation. At this rate, he’ll wear them down to nothing. “He is after something. I’m just not sure what he hopes to accomplish by trying to gain it through you.” He looks into Potter’s cauldron, where half of the remaining liquid is bubbling in murky brown sullenness. “What were you doing?”

In answer, Potter taps his finger on the parchment tucked under the edge of his scarred chopping board. “Your version of Wolfsbane, sir. I wanted to see if I could do it.”

Snape frowns. “Where did you get a copy of this, Potter?”

“Remus has it. I know you two don’t want to share yet, so I wrote it out in runes.”

Snape turns the paper around and realizes why it seemed so illegible. “So I see.”

“It’s driving Hermione batty because she can’t figure out how to read them.” Potter grins. “It’s a set that Hogwarts doesn’t teach in any Ancient Runes class.”

“Brilliant, Potter, though I am tempted to deduct points for that pun.” Snape regards the cauldron again. “Are you well enough to recreate exactly what you’d completed up to the point of Voldemort’s attempt to break through your defences?” He has to label it an attempt. He’ll panic if he
doesn’t. Potter might have voiced the words, but he wasn’t the one who told off Draco Malfoy.

Potter stands up, tilts his head back and forth, and doesn’t wobble. “Yes, sir. I can do it.”

“Good. I’m going to be watching. I need to know exactly what was done, and how,” Snape answers, crossing his arms. “And for the sake of certainty, use a fresh cauldron.”

“It would have to be a bronze. I sort of have a charm on mine so it looks like it’s pewter,” Potter admits. “I only bring the real pewter to class if I know the day’s potion needs the reaction time.”

Why is this young man not a Slytherin? Merlin, why?

Snape jerks his head over his shoulder, in the direction of the cupboard. “They hang on the wall between the silver and gold cauldrons.”

“Okay, but…why, sir?” Potter asks. “Why am I duplicating this near-disaster?”

Snape tries not to feel any sort of excitement. It’s too soon for that. “A very strong feeling that you might have stumbled onto something important.”

By the time Granger knocks on the classroom door for entry, Potter has completed the potion to its original point of sudden, explosive failure. When Snape allows the door to open, Granger has Lupin in attendance, but seems to be lacking a dog.

Before Snape can comment, Black is pulling off Potter’s Invisibility Cloak. “Merlin, that was mindful of a hell of a lot of nice memories about this place,” Black says, grinning.

Snape eyes Granger, who shrugs. “I thought it might be prudent if others didn’t know he was here, so I made Ron fetch it from Harry’s trunk for me.”

“Good thinking,” Snape says, to Granger’s utter astonishment. Then he takes out his wand and taps the brick, activating the wards. He would like the rest of this meeting spent in assured privacy.

Granger’s eyes follow the green flames as they trace the stone. "I want to learn how to do that."

"You literally have to be of legal age, first," Severus replies. "And that is not a discussion we're having again until you are seventeen." If he's still alive to teach it.

“What’s going on, Severus?” Lupin is gazing at the bubbling, bright green concoction in its bronze cauldron. Snape watched the entire process, but Potter had been exact and precise. It was done exactly as Snape would have crafted it, and is halfway through the process.

“Science, Lupin.”

“You didn’t start out in a bronze—” Granger scowls at Potter. “That,” she declares, “is cheating. You owe me a bronze cauldron, Harry, and I want it properly charmed to appear pewter.”

Potter smirks at her. “Charm it yourself, Hermione. Professor?”

Snape nods. “Miss Granger, a bronze ladle is in the lowest drawer of the storage chest inside the cupboard. On the shelf to your left when you enter, you will find four bronze cups. Bring them all here, please.”

Granger does as asked in a prompt fashion, curiosity driving her to a swiftness just tempered by her recognition of the need for safety. She places the bronze cups on the table before offering the ladle to Snape.
Snape motions at Potter. “It was his blunder. He can do it. Equal measures in each cup, Mister Potter, but leave a full sample in the cauldron.”

“All right.” Potter shakes his hand about, as if literally trying to throw off any remaining hint of trembling, before doing as asked.

“Severus, please tell me why I went sneaking through the school in James’s old Invisibility Cloak today?” Black asks.

“Your godson attempted to recreate a recent formula of mine. He got this far in the process before a drop of blood was accidentally introduced. The results were very interesting, and incineratory.” Snape glances up at the ceiling. “I do believe that scorch mark might be permanent.”

“Whose blood?” Black asks.

Potter lifts the unruly fringe of his dark hair, showing off a scar that is still an angry red. “Mine.”

“Are you all right?” Black exclaims. Snape leaves him to be a proper Dogfather and goes to his desk, pulling a specific cloth packet from a locked, warded drawer. He returns to the table and unrolls it, revealing five pristine needles. The tips are thick enough to get a proper drop of blood with a single jab.

Lupin understands at once. He takes up the bubbling bronze cups and puts each one on a different workbench, then brings out his wand to place shields around the individual cups.

“What sort of theory are we testing?” Granger asks, starting to look concerned.

“Three of us are cursed, one of us might be cursed, and one of us is most certainly not cursed in any fashion,” Snape answers.

“How would you be cursed, Professor?” The words are polite enough, but Granger is still challenging him.

“Miss Granger, if you believe that the Dark Mark is not a curse, you are not being diligent enough in your studies. Hold out your hand,” Snape orders. Granger winces but does so.

Before she can change her mind, Snape jabs the pad of her thumb with the first needle. “Hey!” she yelps, but Snape is busy allowing that single drop of blood to fall into the cauldron and its remaining green sample.

There is no fiery or violent response. The formula only loses its bright hue, turning the color of a tree frog. “Black.”

“Please allow me to jab my own blasted thumb,” Black mutters, selecting a needle before moving on to the first bronze cup. The jab into his thumb is swift and expertly done; Black doesn’t even flinch. He does, however, lean back when allowing his blood to fall into the cup.

Again, no response. Black gives it another moment before looking into the cup. “Huh. Tree frog.”

“Congratulations; you are officially not cursed,” Snape informs him dryly. He selects a third needle and goes to the second of the four cups. He is so used to jabbing his hands for necessary ingredients that he’s almost lost sensation in that particular spot of his left thumb.

The drop of blood produces exactly the same sort of response that Potter’s did. Snape steps back on instinct as the white fire adds another scorch mark to his classroom ceiling. “Interesting.”
“Exactly the same thing my blood did,” Potter says. Black looks worried, but doesn’t comment.

“Different curses, different responses, perhaps?” Lupin asks while selecting a needle.

Snape watches more white fire leap out of the cup, bounce around in its shielded confines, and then place another scorch mark on his ceiling. “Apparently not.”

Potter selects a needle without being asked. “Three is a confirmation, and sound scientific theory.”

“You did read the book!” Granger says, beaming.

Potter gives her a baffled look. “Hermione, I have literally read everything you have ever given me.”

“One never knows when a boy will abruptly turn stupid,” Granger returns primly.

“I’m not turning stupid. I’d like to survive long enough to at least become a legal wizarding adult,” Potter counters, and then frowns. “Bollocks. Sir, I’m shaking too much. I won’t get a clean jab.” He turns and presents the needle to Snape.

“Black, stop posturing,” Snape says without turning around. “Are you still ambidextrous?”

Potter looks surprised, but nods. “Sort of. My writing’s not as neat with my left hand anymore, but it’s legible.”

“Good,” Snape says, and jabs Potter’s right thumb with the needle. “It should come from the side of the body closest to the scar,” he explains, if only so Black will stop growling at him.

The final drop of blood in the last cup produces the same white fire. Four scorch marks on his ceiling. The house elves will stage a revolt, or make sure his tea is rubbish, for weeks on end.

Snape realizes he’s smiling. He doesn’t care if the house-elves forget his tea for the rest of term. This is the best gift he’s received since the photographs Potter sent him last summer.

“Christ, Harry. What were you working on?” Lupin asks, holding the edge of a ragged, yellowing handkerchief to his thumb.

Potter shrugs. “The first half of the revised Wolfsbane potion.”

Lupin stares at him in astonishment before shouting at Snape. “SEVERUS!”

“Oh, do shut up. You only drink the finished product, Lupin.” He’s too busy thinking to put any true ire into his words.

A weapon. He has a weapon.

Snape has a weapon he has no way to utilize.

He also has the problem of Granger. He considers Obliviating her, but that would only solve this afternoon’s concerns. Her curiosity will remain, and this sort of situation will eventually repeat itself.

“Miss Granger,” Snape says, gaining the young woman’s attention. “It is my understanding that your parents named Sirius Black as your legal guardian during your visits to Grimmauld Place and during the school year, if by chance swift action is needed due to accidents.”

Granger nods, the suspicious frown back on her face. “Yes. They don’t quite get how wizarding law works most of the time, but at least that’s the same in both worlds.”
“Quite. It’s also convenient. You should not leave this classroom without accepting an Unbreakable Vow, either from myself or from Lupin.”

Granger looks like she wants to step back, but forces herself not to. Steel. Good. “Minors can’t accept Unbreakable Vows from another adult—or from anyone, really. Not without a legal guardian’s approval.”

Snape glances over at Black. “What luck. You have one present.”

“Hermione.” Potter interrupts whatever argument is on Granger’s lips. “I have one with Professor Snape, overseen by Remus Lupin as one of my legal guardians. Professor Snape also has Unbreakable Vows with Remus and Sirius both.”

“Why?” Granger asks. She looks like she’s about to pick up an empty cauldron and bash someone over the head with it, and Snape isn’t sure who her first target would be.

“For two ultimate goals: Harry’s survival, and Voldemort’s hopefully messy destruction.” Black’s expression is grim. “We might not be fond of each other, but war makes for strange bedfellows, Hermione.”

Lupin points at Snape without bothering to turn his head. “Severus, I will kill you if you utter one word in response to that statement.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Your lack is not my doing or even remotely in my interest. Miss Granger, you know and understand the consequences of breaking such a vow, or of making one without trusting in the words of the person with whom you are making the vow, yes?”

Granger nods. “I do. I—I am sorry, but I think it will have to be with Professor Lupin. You’ve done a very good job of terrifying Hogwarts this year, Professor Snape.”

“That is not taken as insult or seen as a lack of intelligence, Miss Granger,” Snape says. “Quite the opposite. Besides, if anyone tortures you, they’ll be asking for answers that Lupin would also be aware of. To give those answers would be to break the vow you make with him.”

Granger blanches. “Torture. Right. That’s the point, then, isn’t it? Utter secrecy.” She hesitates. “Does the Headmaster know?”

“Absolutely not,” Potter growls, a fortunate return of ratel temper, not invading madman. “Dumbledore won’t tell me anything, Hermione. People who aren’t told things are meant to be pawns, and I refuse to be one. Just because he wants Voldemort to fail doesn’t mean that he’s going about it the right way.”

Snape is glad to see that Potter feels that way. He is also not fond of the idea that he has only ever been considered a chess piece, regardless of whose hand is guiding his moves.

“You have the right to say no,” Snape decides, and Granger looks up at him. “One of us would need to Obliviate you to remove your memory of this entire afternoon, but I will force no one into an Unbreakable Vow.”

Granger tilts her head. “I’m pretty certain that you’re supposed to be a terrible person. That sounds like the kind of thing a sensible, rational person would say.”

Snape just stares back. “It is literally in everyone’s best interest for you to know and understand that yes, I am a terrible person.”
“Why?” Granger asks, her chin rising as she continues to challenge him.

“I am meant to be loyal to one of the worst men born in this century. One of the only differences between Nazi Germany’s Hitler and Lord Voldemort is that he never had time to amass the same body count.” Snape grinds his teeth for almost a full minute as he debates on whether to tell her about Charity’s fate. In the end, he decides that it is better for Granger to understand how deep this particular rabbit hole goes.

Now is a terrible time to have that old Jefferson Airplane song stuck in his head. He hasn’t even heard it in years.

“Professor Burbage is dead, Granger. I had the unfortunate pleasure of witnessing the event. Albus Dumbledore is aware of this, but has not yet informed the school as to the real reason behind Professor Burbage’s sudden departure.”

Granger flinches like she’s been struck, but she keeps pushing. “How?”

“She was tortured with *Cruciatus* until it broke her limbs. She was then frozen in a painful contortion and left to spin in the air as gruesome decoration for a dining room table until Voldemort grew tired of the spectacle and ordered her death.” Snape shuts his eyes for a brief moment before he stares down at her again. “Miss Granger, Potter has no choice regarding his youthful participation in this war. You do. Walk away, please.”

That makes Granger scowl. “Professor Snape, I’ve been involved in this war since my very first year at Hogwarts, and you well know it.” She takes out her wand and holds out her hand—at him. “Make the vow.”
They meet again that evening in the Potions classroom after dinner. Potter and Granger tell their fellow Gryffindors that Potter mouthed off to Snape during cauldron-cleaning and earned the pair a dual detention. Lupin doesn’t have to explain himself to anyone, while Black has a borrowed Invisibility Cloak.

They’re seated in a circle around one of the workbenches, the wards casting faint green light down on their faces. Granger has her chin propped on one hand, gazing at Snape with eyes that already seem prepared for war. Black is frowning; Lupin has both arms resting across each other on the tabletop. Potter is Occluding so well there is almost no hint of emotion in his eyes at all.

Snape has been trying to figure out how to explain what’s been preying upon his mind since the afternoon revelation found in a botched potion. Potter, Lupin, and Black have filled in blanks that Granger did not have access to, so Snape decides to begin with what none of the others know but him.

“In the spring of 1980, a Seer became caught up in a moment of true prophecy,” Snape says, gaining their attention. “I was not yet a spy. I had come to realize that following the Dark Lord was not the wisest decision to have made, but couldn’t figure out how to get out of the situation without dying.”

Snape glances at Lupin. “Unimaginative, short-sighted, and stupid.” Lupin’s lips twitch, but he only makes a vague sound of agreement.

“I overheard that prophecy and realized at once that it concerned the Dark Lord. I repeated it to Voldemort, information traded for a night in which I did not suffer. At that point in the war, all were required to report to the Dark Lord before midnight. If one did not bring him good news, the results were often…undesirable.

“Before you stand up with the desire to hex me into oblivion, Black, please bear in mind that I did not keep track of wizarding marriages, births, and deaths. My points of concentration were too narrow. Unless I was facing someone across a battlefield, trying to avoid the Dark Lord’s displeasure, or frantically considering my options, I knew nothing of what was going on.” Snape grimaces. “The prophecy I overheard was thus: The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him. Born as the seventh month dies.

“Then I got thrown out of the Leaky Cauldron. Damn Aberforth and his bloody goats.”

“Born as the seventh month dies.” Lupin closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Harry.”

“Or Longbottom. They were both born in the final week of July,” Snape points out. “Yes, I know. Longbottom. I blame his harpy of a grandmother for that young man’s lack of spine.”

“He is actually getting better in our, ah, extracurricular practicing sessions,” Lupin says. “He may yet shine forth, Severus.”

“Someone should,” Snape murmurs. “Don’t tell me anything more of those sessions, please, for their safety.”

“Right. Safety.” Lupin blows out a breath. “Sirius?”

“I am reminding myself that Peter is the one who betrayed James and Lily to Voldemort,” Black whispers, his hands clenched into fists. “Keep going, Severus.”
“Regardless of the fact that there were two possibilities, Voldemort decided that Potter was the threat, and chose to act and end that threat. I quite literally begged him to spare Lily’s life. Voldemort promised to extend, again, an offer for her to join his Death Eaters. No, I did not actually care about anyone else,” he snaps when Black looks incensed. “For most of my life, whenever I reached out, Lily was the only person to ever reach back. I didn’t want James or their son dead, but my primary concern was her.”

Black turns to Potter, who just glances at him. “I already knew most of this, Sirius. It’s only the prophecy bit that’s new.”

“Bloody hell,” Sirius grumbles under his breath. “I know what Lily would have said to such a proposal from Voldemort.”

“A very polite, ‘Fuck you,’” Lupin says, and then recalls Granger’s presence. “My apologies, Hermione.”

Granger eyes Lupin in irritation. “I am a sixteen-year-old girl living in a dormitory with a bunch of crass teenagers. If you think I haven’t yet heard that word spoken aloud, you aren’t remembering your childhood properly, Professor Lupin.”

“Did he ask?” Black is staring at Snape. “Do you know?”

“He did actually ask, believe it or not. Mum said no,” Potter says in a flat voice.

That, Snape had never known. It seems even Voldemort keeps the occasional promise, if he thought they might serve his purposes. “There were, of course, two problems with Voldemort’s proposal. I already knew that Lily would sooner hex Voldemort into individual atoms than join him. I also didn’t know the latter half of the prophecy when I went to Albus Dumbledore. For the second time in two days, I begged someone I loathed to save Lily Potter’s life.”

Snape turns to Granger. “Take note, Miss Granger. When I begged Albus Dumbledore to save the life of Lily Potter, he wanted to know what I would give him in return.”

Granger is incensed. “You asked him to save a life, and he started bargaining?”

“Slytherins understand the nature of bargains, Miss Granger,” Snape replies caustically. “I hesitated only in surprise. I literally promised Albus that I would give him anything if he saved her life. He castigated me for not caring about James or their son, so I altered my plea and begged him to save them all.”

Black gapes at him. “You did?”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Yes, Black. I really did ask Albus to save all three of them. Stop interrupting me with foolish statements, or this will take all night.” He clenches his jaw before choosing to say the words anyway. “I have not actually forgiven Albus for failing to do as he said he would.”

“At the moment? I don’t blame you at all,” Black growls. “Dammit, I should have insisted that I be their Secret Keeper!”

“It’s moot, Black.” Snape tries to ignore the feel of that terrible weight. He can’t afford to dwell on it, not right now. “When Albus brought word of their deaths, he chose to act on the bargain I’d made. He demanded that I promise to protect Lily’s son, and I agreed.”

“After weeks of mourning, I realized it was a promise I truly meant. To protect the one thing in this world Lily had loved above all else? I could think of no other way to earn her forgiveness, if she ever
decides to grant it. Young Mister Potter was all that was left of her in the world. Petunia Dursley,” he adds in a snide voice, “does not count.”

“She’s Lily’s sister”—” Lupin tries, but Black shakes his head.

“Petunia Dursley is one of the most terrible people I’ve ever met, Remus, and I am closely related to some truly horrific examples of humanity.”

Snape nods in bitter agreement. “Lily received what Albus Dumbledore did not: a blood oath. I swore to her that I would make certain that Voldemort would not destroy her son. Old magic,” he explains for Granger’s benefit. “If you make a blood oath to someone over their grave, the consequences of breaking that oath are actually worse than the consequences of sundering an Unbreakable Vow.”

“Dear God, Severus,” Lupin says in blank astonishment.

Snape glares at him. “Please spare me the sentiment. Listen: Albus knows that Voldemort wants to hear the entire Prophecy, which is stored in the Department of Mysteries within the Ministry of Magic. Voldemort believes that I knew the whole of it and did not tell him, conveniently forgetting that he once tortured me for more information and discovered there was none to be had.

“Voldemort thinks that the Prophecy will explain Potter’s apparent invulnerability to the Killing Curse, thus telling him how to once again end the threat he believes Potter to represent. However, Albus is not unaware of the fact that while I did not know the entire Prophecy before Hallowe’en in 1981, I have known it since November of that same year.”

Snape laces his hands together and rests them on the table. “One night, during the weeks after Voldemort’s apparent defeat, Albus came to see me in Azkaban, where I was awaiting a trial I already knew would end in exoneration for acting as a spy on behalf of the Order—a job I actually did carry out with true purpose until there no longer seemed to be a point. Albus was tired, his control slipped…and I had not yet told him that to survive Voldemort, I’d begun mastering the arts of both Legilimency and Occlumency. Though he’d put on a good appearance of it, what was on the forefront of Albus’s mind was not about speaking to me, but in recalling the Prophecy.”

“What’s the rest of it, sir?” Potter requests quietly.

“The Dark Lord will Mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. Either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives.”

“The Horcrux,” Black spits. “It’s talking about the blasted Horcrux!”

“This, Hermione.” Potter lifts his hair and points at his scar. “I am actually carrying around a shard of that noseless arsehole’s soul.”

“Horcrux.” Granger is frowning. “Old English. Hor meaning evil, or impure, and crux, meaning container or jar.”

“Miss Granger, sometimes your vast intellectual recall is inconveniently unnerving,” Snape says in his driest tones. “But you are correct. A Horcrux is a container that holds a part of one’s soul, split from the whole during a spell that is tied to a sacrificial murder. No, I do not actually know how to make one. Even I have limits.”

“It isn’t supposed to be possible to turn living things into Horcruxes, but Voldemort managed it—accidentally, I believe, with Harry,” Lupin says, “but intentionally with the giant serpent that attacked Arthur Weasley.”
“Nagini. Voldemort had to have created her prior to the ritual of Blood-and-Bone,” Snape tells them.
“By completing that ritual, he has ended his ability to create new Horcruxes. He is unchanging life,
but that spell also applies to what is left of his soul.”

“How many Horcruxes, total?” Granger asks, returning to her narrow-eyed seriousness.

“Me, Nagini, the locket of Salazar Slytherin. The diary would have been number four,” Potter says.
“Sirius believes that there are more.”

“And I think they’re related to the Founders. Grand gestures, remember?” Black looks irritated. “He
has to have found the Diadem of Ravenclaw and the Cup of Hufflepuff.”

“Which would make six, total,” Granger says.

“Seven. There are seven,” Potter whispers.

“Harry?” Lupin asks, when Potter does nothing more than stare straight ahead, unblinking. “Harry, I
would very much like you to return your attention to what you’re doing.”

Potter shakes off the air of distraction. “No, I wasn’t—it wasn’t anything like him. I was just trying to
figure out how I knew that, but I’m certain. It’s seven. My death was supposed to create the sixth,
and he probably had some object with him for that purpose. Nagini makes seven.”

“How does one destroy a Horcrux?” Granger asks. “Because I think right now, that’s far more
problematic than finding them.”

“Stabbing the diary with a basilisk fang worked well enough,” Lupin says.

Potter glances at Lupin. “Remus, we are not stabbing me in the head with a basilisk fang.”

Snape clamps his hand down over his mouth, turning sudden, unexpected laughter into desperate-
sounding choking noises. The expression on Lupin’s face in response to Potter’s dry delivery is a
moment he is going to treasure until the end of his days.

Black just looks appalled. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you laugh in my entire fucking life,
Severus.”

“You still haven’t,” Snape replies after he can stifle the reaction and bury it. “Miss Granger, you’re
also jumping even further ahead than is necessary, though yes, we do have the means to destroy the
Horcruxes that are not Potter. Albus has the sole basilisk fang that Lupin collected when asked. I
have the other three. We don’t dare use them until we have all of the Horcruxes, as well as a means
to save Potter that doesn’t involve making him exceptionally dead. To do otherwise is to warn
Voldemort that the secret behind his seeming immortality has been discovered, as he knew of the
diary’s destruction without needing to be told.”

“Okay, fine.” Granger presses her lips together. “If we can’t do anything yet aside from trying to find
the remaining Horcruxes, what is the point in telling us about this prophecy?

“If Voldemort does not trust me implicitly, then my spycraft will gain the Order very little to make
the endeavor worthwhile. If I give him the complete prophecy, I earn that trust…but I also endanger
Potter.” Snape gives her a level look. “I’m sure you can understand why I’ve been hesitant to do so.”

“Aside from the danger to Harry?” Granger nods, giving him an odd look of respect. Snape isn’t sure
he likes the sensation. “If you tell Voldemort outright, he thinks you’ve been lying to him, and you
don’t gain the trust you think you’re going to need to be useful to us. You can’t get to the prophecy
itself because it’s locked away in the Ministry, which you can’t just waltz in and steal without losing
the trust of Professor Dumbledore.”

“He wouldn’t be able to do so, anyway,” Lupin says. “If it’s been stored the way I think it has, then
only those to whom the Prophecy applies can retrieve it. That narrows the list to Voldemort or Harry.
Voldemort isn’t ready to attempt the theft, and I think Harry fetching it would be a little too obvious
at this point.” He notices that Snape is staring at him and smiles. “Someone had to make certain that
the Marauders kept their wits about them. James and Sirius were certainly not very good at it.”

Black smiles with a faint air of regret. “I resemble that remark, thank you very much.”

“You mention storage. How would the Prophecy be stored, Professor?” Granger asks Lupin.

“The prophecies, and other things like it, are memories retrieved via Pensieve. The memories are
copied before being returned to the original owner, and the copy of that Pensieved memory is stored
in an enchanted glass globe. If anyone aside from the one it’s meant for touches it, they will hear
nothing. Those whom it is meant for will hear or see that memory.” Lupin hesitates. “As far as I’m
aware, not many people outside of certain members of the M.L.E. and high-ranked employees in the
Department of Mysteries are aware of that limitation. The only reason I know is because Arthur
Weasley is a disarming chatterbox who coaxed the information out of someone in the Department.
He then told Molly, myself, and Alastor Moody, so we would be prepared for Voldemort’s eventual
attempt at theft.”

“Okay…” Granger looks at the four of them as if they are all exceptionally daft. “Then what’s
stopping us from crafting a copy of one of those enchanted globes to give to Voldemort?”

Snape stares at her in complete bewilderment before he puts his face down on the table. “One
hundred fifty points to Gryffindor,” he says into the wood. “Lupin, please make up some nonsense
excuse for that and claim responsibility.”

“Did I hear that right?” Granger asks.

“Oh, I already have something in mind.” Lupin sounds far too smug. “Hermione, those points are for
doing more for advancing werewolf acceptance in one summer than anyone else has managed in
fifty years.”

Snape lifts his head and glares at Lupin. “What?”

Lupin grins back. “She’s the one who came up with the brilliant idea to just tell everyone about my
werewolf curse before my first year of teaching Defence. The children began talking about how
excellent it would be for Hogwarts to have its very own pet werewolf. They even had most of the
Slytherins convinced by the end of August just on rumor alone.”

Snape’s jaw falls open. “This is appalling. I’m surrounded by people who were all Sorted into the
wrong bloody House!”

“Excuse me, but fuck you,” Black retorts, which makes Lupin all but howl with laughter.

Granger has a wide smile on her face. “You still can’t simply present Voldemort with the Prophecy.”

“No, I can’t,” Snape agrees, and gets up from the table. He does not often indulge, but sometimes he
does his best thinking while pacing. Lupin, Granger, Potter, and Black all begin discussing how to
create a fake prophecy globe. Snape already knows he’s going to have the harder job—crafting a
false and entirely believable memory of someone viewing Sybill Trelawney uttering the entire
Prophecy in her harsh, grating voice.
“We could perhaps trade for the right sort of glass,” Lupin is saying.

“Or just bribe a Ministry official and get a blank one of our very own, Remus,” Black replies.


“What?”

Snape turns around to find the others regarding him with varying expressions of expectation or confusion. “A trade,” he repeats. “Black is going to offer the fake copy of the prophecy to the Dark Lord in exchange for the whereabouts, or the known fate, of one Regulus Black.”

Black scowls. “We already know what happened to—oh. Merlin, you’re right,” he says, eyes widening in realization. “We might know, but Voldemort doesn’t.”

Snape shakes his head. “I’ve never had any reason to tell him, and he has not asked.”

Lupin frowns. “Voldemort will lie.”

“Of course he will. However, you—” Snape points at Black “—are going to have to believe whatever he says. Then, as a further gesture of good faith, you’ll tell him that you will reconsider the offer he once made to the Heir of the Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

“I believe I said, ‘Fuck off’ when he first made that offer, Severus,” Black returns dryly.

“That was then. This is now. Twelve years in Azkaban do things to a man’s mind, do they not?” Snape asks in his favorite voice, the one that often fools idiots into believing that his temper has cooled.

“Right.” Black is thinking about it, which makes Lupin give him a look of quiet distress. The werewolf really needs to bed that man the moment Potter turns seventeen just to get it out of his system. “It’s still not the safest thing for me to be doing.”


Black snorts out a laugh. “Bollocks. You’re a mad genius, Severus. I just didn’t expect to be participating when you decided to put that moment to good use.”

“The Yule Ball. Appearances,” Granger murmurs. “Plans within plans. It must be annoying, thinking in layers like that all the time.”

“Practice creates the appearance of perfection, if not perfection in truth,” Snape responds. “Black will be safe, as I will be his diplomatic escort, his guarantee of safety. If anyone chooses to attack, they will not live long enough to regret it.”

“He’ll torture the blazes out of you if you kill someone Voldemort likes,” Black points out.

Snape flicks his fingers, much the same way he often dismisses Albus’s more ludicrous notions. “But he cannot afford to kill me, not with both of his primary rivals still alive. If it comes to that, I will recover. I’d rather you not be too dead to do so.”

“Thanks,” Black says, even if they’re both aware that Sirius Black is not the reason Snape feels so altruistic.

Perhaps that is not actually the only reason, a distant part of Snape thinks, just before he burns the
thought to ash and buries the remainder. The Bloody Bat has no use for such foolish sentiment.

“This isn’t just about useful spycraft.” Potter takes off his glasses and looks at Snape. “It’s also about today’s explosive potion.”

Snape smiles, pleased that someone put those pieces together without needing to be lead to such an obvious conclusion. “A spy who is trusted will also be trusted enough to ‘assist’ the Dark Lord in finding ways to add more life to the corpse-like shell he is currently trapped in. A spy from whom Voldemort will accept a potion that, aside from a burning sensation upon initial ingestion, will seem entirely harmless, and alas, so ineffective; I shall have to trouble myself to figure out if there is another potion that will work where that one failed.”


Lupin’s grin is wide and wolf-like in a way that, for once, doesn’t alarm Snape at all. “We won’t have to lift a finger. All we’ll need to worry about is the destruction of every single Horcrux, and the moment that happens…”

Snape realizes he is grinning, too, though his is probably far more vampiric and cruel to be labeled as delight. “Now is that trade of information with Lord Voldemort worth your time, Black?”

“Hell, yes,” Black replies at once. If he resembles one of his more insane ancestors in that moment, Snape isn’t going to be the one to tell him. “The sooner it can be arranged, the happier I’m going to be.”

“Good,” Snape says. “I even know how you’re going to convince Voldemort as to how you acquired it.”

* * * * *

Voldemort’s Death Eaters attack the Ministry in June. To their surprise, there are quite a number of disguised Aurors and Order of the Phoenix members waiting to greet them. The battle scorches holes in walls, destroys property, smashes Pensieved testimony and recorded various prophecies, and traumatizes rare magical creatures. It becomes such a disaster that Voldemort himself shows up in the Ministry Atrium, which almost turns the tide of battle against the Order until Dumbledore appears to thwart him. Voldemort and the Death Eaters who escape capture do so without the Prophecy.

It does, at least, convince Minister Fudge that yes, You-Know-Who is back. Snape spends most of his time over the paper the next morning trying not to roll his eyes to the point of doing himself permanent injury. Potter is now an exonerated hero once more. Even Sirius Black gets mentioned in the article as “the brave hero who arrived to assist the Aurors in the apprehension of dangerous rogue Death Eaters.”

Snape sniffs in a show of disgust, but is inwardly amused by the utter ridiculousness of it all. Perhaps the Daily Prophet is terrified that Black will sue them the same way he successfully sued the Wizengamot for the previous summer’s Dementor assault.

Voldemort, of course, summons him during lunch. Snape is getting used to missing that meal. “I thought we had agreed that Dumbledore would tell you of his plans regarding the Ministry.”

Snape is already kneeling before him, head bowed, waiting for the Dark Lord’s ire to present itself.
“I had thought so, too, My Lord. Either he has lost faith in his spy, or...perhaps Alastor Moody is still keeping to his paranoid ways,” he suggests as the idea occurs to him.

“What do you mean, Severus?”

“Moody earned his reputation for a reason, as My Lord is well aware. Perhaps Dumbledore thought it unnecessary to further safeguard the Department of Mysteries, but Moody was not so sanguine in the matter. As a retired and respected member of the M.L.E., it’s entirely possible that he arranged for the Department’s safe-guarding himself, rather than trust its security to Dumbledore after Dumbledore’s methods were proven failures.”

Voldemort is silent as he considers it. “It would fit very well with what happened that night,” he admits softly. “There were members of the Order of the Phoenix present, yes, but they all had some association with the M.L.E. Albus Dumbledore must have been summoned, which would explain his late and irritating arrival. Can you find out if this is so?”

“My Lord, I will do my absolute best, as always.”

Snape refuses to flinch when Voldemort’s hand comes down on his shoulder. “No. For now, we will not push,” Voldemort says. “I need Dumbledore to continue trusting in you, even if that trust is currently incomplete due to your visceral hatred of Harry Potter. I have all the time I need to find what I sought in the Ministry.”

Snape considers the risks and dares to ask. “My Lord, if I am aware of what that item is, I might be able to assist.”

“You would not be able to retrieve it.” Voldemort removes his hand. “Your assistance is always valuable, Severus. If I believe you will be able to help in this matter, then I will tell you at once.”

“Thank you, My Lord.”

“You may go. I am disappointed in my failure regarding the Ministry, but it was not a failure of your making.”

Severus waits until Voldemort is gone and then considers simply slumping over onto the grass in relief. He really did not want to endure the Cruciatucis Curse today, even if it was a punishment he expected to be a certainty. Instead, he picks himself up, dusts off his clothes, and returns to Hogwarts to complete his last school day of the term.

“How does it feel to be the Boy Who Lived again?” Snape asks Potter that evening.

“It’s stupid,” Potter replies. “Why does Wizarding Britain only have one newspaper that’s considered legitimate, Snape?”

“Harry, I have no idea.”

“Hmm.” Potter rests his arms on a classroom worktable and props his chin on his hands. “Luna says that her father runs a newspaper called The Quibbler. The general consensus is that it’s a ridiculous rag, but maybe they just need money in order to talk about things aside from Luna’s Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

“I don’t even want to know, just as I still have no wish to encounter her nargles.”

“Stay away from mistletoe, then. Apparently there’s a subspecies of nargles that like the berries,” Harry says.
"Please let us return to the part where I said I do not wish to encounter Miss Lovegood’s nargles.”

Snape eyes him curiously. “You’re going to fund a rival newspaper?”

Potter offers him a faint shrug. “I’m the legal Heir of the Ancient and Noble House of Black. What else am I supposed to spend ludicrous amounts of money on?”

“If you carry through with this plan, please allow me to be present when you inform the portrait of Black’s mother.”

“Sure.” Potter looks up at him without lifting his head. “When are you going to kidnap Sirius and take him to meet Voldemort?”

“When you are safely ensconced within Grimmauld Place, and not a moment before,” Snape replies in utter seriousness. “The Blacks were insane, but there are wards on that house that cannot be breached by anyone, not even Voldemort. The only way for an enemy to get inside is if they literally ride you in through the front door.”

“Do you think the meeting will go badly?” Potter asks.

Snape hesitates. “It should not,” he is careful to emphasize. “But Voldemort is sometimes erratic in his decisions. It might be wise to collect the entirety of the Weasley family and offer them a week’s vacation in Grimmauld Place. Tell Molly it’s her chance to finish her terrifying cleansing of that foul heap of brick.”

“I wonder how the Granger family would like to spend the week in 12 Grimmauld Place,” Potter muses. “Hermione says her parents are intelligent and curious. It could be a fun combination. Do you think that will be enough?”

“The Diggory family might also enjoy a brief holiday,” Snape decides, realizing that there are more concerns in Potter’s life now than a dog, a werewolf, Granger, and ginger. “Lupin will already be there, or safely hidden in Cokeworth. The faculty you have earned alliances with in Hogwarts will still be on school grounds, and you’ve made no other significant friendships that have broached the public’s awareness. Or have you?”

“Viktor Krum isn’t a bad bloke, but he mainly corresponds with Hermione, so that’s not really been noticed.” Potter gives Snape’s question serious thought. “Fleur Delacour is dating Bill Weasley—”

“That’s news.”

“To all of us, too,” Potter replies. “It means she and her sister may well be up from France for another visit. I can make certain that Bill is aware of the right timing once you have this meeting arranged.”

“A full house,” Snape comments.

Potter shakes his head. “Actually, I think even with that many people, there are still going to be bedrooms empty. Oh, and Sirius is finally ready to let Regulus’s old bedroom be redecorated. Kreacher gets to keep anything he wants from the room after Sirius has gone through it, and Regulus’s portrait is being updated to reflect changing viewpoints. It’s just as well—the amusement of a portrait that offers nothing more than a two-fingered salute got dull after the first few weeks. If the portrait doesn’t believe us about Regulus Black’s change of heart, it will at least listen to Kreacher.”

“I almost want to ask to be around to witness that, as well.”
“Regulus probably won’t screech nearly as much.” Potter frowns. “You know, if I didn’t think Draco would try to hex me, I’d ask if his family wanted to spend the week in Grimmauld Place, too. Well—not Lucius Malfoy. He’s a bit busy at the moment.”

Snape lifts an eyebrow. “You would probably have to leave Draco Malfoy Stupefied for the entire week just to keep the peace.”

“Maybe. Draco’s stupid, but a week away from his Voldemort-loving family might do him good. He’s been really twitchy the last few weeks,” Potter says.

“I’d noticed,” Snape replies, and inwardly curses for missing Draco’s behavior. His concentration had been focused in another directly entirely. Then another thought strikes him. “Potter. Say your farewells to your friends this evening, and then use the Headmaster’s fireplace to Floo home. Use it as the chance to be politic with Albus Dumbledore before the summer holiday.”

Potter sits up. “An attack on the train?”

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Snape realizes his hand is resting over the Mark on his arm. “If there is a danger, I suspect it will be localized to you. If you’re not on the train, Voldemort will have little reason to target it, and I’d rather have you behind safe walls as soon as possible.”

“Okay,” Potter agrees. “I’ll see you in a few days, sir.”

Once Potter has collected his belongings and departed for the summer, Snape uses the fireplace in his quarters to visit Malfoy Manor. If he is going to suggest that others take given opportunities to be politic, he’d best follow his own blasted advice.

Lucius is not home. He is in Azkaban, awaiting trial for his role for the break-in on the Ministry of Magic—and unlike the trials of the first war, Lucius has a very visible Dark Mark on his arm to further prove his guilt. Snape has long disliked Lucius, but didn’t think the man had gotten so sloppy as to be so easily captured. Imbecile.

Narcissa, however, is waiting to greet him. “Severus. What a pleasant surprise.” Her manners have always been perfect, but there is a worrying tic below her eye, and her grooming does not seem to be as pristine as is her custom.

“Narcissa. You are lovely as always,” Snape replies, placing the platonic kiss of the courtier upon her hand. “I’m afraid this is not a social call.”

“Draco?” Narcissa whispers at once, paling.

“Draco is well,” Snape reassures her. “He will be waiting for you on the London platform tomorrow afternoon. Is there somewhere we can speak where we will not be disturbed?”

Narcissa’s brow lifts a fraction before she nods. “But of course. My husband will be sorry to have missed your visit, Severus,” she says, leading the way from the formal parlor to her own receiving room. “Should I pass on your good wishes when I next see him?”

“Of course.” Snape watches her close the door. She takes out her wand, regards him in curious silence, and then taps a particular rose on the wall three times.

The wallpaper in the room lights up in pale pink fire, tracing every thorn, vine, and rose along the walls. The pattern replicates itself upon the white ceiling in brighter pink lines, and on the rose-colored carpet.
“I see you are still making use of what I gifted you,” Snape says.

Narcissa smiles and returns her wand to her robe pocket. “I never forget a favor, Severus Snape. What is it you wish to speak of?”

“I am about to call in the favor you just mentioned, and I apologize for it,” Snape answers her, and Narcissa’s expression tightens. “The favor I ask is that you keep what I am about to say to you forever away from the Dark Lord’s ears, eyes, and thoughts.”

Narcissa’s eyes narrow. “Go on, Severus. You have my word that the debt between us will be balanced and honored.”

“I noticed last summer that you did not seem fond of the Dark Lord’s presence in your home.” Snape rests his hands on the table to show that he is not reaching for a wand. He has wordless and wandless defensive spells, if needs must. “I wish to know how deeply that displeasure runs.”

Narcissa’s face whitens, and Snape realizes at once that her eyes have widened not with fear, but fury. “Deeply,” she whispers in a harsh voice. “He has plans for my only son, Severus. The Dark Lord is going to make an example of Draco, the better for the Dark Lord to kill my son, shame Lucius, and incite me to…to suicide, I imagine, since I would not be able to resist the urge to attempt to cause the Dark Lord’s death.”

Snape frowns. “What is it that the Dark Lord wishes for Draco to do?”

“My Lord Voldemort says it is the Malfoy family’s chance to make up for Lucius’s failure, but I know better. Once Draco returns home, the Dark Lord is going to task my son with the assassination of Albus Dumbledore.”

“One way or another, a certain defeat and a certain death.” Snape feels his lip curl up in displeasure. “And what is Lucius’s opinion of this matter?”

“Lucius.” Narcissa reaches into her robe and removes an elegant lady’s cigarette case. She opens it, removes a finely crafted cigarra from one of the best shops in Wizarding London, and lights it without using her wand. “Would you care for one, Severus?”

“No, but thank you for the generous offer.”

Narcissa nods, closing the case, and then blows a gentle breath of smoke towards the ceiling. The tobacco smells like the finest of cognacs, the smoke sweet with the hint of alcohol. “Lucius says much, but most of it is without substance. I’m no longer certain what to believe of his true intentions. When told of the Dark Lord’s plans for our son, he claimed pride in Draco’s abilities, and talks as if there is no chance that Draco will fail.”

She glances at Snape. “I love my son dearly, but he has not been as attentive in his studies as he should have been. His complaints about you in that regard tell me that you have done your best to correct this failing. I appreciate the effort, even if the effort may have ultimately been in vain.”

“I did my best, as I do for all of my Slytherins,” Snape tells her. “My attempt to teach Draco a further sense of responsibility for others by giving him the rank of Prefect…even I will admit that it was an almost immediate failure.”

“But still, you tried, and did more to correct Draco’s behavior than that old fool Slughorn would have attempted.” Narcissa breathes out another wisp of sweet smoke. “Speak of what you must, Severus.”
“Soon, there is going to be a meeting between Voldemort and a false ally, facilitated by myself,” Snape says. “If it goes well, there will be plans in motion to negate Draco’s danger. If it goes poorly, Draco will still be facing an impossible task, one that I will not be able to help him complete—indeed, you and I both know that the Dark Lord would murder both Draco and myself for daring to disobey.

“My suggestion depends on a single question, Narcissa. Whose survival do you desire more? Lucius, or Draco?”

Narcissa draws in a deep lungful of smoke, releasing it in a cloud that glows pink from the light of the active wards. “I am a mother first, Severus. I will always choose Draco. Make your suggestion.”

“It is my belief that perhaps Sirius Black and Narcissa Black Malfoy should mend the family rift,” Snape says, watching her with careful eyes. She does not move or speak, so he continues. “Sirius’s current legally named Heir has made the offer of shelter to your family. Number 12 Grimmauld Place is not the luxury you are accustomed to within the Manor, but you are well aware that it is an excellent, nigh-impenetrable shelter.”

“To join their little band of hapless Phoenixes, marching to Dumbledore’s orders?” Narcissa asks in a withering voice.

“No. For shelter and safety only. It would be asked that you not go out and perform tasks for the Dark Lord were you to accept the offer, but no one would make you fight against him, either.” Snape lets a moment of silence play out. “Think of it also as Draco’s chance to perhaps learn and grow, to become the sort of man that Sirius would be willing to name as another legal Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black.”

Narcissa does not look impressed. “Sirius Black betrayed the family.”

“Did he?” Snape raises an eyebrow in polite disbelief. “He was sorted into Gryffindor, and immediately became anathema to his entire family merely by having the wrong colors on his scarf. You know the ways of the Sorting Hat, Narcissa.”

Narcissa’s nod is a touch resentful. “I do.”

“You also know the ways in which Black fought in the last war. Courage did not fail him, and he comported himself with more dignity and regal bearing than he ever managed when we were all in Hogwarts together. He spent twelve years in Azkaban and emerged sane, composed of the sort of steel that is aware of just how far it can bend without breaking. The same cannot be said of your sister.”

“Hmph. Bella was insane before Azkaban, Severus.”

“I’m aware. However, her tenure in its walls has made those old traits decidedly worse. I doubt she would hesitate to kill me, you, Lucius, or Draco. All it would take is for the Dark Lord’s favor to slip a single iota, and she would murder any of us with pleasure.” Snape sighs. “Bellatrix was sighted during the scuffle at the Ministry this past week, Narcissa. Voldemort’s loyal imprisoned followers have already been freed.”

Narcissa regards him in surprise. “There was not a word of it breathed in the news. Not a hint on Lucius’s face that such a thing had happened before he participated in that bit of foolishness.”

“He was either not aware until that moment, or has chosen true folly if he has begun to keep secrets from you,” Snape says. “I almost pity him if it turns out to be the latter.”
Narcissa’s smile gains a hint of dark amusement. “If Draco never earns a place in the Black lineage again, I can at least make certain that he becomes Heir to the Malfoy Estate.”

Snape removes a bit of paper from his robe and slides the scrap of old, rough-edged parchment across the table to rest just in front of Narcissa’s hand. “When the date of this potentially dangerous meeting is known, it will appear on that piece of paper, along with that week’s password for Floo access to the Black family townhouse. You might even know before that time—with Lucius imprisoned, the Dark Lord might call upon you to represent the Malfoy family interests during the meeting. Doing so will not cause the offer of shelter to be rescinded, not when the act itself is of grave necessity. If you or Draco come to Number 12 Grimmauld Place, others will know to expect you. If you do not, I will still do what I can to safeguard Draco at Hogwarts, but I cannot save Draco from himself.”

Narcissa does not move to take the parchment. “Whose side are you truly on, Severus?”

“An intelligent Slytherin remembers that there is no such thing,” Snape replies. “I also remember who won the last war, Narcissa…and it was not Lord Voldemort.”

Narcissa nods and stands. Snape does not see her take it, but the scrap of paper is gone from the table by the time he rises to his feet. She opens the door and escorts him back to the parlor fireplace without a word.

“I will give what you’ve said due consideration, Severus,” Narcissa says at last. “And, when this ridiculousness is over, you will still be welcome in my home.”

Snape accepts her hand to plant the more formal departing kiss upon silken skin. “And though its charms are nonexistent, you will still be welcome in mine.”

* * * * *

The next meeting Snape has with the Order is to discuss Potter’s offer of shelter to the Malfoy family, among other political notions. Snape sits at the kitchen table with Lupin, Black, Albus, Molly and Arthur Weasley, the Diggory family, Alastor Moody, and Nymphadora Tonks. Tonks’s mother, Andromeda, is sitting next to her daughter, a dignified frown gracing her features. Ted Tonks just seems irritated by the entire prospect.

“Narcissa Malfoy.” Black is trying not to grimace. “I’m not sure I trust her to dwell in my house without betraying us all.”

“However, she does sound as if her priorities have become drastically different from Lucius’s,” Albus notes. He was less than pleased to be told that Potter offered certain endangered parties shelter without asking Albus’s permission. Black wisely decided to expand the offer of one week to the entire summer for anyone who chooses to accept.

“As a mother, I do understand the desire to safeguard her son over that of any concern for politics,” Molly murmurs, resting her hand atop Arthur’s. “I also understand her desire not to fight her husband across a potential battlefield, too. Would we be able to convince her to accept an Unbreakable Vow to safeguard the Order’s headquarters, if not a vow to the Order itself?”

Albus looks at him. “Severus?”
“I have known Narcissa Malfoy for many years, though not as many as others.” Snape inclines his head at Andromeda Black Tonks. “If Narcissa were to show up on the doorstep tomorrow, it is because she is fully cognizant and aware of what it will mean to do so.”

“I agree,” Andromeda intones quietly. “I also must admit to some hint of selfishness. It would be nice to regain one of my sisters and know that she might survive the Dark Lord’s war. Merlin knows that Bellatrix is beyond hope.”

“As to our family rooming here for the summer…do you think You-Know-Who is going to push that hard, Severus?” Arthur asks. He is all but recovered from Nagini’s attack on Christmas Day, but still has moments of weakness if he does not conserve his strength.

“If he already plans for Draco Malfoy to assassinate Albus Dumbledore before the end of the next school year? Yes,” Snape replies. “He is angry about his defeat in the Ministry. He is angry about Potter’s invulnerability to the Killing Curse. He fears it will mean he cannot defeat the enemy that still causes others to doubt his strength. If he cannot get to Potter, the Dark Lord will attempt to use Potter’s allies in an attempt to draw Potter out of this house and its protections.”

“Which cannot be allowed to happen.” Albus is stroking his beard. “I do not suggest that the adults sequester themselves away for the entire summer. You are all trained to defend yourselves, and aside from your positions of employment, there is much to do to prepare for what is coming. The children, however…they, I think, should remain within the safety of this house’s walls. If that comes to include Draco Malfoy, then we can all breathe a sigh of relief that at least for the summer, he will gain new perspective. Whether he learns from that exposure is his decision.

“As to the safety of 12 Grimmauld Place, a minor cannot take a vow without a guardian’s consent,” Albus says. “Even if Narcissa grants that consent, Mister Malfoy still has the right to refuse. He would have to be brought into the house via Floo, and never told the words that reveal 12 Grimmauld Place’s location to enemies waiting outside. Draco will also be safe at Hogwarts once school resumes. I fear no assassination attempt from that quarter, but the boy will have to be watched.”

“Theoretically, Voldemort’s followers must still be of legal adulthood to accept the Mark, as well.” Snape hesitates, though a quiet part of himself enjoys that there are adults in the room who still quail to hear Voldemort’s name spoken aloud. “If he becomes desperate, I do not know if the Dark Lord will adhere to that. None of us can go about checking the arms of students for that Mark, either.”

“What, is he not telling his favorite little Dumbledore spy all that he plans?” Black asks Snape mockingly.

Snape lets his gaze drag in slow, lazy regard over to Black. “And yet, I am more useful gathering what scraps I can manage than a dog who does nothing more than spend most of his time hiding within these fading, hideous walls.”

“Get stuffed, Snivellus.”

“Gentlemen,” Albus interjects calmly, while Snape and Black glare at each other. So. Utterly. Sorted. Into. The. Wrong. House. “We will accomplish nothing if we devolve into childish arguments. The offer of shelter was made by Harry, but ultimately it is up to Sirius.”

“I’m fine with all of it, actually,” Black finally says, after giving Snape one more attempt at a meaningful scowl. “We might have to mute Draco Malfoy for the duration, but once it is given, Narcissa has always kept her word. Everyone else is quite welcome, though the Diggorys might not be fond of London.”
“It’s London,” Cedric Diggory says with a bright smile, though his parents look less convinced. “I always wanted to spend a few months living in London. Perfect opportunity to see if it’s to my taste, Mister Black.”

“Sirius, please,” Sirius tells Cedric, whose smile widens. The young man is not yet used to being referred to as an adult, for all that he’s nearing nineteen. The Diggory family must dwell in one of the dullest, most uneventful areas of Great Britain for basic of considerations to still be so new.

Then there are the Weasley twins, who graduated at the end of the school year. Instead of demanding their rights as adults to sit in at the meeting, they have extended some sort of spying gadget from the ceiling in order to overhear what’s being said. Potter has informed Snape that the twins intend to open a joke shop in Diagon Alley with their mysterious acquisition of the proper funds, but that they also intend to develop quite a bit of bespelled spying gadgets for the Order’s use.

Their apparent lack of participation does seem to be keeping Molly’s blood pressure under control, considering she can do nothing to stop her eldest children from becoming active members of the Order of the Phoenix. Instead, most of Molly’s concern is currently wrapped up in motherly outrage that a Half-blooded Veela witch has ensnared her precious, helpless child. As if William Weasley has ever been so foolish. William is also a vast improvement over Delacour’s previous choice of Roger Davies, which speaks well of Delacour’s increased maturity since the Triwizard Tournament’s conclusion.

However, if the Weasley twins are listening, then so is Potter, Granger, Ronald Weasley, and possibly Ginevra as well. Ronald Weasley is probably turning intriguing shades of red at the prospect of sharing living space with Draco Malfoy for the summer.

Strange, though; Snape has noticed that Ginevra Weasley spends time with Granger, and with her siblings and companions from other Houses, but he now realizes he cannot recall any instance of Ginevra in Potter’s company unless it’s at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

Snape gets one single opportunity to speak with Potter in the Black family parlor before he has to depart. There is the improved Wolfsbane formula for Lupin to prepare; he plans to create enough to last for six months in case of incidents that keep Snape away from his brewing cauldron for too long. Otherwise, he will return to Grimmauld Place in a week’s time, during the middle of the night, when the false prophecy sphere is ready to receive its crafted Pensieved memory.

“I realize that I have not seen Miss Weasley in your company in a long time.”

Potter glances up from the book he’s reading, which Snape is amused to see involves the funeral preservation of corpses. “Well, no. I suppose I never thought to mention it.”

“Mention what?” Snape asks. This may simply be adolescent drama, but Snape learned long ago that no bit of information is truly useless.

“Oh.” Potter straightens his glasses. “Ginny’s mad at me. Has been for a while now.”

That’s a surprise, especially given how much Ginevra Weasley followed Potter around like a lovesick fool—even before she arrived at Hogwarts. “Whatever for?”

“For not saving her at the end of my second year,” Potter says, which causes Snape to stare at him.

“Does she forget the fact that you were spell-damaged, while also conveniently glossing over the fact that you are the reason she was saved?”

“Pretty much exactly that,” Potter replies. “She wanted me to be her knight in shining armor or
something, and when I failed at being her perfect hero...I honestly don’t understand people, Professor. She’s getting a bit nicer about it, but Ron says I have not yet been forgiven for failing to give her a proper storybook rescue.”

Snape narrows his eyes. “Storybook rescues do not exist.”

Potter shrugs. “With Voldemort around, she’ll have the chance to figure that out, sir.”

He decides to change the subject. “Your choice of reading material is quite interesting.”

“Well, if the plan succeeds and Voldemort ingests White Fire, I thought you might like some assistance in keeping up appearances,” Potter explains, placing a page marker into the book before closing it. “I’ll let you know if I find anything plausible. The Blacks were really fond of going into their tombs looking like they were just going to spend the next century taking a nap.”

Snape has had unfortunate need to spend a night in the Black family crypt, during the first war, while Bellatrix and her new husband made exceedingly disconcerting noises somewhere in that dark and cold maze of rooms. Most of the bodies had indeed looked to be sleeping, to the point that Snape had actually drawn his wand and poked one just to ensure it was really dead. Voldemort liked Inferi; he wouldn’t have put that type of curse past the Black family, either.

Potter stands up and pulls his jumper back down into proper place. “Sir, before you go, I want to do something.”

Snape has heard that sentence spoken in some truly ridiculous circumstances. “Potter, if you attempt to kiss me, I shall slap you and complain to all of my compromised virtue.”

Potter laughs. “Not that. No, I’d rather you be stuck pondering the fact that Cedric Diggory is excellent at kissing.”

Snape squeezes his eyes shut. “I did not need to ever ponder that, thank you.”

While Snape’s eyes are closed, Potter hugs him. Snape is so startled that he simply freezes.

“You are supposed to hug someone back,” Potter informs him seriously. The overgrown brat is now only two inches shorter than Snape, and that seems to be where his growth stalled out. It’s still an impressive height for a Potter or an Evans; James and Lily had both been much shorter.

“Forgive me; I am out of practice at being assaulted by others,” Snape drawls back. Potter’s chuckle is like a warm vibration against his chest.

When is the last time someone held him? He can’t bloody well remember.

What alerts him to the fact that Potter is well and truly up to mischief is when that feeling of warmth—of being cared for—begins to saturate Snape’s perception. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Sharing. Hold still, Snape,” Potter says, which is such a baffling statement that Snape does exactly that. He isn’t in danger, and he knows better than to interrupt a magical working in progress.

What comes to him then is the clean scent of warm citrus blended with cool wintergreen, filling his nose and almost bringing tears to his eyes.

Lily. He’d crafted that scent for Lily in their second-year, and it had been so favored that he never knew her to wear anything else.
When Potter steps back, Snape stares at him. The impression of citrus and wintergreen is no longer as strong, but still present, as is that feeling of odd warmth. “What did you do, Harry?”

Potter smiles. “I told you, I was sharing.” Then his smile vanishes. “I don’t know how to care for many people. I do a decent enough job of it with you, Hermione, Remus, Sirius, Luna, and the Weasleys, but otherwise, I’m not—I don’t—I don’t get it, most of the time. Maybe when people are less terrified of me, that list will get longer, but right now, you’re all pretty much it.

“If there is anything left to the protective magic that Dumbledore says my Mum gave me when she died, well…I don’t want any of you to die, but out of everyone, you’re the one in the most danger. Maybe she’ll look after you the same way she’s been looking after me.”

Snape feels his lips turn down in a scowl. “You give up a tactical advantage, and you assume she would be even remotely interested in doing any such thing.”

“Well, no, Voldemort ruined that tactical advantage with the Blood-and-Bone ceremony,” Potter reminds Snape. “Some of that protective magic is still there, though. Besides, you have my mother’s Patronus, Snape. How do you know she hasn’t been looking out for you since the moment you decided to swear a blood oath over her grave?”

Snape glares at Potter. “That’s ridiculous.”

Potter merely shrugs. “Maybe, but you’re the one with the doe Patronus. Not once have I heard you say that you conjured it on purpose. You’ll just have to cope with the notion that there is more than one person in existence who finds you tolerable, sir.”

Snape draws himself up in apparent affront. He has no idea what else to do. “You’d best have something useful for me upon my return,” he says in a cold voice.

Potter smiles. “Yes, sir.”

Black is in the kitchen when Snape goes downstairs to depart by Floo. “Yes, I’m the only one here,” he confirms, correctly interpreting the expression on Snape’s face. “What’s your problem, Severus?”

“You godson hugged me,” Snape hisses out, trying to figure out if he’s offended, appalled, or on the verge of crumbling into bitter, cracked bits. He can’t afford the last one, so he goes with the first two options.

Black snorts. “Severus Snape, you are the only man in existence I know of who could look so infuriated over the idea that someone gives a damn about you.”

“If you also attempt to hug me, I will actually hex your legs off, Sirius Black.”

Black laughs. “I don’t like you that much, Severus. Go get me an appointment with a terrifying bastard. We’ll see you next week.”
Snape doesn’t start off with Black’s offer of a trade when he sees Voldemort again, two days before Saturday. First there is a meeting, one that discusses Voldemort’s impending infiltration of the Ministry. It’s a subtle work of art. The plan is so precise, so complete in the scope of what it will accomplish, that Snape doesn’t think anyone will be capable of thwarting it even if Snape gives advance warning.

He is going to have to narrow his focus. If the Ministry falls to Voldemort’s control, so will Hogwarts. If Snape is not there as Voldemort’s trusted servant, control of the school will be given to someone else, and the list of horrible choices is far too long.

“Perhaps I should attempt to convince any Half-blood or Mudblood—” he despises speaking that word “—member of the faculty at Hogwarts that it would be wisest to depart, the better to fill those positions with true witches and wizards.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Alecto Carrow asks in narrow-eyed suspicion. Idiot.

“Because Severus is a true Slytherin, capable of detecting what lies within the plans I speak of,” Voldemort tells Carrow in a chilling whisper. “Can you do so without arousing Dumbledore’s suspicion, Severus?”

“Possibly. I can’t simply kill them, as we did to Burbage. That will be noticed. I will think on it, My Lord. If it cannot be done, then they will simply have to be disposed of when your plans have reached fruition.”

Voldemort’s nod is slow and deliberate. “Good. I must ask something of you, Severus. All our plans hinge upon it. If young Malfoy fails in his task, you must complete it.”

Snape blinks once in calm contemplation before he looks to Voldemort. “If Mister Malfoy fails at killing Albus Dumbledore, will it mean his death, My Lord?”

“He will have failed me,” Voldemort reminds them all, but Snape knows from his body language that he has not yet made a final decision.

“He will, and as we all know well, a punishment will be administered by My Lord,” Snape says. “But he is the sole Heir to the Malfoy Estate. That is a power base it may be unwise to lose.”

“Narcissa does not inherit?” Voldemort asks, his voice dark and curious.

Bellatrix laughs in a way that grates on Snape’s ears. “No, my Lord. The Malfoys are quite backwards in that respect. They consider my sister to be a Black, first and foremost. Little tiny Draco is the only one who can inherit the estate. If he is not alive to receive it, old magic will come into play. Land and titles will be lost.”

“The Malfoy coffers run deep,” Rodolphus Lestrange offers. “If the young man is sufficiently broken after his failure, then all My Lord needs is a pliable puppet, one capable of opening a vault for our benefit whenever it is needed.”

Voldemort lifts his head, the flaps over his nostrils moving in a way that resembles a creature scenting the air. “You all raise valid concerns. I will think on what young Mister Malfoy’s punishment should be if he fails.”
When he fails, Snape knows that Voldemort is thinking. He refuses to clench his jaw, an action that might be observed by others.

“Is there other news that my loyal Death Eaters must report before we part ways again?”

Snape waits until the others have confirmed that they do not before he speaks. “Actually, My Lord, I do have something I feel is worthy of your attention.”

“Oh?” Voldemort’s eyes glimmer red in the candlelight before returning to the watery blue that is most often dominant. “Tell me, Severus.”

“Sirius Black wishes for safe passage to meet with you,” Snape says. His words are greeted with immediate derision and Bellatrix’s wild laughter. He ignores them all. “Black claims to have something My Lord is interested in acquiring.”

“I see.” Voldemort frowns. “What is it he wishes for in return, Severus?”

“That, he will not tell me.” A lie that is true; he is practiced at those. He pauses just long enough to rouse further curiosity. “I believe it may be related to what My Lord was seeking within the Ministry.”

Voldemort straightens in the same, slow way a snake will when it has spied its prey. “Oh. How interesting. A trap, Severus?”

“He has told Dumbledore nothing of it, or Dumbledore would have voiced his concerns to me in order to keep the meeting from happening,” Snape replies. “Whatever it is that Black is offering, he makes the gesture on his own.”

“Hmm. Tell Sirius Black that he shall have his meeting. I will acquire whatever it is he brings, and then I’m sure Bellatrix would like to make his acquaintance again.”

Snape braces himself. “My Lord, to kill Sirius Black is to invite the same problem with the Malfoy Estate. Bellatrix, if you would stop giggling long enough to inform our Lord as to the matter of the Black family inheritance laws?”

Bellatrix lets out one more insane, bubbly giggle. “Severus is right, My Lord,” she says, smiling with her face propped upon her hand as she leans over the table. If it is an attempt to show off her cleavage, Snape has no idea who is supposed to be benefitted by the act. “Unless Sirius Black names another Heir aside from precious Harry Potter, then all lands, titles, and coffers all will also be lost to us. Three Black sisters live, but without being Named, we will gain nothing from Sirius Black’s death other than delight in the accomplishment.”

“And, perhaps, a show of…diplomatic good faith might best be served here,” Snape deigns to mention. Voldemort’s head swings back around to gaze at him, the slitted pupils of his eyes more pronounced. This pushes close to the edge of the Dark Lord’s patience, then. “If Sirius Black wishes to meet with you at all, it could be a sign that perhaps he is rethinking his allegiances. Attacking him before he’s made a decision will not endear him to My Lord’s cause.”

“True, true.” Voldemort rests the tip of his wand against his lips. Snape has to stomp on a moment of intense amusement when he realizes how much the gesture matches one of Albus Dumbledore’s favorite mock-thoughtful poses. “Make the arrangements, Severus. Tell Sirius Black I will meet with him just after dark on the fifteenth of July. I think the cemetery of Little Hangleton an appropriate place to receive him.”

“Leaving his body there would be so much fun,” Bellatrix whispers, and giggles again.
“It will be arranged, My Lord,” Snape promises.

One step closer. Excellent.

Then he returns to Hogwarts and feels like he’s been thrown eighteen steps back. “WHAT IN MERLIN’S NAME IS THE MATTER WITH YOU?”

Albus holds up his right hand to reveal flesh that is swiftly turning dark with necrosis. “This, I should think.”

“IDIOT!” Snape roars, and then bolts back to the fireplace. He selects potions from his private arsenal of curse and poison cures with hands that are on the verge of shaking. What he’s just seen is the mark of a curse so dire that he’s not certain any of them will work.

While he tries to keep Albus Dumbledore from expiring in his own office in most unpleasant fashion, Snape takes note of the ring on Dumbledore’s desk; the Sword of Gryffindor lies next to it. The ring is broken, with its original stone lying beside the severed metal pieces.

“Why, why,” Snape repeats, incensed, “did you put on that ring? It was so cursed that it screams of it even after you’ve chopped it in half with a blasted sword.”

Albus looks to be in pain, or perhaps Snape is seeing shame on the Headmaster’s face for the very first time. “I was a fool. Sorely tempted…”

Snape wants to roll his eyes. “Tempted by what?” Albus doesn’t answer him, which just angers him even more. “It’s a miracle you managed to return here at all from wherever you dug up that hideous relic. All I have done is contained the curse to your right hand, Albus. It will eventually prove fatal, no matter how I attempt to stop it.”

Albus raises his now entirely black hand and examines it. There is mental distance afoot, given the man’s apparent lack of concern over a limb that looks like it was burnt to near-ash in a fire. “You did very well, Severus. I was not actually certain I would survive at all.” He turns his arm to view the backside of his ruined hand. “How long do you think I have?”

Throwing things at the old fool only means that Snape will have to clean up a mess. “I don’t know. Perhaps a year, at most.” How utterly, infuriatingly convenient.

Snape doesn’t even need to offer up the intelligence he gained from Voldemort this evening. Albus has already discerned most of it for himself. The only thing that stokes his anger afresh is when Dumbledore asks Snape to promise to look after the students of Hogwarts upon his death. As if Snape has not been doing that very thing since he accepted a teaching post!

Bollocks. The next school term is going to be a nightmare, and it’s still a full eight weeks distant.

“Tell me what that is,” he orders, when Albus seems to run out of words.

“Ah, the ring. It belonged to one Marvolo Gaunt, Severus.”

Marvolo. “You’ve found Voldemort’s family.”

“I did, yes. Such poor beginnings, too,” Albus muses. “But poor beginnings do not create monsters. I do believe, however, that Tom Marvolo Riddle murdered a family member to place the curse on that ring.”

Another Horcrux, then. The Headmaster has not seen fit to share his knowledge of the existence of
Voldemort’s Horcruxes with anyone, so Snape will keep his silence and let the old fool dodder along on what he now suspects is a failing path. If not a failing one, then at least one littered with far too many sacrifices than even Snape is comfortable with.

_Voldemort didn’t know of the ring’s destruction_, Snape realizes. He could not have, else Snape’s earlier meeting with the Dark Lord would have had an abrupt ending, and possibly a body count composed of anyone fool enough to linger within range of Voldemort’s wand. Snape doesn’t trust that lack of awareness to be true of all the remaining Horcruxes, not when Voldemort knew of the diary’s fate. They must still hold course on not destroying the other Horcruxes until the right moment.

While Snape is not delighted by the idea of touching the ring, the curse was broken with the ring’s destruction. It is now safe to handle, even if it has a lingering feel of unpleasantness.

The stone has no such sensation when Snape touches it. He picks it up and holds it closer to the nearest light. Though the stone is now cracked, the emblem is unmistakable.

Snape shakes his head. “The Resurrection Stone was irresistible, then? That was still a foolish blunder to make, Albus, no matter the ancient family heirloom in question.” His senses are often fine-tuned to such things. This ring was held by the same bloodline for the entirety of its existence.

Snape was already aware that the Black library is missing details from the old lineages, but this is a lack he wasn’t aware of. Voldemort is Peverell-descended, just like Potter.

It also means that James Potter strutted around in Death’s own Cloak of Invisibility and never had enough brains in his head to recognize the item for what it was. At least his son seems to be in the habit of using the tool wisely, and does not rely solely on its charms.

Snape already knows who bears the Elder Wand. He was the son of Eileen Prince. While she never mastered motherhood, she did make certain that Snape knew what the three Deathly Hallows looked like.

Snape holds up the Stone between thumb and forefinger. “I wish to borrow this for three days, Albus.” Three days, three turns. Tradition should be observed, after all.

“ _The Resurrection Stone? Severus, much like the Mirror of Erised, that is not a wise thing to use,_” Albus says. Bloody hypocrite.

“I am not asking to use it for whom you might suspect.” Snape squeezes the Stone in his palm to hold it more securely. “I need to speak to my mother.”

Albus’s eyebrows lift in almost comical surprise. “I did not realize the two of you had anything to discuss.”

“She may have taken a secret to her grave that I would find useful over the summer, Albus. At the end of the three days, I will return the Stone to you, and you can do whatever the hell you want with it. Mount it on top of this year’s Christmas Tree if you like; I don’t care. Do I have your permission?”

Albus nods, but he still appears concerned. “Three days from this moment, Severus. I trust you to return it to me.”

“Well, you’ve already chosen to master Death in the more traditional fashion,” Snape observes, giving Albus’s hand a snide look. “I do not have concerns that you’ll be grasping in vain for lost cloaks. Go to bed, Headmaster. The only thing left is for you to rest and allow my potions to do what preventative work they can to extend your life.”
“I believe I will do exactly that. Thank you, Severus.”

Snape resists the urge to sigh. “Good night, Albus.” He returns to his own quarters not by Floo, but by walking the halls. He needs the time to consider the wording of his request. The Resurrection Stone burns like a brand the entire way, constant reminder of what he holds.

He is not yet ready to confront the truth that his most vocal supporter in the wizarding world is dying.

In his quarters, Snape activates the wards. In here they are different than the classroom, burning with the pale blue fire of a superheated flame. Snape prefers this over his classroom and office wards, which shine with the green light of a properly executed Avada Kedavra.

Snape seats himself next to his fireplace. His wand ignites the fire to warm the room, and the school’s kitchen elves deliver a tea tray bearing a light evening meal—he missed dinner in the Great Hall while dealing with Albus’s foolishness. When the first warm cup of tea is resting in his left hand, Snape turns the Stone over in his right hand three times while focusing on the memory of her face.

The shade of Eileen Prince Snape appears grudgingly, as if resenting the Stone’s call. Her features morph into the familiar long face with its sunken brow and narrow, pinched expression. By the time she finishes manifesting, even the sallowness of her skin is visible, though Snape can see the wall through her form.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Severus.” Eileen regards him with cool disdain. It is a marked reminder that he learned the expression literally at his mother’s knee. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Liar.” Snape keeps the Stone carefully held in his hand. “Death did, at least, free you from my father.”

“Tobias. Mm. You would have been a much more engaging child if I had listened to my parents and married that nice boy from a proper Jewish wizarding family,” Eileen says.

Snape raises an eyebrow. “I’m Jewish? That might have been useful information to have when you were still alive to tell me.”

Eileen sniffs. “Tobias did not hold with allowing me to keep any part of my faith; holding onto my wizarding heritage was difficult enough. Your father gave you enough grief. I was not a proper parent, but I was also not cruel enough to give Tobias more fuel to use against you during your childhood, Severus.”

Snape nods. “Fair enough, Mother.” He hesitates; Eileen Prince had never been a proper parent, no, but she had, in her own way, tried to provide for her only son. “I hope the years since your death have brought you some measure of peace.”

“Peace.” Eileen considers it. “Perhaps one day, maybe, though I never had much use for the feeling when I was alive. What is it you want, Severus? I doubt you were so fond of me that you used the Resurrection Stone to call me here out of affection.”

“I have more affection for you, than I ever did my father,” Snape retorts, annoyed. “But yes, I did call you for another purpose. I have a question.”

“Ask. I should not linger here too long. I have no wish to become yet another of Hogwarts’ many ghosts.”
“I know that the Prince family once had preservation spells meant for use upon the living, so that they retained a younger, haler appearance until Death was all but knocking upon their doors,” Snape says. “I might have dire need of such a thing, though not for myself. Other means of acquiring it are proving difficult.”

“You would be wise to use it upon yourself. You are a man of thirty-six, Severus, but your life is wearing upon you.”

Snape frowns. “I am not vain.”

“Vanity is not what I concern myself with, nor what I speak of,” Eileen says in a dry voice. “Unfortunately, I cannot give you what you seek. My parents were supposed to teach it to me, but after I unwisely chose to marry Tobias Snape, they refused to pass on the lesson.”

“Would they tell me, if I summoned them?” Snape asks.

Eileen looks at him as if he’s a blithering idiot. “Tell you, a Half-blood? They would laugh in your face. The Resurrection Stone allows one to call a spirit forth from beyond the veil, but it does not incite obedience.”

“No, I did not think it did. You spent too much time educating me on the matter.” Snape shakes his head. “Antioch’s wand has been found. I have studied it, and find I do not desire it at all.” As if he wants to be cursed with the Elder Wand. His own wand serves quite well enough, thank you.

It does make Snape wonder. Himself, Potter, and Voldemort—were their fates always meant to intertwine in such a fashion? It seems ludicrous, and yet there are multiple truths now at play he would be a fool to deny.

“While seeing the wand returned to its proper lineage would be favorable, I understand why you’ve made that decision,” Eileen says, surprising him. “Do not keep the Stone, either. The magic it emanates would only place you in more danger than you already dwell in, my son.”

“Mother,” Snape says. “Perhaps I will see you again soon.”

Eileen shakes her head. “I had better not. You are far too intelligent to be caught out so easily, child.”

Snape drops the Stone onto the table at his side, and the shade of his mother vanishes. He wants to rest his head in his hands, feeling a headache attempting to form. He never liked speaking with his mother, even when she was in a vaguely favorable mood.

He finishes his tea, still disappointed in the lack of information. If record of such a spell still exists, it may truly be up to Potter’s excellent skills in library research to find it.

Snape clasps his hands together and rests his fingertips against lip and chin. He had no idea the Prince lineage was of a different faith than most of Wizarding Britain’s Pure-blood families. They most often follow the older paths of the Kells, the Picts, the northern Irish ways spread by Tuatha de Danann, the Angles, the Saxons, or no beliefs at all but for faith in their own magic. Christianity and other religions are more common among the Half-blood families and the Muggle-borns, especially those who are of more recent British immigration. In terms of tactics, it serves no purpose to reveal this newfound part of Snape’s lineage, but it does rather explain why he has no use for Christmas.

Only when what little food he’s eaten has been consumed does he again turn the Stone three times in his hand.

She appears much more quickly than Eileen had, assuming proper form at once instead of dragging
out the process. Her hair is unbound, falling almost to her waist in dark red waves, and her green eyes are as intense as they’d been in life.

“Lily,” Snape whispers.

“Severus,” Lily returns his greeting with a smile. “It’s so good to see you again.”

Snape draws in an unsteady breath. “Is it?”

“Of course.” Lily walks forward and kneels down before him, resting a hand on his knee. There is the faintest impression of touch, but nothing else. “I’m so sorry.”

Snape frowns. “Those are meant to be my words.”

“You have already apologized, many times over,” Lily reminds him tartly. “Why would I demand another?”

“Because it is deserved,” Snape says, and hates it when his breath catches in his throat.

Lily shakes her head. “My son was right, you know. I abandoned my friend when he most needed me.”

“You made a decision you thought was best for yourself.”

“No, I made the easiest decision. You and I both know that ‘best’ and ‘easiest’ aren’t always the same thing.” Lily seems frustrated. “I shouldn’t have—I let the House prejudices get to me, Sev.”

He stares at her. “You absolutely did not.”

Lily smiles. “I did. I was sixteen, Severus, and neither of us were saints, then or now. I got as much grief from the Gryffindors as you did from the Slytherins, all that rubbish about being a House traitor, and when you started to look as if you were acting the part…I ignored everything I knew about you and turned my back. All I have been able to do to make up for that stubbornness is follow you from the moment you shed blood over my grave. That was a foolish oath to make, by the way.”

“It was my choice.” Snape presses his lips together. He’s not sure this is the best idea he has ever had.

Lily pats his knee, which offers a repetition of that faint sensation. “You’re still an idiot.”

“And you are still very much a Gryffindor,” Snape retorts, feeling his lips twitch in a smile he desperately wants to suppress.

“We both should have been Hufflepuffs,” Lily says dryly. “It would have made everything so much simpler.”

He wants to laugh, but can’t. “I am still so very sorry,” Snape utters in a harsh, stifled whisper. He will not lose his control, no matter the situation.

“I know. I forgave you long ago, Sev,” Lily tells him, her gaze serious and sad. “Harry would not have been able to share my gift with you if it were otherwise.”

“What is it?” Snape asks. “I know it is a form of protection that once burnt Quirrell to ash—”

“That was far more enjoyable than is proper for me to feel.” Lily’s lips quirk up in a dangerous smile. She was Gryffindor for a reason, after all. “It is protection, yes, but it’s also me, Severus. Harry
might be forced to bear a tiny fraction of that bastard’s soul, but death has not kept me from my son. Voldemort’s ritual gained him the ability to touch Harry without burning to ash, but my presence also protects Harry from true possession.”

That is useful information. “How?” Snape asks, unable to resist the urge to reach out and touch her hand. It is insubstantial, just as a ghost’s flesh would be, but he can still feel her. It makes the scent of wintergreen and citrus fill his senses once more.

“A power that the Dark Lord knows not,” Lily quotes. “Love is the most terrifying sensation Voldemort has ever felt. If he breaks through Harry’s excellent protections by battering his way through, it is an act he will regret.”

“Part of the trap. An utterly brilliant part of the trap,” Snape murmurs. “Lily, I love you.”

She smiles. “I love you, too, though James is currently whinging that I’m not supposed to say such things as a married woman. One day I will get it through his stubborn head that love between men and women does not automatically include romance. Now then,” she says, turning serious. “You need to take the Stone to Grimmauld Place, Severus. There are people residing there who need closure just as much as you do.”

“This isn’t closure. This is self-indulgence,” Snape mutters.

Lily rolls her eyes. “And one day, I will get it through your thick skull that accepting affection is not selfishness.”

* * * *

Snape Apparates back to Grimmauld Place, just within the proper spot on the walkway where the Fidelius Charm hides visitors from view of those spying from the street. When he knocks, it is Lupin who receives him. “Severus,” Lupin says in surprise. “We were not expecting you until Saturday.”

“Circumstances changed,” Snape murmurs. He hasn’t dared release his hold upon the Stone, and it still feels like he clutches a burning ember. “Let me in, please,” he requests, uttering the current verbal password for the Order.

“Who do I need to gather?” Lupin asks, understanding at once that this is not any sort of social call.

“Black. Potter. Yourself. If Miss Granger has arrived, then bring her as well.”

“Those of us who share Unbreakable Vows. Is it that bad?” Lupin asks.

“I bring bad news, good news, and improbable objects,” Snape replies tiredly. “Have you finished constructing the wards in the parlor?”

“I did it the last week of June, actually,” Lupin tells him. “I’ll get the others. You sit down. You look like death, Severus.”

Snape wants to make a snide observation, but he is too rattled to come up with one. Instead, he selects a chair and leans back into it, his hand tightening around the Stone until its edges bite into his skin.
Potter enters first, gives him an odd look, and then sits down directly across from him. “Are you all right, Snape?”

“Yes, Harry.”

“I’m just—you look like you’re afraid,” Potter says.

Snape thinks about it. “I am,” he admits. “If you tell the dog or the werewolf, I’ll hex you.”

Potter nods, offering him a faint smile, before Black and Lupin enter with Granger tailing behind them. Black and Granger were obviously dragged from their beds, but they’re both quick to recover their wits when they see that Snape is waiting for them.

Lupin closes the parlor’s double doors, gently lowers the latch, and then taps his wand against the frame of a truly hideous painting of Cygnus Black the First. The new wards light up in the same shade of gold that burns in Lupin’s eyes when the wolf is most prominent.

Snape watches to make certain the wards wrap the room properly before speaking. “Albus has done something so foolish that it astounds me, but it may also have provided us with the means to save Draco Malfoy, among other things.”

“How?” Black asks. He is not fond of his cousin’s child, but he has become a vocal champion of protecting those who are in danger not of their own making. Perhaps prison truly did drive that lesson home.

“I will explain that part later, when both Draco and Narcissa Malfoy are present,” Snape answers. “In the meantime, you all need to know that Albus Dumbledore is dying. He might last throughout the school term, but not much longer beyond that.”

“How!” Lupin blurts, appalled. “What did he do, Severus?”

“He succumbed to terrible temptation for reasons that escape me, and placed a ring upon his finger that was cursed by Voldemort himself.” Snape nods in response to the mutual looks of disbelief. “I yelled at him for doing so, even as I acted to preserve his life. Without that assistance, he would be dead already.”

“Albus is dying, I can’t imagine a world without that cagey old bastard.” Black wraps his arm around Granger’s shoulders. Miss Granger looks shaken and upset, but she doesn’t utter a sound.

Snape hesitates before nodding again. “For now, I believe it to be of vital importance to pretend ignorance of Albus’s fate. Proof of the curse is visible on his right hand, but I don’t know how he is going to handle that among the student body in September.”

“I’m guessing that was the good news and the bad news,” Lupin says in a faint voice. “God.”

Potter remains silent, but his eyes are narrowed in what looks like intense displeasure. Perhaps there is grief lurking behind his irritation, but Snape isn’t going to pry.

“Yes, that was the good news along with the bad. The improbable aspect is this.” Snape gently puts the Stone down on the parlor table. “Explore it, but do not turn it over in your hands. Not yet.”

Potter picks it up first, tilting his head as he regards the Stone. Then he removes his glasses and peers closer. “It’s damaged, but…I thought that the story was a myth.”

“It is not,” Snape replies. “You are descended from Ignotus Peverell, a fact you discerned for
yourself. Your family has passed on his Cloak of Invisibility from one generation to the next since the thirteenth century, Potter.”

“Shite,” Black murmurs, reaching out for the Stone. “Severus, are you seriously telling me that this is the Resurrection Stone?”

“It is. Cadmus Peverell either sired children or adopted an heir before his death, and that bloodline has held the Stone ever since. Its last owner before being cursed was Marvolo Gaunt—Voldemort’s grandfather.”

“Instead of being the heir of Slytherin, he’s a Peverell heir.” Lupin shakes his head. “He must feel that to be detrimental to his power, or he would have claimed that lineage long before now.”

“Voldemort may also still be the Heir of Slytherin,” Snape corrects him. “The lineages can only be traced back so far before the records begin to fail. Either way, it does not matter. The three Deathly Hallows are all in possession of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I thought—I thought the Deathly Hallows was just a wizarding nursery tale.” Granger takes the stone from Black’s fingers and gazes at it with her brow wrinkled in puzzlement. “The Stone even has the symbol carved on it.”

“It became a nursery tale, yes, meant to warn young witches and wizards about the perils of arrogance.” Snape massages his forehead. “My mother made certain I was aware of the full extent of the Prince family lineage. Antioch Peverell was one of our ancestors. Technically, it is supposed to mean that the Elder Wand belongs to my family, but it can remain in the hands that hold it. I want no part of that cursed thing.”

“The Elder Wand still exists, and someone in the Order wields it,” Black states in a flat, angry voice. “Who in the hell would—Dumbledore. Albus Dumbledore has the bloody Elder Wand.”

Snape nods. “He does. I believe Albus claimed it from Grindelwald after defeating him at the conclusion of the European Wizarding War in the 1940s.”

Lupin is now holding the stone, a grieved expression on his face. “Turn it in your hand three times, werewolf,” Snape says. “Concentrate on them both; they want to speak with you all.”

When James and Lily Potter appear next to Lupin, the man breaks down into harsh sobbing. James Potter shakes his head, sits down next to Lupin on the sofa, and leans into him in an attempt at comfort. Perhaps it might even help, given what Snape experienced with Lily earlier in the evening.

Snape notes that Potter is staring at his father, taking in details like a young man trying to quench a terrible thirst. If anything, this will certainly help him to understand everyone’s nonstop comments about how much Potter looks like his father. Except for Lily’s brilliant green eyes, James passed all of his physical traits onto his son, from his perpetually disastrous black hair to his pale bronze skin.

It still infuriates Snape that Albus Dumbledore overlooked such an obvious fucking problem. There is more than one reason why Petunia Dursley hated her brother-in-law and her nephew. Petunia would hate Hermione Granger, she of one black dental doctor parent and one white dental doctor parent, for the very same reason. Wizards have always cared far more about blood purity and lineage than skin color, but not so with Muggles, who tend to swing back and forth on the issue every few centuries.

It does make Snape wonder if that is one of the reasons Petunia Dursley hated Snape, as well. Perhaps she recognized his heritage where he remained oblivious. God and Merlin both know that
the woman proved herself a Muggle bastion of racism and bigotry before she even graduated from school.

“Merlin,” Black finally whispers, staring at Lily. “I’m so fucking sorry, Lil.”

Lily smiles at Black as she walks over to him. “Yes, we should have listened to you, but Peter’s actions were not your fault, you ridiculous man.” She bends down and plants a ghostly kiss on his forehead while Black sits there in stunned amazement. “I’m so glad you’ve survived, and that you’ve come so far.”

Then Lily straightens and turns to Potter. “Harry.”

Potter stands up, looking like a young man who has just been gutted. “Mum.”

“You, my dearest one, are the only person in this room I can actually touch,” Lily says, and steps forward to wrap her arms around her son. Potter jerks, startled, before he returns the embrace. It’s as if he’s holding onto a solid, living being.

“I am so very proud of you,” Lily whispers, and Potter lets out a soft, keening sound of mourning.

Snape quietly gets up from his chair and touches the wards on the door, sensing that they will let him leave the room without breaking the protections in place. Granger is right behind him, biting her lip as they both slip outside and shut the parlor door.

“That was for them. They didn’t need me,” Granger says in quiet explanation. “I think that’s why you left, too.”

“You did need to hear the news about your Headmaster’s foolishness, and the confirmed existence and locations of the Hallows,” Snape counters. “However, you are correct about the rest.” Whatever it is that James and Lily Potter speak of with their son, Lupin, and Black are things Snape does not need to be aware of—what happens within the parlor is now for that family alone.

Snape hesitates before he rests his hand on Granger’s shoulder. “Kitchen, Miss Granger. I believe tea is in order, and there is a house-elf here who is most enthusiastic about such things.”

Granger is eying him like he’s a new and baffling lifeform. “Professor?”

“They need… closure. I need bloody tea,” Snape says. “You may join me, or go back to bed.”

“I actually have no idea what to do with a version of you who is polite,” Granger complains, and then gives him a sharp, piercing look. “What about you, Professor? Did you receive closure, too?”

Snape escorts Granger to the kitchen when he realizes she’s made her decision. “In a sense.”

Speaking with Lily, and knowing that her essence truly is wrapped around him in a protective embrace, has done strange things to his psyche this evening. However, Snape knows that he will not have true “closure” until Voldemort is very, very dead.

He greatly looks forward to that day.
“I have confirmation that Narcissa will be arriving with Draco tomorrow,” Snape announces as he enters the kitchen on Saturday, minutes before midnight. The ash from the fireplace is worse than usual; he uses a quick cleaning charm to dismiss the mess. “Draco might be in a full Body-Bind and hauled in like luggage through the fireplace, but he will be here.”

“That will be fun,” Black says, watching as Kreacher and Dobby compete in snarky house-elf fashion to clean the kitchen table in preparation for midnight festivities. “You’re ready?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I were not,” Snape replies. “Dobby, when you are finished flirting with Kreacher, tea would be appreciated.”

Dobby’s ears fall almost to his shoulders while Kreacher starts turning purple. “Dobby does not flirt!” The house-elf looks appalled by the very idea.

“Well, you’ll have to find someone to mate with at some point, else we’ll be down to just one house-elf after Kreacher kicks the bucket,” Black tells the elf cheerfully.

Dobby frowns. “Why is you not be doing yous duty to yous House?” he asks Kreacher. The other elf scowls and says nothing.

“Either he’s too much of a bastard, or my mother refused to allow him to do so,” Black tells Dobby. “My family had some vile notions when it came to house-elves, but my mother was the cruel one.”

“Do not be speaking ill of the Mistress,” Kreacher hisses at Black. “Kreacher be serving you because you be helping Master Regulus, but you will not be saying bad things about the Mistress!”

Black holds up his hands. “All right. Sorry about that, Kreacher.”

Snape stares at Black after both elves disappear to put away the table detritus. “Did I just hear you apologize to a house-elf?”

“I’d like to sleep with the assurance that I won’t wake up to find Kreacher standing over me with a knife,” Black returns dryly. “Besides…” He grimaces. “Given how my family treated me, I imagine that Kreacher’s life was complete shite, and he’s too old to be all that interested in changing his opinions. If he wants to worship that shrieking harpy, that’s his business.”

“I see he’s wearing Slytherin colors,” Snape observes, selecting a chair to sit down in. He’s never seen house-elves choose to wear much other than white tea towels—or in Dobby’s case, a hideous collection of socks on his legs, arms, and ears to accompany the traditional tea towel. Kreacher, however, is now wearing a green tea towel edged in silver, like those most often found in the Slytherin dormitory.

“I had to specifically state that I was not freeing or firing him from Black family employment,” Black explains. “I wasn’t sure if he’d accept it, but Kreacher wanted something of Regulus’s more than he wanted to keep to white tea towel traditions.”

“And the additional choice of striped green and silver night cap?” Snape asks.

“I wisely decided that I didn’t want to know.”

Kreacher pops back into existence, standing on the kitchen table with a great stone bowl clutched in
his hands. He places it onto the table with a scowl, revealing a Pensieve full of cobwebs and rodent droppings. “I be finding it in the attic, Master Sirius. A proper wizard might wish to give it a good Scourgify before usin’ it.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” Black says gravely. “I would have had no idea where to find the blasted thing without you.”

That gives Snape an idea. While Black subjects the Pensieve to a thorough cleansing spell, he asks, “Kreacher, would you be willing to grant me a trade, if the item exists?”

Kreacher dusts off his green tea towel before peering at Snape. “What does the great Bloody Bat wish for?”

“I’m seeking a preservation spell meant for the living,” Snape says. “The Prince family line once held it, but it has since been lost. Do you know what I’m speaking of?”

Kreacher scowls. “The Bloody Bat wishes to look younger?”

Snape keeps his face impassive, even if Black fails at it and has to put his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. “It’s not for me. It’s meant to help ensure that Regulus Black’s attempt to defeat the Dark Lord continues, and possibly succeeds.”

The house-elf’s ears twitch in either palsy or thought. “Perhaps, Bloody Bat. What is in it for Kreacher?”

“I might—and I stress might—be able to retrieve Regulus’s copy of the Slytherin locket, one that would be safe for you to wear in remembrance of your old Master.”

Kreacher’s eyes grow as huge as Dobby’s, glimmering with suspect moisture. “You would be doing such a thing for Kreacher?”

“Only in exchange for that spell. Retrieving the locket will not be a pleasant task,” Snape reminds him. “I have no desire to tempt death for no reason at all.”

The house-elf regards him with a stark frown, but his eyes have not regained their traditional, narrow-eyed glower. “If Master Bat brings me Master Regulus’s locket, Kreacher is promising you that you will have the Permanent Youth potion. Mistress used it until Death came too close.”

A potion, not a spell. Interesting. This might give Snape even more to work with. “Then I will do my very best to bring it to you, though it might take me a while to discern how.” To begin with, Snape is going to need to have another copy of the locket made, which will take time, along with Galleons he’s not sure he has available. If Voldemort were to check on his Horcrux and find an empty fountain, the element of surprise will be lost, and that is unacceptable.

“I’ll pay to have a copy of the locket made,” Black says, interrupting Snape's thoughts. "I have easiest, consistent access to it, and I can afford the bribes to ensure a jeweler’s silence in the matter."

Snape nods. "Acceptable, and possibly the only safe course of action."

"If Kreacher gives you that potion, would you mind sharing a copy?” Black asks. “It’s not about the vanity on my part, either. It’s the physical health aspect I’d like to enjoy. I still find myself coughing up things that I know are from Azkaban.”

“That is foul, Black,” Snape says, but he does feel a certain amount of sympathy for Black’s plight. Azkaban hadn’t been kind to his own health, and Snape only needed to spend a week within its
walls. “If I find it, you will have your copy. It might take you one hundred years to find someone willing to put up with you long enough to breed an Heir, so you might as well look presentable.”

Black laughs as Granger, Potter, and Lupin arrive in a cluster. Granger is bearing a cloth bundle in her hands. “Don’t ask,” Lupin says as Granger places the object on the table. She unwraps it to reveal an empty prophecy sphere.

“I take it that this is the real thing, then.” Snape eyes the glass globe. It looks simple enough, but he can feel waiting magic. “Please tell me one of you idiots knows how to copy a memory. What I place in this Pensieve should also be kept in this house, just in case our knowledge of its contents is lost.”

“I know how,” Potter says. “I found the spell in the library when I was trying to figure out more information on that Memory Projection Potion.”

Snape pulls out his wand and then eyes the house-elves that have not yet departed. “Yes?”

“We’s bein’ sworn to secrecy, Master Snape,” Dobby tells him in wide-eyed seriousness. “I’s servin’ Master Harry Potter. Kreacher servin’ Master Sirius Black. He-We-Do-Not-Name is not bein’ nice to house-elves.”

“Better a blood traitor than a Half-blood,” Kreacher mutters darkly.

“Still a Half-blood,” Potter says to the elf.

“Still a Muggle-born,” Granger adds.

Kreacher treats them both to an impressive glare. “Yes, but you is respectable Half-bloods and Muggle-borns.”

“Please, can we continue?” Snape requests, and is gratified when everyone stops arguing over blood status. He needs the quiet to be able to concentrate on what has been carefully crafted. Snape ignores the others’ waiting expectation; once he’s certain he has it right, rests the tip of his wand against his temple.

The memory he pulls forth is gratifyingly substantial wisps of silver. Snape lowers the memory into the Pensieve, letting the magic of the bowl catch the memory and hold it in place. Only then does he let out the breath he’s been holding. “Someone else request to view it,” Snape suggests. “We need to be certain it appears to be entirely legitimate.”

Lupin is the one to reach out and give the bowl the proper taps with his wand, muttering under his breath. Instead of the more traditional faceplant-viewing method that Snape dislikes, this causes the memory to gather in a silver mist until it becomes the spitting image of Sybill Trelawney standing before an indeterminate background.

“You are absolutely kidding me.” Black is staring at the image. “Trelawney came up with the Prophecy?”

“Shush!” Granger orders him sharply, just as Trelawney begins to speak in the harsh, grating voice that comes to her during her rare moments of uttering true prophecy.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...”
Lupin grimaces and taps the bowl again, allowing Trelawney’s image to sink back down into the Pensieve as swirling silver mist. “Good job, Severus. Was she that creepy at the time?”

“Yes,” Snape answers him. “Very much unlike herself. I sometimes wonder if it’s her insistence upon such frivolous fortune-telling trappings that inhibits her gift.”

Potter has an odd look on his face. “I’ve heard her speak like that before, during the last fourth-year exams that happened the day of the Third Task.”

“What did she say, Harry?” Black asks.

“Nothing I didn’t already know about Voldemort returning, not at that point. She just gave details as to the how, which were stupid and useless until it was over and done with.” Potter holds up his hands to signify that he’s quoting Trelawney. “The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant’s aid, greater and more terrible than ever before. Bone of family will rouse him; blood of the enemy will empower him. The light of Death will fill the air, and the Dark Lord will Rise.”

“So, basically, Voldemort will come back but I’m absolutely rubbish at giving out useful information,” Granger says in irritation. “At least her first prophecy included a blasted date!”

Snape glares at Potter. “And you never imparted this information…why?”

Potter seems confused by the idea. “Well, after the night of the Third Task, it seemed redundant, sir. Everything she said had already happened. And…after she’d said it and snapped back to normal, she denied it all. I wasn’t sure what to make of it, so I let it be.”

Snape puts aside his anger. Potter is not the deserving party, and Lockhart is still too dead to suffer for it. “Please never, ever ignore such information again, no matter how trivial it may seem. You are correct in that her timing would not have prevented the Blood-and-Bone ritual; it is highly likely that Pettigrew had already retrieved the necessary components from Tom Riddle’s grave. But: no information is without value. Do not forget this.”

Potter gives him a grave nod. “Yes, sir. Should I copy the memory now?”

Snape waves his hand in permission. Potter gets out a simple glass phial, setting it on the tabletop before stirring up the contents of the Pensieve with his wand. When he’s done, there is a second silvery mass floating above the stone bowl, a complete yet much fainter copy of Trelawney’s Prophecy. It might not be enough to grant a viewer the visual of the Divination teacher, but it’s the words they need, not Trelawney’s appearance. Potter guides the fainter mist to the phial with his wand; Granger is quick to put a proper glass stopper in place to keep the memory trapped inside.

“The whole of what remains goes into the prophecy globe, yes?” Lupin asks, glancing at Snape.

He nods. “I have my original memories of overhearing the prophecy, and of learning the whole of it from Albus later. This is a crafted memory; I don’t need it back.” In fact, he doesn’t actually want it. It’s so recent that it’s something Voldemort could, if he pushed hard enough, retrieve from Snape’s mind. That would not be an acceptable outcome, either.

Potter breathes out before lifting his wand again. “All right. Ready?”

Lupin and Granger nod, both of them placing their wands upon the empty prophecy globe. Their wand tips glow, which causes the globe to do the same. “Now, Harry,” Lupin instructs, “or the globe will begin recording other things, instead.”

Potter nods and gives the Pensieve’s remaining contents a far more vigorous swirl with his wand,
gathering up the whole of the silvery mass. His lips are pressed into a thin line of concentration as he brings the memory over to the globe, touching his wand to globe so that all three wands form a perfect triad. The memory seems to hesitate before rushing into the glass, swirling around on the inside like a trapped, living creature.

The three lower their wands, edging back from the globe. “And people do this all day?” Granger asks in dismay, sweat standing out on her face. “That’s a ridiculous amount of effort!”

“There are probably easier ways, but Merlin knows Wizarding Britain is hung up on Proper Tradition.” Black picks up the globe. At once, Trelawney’s words begin to emerge from it in her grating monotone. He puts it down again in a hurry. “Well. At least it works.”

Lupin glances at Black before he places the original protective cloth over the globe and picks it up. Without direct physical contact, the globe remains silent. “No, now we know that it works. It would defeat the purpose if you were carrying around a globe that nattered on without pause.”

Black accepts the cloth-wrapped globe, tucking it into an inner pocket of his short robe. “And we’re to do this when, Severus?”

“The fifteenth of July, nine o’clock, in the Little Hangleton cemetery.” Black’s face develops a grimace of intense distaste. “You’re the one who claimed to understand that Voldemort is into grand gestures, dog.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t find his choices to be unpleasant,” Black retorts. “Should I meet you there?”

“Dear God, no, or you could Apparate into the middle of a group of Death Eaters who have no self-control,” Snape replies, annoyed. “Don’t be an idiot. I’ll take you by Side-Along Apparition to a safe place within walking distance of the cemetery. We go in together, as I still might have to save your mangy life. Bellatrix and mental stability are running further and further in opposite directions.”

“That will have to do.” Black rises from the table. “I’ll see you out, and then we’ll all see you again soon to listen to my cousin’s son screech about betrayal.”

Snape’s Sunday morning is spent inspecting Albus’s cursed hand, railing at him some more about being stupid. He then returns the Resurrection Stone to the Headmaster earlier than agreed upon. “You’re certain? You still have until this evening,” Albus says, though his left hand is already wrapped securely around the Stone.

Snape just looks at him in mild displeasure. “If I were not certain, you would not be holding it. It accomplished its purpose, though my mother was less than useful.”

“I see,” Albus replies. Snape has not asked Albus further questions as to whom he was so desperate to speak with that he shoved a cursed ring onto his finger, and Albus, it seems, is granting him the same courtesy in not asking if Snape spoke to Lily. Snape wouldn’t tell him, regardless. “I will safeguard it, never fear.”

Snape nods in response, saying nothing before departing. If Potter’s Invisibility Cloak suddenly goes missing, he’ll be killing Albus Dumbledore sooner rather than later. He doesn’t think the old man would ever do such a thing, but fear can cause even great men to make foolish decisions.

* * * * *
The meeting in the warded parlor of 12 Grimmauld Place with Narcissa and Draco Malfoy, Black, Lupin, Potter, and Granger is less stressful, though much louder, than dealing with Albus Dumbledore. Snape rests his chin on one hand, elbow propped on the arm of his chair, and regards Draco with an expression of utter disinterest while the child rants about betrayal and the Dark Lord’s wrath and revenge and betrayal, basically making a complete spectacle of himself. Narcissa sits in dignified repose, as does Black, their mutually trained youthful mannerisms reinforcing each other. Lupin just seems irritated, as does Granger.

It’s Potter’s fully Occluded, blank-seeming stare that finally causes Draco to stutter mid-rant. “Why are you looking at me like that?” Draco demands hotly.

“Because you’re being loud, and really fucking stupid,” Potter returns in blunt observation. “Or haven’t you figured out yet that Voldemort is setting you up for failure and death?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Draco scoffs.

Narcissa lets out a breath that is not a sigh, but a hint of sublime disappointment. “Draco Malfoy, foolish product of my womb. That is exactly what the Dark Lord plans for you.”

“And you trust their word, Mother?” Draco yells back. “You trust the word of these traitors over that of our Lord?”

Narcissa gives Draco a cold stare. “No. I am an intelligent Slytherin, one who discerned the Dark Lord’s plans for you the moment he gave you those instructions. Or do you think me lacking in intellect, Draco?”

Draco’s expression twists in a way that suggests he is restraining the urge to say a lot of things he would immediately have cause to regret. “No, Mother,” he finally grates out. “I do not think you lack intelligence. I am…I’m disappointed that you would so easily betray the Dark Lord.”

“My allegiance,” Narcissa says in a sharp, foreboding voice, “has never been to the Dark Lord, but to the fortunes and survival of our family! That is the way a true Slytherin views the world, Draco, and I despair that you never heeded Severus’s lessons in that matter!”

“I warned you at the beginning of last school year, Mister Malfoy,” Snape says, his voice quiet and deadly in comparison to Narcissa’s bright anger. “Now you have fallen into the Dark Lord’s trap.”

Draco glares at them all, but then he slowly sits down in his chair. “What you are saying, Mother, goes against everything Father has ever taught me about the Dark Lord’s goals.”

Narcissa’s expression hardens. “I once loved your father very much, Draco, else you would not exist. But he has become a fool who is easily led, and has placed you in danger without once giving thought to the consequences of that action. I am no longer capable of producing another Heir for the Malfoy Estate. I do not know if he forgets that, or somehow thinks he will live forever and another Heir will never be necessary. If so, that makes him doubly foolish, for he no longer has the speed and skill in which to survive a war against the Order of the Phoenix.”

“You wish us to join Dumbledore?” Draco says at his most disparaging. “Marching against those who are Pure-blood and family to us?”

“You will be required to do no such thing,” Snape interrupts, getting tired of the way this is dragging out. “What your mother wants is your survival and her own safety. Once word gets out that she is trying to reform an alliance with the House of Black, the Dark Lord will immediately call for her
death, putting a bounty on her head that every Death Eater in Britain will try to collect on.”

Draco looks around at every person in the room, his cool blue eyes searching for something. Snape doesn’t know what he seeks, but Draco finally asks, “What must I do, then? If I refuse, the Dark Lord will kill me.”

“You will not refuse,” Snape says. “You will attempt to carry out your plan to assassinate Albus Dumbledore, but you will do it slowly. For many reasons, this is an attempt that must wait until the end of the school year, if possible. At that time, you will disarm him—and Dumbledore will allow you to do so. Then you will fail at casting the Killing Curse.”

“Failing my assignment, and again earning my death.” Draco crosses his arms, looking mutinous. “I do not yet see my survival in this plan.”

Snape makes an effort to keep his voice patient and level, if brutal. “Because I am going to convince the Dark Lord that you are more useful to him alive than dead. As long as you make all appearances of having made the attempt, and I finish your failed task…you will be punished, but punishment is survivable. Death is not.”

Draco gapes at him. “You’re going to kill Albus Dumbledore?”

“The fool is already dying,” Snape bites out, resisting the urge to growl and hex someone. “He has actually asked me to kill him. The irritating irony here is that I once told Black it would take the apparent betrayal and murder of someone in the Order for Voldemort to truly believe I’m one of his own.”

“Killing Dumbledore is definitely not what I thought it would come to,” Black says glumly. “Merlin, this is a disaster.”

“A success within a disaster,” Snape corrects him.

“Success, my arse,” Lupin snaps. “If you kill Albus Dumbledore, most of the wizarding world will be happy to shove your head onto a pike and march it around the entirety of Great Britain, Severus.”

“I don’t care,” Snape retorts. “I care far more about being in the position to protect the students of Hogwarts. Voldemort will have control of the Ministry by next summer, and there isn’t a damned thing we can do to stop it!”

Draco’s expression brightens. “Then the Dark Lord will succeed!”

Snape rolls his eyes. “No, you idiot child. A temporary success is all it will be. Or do you think that the vast majority of witches and wizards will simply roll over and die because Voldemort wishes it? He assumed so last time, and that did not turn out so well.”

“But he didn’t hold the Ministry!” Draco insists.

“No, he did not,” Snape concedes. “While holding the Ministry will put him in a superior tactical position, it is not one that will last. He does not know how to run a government, especially one that is fueled only by fear. The Ministry will crumble, and his control will crumble with it.”

“But Voldemort cannot die. His return proves that,” Draco says, but his eyes have narrowed. Snape thinks that, perhaps, they have finally broken through Draco Malfoy’s childish faith in a madman, instilled by a father who chose foolish loyalties over his own bloodline.

“Voldemort is not immortal.” Granger treats Draco to an earnest look that is too fierce to be labeled
endearing. “He just likes to think he is.”

“The means to bring about his final, true death are already being arranged,” Black says. “Now, then: you can continue to be as foolish as your father, Draco, or you can learn from this oncoming war some of the same lessons I did during the last one. Your mother wishes for the House of Black to be united once more, and I find that I’m fond of the idea. Right now, Harry is the only Heir to the Black family, and I could only get away with making that legal and binding because my Aunt Dorea married Charlus Alastair Potter.”

Narcissa looks surprised. “A Black of that generation married outside of the immediate circle of acceptable suitors?”

Black grins at her. “Bloody miracle that someone did.”

Draco makes a disgruntled face. “Er—I know I’m going to regret asking this, but why is that so important?”

“You mean you didn’t tell your son as to the absolute cesspool of a family we originate from?” Black asks Narcissa.

Narcissa sighs. “The Malfoy lineage is ever so much worse.”

“I thought the Lestranges had that distinction,” Black says.

“No, we’re running in third place. Thank goodness.”

“I cannot believe I am sitting here listening to you two discuss which family is the more inbred,” Snape mutters.

“Worse than what?” Draco snaps out. “The Malfoy family tree is a list of illustrious Pure-bloods from the Sacred Twenty-Eight!”

“That list is such complete shite.” Lupin scowls. “If it were anywhere near accurate, some of those names would not be on it, while many others would be. The Potters were still Pureblood at the time; my family is on both sides is for generations until the records die out in the eighth century. Even the Princes were still Pure-bloods. Granted, the author kept the Weasleys on there—”

“Great-Aunt Cedrella married Septimus Weasley. Phineas might have disowned her for it, but it upped the Weasley’s social standing at the time,” Black says.

Snape merely lifts an eyebrow when Black and Narcissa glance at him. “Jewish. Also very much not in vogue in the 1930s.”

“When did you discover this?” Narcissa asks, curious.

“Last month, but that is also entirely irrelevant to the subject at hand. Draco, the Sacred Twenty-Eight was a title given to those who had either the wealth or social standing to warrant inclusion. It was nothing more than politics, not bloodlines.”

“Your mother and I? We’re first cousins once removed, second cousins, and we are also third cousins,” Black tells Draco. “Please do your genealogy research properly. Try to marry someone who is at least a fourth cousin or multiple generations distant, or you’re risking your children being born with extra fingers and toes.”

“Might I just quote this entire conversation as to why blood purity is a stupid idea?” Snape asks.
Narcissa seems to wince. “Not entirely foolish, though some of the families take it to exceptionally unhealthy extremes. I would never have consented to marry Lucius if it hadn’t been five generations since the Black and Malfoy lines last merged.”

Draco looks at his mother. “If you and Sirius Black are three-times related—”

“Oh, that’s a good way to put it,” Lupin says dryly.

“—then how exactly is Potter related to the Black family?”

“We’re first cousins four times removed, dingbat,” Potter says to Draco, who immediately does an excellent impression of an oxygen-starved fish.

“I didn’t even know about the connection until Harry discovered that part of the family tree was hidden under a Disillusionment Charm. The Potters were still Pure-bloods of good standing at the time, so Mother didn’t dare erase the connection. She just hid it.”

“Directly second cousins,” Lupin says, which makes no sense until he continues, “my aunt Euphemia married Fleamont, Harry’s grandfather.”

“This is all very fascinating, but can we please get back to the point?” Granger asks, crossing her arms and glaring at all of them.

“Certainly.” Black turns his attention back to Draco. “Learn and grow. Become a decent man, Draco Malfoy, and I will name you as another Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black along with your cousin, Nymphadora Tonks.”

“Auror Tonks? She is a fool,” Draco pronounces, scowling.

“No. Nymphadora Tonks is a skilled Auror and an accomplished witch whom you do not want to cross in battle, Draco Malfoy.” Lupin stares down at Draco, as if finally losing his patience with the affair. “First lesson: repeating your father’s tired twaddle will get you nowhere very quickly.”

Black just seems amused by Draco’s ridiculous opinion. “If it’s money you’re worried about, there is more than enough to go around, even if you all decide to have hordes of children later in life. Hell, even if I somehow become dignified enough to become an eligible bachelor once more, we’d scarcely put a dent in the whole of the Black fortune.”

“We still don’t want you to breed.” Snape is humored by Lupin’s swift agreement.

“Here is the other thing you need to recognize, Draco.” Black sits up in his chair and pins the boy with a stare worthy of Minerva McGonagall. “You and your mother were not offered sanctuary due to any idea of mine. If this happens at all, you will owe your survival to Harry Potter.”

“What.”

Potter looks up at the ceiling. “Malfoy, not everyone is as short-sighted as you are. I might not ever bloody like you, but you don’t deserve to die just because you’re a prick.”

Draco turns and glares at Granger. “You hit me in third year!”

“You deserved it.” Granger has a curl to her lip that isn’t the slightest bit friendly. “Call me a Mudblood again, and your teeth will not survive the experience.”

“Draco Lucius Malfoy!” Narcissa bursts out, incensed. “You said what on school grounds?”
Draco shrinks back from her. “Er.”

“Lesson number two: I abhor that word,” Snape informs Draco. His voice is rolling smoke, and it’s amusing to see that Draco can’t figure out who he wants to escape first—Snape, or his mother. “Say it again outside of the Dark Lord’s company, and it will be the last word you speak. It is very difficult to use the English language when one lacks a tongue.”

“You have my sincerest apologies, Miss Granger,” Narcissa says. “A Pure-blood witch or wizard has no need of stooping to such words if they have been raised with proper manners. That Draco has not learned this lesson is my failing.”

Granger’s brow furrows. Snape suspects she is wracking her brain to search for the correct response. “Your apology is accepted, Madam Malfoy, but I do not think it is your failing. Draco has two parents, after all, and one of them had no compunctions against trying to kill an eleven-year-old girl—and a Pure-blooded one, at that. Blood purity makes no difference to me, but I suspect it does to you.”

“Mm. The diary incident.” Narcissa glances at Draco. “One of my son’s saving graces of that year was his effort, slight as it was, to inform the school of the true nature of the danger.”

Snape is amused when Draco flushes dark red and stares down at his lap. “Oh no; you acted to save an innocent. Your family shall forever bear the stigma and shame of such a despicable act.”

In the end, Draco finally gives up—though Snape thinks it’s more that the boy wants to save his own skin than out of any real desire to change. Snape doesn’t mind; a good Slytherin understands when to put life above pride.

Narcissa has already been informed by Voldemort that her participation is expected on the fifteenth, whether she is Marked or not. She discusses it with Black and Snape before deciding to attend, a third set of eyes to oversee her cousin’s safety.

“I can Apparate faster than most of them can lift a wand,” Narcissa says in disgust, when Black points out that he doesn’t want to see her harmed. “Besides, it will be well known after the fifteenth that Narcissa Black Malfoy has sought sanctuary within the House of Black, leaving her poor and abandoned only child to be the sole Malfoy representative in Voldemort’s ranks.”

Draco becomes far more adaptable to the entirety of the plan when he realizes that he will have to play the role of loyal Death Eater through sixth-year and possibly his seventh year at Hogwarts, as well. Something about the duplicity appeals to his Slytherin nature. Snape thinks that enjoyment of duplicity is not necessarily a positive trait, but for now, it will serve. Draco’s attendance at Hogwarts is guaranteed; Snape plans on placing Draco in the role of Head Boy for his seventh year. Snape does make sure to impress (terrify) Draco into understanding that being Head Boy means he is responsible for his entire House’s safety, not merely his own life. The role of Head Girl, Snape feels, should go to someone who already has an intense sense of House unity, and that person will not be Pansy Parkinson.

Draco might escape the necessity of the Dark Mark, at least through sixth year, but afterwards…

“Will it come off?” Draco asks, one of the few moments when he catches Snape alone in a safe location. “The Mark. I know I won’t be able to avoid it once I turn seventeen, not if we still need to keep applying ourselves to spycraft.”

Snape has begun to realize that Draco also intends to use his time to try and sway his father into seeing some damned sense. As long as Draco does not sever the Unbreakable Vow he took under
Narcissa’s approving, watchful eyes, Snape doesn’t care what he tells Lucius. He just thinks it’s a wasted effort.

“When the Dark Lord lost his first physical form, the Mark all but disappeared. It only returned when the Dark Lord began to regain power.” Snape realizes once more that his hand is resting over the Mark on his arm. “Yes. I think it will disappear with the Dark Lord’s death.”

He allows Narcissa to be the one to educate Draco as to the true extent of the horror he’s to be faced with. “If you find you cannot take it, you know how to Apparate already,” she says. Snape is leaning against the wall in the other room, listening. If they cannot think to shut a door, it isn’t his fault. “We will shelter here for the rest of the war, and I will not think you a coward for knowing your limitations.”

“Others might,” Draco mumbles.

“Then they are fools,” Narcissa says sharply. “Your concern is survival, to learn to become an excellent Slytherin in truth instead of just green-and-silver labeling.”

Snape appreciates Narcissa’s venomous steel. Most members of the Order are not so fierce unless a pitched battle is involved. They are going to desperately need more of that venom in the days to come, even if Narcissa only advises from the sidelines. She even agrees to accept a modified version of the Order’s vow, a promise never to betray a member of the Order or the Order’s headquarters, be it 12 Grimmauld Place or the other safe-houses scattered throughout Britain. Snape composes it himself to make certain that a brilliant Slytherin woman will not be able to find and exploit any potential loopholes.

Lupin corners Snape in the Black family library while Snape is tracing his wand over book covers in a vain attempt to find that blasted preservation spell. “If the old legends are true, and Draco disarms Albus, then Draco Malfoy becomes the master of the Elder Wand, Severus.”

Snape gives Lupin a bland look. “Which is exactly why we are not going to tell anyone about the true nature of Albus’s wand, werewolf. The wand will go into Dumbledore’s tomb according to proper wizarding tradition, and then we’re rid of the damned thing.”

“Huh.” Lupin looks surprised. “That’s a really elegant solution.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I excel at those.”

* * * *

The week of the fifteenth arrives, and with it a horde of Weasley ginger, the Diggory family, Fleur Delacour and her younger sister, Gabrielle, and the Doctors Granger. It also brings Draco and Narcissa Malfoy’s return…and to Snape’s surprise, a visit from Viktor Krum.

Granger shrugs when asked about Krum’s presence. “Just in case,” she says. “It’s not quite off-season for his Quidditch team, but he managed to gain a week’s leave. We don’t know who Voldemort’s people are watching, anyway. This might be the way to find out, depending on who complains about their targets going missing.”

“Very Slytherin of you, Gryffindor,” Snape says. He can tell Granger is fighting the urge to roll her eyes before she accepts what is meant to be a genuine compliment.
Besides, it’s all very amusing; Ronald Weasley spends his free time staring daggers at Viktor Krum’s back every time he speaks to Granger. When that option is unavailable, he joins the other Weasleys, who are devoting their time to glaring daggers at Draco Malfoy.

Molly Weasley is giving Fleur Delacour the same treatment any time her precious eldest son speaks with the French woman. Fleur has become an accomplished witch in a very short time, something Gabriella is happy to fill anyone’s ears with if they hold still long enough. Snape was correct about Fleur Delacour’s improved maturity, as well. She is fully aware of Molly’s hostility, and is graciously ignoring it.

When the others are distracted, Snape finds William Weasley and gestures for him to join Snape in a quiet corner of the second floor. “An excellent choice,” he murmurs.

William just puts on an innocent expression. “No idea what you mean, Professor Snape.”

Snape snorts his amusement of that. “That ring you’re carrying about is burning quite the hole in your pocket, William Arthur Weasley.”

William leans out of the corner to take a quick glance up and down the hall before he pulls out a velvet ring box and opens it. Inside is a silver band set with a blue stone that is the exact match for Fleur Delacour’s eyes. “Did I pick well?”

Snape glances at him. “Do you see any jewelry on my person, Bill?”

“No, not at all. You might not know jewelry, but you do know stones and metals,” William points out. “No, it isn’t cursed.”

“I am paranoid for very good reason.” Snape finishes a brief but thorough check to ensure that the ring is free of any enchantment whatsoever. Then he uses the edge of his coat sleeve to pull the ring out of its velvet padding. Excellent cut on the stone; he tilts it towards the light to find absolutely flawless blue zircon. The band is white gold without nickel impurities, creating a bright silver over gold instead of the duller, steel-like finish that is more traditional. “Goblin-made?”

William accepts the box back, snaps it shut, and shoves it into his pocket before anyone ginger wanders in their direction. “Yeah. I actually got them to accept a contract saying that it belongs to mine and Fleur’s direct descendants until we don’t have any left, and then it reverts to the goblins. Makes ’em happy. Well. If she says yes, anyway.”

“Don’t be an idiot. She wouldn’t be putting up with half of the things your mother is muttering about if Fleur Delacour was not entirely gone on a Weasley.”

Snape has no idea how he ends up having tea with the Doctors Granger in the parlor. Bribery, he suspects, or Muggle dentists are simply that pushy. He was always glad to escape them as a child, no matter what his local Muggle primary school thought of the matter.

“It’s just that…well, this is our first time in the wizarding world that hasn’t involved Diagon Alley,” Madam Granger says, sipping her tea while keeping one eye on Dobby. Dobby is oblivious; he is busy admiring the doctor’s expertly painted toenails, just revealed by her Muggle sandals. If painted nails suddenly becomes a house-elf fashion trend, Snape will know who to blame.

“Houses that appear only if you know the right word—it’s startling, but it’s mad genius.” Mister Granger is smiling in excitement. Miss Granger definitely takes after her father in academic enthusiasm, even if she looks more like her dark-skinned mother.

Madam Granger winces when there is a sudden crash and shouting from upstairs. “Should anyone
“It will be fine,” Snape tells them. “A few of the younger houseguests are having trouble adapting to the idea of playing well with others.”

“Quite.” Madam Granger puts down her tea, doing a very good job of being polite to the bulbous-eyed house-elf who is excitedly refilling her cup. “Professor Snape. For several years, our daughter had nothing but irritation for your style of teaching. That recently changed, though she says she can’t tell us why. I am…concerned.”

It takes him a moment to understand her meaning. “Are you speaking of a lack of propriety?” Snape asks, startled enough by the question that his eyes widen. “I assure you that in Hogwarts, such abuses are not possible. There is old magic in place that quite literally prevents any sort of inappropriate contact between faculty, staff, and students. Given the split dormitories, it is also difficult for the students themselves to get up to those sorts of shenanigans.”

“Our daughter did try to assure us that was the case, quoting from that giant book she loves so much,” Mister Granger admits, giving his wife a quick glance. For Muggles, there is quite a bit of silent communication packed into that single moment. They are both suddenly much more relaxed, at least until Dobby forgets himself and starts admiring his reflection in Madam Granger’s toenail polish.

“Dobby,” Snape says, trying not to sigh. “Manners.”

Dobby squeaks in dismay and backs away several feet. “Dobby is sorry, Madam Granger! Please don’t be punishin’ Dobby! I was just thinkin’ they’s so pretty.”

“Punishment? Certainly not, though I appreciate the apology.” Madam Granger seems to consider it before reaching for her Muggle purse. “You know what? I have the color with me, and while it was well-done in the salon, I find I’m not all that fond of it.” She pulls out a glass jar of Muggle nail polish and holds it out to Dobby.

Dobby edges forward, and when nothing hits him, he gently takes the bottle of deep, rich burgundy from her hands. “You’s meanin’ it? Dobby can have the paint?”

“Absolutely,” Madam Granger tells him. “I would advise against sniffing too deeply of its scent. Certain of our, er, Muggle chemicals are not wise to inhale, though it’s perfectly safe to wear. You may need a special substance to remove it, though.”

Dobby smiles. “Dobby's a house-elf, Madam Granger. I just have to think it off, and off it be!” He disappears in an excited pop of displaced air.

“Oh, dear,” she mutters. “Was that something I shouldn’t have done?”

Snape realizes a muscle beneath his eye is ticking and forces himself to relax. “No. In fact, you might have just won a permanent ally. Be prepared to be all but smothered by a doting house-elf for the rest of your time here.”

“Are they servants?” Mister Granger asks, “or are the creatures slaves? Hermione sees very concerned that they may be the latter.”

Snape muffles an undignified sigh. “Please ask your daughter to question others about house-elf politics and culture before she makes a decision regarding that matter. She might find herself pleasantly surprised.”
“Professor Snape…” Madam Granger clasps her hands together in her lap after adjusting the rims of spectacles that probably cost more than the house at Spinner’s End could ever hope to sell for. “Neither of us are deaf, even if we’re not magical. We know that there is some sort of impending danger, some kind of magical civil war potentially looming. How much danger is our daughter in?”

“Should we pull her from school? Perhaps relocate to the continent until Hermione is ready for university? Lovely Miss Delacour informs me that there is a magic school in France,” Mister Granger says.

“This will sound as if I am trying to be self-serving to my place of employment, but I assure you I’m not,” Snape answers, after giving the question a moment of serious contemplation. Granger is still a minor, after all, and her parents are correct to be concerned. “Miss Granger is quite literally safer passing her summers in this house, or being on Hogwarts school grounds, than practically any other place in the world.”

Snape spends the rest of that day trying to avoid people. He is used to crowded conditions, but he has had to be diplomatic in ways that are tiring.

“So, Dad says I’m to ask someone else about house-elves,” Miss Granger greets him when she corners him in the empty kitchen.

Snape glances up from his tea, scowling. Next time, he’s going to hide in the blasted dining room, no matter the number of spiders it contains. “When I made that suggestion, I meant for you to ask someone else.”

“I’m not surprised,” Granger agrees, settling down at the table across from him. “But someone else might try to sugarcoat the situation. You won’t.”

“It is a terrible day in our world when people are coming to me for honest answers,” Snape replies, trying not to roll his eyes. “What do you want to know, Miss Granger?”

“When we first opened up the house for Sirius and Harry, in 1993, there were…er…” Granger wrinkles her nose. “Decapitated house-elf heads mounted to trophy plaques lining the staircase. Sirius told us it was just his family that did things like that, but when Dobby turned up last summer, he had to be freed so he would be safe. Then there are Hogwarts’ house-elves that no one tells us about—it’s not even in Hogwarts: A History! None of those things, when put together, paint a very nice picture.”

“The house-elves mounted on the stairs were placed there by Black’s aunt, Cassiopeia Black, who was by all accounts a detestable human being even when compared to the shrieking harpy portrait upstairs. When Cassiopeia and Pollux left the townhouse after their sister’s death in 1985, Kreacher was ordered to remain.”

“Kreacher was, uh, really upset when Sirius and Mrs. Weasley got rid of the house-elf trophy heads so Harry wouldn’t have to try and comprehend that sort of…of cruelty along with everything else he was attempting to figure out.” Granger winces and takes a quick glance around for the house-elf in question. “I guess being shut up alone in a house for eight years would make anyone unhappy—but that’s what I mean! He couldn’t leave! Harry and Dobby have been trying to figure out what house-elves are actually supposed to do for wizards, and so far I haven’t heard a thing that doesn’t say slave.”

“That is because Dobby and Kreacher have known nothing else. A house-elf at Hogwarts would never call themselves thus, and there is a key difference.”
Granger glares at him. “Just because someone’s treated nicely doesn’t mean it’s not still slavery.”

Snape resigns himself to a potentially lost evening, but at least Granger is not grating company. “Do you know your local mythology well enough to understand what a brownie is, Miss Granger?”

“Oh, yes. They’re supposed to enjoy being household servants, ones who don’t like to be seen or paid, but they appreciate being taken care of—oh.” Granger’s eyes widen. “It’s supposed to be a symbiotic relationship.”

“Yes.” He’s pleased that she grasped the concept so quickly.

“Then what’s gone wrong with house-elves?”

“With house-elves?” Snape lifts an eyebrow. “Nothing. The difficulty lies in the fact that house-elves have become a sign of wealth and privilege among a corrupt societal circle comprised of terrible people. The Ministry department meant to oversee house-elf welfare has not bothered to do its job in at least a century. Speak to the Hogwarts’ elves when you return to school in September, Miss Granger. As long as you do not try to insult them by thinking them unintelligent, or worse, insist they need to be severed from their ties to Hogwarts in a very misguided attempt to ‘free’ them, the house-elves will be glad to inform you of what a proper wizard and house-elf relationship should be like.”

“I’ll do that.” Granger gives him another odd look. “That was brief, to the point, and useful information. Why can’t you teach Potions the same way?”

“Discussing house-elves will not cause things in our immediate vicinity to explode, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, but—” Granger frowns. “This same sort of lecture in Potions might lead to far less potential explosions.”

Snape shakes his head. “Miss Granger, whom are you speaking to at the moment?”

She looks confused. “You—Professor Severus Snape, if you want me to be specific.”

“You are speaking, privately, to a man you share an Unbreakable Vow with.” Snape then allows the mask to settle firmly back into place, which feels like a vicious shroud settling over his skin. “Now: who are you speaking to?”

Granger actually leans back. “Someone Voldemort would find pleasing. I get it, Professor. Please put that away now?”

Peeling the mask away is difficult once he’s put it in place, but Snape does, at least, tone it down. “I do hope you now understand how difficult it will be to play your own necessary role until Voldemort is defeated.”

Granger nods, her expression set in firm resolve. “I did it for the remainder of last school term. I can do it until he’s dead, Professor.”

That helps to ease the mask back even further. “As I said before, Miss Granger: you would not be here if I believed you incapable.”

* * * * *
“Great Merlin, what a shithole,” Black declares the moment they arrive.

“Let go of my arm, keep your voice down, and yes, it is exactly as you’ve just observed,” Snape replies, shaking his arm when Black is a second too slow to release him. “You’re ready?”

Black lifts his chin. “Remember what sort of bastard I was at Hogwarts?”

“I have many reasons to never forget,” Snape reminds him.

Black just nods. There is a mask settling into place over his features, one that would have thrilled Black’s parents. “Don’t hex me. He’s about to put in a necessary appearance.”

Snape side-eyes Black. “I can hardly wait. Please do not get us killed.”

“We’re speaking of hubris, not idiocy,” Black returns—sounding just like the arrogant cretin he’d been for many years. “Let’s go.”

Black was right to warn him. Snape’s fingers itch with the urge to hex him across the entirety of the village as that mask becomes more and more pronounced.

Snape paces their steps so that they arrive at the cemetery in Little Hangleton precisely at nine. Death Eaters appear to merge out of the low-hanging fog, cloaked and masked. Snape is all too aware of the fact that they’re walking into an enclosing circle, but they don’t stop until Voldemort emerges from behind his father’s tombstone.

“Sirius Black. I must confess, I wasn’t certain if you would come,” Voldemort says in his soft rasp of a voice.

Black does not bow, or even incline his head. He is aloof and imperious, every inch the Pure-blooded wizard who was raised to a position of wealth and power. Snape hadn’t realized just how much trouble Black goes to not to leave others with that impression until that very moment.


“If I say I’m going to do something, I mean to do it,” Black tells Voldemort, his voice mocking and cold. “If that bitch doesn’t lower her wand, you’re going to lose a follower, Voldemort.”

Voldemort tilts his head towards the left. “Bella. Behave yourself.”

“Not. Now.” Voldemort still sounds pleasant, but half of the Death Eaters present flinch as the Marks flare with a brief spike of pain. Snape ignores it entirely.

“My cousin was never stable,” Black comments. “Perhaps this is a trade that should be performed quickly.”

“You have not told me what it is you have that is worth such a trade,” Voldemort says in his soft rasp of a voice.


“If I say I’m going to do something, I mean to do it,” Black tells Voldemort, his voice mocking and cold. “If that bitch doesn’t lower her wand, you’re going to lose a follower, Voldemort.”

Voldemort tilts his head towards the left. “Bella. Behave yourself.”

“But think of how much delight there is to be had!” Bellatrix whispers.

“Not. Now.” Voldemort still sounds pleasant, but half of the Death Eaters present flinch as the Marks flare with a brief spike of pain. Snape ignores it entirely.

“My cousin was never stable,” Black comments. “Perhaps this is a trade that should be performed quickly.”

“You have not told me what it is you have that is worth my time.”

Black smirks. “I’m not going for my wand,” he announces before reaching into the longer, more formal robes he put on for the occasion. He draws out a round object wrapped in velvet green cloth.

Voldemort’s eyes track the bundle's movement the moment it becomes visible. “So I see. Before we proceed, Sirius Black—what is it you think I have that is worth such a trade?”
“I’m seeking the whereabouts of Regulus Black.”

There is a rustle among the Death Eaters at that. Interesting. Snape can read the currents of a situation quite well, and none of them have any idea as to Regulus’s fate.

Voldemort’s eyes glint red in the darkness. “Unveil the globe, Sirius Black, and show me that what you hold is true.”

Black puts on a show of slow deliberation, as if deciding whether or not Voldemort is worth his time. Then he unwraps the prophecy globe, holding it in his bare hand. The wispy image of Trelawney rises forth.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches…born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies…and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not—”

Black wraps the globe again, cutting off the prophecy before it is completed. “Well? Is it worth the trade, Lord Voldemort?”

Voldemort has half-closed his eyes in apparent delight. “You give me this, knowingly endangering your own godson?”

“Part of the prophecy says that Neither can live while the other survives,” Black quotes disparagingly. “And yet, you’ve both been doing just fine since last summer. I think it’s complete bollocks, personally.”

“You do not understand the true nature of information.” Voldemort's smile is genial, and entirely false.

Black grins back, hard-edged. “I might not have been a Slytherin at Hogwarts, but I come from a long line of those who proudly bore silver and green, my brother included. Do you want this or not? I can still dash it against the nearest stone, and you’ll never hear the rest.”

Voldemort adopts an expression of false mourning. “Your brother is dead.”

“I figured that part out,” Black returns in an acid-laced voice. “No one has seen him since late 1980. How, Voldemort? Tell me, or you can try to retrieve scraps of prophecy from shards of broken glass on the ground.”

“He died in one of the last skirmishes before Hallowe’en.” Voldemort rises to his full height, as if trying to impress that his words are the truth. “He performed admirably and bravely in my service. I regret that by now, there is probably no body to recover. Fens are not kind to biological matter, and that particular battle was fought in a most unwise arena.”

“I see.” Black holds out the velvet-wrapped sphere.

“That is all? Nothing more?” Voldemort asks, affecting surprise.

Black sounds like Voldemort has asked him an exceptionally stupid question. “I wished to know the fate of my only brother. You carried out your part in our bargain. What else is there?”

Voldemort looks down at the bundle of cloth. “Madam Malfoy. Would you please come and retrieve the item in question from your cousin?”

“Of course, My Lord,” Narcissa murmurs, her voice emerging from behind one of the closer masked
Death Eaters. She steps forward without removing the mask, taking the bundle from Black before making expert work of exploring it with wand and hand for hidden traps or curses. That done, she wraps the globe once more and presents it to Voldemort.

Voldemort takes it as if being granted ownership of the rarest sort of art. “Thank you, Narcissa. You may return home; I imagine young Draco is expecting you.”

There is no missing the implied derision in Voldemort’s voice, but Narcissa ignores it. “My Lord,” she says in farewell, bowing before Disapparating.

Snape has his wand out, with Bellatrix disarmed and bound, before she can even begin mouthing the curse. “We discussed this, Bella,” he purrs, but Bellatrix merely shrieks back in thwarted rage. She is utterly insane, but she does understand how to take advantage of potential opportunities. Draco is going to need further warnings on how to deal with his crazed aunt.

“Severus.” Voldemort waves his hand in a soothing gesture. Snape slowly lowers his wand as Voldemort addresses Bellatrix. “I promised safety to the current Head of the House of Black. That is not how one treats potential allies, my dear.”

“He is no ally!” Bellatrix spits, still struggling against the Body-Bind curse that Snape hasn’t yet released.

“Oh, shut up, you barmy bitch,” Black says in complete irritation. “Your time in Azkaban did you no favors at all. Voldemort, you once made me an offer.”

Voldemort’s curiosity is re-awakened. “I do recall it. Your response was ill-mannered at the time.”

“Let’s just say that I’m intelligent enough to reconsider it in light of current events.” Black pauses. “It will, of course, depend on how you decide to treat with my only Heir.”

“Of course. I would expect no less,” Voldemort murmurs. “How fascinating. Severus, you may escort Sirius Black to a safe exit point.” He turns his head and meets Snape’s eyes. “I expect you to return to my side the moment he is gone. We have things to discuss.”

Snape bows with the sort of precision Narcissa would find pleasure in. “As My Lord wills it.”
All Snape wants is to go home, fall into his own bed at Hogwarts, and sleep for the next three days. The difficulty lies in the fact that if he does not reassure several idiots in Grimmauld Place as to his continued safety, someone will panic, awaken the castle, and Snape will have to glare an entire succession of dunderheads into submission just for the right to return to bed. Even Black threatened him about checking in before Disapparating.

His life has become Albus Dumbledore-levels of ludicrous. Snape isn’t sure who is to blame for this, but he’d prefer to find them and kill them so he can have some semblance of normal back.

He keeps forgetting; Gilderoy Lockhart is already dead. Life is not fair.

Kreacher opens the door at his knock. The house-elf gives him a stern up-and-down examination. “You is stinking of the Mistress’s favorite magics.”

“Fabulous,” Snape observes. “Please let me in, or I will slice you down into your component parts.”

Kreacher cackles, coughs a few times, and continues chuckling even after he’s closed the door behind Snape. “Kreacher should make you use the password, Bloody Bat!”


“I am,” Lupin says, appearing around the corner of the parlor. “Sirius went to bed, but I promised to tell him you stopped by in one piece—ye God, Severus, you look like death. Again. What happened?”

“Believe it or not? Nothing much of interest after Black’s departure.”

“Sir?” Potter sticks his head out of the library. “Glad you’re back.”

“How did I overlook you?” Lupin asks, giving the boy a fond look.

“I could not sleep, books are amazing, and I have an Invisibility Cloak,” Potter replies. “And—Remus is right, Professor. You really don’t look all right. What’s wrong?”

Snape has opened his mouth to tell them both that he’s fine when all at once he’s down on his knees, his hand clamped down over the Dark Mark. He’s lost in pain the likes of which he hasn’t felt in years.

He would warn the others as to what’s about to happen, but his jaw is clenched so tightly he cannot get the words out. He will not scream, he will not awaken every being in this house, he will not—

The pain fades but does not end. Snape finds himself slumped against the entryway wall, panting for breath. Sensation is a cool line of agony down his arm before it emerges from the end of his sleeve, hissing out warning and death.

“What the hell?” he hears Lupin gasp in shock.

The noise attracts the serpent. It rises up from the floor, the fabled hood of the king cobra revealing itself as its eyes turn to Lupin.

The growl that emerges from the end of the hallway is unexpectedly loud. Where Potter had been is the ratel. If the noise he is making is any indication, he is very, very angry.
Snape watches in exhausted disbelief as the ratel tackles the cobra. The snake strikes the ratel twice in rapid succession, which only seems to enrage the badger even more.

He may as well have chosen to scream. The racket of battle between a furious ratel and the thuds of a massive cobra trying to subdue an attacker is tremendous.

“Remus, what the hell is—” Black stops halfway down the stairs. His jaw is hanging open in a way that would be entertaining under different circumstances. “Where the fuck did that thing come from?”

The cobra manages to throw the ratel off. The badger rolls end over end to thump up against the far wall, but it’s already scrabbling to righten itself. The cobra, bleeding from many wounds, rears up again for another strike.

The serpent’s attack of Potter has gifted Snape with just enough adrenaline to concentrate. He raises his wand and whispers, “Sectumsempra,” before the ratel can pounce again.

The blast strikes the cobra below the juncture of body and hood, slicing clean through. The head falls down onto the floor while the rest of the cobra’s long body flops around in its reptilian death throes.

The ratel gets up, shakes himself, and wanders over to the dying cobra. Then he turns his head and subjects Snape to the angriest glare Snape has ever received from any living creature outside of the Dark Lord.

“You are not…eating…a fucking cobra!” Snape rasps out. “It’s bloody unsanitary!”

The ratel picks up the cobra’s head and marches directly over to him, dropping it next to Snape before subjecting him to another glare. “Cobra venom.” Spots are dancing across his vision. He can hear noises from upstairs, running feet on the stairs as the rest of the household tries to find out what’s happened. “You wanted to kill it so much, you harvest it, Potter.”

Lupin kicks the cobra head away, which causes the ratel to growl low in his throat again. “I am talking to you later,” he informs the ratel sternly, before kneeling down next to Snape. “Severus, your eyes are bleeding.”

“Are they?” Snape asks, feeling his wand drop from fingers that have lost the strength to hold it. He can taste blood in the back of his mouth, coppery and unpleasant.

His next sight is of a newly finished plaster ceiling. The smell in his nose is the pungent cloying dust that 12 Grimmauld Place never loses, no matter how many scouring spells Molly Weasley throws at it.

His magical core feels drained, sick and empty. It isn’t permanent, but this is at least a week’s recovery—perhaps even longer now. The last time this was done to him, he’d been a much younger man.

Snape’s eyes flicker to the right when he hears the turn of a book’s page. Potter is sitting in a chair next to his bedside. The colors on the walls are still faded Slytherin silver and green; he’s ensconced in Regulus’s old bedroom.

I read everything. Snape hears the words in his head, a statement of blunt honesty from a young man who’d spent months in seclusion after being legally claimed as Sirius Black’s ward. That spring, Snape thought it would be years before he’d be saddled with the responsibility of Potter in his classroom again.

Over the course of a single summer holiday, Potter caught up on five years of primary schooling and
two years of Hogwarts classes. No one wanted him to fall behind in his studies due to Gilderoy Lockhart’s thoughtless cruelty. The fact that Potter succeeded at all, Snape once attributed to Albus lending a hand, or perhaps his army of Weasley tutors—plus one Miss Granger—all who’d been intent on making sure Harry Potter could enter his third year at Hogwarts and match pace with his peers.

Instead of years, it was only months before Potter was back in Snape’s life. When Potter arrived on the train, Snape expected a renewed first-year, and instead found Potter’s name on his list of third-year Gryffindor students. When Snape snidely asked Albus if he was expected to provide tutoring, the Headmaster had given him a thoughtful look before saying that no one had asked for such a thing on Potter’s behalf. Not for any of his classes.

During the Start-of-Term Feast, Snape watched Potter. The boy’s eyes roved the Great Hall, taking in details. His head tilted as he listened to the flow of conversation around him. When Albus gave opening remarks before dismissing the students for the night, Potter took it all in with a complete lack of expression on his face. Poppy later confided that she suspected it was from being emotionally overwhelmed, a response that would fade in time. She’d been proven correct, but for a while, that blank-eyed child’s face had been utterly unnerving.

Snape gave it no thought, at first, when Potter turned in fundamentally correct potions during that first month of class. He’d eyed the Gryffindors with dark disapproval, but ignored Granger’s occasional whispered instruction. It wasn’t until the incident during Snape’s first round of substitute teaching for Lupin at the end of September, and his failed werewolf outing, that Snape realized Granger had ceased whispering reminders to Potter at least a full week previous.

The fact that Potter took every single available third-year class, Snape still blames on Granger and her bloody Time-Turner. He refused to admit that he was impressed they both succeeded with good passing marks in every single subject, including his own.

“Is that the same book?” Snape asks. His voice sounds like the rumble of someone just waking, not damaged at all. He suspects Poppy’s excellent handiwork.

Potter lifts his head and rubs his eyes. His glasses are perched up on his messy hair. “No, that was eight books ago, sir. How are you?”

“Wondering why I am in a bedroom in this house with a nursemaid in a chair.”

Potter grins at him. “Because you arrived here after midnight Saturday, and now it’s Tuesday afternoon. We’ve been taking turns.”

Snape groans and lets his head thump back down on the pillow. “Fuck.”

Potter puts a slip of paper into his book before closing it. “Compromised virtue, sir,” he says, and smiles when Snape glares at him. “There, that’s better. If you were not a bastion of foul temper, I’d be certain you were a doppelganger.”

“Of course. Appearances,” Snape grumbles. “How much clucking has there been, Potter?”

“Hmm.” Potter rests his hands on the book’s front cover, ignoring the fact that the runes decorating the surface immediately begin crawling all over his skin. “Remus says I’m grounded, Sirius says I’m not, and I think they’re still arguing about it. The ratel conveniently disappeared before anyone else noticed him, and your hitchhiker’s damage was all attributed to that spell you cast. Forever severed? Really, sir?”
“I once fancied myself to have a sense of humor,” Snape replies.

“Then, of course, nobody knew what had happened, so Sirius calls for Poppy, Poppy calls for Dumbledore the moment she hears, ‘Severus is shedding snakes all over my entryway,’ which is alliteration I can’t get out of my head. Dumbledore professed to know nothing of what happened, but the snake in your Dark Mark seems to be missing.”

Snape feels a flutter of hope and terror mingled together. It’s not a nice sensation. “He’ll put one back. He always does.”

“So he’s attacked you that way before?” Potter looks concerned. “You badger me about information, sir—”

“I’m taking points for that pun.”

“Summer holidays, go ahead and try. Professor McGonagall says that the gem counter for the Houses always laughs at you,” Potter says smugly. “You say all information is important, and then don’t bother to tell anyone that Voldemort can use you to send cobras after people using the Dark Mark? That’s very shoddy, sir.”

“I suppose you’ll be reporting this to any busybodies waiting downstairs,” Snape says.

Potter nods. “The relevant parts, of course.”

Snape closes his eyes. “The attack is not primarily aimed at myself. This is a side-effect. Voldemort uses the victim’s own magical core to create the physical serpent. The attack is aimed at anyone who is fool enough to be in the serpent’s path.”

Potter brushes off some of the runes that are energetically trying to crawl up his arm. The runes land in a heap on the book cover before regrouping. “Then, despite the creeping nature of the attack—”

“Potter,” Snape growls.

“—it wasn’t necessarily about either prospect. Voldemort decided that if you were spending time in Black’s company, then other Order members would be nearby. This was a test to see if Dumbledore still thought you were loyal to the Order. You know, since bringing deadly, venomous snakes into other people’s houses is usually frowned upon.”

Snape tries not to sigh. “It usually is, yes.”

“At least the Grangers slept through it. Hermione says they live in a rather noisy part of London, and the sound of a ratel and cobra fight didn’t even make the scale of things worth waking up for.”

“Good. They’d probably be whisking Granger off to France, otherwise.”

Potter has an expression on his face that isn’t quite thoughtful, but not pensive, either. “I don’t actually think Hermione would let them. Oh, speaking of Hermione…” He puts the book aside and gets up, taking a moment to stretch before crossing the room.

Snape tries to sit up and discovers that it’s a failing effort. Potter doesn’t even turn around. “Madam Pomfrey says she might let you up this evening, if you can sit up without sacking up or immediately taking on the appearance of an underweight corpse.”

“That’s what charms are for,” Snape mutters.
Potter glances at him over his shoulder. “Snape, you can’t Apparate, Floo, or use a Port Key right now. I doubt you could cast a spell if your life depended on it. What’s so important that you need to leave that badly?”

“My own blasted bed,” Snape retorts.

“Oh.” Potter tilts his head. “Okay. If Madam Pomfrey says you look better, then I might have an idea about that. You don’t mind an underage driver, do you?”

“I take it no one has re-informed you of the incident with the Ford Anglia.”

“Well, yes, but I wasn’t driving. I don’t think that counts.” Snape listens as Potter opens and closes a plastic-sounding case. He moves just enough so that when Snape lifts his head, he can see a near-identical version of the same modern Muggle stereo Potter gifted to him last year.

“What now?” Snape asks, feeling tired. He’s also frustrated; Potter is correct. Perhaps he could manage a spell if his life really did depend on it, but otherwise? No.

“Hermione found this one in London during Easter vacation. The band is from Belgium, though they perform most of their songs in English.” The louder click is the familiar sound of the PLAY button. Then there are slighter clicks to denote forwarding through the compact record’s track listing.

“Do I have a choice?” Snape asks.

“No really. I was on the verge of deciding the quiet was getting to be a bit much just before you woke up. Sometimes it helps to split my focus if I’m trying to interpret something.” Potter retrieves his book as he sits back down. “Shut up and go back to sleep, sir.”

Snape makes sure to give Potter one final glare before he settles again. The music is soft and quiet; another lead female singer, though without Lovegood’s breathy quality. This is huskier, closer to Janis Joplin but without the additional caterwauling.

“I’m sure you’re only dreaming
You’re only juggling with my mind
When I feel more and more like screaming
For the scar you left behind.

I’m sure you’re only dreaming
I’m sure we’re just a part
Of what the lucky man believes in
I’m sure you know this song by heart.

You’re only dreaming
I think I can hear you talk
You’re only dreaming
I think I can hear you say, ‘Shut up’
You’re only dreaming
I hope your dream is in me
You’re only dreaming you’re free…”

“Potter, this is depressing,” he complains.

Potter shushes him. Unimaginable, atrocious brat.

The chorus, the repetition of only dreaming that he is free, follows him back into slumber. To his surprise, he gets not nightmares, but Lily’s voice singing it in her soft, quiet way. The scent of wintergreen and citrus is heavy in the air.

*          *          *          *

Poppy allows him out of bed for a late evening meal. Snape refuses to tell anyone that he almost falls down simply trying to get his trousers back on. The unrepaired tear in the left sleeve of shirt and coat is irritating, but there is also a red, angry line down the length of his left arm that is still healing. The damaged fabric might have been someone’s emergency slice, forgotten in the chaos afterwards.

The skull is still in place on his forearm, but the serpent is missing. As he told Potter, Voldemort will replace it later. Receiving the replacement is not nearly as traumatizing as its emergence.

“My boy, you really should have told us this was a possibility,” Albus says, after Snape is seated at the kitchen table. Molly is a flurry of terrifying activity, but it means he has tea almost at once.

“Albus…” Snape takes a sip just to clear the last hint of a rasp from his voice. “That has happened only once, and that was in—1979, perhaps?” He stops to think about it and realizes that’s as close as he wants to go. “It is not a nice memory, Albus. There were casualties.”

“Can anyone’s Dark Mark do that?” Draco asks in a faint voice. Narcissa’s hand is resting on his shoulder; a grim and unhappy stare mars her cool, sculpted features.

“Yes. That is part of the point, after all,” Snape tells him. Draco pales, biting his lip, but Snape doesn’t think that he’ll renege on his decision. After this past Saturday, perhaps even Draco realizes how much his survival will ultimately depend on Voldemort’s defeat.

“You angered him,” Albus guesses.

Snape considers it, and realizes that it’s as good a cover as any. They will need something, or Dumbledore will never stop prying. “Something had to be done to explain the time I spent with Black during the Yule Ball, or suspicion would mount that all was not as it seemed.”
Black just nods when the others glance at him. “Told the bastard I’d ‘reconsider’ his old offer to join him based on the way things are going.” His grin is sharp and humorless. “Doesn’t mean I’ll actually do it, but it gives Snivellus the means to keep spying for scraps.”

“Sirius. Not right now, please,” Lupin says, putting on his long-suffering expression of needing to act as the voice of reason.

Albus peers over his glasses at Snape. “Sectumsempra, Severus?”

“Dead snake,” Snape retorts crossly. “Or would you perhaps prefer it have killed someone?”

“If you hadn’t done it, I was about to. I think I was too startled by sudden midnight cobra to react properly at first,” Black admits. “I haven’t had to worry about dangerous creatures roaming the halls since my uncle died.”

“Are we sure it was not simply a trap that the Dark Lord placed, one that rode in with you?” Alastor Moody is staring at Snape, his magical eye whirling around in its socket.

Snape rolls up his unreppaired left sleeve to reveal the Mark, which is missing a vital part of itself. “Absolutely certain.”

Moody studies the incomplete Mark. “Damn,” he breathes. “I’ll have to warn every Auror, not to mention every member of the Order. Is this a constant threat, Professor Snape?”

“No.” Snape gives Molly a look of polite gratitude when a scone appears in front of him. That, he might be able to eat. “If it happens, Voldemort is either using it as a test, or he’s sacrificing the Death Eater in question. We’re not exactly active on our feet afterwards.”

“Active, hell. Madam Pomfrey wasn’t sure you were going to survive it,” Doctor Granger says. He’s seated without his wife, who went with Miss Granger and Auror Tonks on an early school shopping trip to Diagon Alley; Nymphadora sent word that they would be late returning. The man is handling things very well. It’s almost a disappointment that the Doctors Granger may have to be Obliviated from recalling certain events during their week’s stay—like the bloody cobra incident. “If it weren’t for the world you live in, Professor, I doubt you’d be alive.”

“If I lived in the Muggle World, I would not have a cursed tattoo on my arm,” Snape returns dryly. The doctor has the grace to look chagrined, realizing too late the inherent stupidity of his statement.

Albus is still studying him. “Are you sure a test of loyalties was all it was, Severus?”

“There was nothing—nothing—to suggest otherwise, Albus.” Snape rubs at his forehead. “I will say that Bellatrix is slipping even further into insanity. The Dark Lord is not only refusing to curtail it, I believe he’s encouraging it.”


“I would rather it had been none of us at all, but…” Narcissa glances at Draco. “Yes. Better her than us.”

“And you, Narcissa? I refuse to ask you to fight in a war against your estranged husband, but will you keep yourself and Draco safe from harm by seeking refuge among us?” Albus asks.

“Your offer has been…most generous,” Narcissa says, inclining her head. “And it has been good to have conversations with my cousin and my sister that do not involve shouting and bloodshed. I will still need to give the matter further consideration, and Draco must complete his studies at Hogwarts
in order to be properly capable of running the Malfoy Estate if his father perishes. In the meantime, I have your word that our presence here will not reach the Dark Lord’s ears?”

“You have it, Narcissa,” Albus promises solemnly. “There is no one at this table who will turn over a potential ally to the horror that Voldemort is capable of unleashing.”

“Especially after the kind of demonstration that greeted us this weekend,” Molly says. Snape refuses to cringe when Molly’s hand briefly rests on his shoulder. “No, Narcissa. Our disagreements in the past will not alter my promise now. You have safe passage from here, and if you choose to return, you will be welcomed. You and Draco both.” Molly gives Draco the look of a mother on the verge of mischief. “If nothing else, your son and my children certainly got plenty of dueling practice during the week.”

“So many claims of cheating, from both parties.” Black shakes his head.

“There’s no such bloody thing as cheating,” Snape grumbles over his tea.

“Professor, the statement you made to myself and my wife over my daughter’s attendance at Hogwarts.” Snape glances up to see Doctor Granger regarding him with a hint of nervousness in his eyes. “Do you still stand by what you said?”

“Believe it or not? I do,” Snape says, and Doctor Granger nods. The man is either naïve, or painfully aware that Snape is speaking the truth.

It takes an interminable amount of time to send everyone off to bed. Snape stands up, rests his hands on the table, and considers his physical state. “Yes, I still need to go back to Hogwarts. I will recover faster in my own quarters, and if Voldemort calls for my presence before I have that chance…”

“We get it.” Black’s face is set in a grim frown. “Harry, are you sure you’re ready?”

“What did you say last year? That the only thing keeping me from getting my license is my age, yes?” Potter comes into the kitchen with two sets of goggles, wearing a leather jacket, and holding a larger one in his arms.

“I did. I’m just feeling uneasy about all of this.” Black shoves his hands into the pockets of his evening dressing gown. “Fucking cobras, by Merlin.”

“Blasted ratel,” Lupin counters, glaring at Potter. “How long have you been hiding your Animagus form?”

“Since last summer,” Potter says. “No, I’m not registering, Remus, and you know exactly why.”

“Voldemort.” Lupin looks like he’s chewing on something foul. “Disillusionment charm, Harry.”

“Of course. I’ll overnight at Hogwarts and come back in the morning, all right?”

Black and Lupin take turns hugging their godson goodnight before leaving the kitchen. Potter gives the larger leather jacket to Snape. “Put it on. It’s going to be chilly, otherwise.”

Snape, expecting a broom ride, almost balks at the sight of the motorbike waiting in the old carriage house. “Absolutely not.”

“It’s either this one, or we can use the bike Sirius keeps on the roof. You can sit in the sidecar.” The smile Potter gives him is all ratel vengeance.
“What the hell is wrong with a broom?” Snape wants to know.

“Nothing, but we’re trying to avoid notice, right? Voldemort’s people watch the house for anyone leaving on a broom. The carriage house lets out onto a Muggle street in the back, and the idiots never think to look for wizards or witches on Muggle vehicles. It’s a huge oversight that should really be corrected.”

“No, it shouldn’t.” Snape eyes the bike with the feel of impending regret. “I haven’t been on any sort of contraption like this since 1976, Potter.” He’d done just enough to earn the Muggle driving license that his father insisted Snape have in his possession, and then discarded it the moment his idiot father expired.

“Then it’s your twenty-year anniversary,” Potter declares, hopping onto the bike and starting it with the speed of a seasoned expert. “Get on. We’re road-bound until I know no one’s following us.”

“Oh, God and Merlin, it flies.” Snape places his life in the hands of an underage driver and then climbs onto the back of the bike to ride pillion. “Please do not crash. I have seen the aftermath of Muggle motorbike accidents, Potter.”

“Oh, no worries. Sirius says that I drive like I fly a broom,” Potter replies.

“That is not reassuring.”

The ride is noisy until it’s safe to take flight outside London with a proper Disillusionment Charm in place. Then the bike is silent, the motor no longer needed. “I could turn it back on, but up here it’s mostly for show,” Potter explains. “I’d rather have the quiet.”

Snape agrees with him. They’re surrounded by darkness and starlight, far above the winking lights of villages that dot the landscape. It’s the closest to peace he’s experienced in a long time. 

I wonder if death is like this, Snape finds himself thinking, and discovers it’s not an unpleasant notion. He has no illusions about surviving this war. If death is the peace of the quiet night sky, then he’ll welcome it with open arms.

By the time they arrive at Hogwarts, Snape is all but asleep on his feet. If it weren’t for the fact that he was utterly serious about needing the peace of his own quarters, it would have been at least a full day too soon to make the journey. He relies on Potter’s support more and more as they make their way through the silent halls. Only the Bloody Baron is present to witness Snape’s return.

Potter politely greets the waiting ghost. “Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening, young savior,” the Baron intones. “Is the Head of my favored House ill?”

“He was, but he’ll be fine in a few days. Oh, and I almost got to eat a cobra.”

The Bloody Baron gives Potter a pleased smile while Snape taps his wand against his door, trying to remember how to breach his own blasted wards. “Someone must have stopped you. A ratel and his food are not easily parted.”

“They did. Said it was unsanitary. Like a ratel cares about that, right?” Potter replies, smiling.

“Indeed.” The Baron waits until Snape’s door swings open. “Young savior. Come to the school at least a full day before the other students arrive for the new term in September. The Grey Lady and I would speak with you.”
Potter halts in surprise, as does Snape. The Grey Lady, ghost of Ravenclaw Tower, speaks to no one. “Is she all right?”

The Baron considers the question. “I think, perhaps, that you might assist us with a matter that will allow her to be. She has been trapped here for too long, and it is my own fault this is so. You will thus be doing us both a great favor, young savior.”

Potter nods. “Then I’ll be here, sir. Good night, Baron.”

“Good night, vicious and victorious ratel.”

“What was that all about?” Snape asks, struggling to remove the dragon-hide leather jacket. After he shrugs it off, he hangs it on a peg next to one of his own winter robes.

Potter adds his coat to the lineup on the wall. “I’m not sure. I mean, I’ve always been nice to all of the ghosts, but the Grey Lady has never spoken to me. Luna, now—she likes Luna.”

Snape isn’t surprised by that. He blames the exhaustion. “The sofa is over there,” he says, pointing at the obvious piece of furniture. “I’m going to bed, Potter. Get some rest before you take that ridiculous contraption back to London tomorrow.”

Potter smiles. “Good night, sir.”

The last thing Snape sees before he shuts his bedroom door is Potter aiming his wand at the fireplace, lighting the fire and illuminating the room in cheerful warmth. Then he collapses on his own bed, exhaustion takes hold, and he spends the next few days in a haze of semi-consciousness interrupted by slumber.

* * * *

When he awakens and is fully cognizant again, Snape finds two envelopes waiting on his office desk. There is no scent of owl; he suspects Dobby is enjoying his job of letter carrier again.

The first envelope holds useful information.

Dear Professor,

The other Order members wanted to tell you, but I said I had a more secure method via house-elf of making sure you received information, and they gave in when Sirius badgered them about it.

You still can’t take points for puns during the summer.

It’s confirmed by the Aurors who were undercover during the week of the Great Trade (Blame Sirius) that there are people watching the Granger home and the Burrow, as well as the Delacour home in France. An unknown Death Eater broke into the Granger home to try to figure out where they’d gone, but otherwise did no damage. The Order has taken this into account and will be adding wards to the Granger home with the Grangers’ permission.

The Burrow tried to eat a Death Eater spy that got too close. That particular Auror reports that the Death Eater ran off, covered in garden gnomes, before Disapparating and taking the gnomes with
That explained Mulciber’s interesting new collection of bite marks when Snape saw him unmasked the night of Black’s prophecy trade.

_The Death Eater_ who got too close to the Delacour home found herself surrounded by very upset Veelas. Fleur and Gabrielle’s family look after their relatives. The noseless arsehole might be missing a follower. Fleur said, in utter seriousness, that her grandmother’s Veela clan might have eaten the intruder.

Bill then made jokes about being eaten. Fleur smiled at him. I do not want to know. This week has been an education in things I was not ready for. Reading it in a book is not the same thing as witnessing it. I’m not even sixteen yet. Please let me pretend no one is actively having sex in the next bedroom for a while longer. Please.

No one was spying on Viktor’s family, and Malfoy Manor remained undisturbed. Voldemort’s trust in their family’s loyalty seems solid. Madam Malfoy isn’t concerned for its safety even once that trust is broken. It seems the Manor is capable of taking care of itself as long as it still recognizes Draco. I don’t want to know the details about that, either, but I’ll probably ask anyway. Regret, thy name is often Malfoy.

The Diggory home was also being watched. No one chased that Death Eater away, nor did the idiot try to break into their home. He just seemed very thwarted about not knowing where the family had gone. At least now we know who’s going to need protection.

I did ask if Luna wanted a vacation in London, too. She and her father said they would be fine, but an Auror kept watch, just in case.

Nobody knows what happened to the Death Eater that showed up to poke around the Lovegood garden. “Screaming and disappearing” was the report the Order received. I don’t think I want to visit her house uninvited.

Yours,

Harry

The other envelope contains a plastic compact record case for a band called K’s Choice. There is a brief note on the inside of the case from Potter, claiming that if Snape is going to sleep through the entire album, it might be helpful if insomnia becomes a difficulty.

_Brat_. Snape shakes his head and adds the compact record to his growing collection. At least his knowledge of Muggle music is now somewhat up to date.

As planned, Draco makes a great show of breaking off with his “traitorous” mother when she goes to Grimmauld Place for sanctuary against the Dark Lord. He is still underage, but Voldemort accepts him into the ranks of the Death Eaters with an expression that makes a tiny part of Snape relax a little. Such a division of family and youthful declarations of utter loyalty pleases Voldemort, and it might make Draco Malfoy’s punishment for failing to murder Albus Dumbledore a bit less severe.
Unfortunately, it does not distract Voldemort from the “necessity” of replacing the snake in the Dark Mark on Snape’s arm. Watching that serpentine line crawl up his skin before it curls up in the skull is exceptionally discomfiting.

The general public and the *Daily Prophet* are not aware of the Malfoy split, but it is Snape’s task to inform the Order of the Phoenix. Not every member is aware of their ultimate goals, for good reason.

Moody wants to flay Draco alive. Albus talks him out of it, pointing out that it’s not legal to flay minors, and that Draco still has two years of schooling to change his mind. Moody alters his promise and says that he’ll flay Draco alive after his graduation from Hogwarts. Molly does her best to comfort Narcissa, who remains stone-faced throughout the meeting.

Snape is too busy to attend to anything else that occurs at Grimmauld Place that summer. His presence is not needed at Order meetings unless he is given information by a Death Eater or Voldemort that is too important to delay.

He corresponds with Narcissa by house-elf mail, though she entrusts her letters to Kreacher rather than Dobby. She has a surprising amount of appreciation regarding Black’s behavior and maturity, and her hopes that her son might, perhaps, observe his betters among the Pure-blood and Half-blood set to see how a proper young wizarding gentleman behaves.

Snape smiles at the direct compliment Narcissa is paying to him, rather than anyone else, but Potter is also well-mannered. Perhaps she is keeping Draco’s favorite rival in mind, as well.

* * * *

On Potter’s birthday, Snape receives an unexpected evening message. Dobby is wearing gold and scarlet socks on his ears and all four limbs which actually complement his Muggle burgundy nail polish.

*Professor,*

*Happy Birthday to me. I’m sixteen and still alive. Given the state of Wizarding Britain, I’ve decided to make it a goal to meet each birthday individually. If I live to be seventeen, then I’ve accomplished a goal! After that, my aim will be to survive to age eighteen.*

*I know you are busy, but you should know that Dementor attacks have been reported across the countryside. The Ministry knows, but refuses to inform the public that Dementors are leaving Azkaban. Certain Ministry-affiliated Order members are in a foul temper about this, but none have the authority to act without losing their jobs—and the positions that help provide us with useful information. Rufus Scrimgeour has been Minister for Magic for exactly a month, and I already dislike him. Probably not a good track record, that.*

*Remus thinks that the Dementors are breeding. Fucking gross.*

*Then there are the disappearances. Bill says at least three entire families have gone missing, all Half-bloods, and it doesn’t look like they left willingly. Other members of the Order are searching for them, but I can tell by the look on Bill’s face that he thinks they’re all dead.*
I don’t know if anyone who sides with the noseless arsehole will confide in you regarding the disappearances, but if it happens, please send word, even if it’s just to confirm what Bill believes.

Yours,

Harry

Snape has no idea where Albus continually disappears to for the rest of the summer. When Minerva McGonagall returns from a vacation abroad at the beginning of August, Albus puts control of summer preparation for start-of-term into her capable hands and vanishes again.

It makes Snape suspect that Albus is aware of what he plans, but at this point, he doesn’t care. If Snape doesn’t do it, it will not happen in time, and this is an easily preventable loss of life. Waiting is stupid and unacceptable.

The trouble is convincing Minerva that yes, it will be necessary. She doesn’t want to believe it at first, but she is also a Scot of intensely practical bearing. Once she sits down and truly listens to Snape as to how dire things are going to become, she is his ally in this.

“He’s going to make you the Headmaster. You,” Minerva says, looking over the rims of her glasses at Snape.

“Yes. The Dark Lord won’t trust you, not when you’ve been a strident and outspoken member of the Order, but if you make declarations during the coming year that your students are your very first priority, politics be damned, it will keep you here, where you need to be. The students will need someone they still trust in a position of authority. Merlin knows they will not trust me.”

Minerva eyes him in a way that says she is, perhaps, seeing more of his motivations than Snape is comfortable with. “Why? You are a thunderous terror, Severus Snape, but you have never deliberately harmed a student.”

Snape considers it over his cooling tea. “Find another professor whom you know can survive Voldemort’s control of the school without being murdered for not being of proper wizarding blood. If I accept another Unbreakable Vow, the strength of those magical bindings might become noticeable, and then I am under suspicion all over again.”

Minerva treats him to another one of her no-nonsense looks. “Very well,” she agrees, and returns with Poppy Pomfrey. Snape finds it a sensible choice.

“Minerva came to get me muttering over secrecy and the need for Unbreakable Vows, Severus.” Poppy crosses her arms and subjects him to the sort of caring glower that only matrons of her caliber seem to master. “Please inform me as to what insanity is going to be occurring in the school this year.”

Neither of the witches are pleased when he informs them of Albus Dumbledore’s impending fate, or of what might await those teaching professors who are not Pure-blooded. “Dear Merlin,” Poppy murmurs. “Pomona is a Half-blood, and there isn’t another witch or wizard in Britain who would be fit to replace her.”

Minerva shakes her head. “Pomona’s family went to a great deal of trouble to hide Pomona’s Half-blood status when she was a child. If we wipe any reference to it from the school records, she should be safe. Not even the Ministry has accurate files regarding Pomona’s birth father. The only people who know of his origins are the three of us and Filius, and Filius would sooner eat his wand than
endanger anyone.”

“Will Filius be safe? His ancestry might be Pure-blood on one side, but he’s goblin on the other,” Poppy says.

“Fortunately for all of us, the Dark Lord doesn’t give a damn about mixed-race blood. He just wants an utter lack of Muggle influence in the school.”

“You’re a Half-blood,” Minerva observes dryly. “What makes you exempt, Severus?”

“I really don’t know,” Snape replies, which is a lie. It’s just not a truth he is comfortable sharing with anyone. “Regardless, it is not something I emphasize, and like Pomona’s father, it should be a matter we do not discuss.”

They have five classes taught by Muggle-borns or well-known Half-bloods aside from himself. It would be six, but Charity Burbage was not replaced during the last school term for Muggle Studies. Theoretically, that means finding a teacher for this term, but that is a thankless task Snape gladly leaves to Minerva.

Snape does not have the same level of authority that Minerva does, and his presence would be considered odd. A simple Disillusionment Charm means that he can observe each meeting with the endangered faculty without being noticed. The remaining teachers for Art, Alchemy, Ghoul Studies, Magical Theory, and Music have to be convinced to either take teaching sabbaticals at the end of this coming school term, or made aware of the fact that yes, they will indeed have to flee the moment the danger becomes apparent. Snape honestly despairs of any of them listening to Minerva’s sensible advice.

“What is supposed to signal that, then?” Madam Willowood demands to know, glaring at Minerva. The teacher of the wizarding arts is less than impressed by Minerva’s reasoning.

“You will receive a Patronus informing you as to your sudden, very real danger. The moment that happens, take your family and leave Britain at once,” Minerva says. “I mean it, Sasha. What is coming is not worth risking your life.”

“What of my students?”

“We will find a temporary replacement, though I doubt the teacher will share your skill,” Minerva tells her. “Your job will be waiting for you once the war is over, Sasha.”

Madam Willowood sniffs haughtily, but nods stiff agreement. There is a reason Snape has never liked that woman, and he has a strong suspicion that she won’t listen to the warning Patronus when it arrives. More fool her, then.

By the time it’s over, Snape knows that the art teacher, the alchemy instructor, and the ghoul studies professor may not attempt escape when they receive their warnings. The professor of music and their instructor for basic magical theory, he thinks, will heed Minerva’s words.

Minerva leans back in her chair when the battles are over, sighing in resignation. Snape removes the charm and walks over to sit next to her. This didn’t go as well as he’d hoped. Maybe that’s why Albus didn’t bother, but refusal to act does not make it correct.

“What about the students, Severus?” Minerva has removed her hat, revealed hair that seems to be growing more frazzled as the woman’s stress levels rise. “If we stop them from attending Hogwarts, they will be in danger. If we allow the Half-bloods and Muggle-borns to attend, they will also be in danger.”
“We’ll have to charm the student registry,” Snape says, which causes Minerva to stare at him in surprise.

“Severus, the registry can’t be altered. That’s part of its purpose!”

“All of the ancient items this school uses have some level of awareness and intellect,” Snape counters, “including that stupid hat we use every year. If we explain the danger to the document in question, I suspect it will do exactly as we ask. No mention of Muggle-born blood status will appear.”

“And the Half-bloods, Severus?”

“He wants them to attend,” Snape answers, frowning. “They will be pushed harder than the other students, and be in far more danger…but better here than remaining at home, waiting for corrupt Ministry officials to come and claim them.”

“Their families,” Minerva whispers. “Merlin, what can we do?”

“Narrow your focus,” Snape says, his tone harsh and unforgiving. “We protect who we can, and that will be the students of Hogwarts. We will have to trust the rest of the Order to look after those we cannot.”

Minerva takes off her glasses before looking at him. “Severus Snape: are you really on the side of the Order, or is your allegiance solely towards You-Know-Who?”

Snape smiles. “I am utterly loyal to the Order, Minerva.” Then he lets the smile fade, and the hard edges come through to reveal the full extent of the Bloody Bat. “My allegiance is also truly with the Dark Lord, and that is the way it must be. After the Ministry falls, you will find you do not like me very much.”

Minerva cleans her glasses on her robe sleeve. “Well, that will make it so much easier to play my part, won’t it?” She puts them back on, but she is no longer looking at Snape. “Albus is really dying, isn’t he?”

Snape lets his disgust and frustration be heard in his answer. “Yes.”

It’s while investigating the student registry that Snape is reminded of something he’s grown so used to that he stopped considering it at all. It had been this way when he’d started teaching, yes, and he’d recognized it then, but the averages never changed.

“Minerva, what was the average student population of Hogwarts in 1970?” Snape asks. That was the year before he began school; it’s as good a place to begin this line of query as any.

Minerva eyes him over the list of students she’s writing down from a pile of letters returned by families who wouldn’t accept them. “Twenty-eight hundred, Severus.”

Snape counts the names listed in the registry who are meant to attend Hogwarts in the coming term. “And in 1982?”

“No. First you must consider 1975,” Minerva says, putting down her quill. “Attendance had already dropped to seventeen hundred at that point, Severus, though it would have been harder to notice when you were living right in the midst of it. Then you may move on to 1982, your first year of teaching, where our students numbered exactly seven hundred eighteen.”

“And last year we had nine hundred seventy.” Snape considers resting his face in his hands, but it
won’t help. “The numbers had finally begun to climb again from the war.”

“Partly through population recovery, though we still averaged a lack of about fifty-five percent—families who never lost the paranoia of the first war and sent their children to schools outside of the British Isles, or continued the whole of their education at home.” Minerva frowns. “I am not fond of the latter decision; it’s much easier for relevant lessons to be overlooked in that sort of environment. It’s one thing to teach a child the fundamentals of reading, writing, history, and arithmetic at home, but quite another when it comes to complex, necessary spells. Those children have an unfortunate tendency towards doing poorly on their N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s.”

“I see.” Snape double-checks his count. “There are three thousand seventy-seven names listed in this registry for the upcoming term, Minerva.”

She nods. “Our standard was once to deduct thirty percent of that number to estimate expected attendance numbers. If you check by blood status, you’ll note that some are Squibs. Even before Voldemort’s threat, there were parents who chose home-schooling, or other boarding schools in Europe.”

“And with the war?” Snape asks. “With this summer’s public confirmation that Voldemort is returned?”

Minerva purses her lips. “Thirty percent, reduced by yet another fifty-five to sixty percent. I would estimate nine hundred students. Perhaps less. I certainly wouldn’t be preparing for more than that.”

“I see,” Snape repeats, because he cannot decide on a response that is even remotely reasonable. “You’re telling me that Hogwarts’ average student population is meant to be three thousand.”

“Yes.”

Snape gives up and squeezes the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “And how long have we been chronically short-staffed?”

“Oh, since about 1978,” Minerva says, returning to her work. “But when the student averages never climbed over one thousand, the governing board wasn’t willing to fill in those gaps when the war ended. Why waste the money, after all? Each Head of House only had to cater to the whims of approximately two hundred students per term. There are plenty of us to monitor the little darlings.”

“The hell there are,” Snape retorts. “Is it a done thing to turn an entire Board of Governors inside-out for stupidity, Minerva?”

“Not unless you let me have a crack at them first,” Minerva says curtly. “I’ve been dealing with their nonsense far, far longer than you.”

“When the opportunity presents itself, then by all means: ladies first.”

The third week of August sees him finalizing the student list for his sixth- and seventh-year N.E.W.T.-level classes. He isn’t surprised to see that Ronald Weasley didn’t make an O, but he did scrape by with an E. Snape wasn’t aware that Mister Weasley had paid enough attention in class to attain such a grade. He seemed far too interested in reserving most of his class time to complain about Snape.

Potter would have been hexed within an inch of his life if he hadn’t attained an O. Miss Granger’s presence is not a surprise, either. What frustrates Snape is that they are the only two Gryffindors in their entire year to succeed. Parvati Patil had certainly shown the skill to earn an O, but when he checks the records, he discovers a severely disappointing A-grade.
Combining every successful O-grade recipient into one class gives him a total of eleven students for sixth-year. The lack of further academic successes is discouraging, but a smaller class will be easier to guide and teach, even if he must maintain his role of the Great Bloody Bat. Aside from Granger and Potter, he will have a sole Hufflepuff in Ernest Macmillan; Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Padma Patil, and Sue Li will represent Ravenclaw; Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini, and Millicent Bulstrode are his only successful O-grade Slytherins. Snape is pleased with Miss Bulstrode for outshining every other female in her year while also outgrowing the entire lot. By last June, she towered over a great deal of the student body at a precise six feet in height.

He wonders what it would be like to teach in a Hogwarts that was full to student capacity and immediately scowls. Each year would hold an average of four hundred twenty students until N.E.W.T. Potions weeded out anything below an O-grade. That would require twenty-one bloody classes for each year, first through fifth, if he tried to keep a Potions class at a relatively safe twenty students. One hundred five classes. Absolutely not. Even daring to attempt thirty cauldrons in a classroom would still require that seventy classes be taught. If Hogwarts ever recovers from the coming war and repopulates to pre-Voldemort levels, he does not want to be the one dealing with that impending disaster.

Snape receives a letter delivered by house-elf later that same day. Dobby’s fingernails are painted with a thicker application of Doctor Granger’s burgundy nail polish, and the house-elf has carved out intricate symbols in the paint covering each nail. “Symbols of protection?” he asks.

Dobby nods vigorously. “Good house-elf magic. When we’s cannot be where we’s needin’ to be to protect our wizards and witches, we make signs and wear them. I’s even have one for you, Professor!”

Dobby shows him a symbol that Snape realizes is a constellation-style head of a doe. “An interesting choice. Thank you for the letter, Dobby.”

“You’s bein’ welcome, Professor!” Dobby declares, and vanishes.

Dear Snape,

In all of the excitement of the Great Trade (He really won’t stop calling it that) I forgot to tell you the results of my O.W.L.s. Remus suggests you’re probably already aware of the O in Potions, and that you’re plotting accordingly. I told Remus that if you weren’t plotting, it was because you were dead.

I’m not doing a very good job at learning to have a sense of humor. Remus didn’t laugh.

Anyway:

Charms – O

Transfiguration – O

Herbology – O

Defence Against the Dark Arts – O

Ancient Runes – O

Ancient Magic – O
Potions – O
Care of Magical Creatures – O
Astronomy – O
Divination – O
Arithmancy – O
History of Magic – O

Congratulate me; I am the first person to achieve a perfect set of 12 since Bill Weasley.

Hermione is ready to throttle me. She only received ten. I told her not to ditch Muggle Studies and Divination, or to at least replace them with two of the other offerings. She complained that people have to actually sleep sometime. I told her that I’m probably never going to sleep again for fear of what she’ll attempt to do to me in revenge.

After this, however, I am turning in the bloody Time-Turner. I’d rather start narrowing my focus—yes, I am paying attention.

I didn’t mention the Time-Turner before, did I? Must have slipped my mind.

Snape finds himself smiling. He wonders how Potter is really doing in his attempt to relearn Parseltongue, but now knows for certain that he won’t find out until it’s safe for Potter to speak of it. Brilliant young man. He’s so proud of Harry.

He pauses, blinking a few times. That hadn’t occurred to him. Not that way, not before this.

He is. He is proud of Harry James Potter.

“Lily, your child is amazing,” Snape murmurs under his breath.

For just a brief moment, he can smell wintergreen and citrus. It’s like being hugged by scent and memory.

Oh, well. Back into the Ministry’s Hands the Time-Turner goes. (I couldn’t think of anything to do with it that was useful. Fred and George chided me on not being imaginative enough. I say they’re imaginative enough for the entire school, even after graduating.)

Potions is first on this year’s class list. You would throttle me otherwise. Hagrid already understands that I can’t continue in his class, but that man has an emotional attachment to me that no one has ever bothered to explain.

I don’t remember these things. Why do people expect me to just know them? How have I gotten from the spring of 1993 until now with others still forgetting that I don’t remember this shite?

Transfiguration is next, as Professor McGonagall would also throttle me if I did not. Defence Against the Dark Arts should be the obvious addition. Ancient Magic is on the schedule, also, since that class subject covers a lot of things that current wizarding classes do not teach. I believe Professor Babbling tosses in new ancient rune sets, too, even if they are supposed to be for her other
Snape, many of the spells in Ancient Magic are useful to practically all of the wizarding world. Why are we not teaching everyone things that are useful? It’s fucking stupid.

Professor Flitwick is still pushing me to extreme feats of “Please keep making up new things to do” so I’m giving that at least another year of my time. I don’t want to give up Astronomy, but with Firenze joining in as the Divination teacher for older students—Snape, he teaches how to divine by the stars. It’s like getting two classes in one, except I don’t have to worry about Trelawney spotting me and turning into a cryptic, creepy statue.

I’ve been advised that six classes is too much for N.E.W.T-levels, but I just successfully completed twelve classes. If I want to take eight classes this year, that’s my business. Arithmancy and Herbology will round out this year’s set.

Merlin, I’m going to have to find something else to do. Things will be dull, otherwise.

See you soon,

Harry

* * * * *

“The replacements are arranged.” Minerva throws a scroll onto her desk and takes off her spectacles so she can rub her eyes. “Or they are arranged as much as it is possible to do so when I’m asking people to accept positions that won’t be available until autumn of next year.”

“May I?” Snape waits until Minerva waves her permission before taking up the scroll.

Professor Horace Slughorn is listed as next year’s teacher for Alchemy, replacing Professor Seemont once Voldemort’s plans for the wizarding world take effect. “You convinced Horace?”

“I threatened to hex his testicles onto his forehead with a permanent sticking charm if he refuses to answer the call when he’s needed.”

Snape decides it’s probably wiser not to comment. He has no love for Slughorn, who overlooked the fact that Snape was, without arrogance needed, the best Potions student in class, preferring to make connections with accomplished families and famous faces. Idiot.

Professor Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank is down as a potential substitute for Hagrid, if Hagrid loses his temper and opens his mouth to express his displeasure with…well, anything. Grubbly-Plank is a good choice, flexible enough to potentially also cover Muggle Studies if Voldemort does not send in direct Death Eater interference. The Dark Lord has said nothing of such a thing yet, but Snape knows it’s a valid possibility.

Professor Griselda Marchbanks is a welcome surprise. She’s a witch of advanced age, but she has no patience for nonsense, and is well-versed in multiple subjects. She’s a valid contender for every single position they will need to fill.

Charles Weasley is listed as a potential for Ghoul Studies, a subject he studied while also working with his favored dragons, and is thus aware of Ghoul habits in multiple countries. He would also be
useful as a spy for the Order in Hogwarts, but Snape doesn’t think it will be safe to have any Weasley in the castle who is not also a current student.

Wilkie Twycross has volunteered to return to the school full-time in the fall once he completes Apparition lessons for students over the age of seventeen. He also claims to have the largest Wizarding music collection in Britain, which will solve the difficulty in replacing Professor Harper.

Apparition. Snape considers the matter before he composes another brief note for Dobby to take to Potter.

Dear Harry,

Yes, I’m using your first name. Take note, as I have to say this in an entirely unofficial capacity.

You are underage, but there are events on the horizon that will care not about such things as the limitations imposed by birthdays. Tell the Dog and the Werewolf that they must begin teaching you how to Apparate safely. It need not be a lesson completed before your arrival on 1st September, but the first demonstrations should be made. Study the subject during the school term if you need more information, but do your best to master the skill over the winter and Easter holidays.

If I did not think it important, I would demand that you wait until proper tutoring as you near age seventeen, like a proper witch or wizard. However, you and Draco are the only students in our odd alliance who will not be of age to earn an official license from Twycross in the spring. The matter of licenses will become a moot point under Voldemort’s rule, so I would suggest you try to gain the skill without needing Twycross’s instruction at all—it is always useful to have skills that others are unaware of.

Sincerely,

Snape
The Start-of-Term Feast is almost a relief when it finally begins. What is not reassuring is the disappointingly small number of students waiting in line for the Sorting Hat. Snape has to wonder if more parents are beginning to recognize the danger Voldemort represents, choosing to homeschool their children or send them to schools on the Continent. He thinks it a foolish, temporary stopgap; if Voldemort succeeds in conquering the British Isles, it ultimately will not matter where a student resides.

Albus is wearing a glove the same color as his robes to disguise his dead right hand. It’s an affectation he won’t be able to keep up forever. Despite the eccentricism the students of Hogwarts expect from their Headmaster, the cloth will eventually start to get caught on dead skin, and then there would be unpleasant…crumbling.

All four tables are uneasy, with lower tones of unhappy muttering lurking beneath the happier chatting of the younger returned students. As if sensing the atmosphere, the Hat opens its floppy cloth mouth to begin its song.

Except it isn’t a song that emerges, but speech.

“A year ago it was, when thought I to first sing this song. I waited, and I watched, as a good Hat should. My words, I felt, would not be heeded. Now, perhaps, they are truly needed:

In times of old when I was new
And Hogwarts barely started.
The founders of our noble school
Thought never to be parted.
United by a common goal
They had the selfsame yearning
To make the world’s best magic school
And pass along their learning.
‘Together we will build and teach’ the four good friends decided,
And never did they dream that they Might someday be divided.
For were there such friends anywhere as Slytherin and Gryffindor?
Unless it was the second pair of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw.
So how could it have gone so wrong? How could such friendships fail?
Why, I was there, so I can tell the whole sad, sorry tale.
Said Slytherin, ‘We’ll teach just those Whose ancestry’s purest.’
Said Ravenclaw, ‘We’ll teach those whose Intelligence is surest.’

Said Gryffindor, ‘We’ll teach all those With brave deeds to their name.’

Said Hufflepuff, ‘I’ll teach the lot and treat them just the same.’

These differences caused little strife

When first they came to light

For each of the four Founders had

A House in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,

Slytherin Took only those Pure-blood wizards

Of great cunning, just like him,

And only those of sharpest mind

Were taught by Ravenclaw,

While the bravest and the boldest,

Went to daring Gryffindor,

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest and

Taught them all she knew.

Thus, the Houses and their Founders maintained friendships firm and true, so Hogwarts worked in harmony for several happy years,

but then discord crept among us, feeding on our faults and fears.

The Houses that, like pillars four had once help up our school,

now turned upon each other and divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the school must meet an early end,

what with dueling and with fighting and the clash of friend on friend.

At last there came a morning when old Slytherin departed,

and though the fighting then died out, he left us quite downhearted.

Never since the Founders four were whittled down to three have the Houses been united as they were once meant to be.

Now the Sorting Hat is here and you all know the score: I sort you into Houses because that is what I’m for.

But this year I’ll go further. Listen closely to my song: though condemned I am to split you, still I worry that it’s wrong.
Though I must fulfil my duty and must quarter every year, still I wonder whether Sorting may not bring the end I fear.

Oh, know the perils, read the signs, the warning history shows, for our Hogwarts is in danger from external, deadly foes.

We must unite inside her or we’ll crumble from within. I have told you, I have warned you…let the Sorting now begin.”

Minerva is waiting by the corner of the table near Snape’s seat. He suspects only he hears her say under her breath, “Oh, how auspicious.” Then, with a pleasant smile on her face, Minerva calls the first child forth, as if the Hat gives out such hair-raising portents every year.

Snape uses the opportunity to scan the Slytherin table. A disappointing number of them look pleased, as if the division of the Houses is what Slytherin intended, and this is only the fruition of ancient planning. Draco is one of the few who has a disturbed look on his face, as is Miss Bulstrode, the Greengrass sisters, and Mister Pritchard. Aside from those few, the Slytherins who are not visibly pleased are the Half-bloods and Muggle-borns. Snape wonders how he is going to remind his House that the Hat does not give a damn about blood purity without endangering the role he has to play. He has to be here for the safety of these idiot children. One of the only favors he’s been granted in the matter is that the Muggle-borns never dare tell other Slytherins in their House that they were not born to wizard parents.

He wanted to put a stop to that fear so long ago…but again, Snape had a role to play. Soon it may save many lives, so it is a deception he must continue.

Snape was wrong about charming the registry. This problem is too big, and too many other students’ parentage is already known. Perhaps the Order can put in a plan within a plan, a means of evacuating those children and their Muggle families. Snape will need an excuse to give to Voldemort as to why Hogwarts receives no Muggle-borns to victimize. If the work is done for him, he need offer only the truth.

He allows his gaze to drift over the tables, as if in unconcerned repose, before his eyes alight on Potter. The young man is ignoring the chatter around him, a mix of excited babbling about the Hat’s revised Sorting Song. There is a look of intense disquiet in his eyes. At first, Snape fears that the boy has forgotten to Occlude.

No; Potter is Occluding just fine. This isn’t even a sign of ratel temper kept in check.

Potter is angry. A low, burning fire of thoughtful discontent is turning his eyes into glimmering emeralds. Snape wonders if Potter came into the school with the expression, or if it was something triggered by the Sorting Hat’s unusual, informative song.

Sixth-year Potions is his very first class of the year, meant to ease Snape’s way into preparing for what the rest of the week will bring—idiot first- through fifth-year students. His Potions class for seventh-years is held on Friday afternoon for a reason.

“For once, you do not have a textbook composed of foolish words about a potion’s apparent safety,” Snape announces after closing the classroom door. None of these young men and women leap about in surprise, already used to his habits. He strides towards the front of the room before turning, the edges of his cloak billowing out to just brush the spindled posts that support the chalkboard. “If Advanced Potion-Making says a brew is difficult or dangerous, it does not exaggerate in the
slightest.” When he sees only appropriately sober gazes looking back at him, Snape continues. “This is your first class of this new term. Today you will receive from me the only two gifts I will ever bestow, from now until your graduations—if you graduate.

“The first is that while none of your classes listed for this first week are set to a double timetable, do not expect leniency. The preparation for your N.E.W.T.s begins now, and this week, you will all be issued challenges meant to assess what skills you may have lost, or gained, during the summer holiday. While I do not expect that you will succeed in the challenge I will give you, I do expect that you each turn in a completed potion at the end of the hour, even if it is a horrendous disaster.”

Snape considers it. “Perhaps I should call it three gifts, since this is a secret each student in their sixth or seventh year does well to keep: your N.E.W.T.-level Potions class is the only one in which I show no House favoritism whatsoever. I will not award points. I will not deduct them. You have reached a level of brewing where my concern, no matter how much I despise your very existence, lies far more in ensuring that we all survive every classroom session. Is that clear?”

He receives an assuring chorus of assent. “Good. Your assignment is thus,” Snape says. The potion name appears on the chalkboard, along with the page number on which it is found. There are at least two gasps, but no other sounds of protest.

“My third gift: it is traditional by the standing of many centuries that anyone who can actually complete the correct brewing of this potion before the end of the hour is given a phial of a rare and useful potion. If you wish to discover what this potion is, I suggest you begin your brewing at once.”

Snape roams around the classroom in silence to observe. He notes Malfoy’s hands shaking a little, but Draco makes certain to keep his ingredients precise. Snape gives Draco a quick glance as he walks by, but does not comment. Draco will need to come to peace with what’s at stake this year, and brewing a little Draught of Living Death barely rates on the scale of true danger.

He has eleven students of mixed houses, and everyone should be too blasted busy with Snape’s challenge to bicker. That doesn’t mean there are no attempts at childish bickering to be had. Theodore Nott tries to make a snide comment about the two Gryffindors and a pathetic, lone Hufflepuff before getting so firmly elbowed by Miss Bulstrode that he nearly winds up with his head stuck in his own cauldron.

Snape observes Granger and Potter practically biting through their tongues to maintain their silence; poor Macmillan is turning so red Snape fears he might explode in some fashion. The Ravenclaws scowl or roll their eyes in irritation at the disruption. Mister Zabini observes Nott’s flailing and says, “Mate, you deserved it,” before returning to his work.

After Nott has Vanished and restarted his attempt on the day’s potion, Snape glances at Miss Bulstrode, giving her a faint nod. The edge of her lip curls up, signifying her understanding that a N.E.W.T.-level class is no place for the sort of nonsense Snape tolerates in lower-level classes. He is strict about a required O-grade for O.W.L. passage to N.E.W.T.-level for a reason, and that is due to the very real danger of a student’s death if they are careless. One would think that Snape drove that lesson home in the first five years of a dunderhead’s schooling, but Mister Nott seems not to have absorbed the lesson.

Snape will need to have a private discussion with the young idiot later. If Mister Nott absorbs a faceful of the wrong sort of brew, there will be an unpleasant child haunting his classroom.

He isn’t surprised that Potter finishes first. Snape leans back in his chair and lets out a disappointed sigh. “Really, Mister Potter?”
“Yes,” Potter replies, not fazed in the slightest. “If you’re not too busy, sir.” Snape’s eyes flicker over to Macmillan and the Ravenclaws, who aren’t used to witnessing Snape’s anti-Potter behavior.

“Last chance to go back and be certain,” Snape breathes out. “The year’s first class does not mean exemption from a failing grade.”

Potter affects surprise. “Sir, you are the one who said we only had to turn in a finished potion, even if it was...hmm, what did you call it? Oh—a horrendous disaster.”

Snape waves his hand in an exaggerated gesture. Potter puts the corked flask down on his desk. Snape doesn’t look at it. “Return to your seat, Mister Potter. Ten minutes of brewing time remain.”

Potter smirks at him. “Yes, sir,” he says, and wanders back towards Granger, who glares at him. The Hufflepuff and the Ravenclaws look like they’ve just witnessed someone sign their own death warrant.

Snape places an invisible mark upon the flask and puts it in a drawer. Granger delivers her attempt next, though she’s still scowling. Malfoy is third, followed closely by Patil and Boot. Their marked samples join Potter’s in the drawer. The other six students scrape by with completed and filled flasks just when Snape clicks the timer of his pocket watch. Wordless magic ensures that each sample also bears the invisible magical mark.

“Onto the desk,” Snape orders, watching as those last six samples are put down in a row. Snape gets the other five out of the drawer, adding them to the line of flasks. “Malfoy: what are the qualities of a successfully brewed Draught of Living Death?”

“It should be colorless,” Malfoy recites, frowning. He knows what he turned in, and it is not clear liquid. “With the faintest hint of wormwood if inhaled, though it should not be inhaled more than once without risking an unexpected nap, sir.”

Snape nods, removing two lilac samples, three brilliant pinks, one flask full of what looks like swamp sludge, a pale blue, and a final murky grey contribution from the row, setting them aside in a new lineup. Three remain.

“Three winners, sir?” Mister Zabini asks. He is taking his loss well, but his potion at least made it to the lilac stage. Snape knows Zabini will analyze the potion until he finds the step he missed and remedy the mistake.

“All three of these containers hold properly made Draught of Living Death, but only one of them is utterly pristine,” Snape announces, which makes all eleven students perk up in interest. “Mister Malfoy is correct to say that there should be a faint hint of wormwood to a completed Draught, but while that gives the potion the correct properties, it is not what the final result should be. A true Draught of Living Death has no odor whatsoever, else the recipient would have some warning as to their fate if the potion were added to a food or drink that does not also hold the same scent. The potion should be as clear and odorless as perfectly distilled water.”

Snape uses his wand to levitate the three flasks into the air. “View them in the light. Are all three truly clear?”

He watches Miss Patil’s face fall. “Not completely. Would the one with the faintest hint of cloudiness still work, or would it fail?”

“Its properties would not be as extensive,” Snape tells her. “The sleeper will eventually awaken on their own after an extended period of time. The traditional Wiggenweld antidote would still be
useful, but not a necessity.” He uncorks the final two potions and allows Miss Bulstrode to take them from the air. “One whiff only. One potion has a hint of wormwood; one does not.”

Miss Bulstrode does as instructed and holds out the correct flask. “This one doesn’t smell like anything, Professor.”

“Correct.” Snape gestures with his wand until every flask is standing on his desk again, though the clear and unscented sample is by itself. Another gesture of his wand reveals the names labeled on each flask.

“POTTER?” Mister Boot exclaims in disbelief.

“What?” Potter asks, glancing at Boot in confusion.

“Since when do you know how to make an expert Draught of Living Death?” Miss Li demands to know, placing her hands on her hips while she glares at Potter.

“Oh.” Potter adjusts his glasses while thinking about it. “Since last year. I memorized it.”

“Why, why would you memorize the formula for the Draught of Living Death?” Zabini asks.

“I read everything?” Potter offers, something he’s been reiterating since autumn of 1993. Snape is beginning to suspect that Potter is well and truly frustrated at having to explain his reading habits so often. “Don’t you read your textbooks?”

“Yes, for the current year,” Macmillan retorts. “Not a year ahead.”

Granger studies Potter’s expression and rolls her eyes. “You’ve already read the textbooks for seventh year, haven’t you?”

Potter sounds defensive. “I ran out of things to read!”

“You only just started this year’s textbooks at the end of June!”

“Gryffindors,” Snape intones, cutting off the argument before it can get any louder. He lets his features settle into an impressive glower that causes almost everyone to step back. “Loath as I am to admit it, Mister Potter did win this particular contest. This is yours.”

Potter reaches out and takes the phial Snape produces from his desk. It is rounded glass with a pointed bottom, so it must be hung, which is why it’s suspended on a sterling silver chain. “Oh, that’s not what I expected. Felix Felicis.”

The others crowd around Potter to look while Snape rolls his eyes and Vanishes the contents of their corked flasks. “I thought it was supposed to be gold,” Miss Patil observes.

“Gold jewelry and molten gold aren’t quite the same color.” Potter lets the phial spin on its chain. “Jewelry takes on a more brassy quality the longer it’s been set, and most of it isn’t pure gold—it’s got metal impurities to strengthen it so it isn’t as prone to picking up scratches, dents, or losing its shape.”

“You read about that, too?” Zabini asks dryly.

“Yeah.” Potter glances down at the row of eleven clean flasks. “Are those safe to put anything in?”

Snape gives him an exaggerated look of polite indifference. “They are clean, yes.”
Potter finally looks up to glare at Snape, which makes Macmillan turn red again. “Not the question I asked. Sir.”

“Something each of you should very much bear in mind,” Snape murmurs, though he doesn’t smile. “Yes, Mister Potter, they are safe for use.”

Potter nods. “Everybody, grab one. Your own, preferably, since our names are still on them.”

“Why?” Miss Bulstrode asks, subjecting Potter to a fierce scowl. He is one of the few people in the room she doesn’t tower over, but she is still taller.

Potter snorts. “Do you want any of this or not, Bulstrode?”

“What, you think you don’t need the help, Scar Head?” Malfoy sneers.

Potter glances at the phial before he looks at Draco. “Malfoy, there are multiple doses in here. If I need that much luck, I’m probably too dead to go back for a refill.”

“Potter.” Snape treats the young man to a cruel smile. “If you do not want it, I can easily take it back.”

“What? You’ve already given it to me, Professor. That’s theft,” Potter points out. “You wouldn’t steal from your students, would you? Sir?”

“It’s never stopped you from stealing from me,” Snape returns. The smoky words roll out from his lips like the cloud that emerges before a dragon’s first gout of flame.

“Okay.” Potter has his wand in-hand and has tapped the side of the phial before Snape realizes what he intends. The tone rings out like a struck tuning fork, and then the phial is empty…but every corked flask now has an equal amount of Felix Felicis. “Now you’d have to steal from all of us. Sir.”

Snape squeezes his eyes shut and pinches the bridge of his nose. He has to; otherwise he is going to start laughing, or whinge about Potter being Sorted into the wrong bloody damned House again. “Just get out. All of you. Go away.” Snape lowers his hand as the students pack up their belongings, noting that every single flask has conveniently disappeared. “And in case any of you dunderheads are stupid enough to try it, Felix Felicis has been banned from use during Quidditch for centuries, and that includes tryouts. The same ruling applies to exams. Save it for something more useful, like your pathetic attempts at dating.”

“Oh.” Malfoy scowls. “Who would rather have more money than Felix Felicis?”

“Someone who has less money than Felix Felicis, you daft ferret,” Boot replies, which is fortunately when the classroom door closes behind them. If they all hex each other at that point, Snape does not have to be responsible for cleaning up afterwards.

He does send a note to Potter’s dormitory via Dobby, who is always pleased to be useful.
Potter,

Why the sudden burst of altruism?

He receives a response near student curfew that evening. It is terse and to the point.

_Fucking House unity, sir._

Snape frowns at the piece of parchment. It seems to have indeed been the Hat’s pointed reminder about unity and divided loyalties that left Potter so irritated during the Start-of-Term Feast. Either Potter has plans in motion, or he’s simply lost his patience with Albus Dumbledore and his sudden insistence upon borrowing Potter for private evening lessons. There are other things Potter and Snape both wish to concentrate on, such as forming the Occlumency/Legilimency trap. Even the Baron is frustrated; on Potter’s return to school, the Headmaster absconded with him after dinner before the Baron could impart whatever information he and the Grey Lady wish to tell Potter. It is, the Baron informs Snape in disgust, a habit that seems to be conveniently repeating itself.

“Deliberate, do you think?” Snape asks. He’s leaning against the wall, watching students roam through the passageways and the Entrance Hall from his position on the second floor stairwell.

“No,” the Baron admits, but he sounds irritated. “I just think that man has the worst timing of any living being in existence.”

Snape does not attend most Death Eater meetings, not when Voldemort claims that secrecy until the Ministry falls is of utmost importance. It is a precaution meant to keep the plan from Dumbledore’s prying mind. Snape is all too happy to be left out of that plot, and calmly assures the Dark Lord and his fellow Death Eaters that Dumbledore will only know the truth when he is breathing his last.

Albus, of course, already knows of Voldemort’s plans regarding the Ministry. The problem lies in the fact that he also has no useful idea of how to counter it that would not leave them in even more dire straits afterwards. Voldemort would have to be truly deceased before a useful defence could be enacted.

“This time Dumbledore showed me Pensieve memories of what he’d learned about the Gaunts,” Potter says, striding back and forth in the classroom. The wards have been active for some time, but Potter is highly agitated, and it has nothing to do with their false “confrontation” in front of the Grand Stair that led to Snape giving Potter immediate detention. Snape is beginning to wonder about Potter’s intent; when the boy picks a fight, it is usually to an express purpose.

“Was it anything more useful than the ring?” Snape asks, curious.

“He didn’t discuss the ring at all,” Potter replies, his brow furrowing into a truly vicious glare.

Ah; that would explain Potter’s current level of frustration. “Go on.”

“He claims that we’re going to be doing this bit with the Pensieve so I can learn more about how to defeat Voldemort, but how is that supposed to happen when he won’t discuss the Horcruxes?” Potter asks.
Potter is correct. That does not actually make tactical sense. Albus is dying, but his mind shouldn’t be deteriorating, not with the curse contained to his hand. “Play along for now,” Snape suggests. “All information is useful, Potter, though it does concern me that he is hiding obvious parts of this particular tale.”

Snape feigns ignorance of what Potter’s lessons entail and asks Albus about them. The Headmaster admits readily enough to the fact that he is giving Potter information that will help him to defeat Voldemort. He will not confide the nature of that information, claiming not to want all of their secrets regarding Voldemort to be stored in one proverbial basket.

That irritates Snape to no end. He has kept every secret granted to him since he took on the role of spy in 1980, yet this he cannot know?

Potter does not keep the information from the Pensieve to himself. The young man pushes Snape into a temper—always outside of the Potions classroom—to earn detentions so he can reveal the information Dumbledore gives him. Snape is even more unsettled with each revelation. Knowing Tom Marvolo Riddle’s background is interesting, yes, but Snape does not yet see a way in which it is yet useful.

If Snape is honest with himself, it sounds far more like Albus Dumbledore is trying to induce Potter into having sympathy or pity for the Dark Lord. What bloody purpose would that serve?

* * * *

Snape receives the student Quidditch listings on the fourteenth of October, once tryouts are completed and the rosters finalized. He settles down in his office to read it before passing the list on to Miss Bulstrode. The captain of his House’s team needs to be prepared; she studies each player’s flight habits and actions, quietly and viciously insistent upon doing the job properly. The Slytherin roster has changed again in accordance with Miss Bulstrode’s exacting standards.

*Bulstrode, Millicent – Keeper, Team Captain

Prewett, Mafalda – Beater

Harper, Michael – Beater

Greengrass, Daphne – Chaser

Baddock, Malcolm – Chaser

Pritchard, Graham – Chaser

Greengrass, Astoria – Seeker*

Malfoy lost his position of Seeker. He hadn’t mentioned this to Snape, but then, Draco has quite a lot on his mind this term. He’s still listed as back-up for Seeker position, so perhaps he hasn’t given up on the sport entirely. Tiny little Astoria Greengrass, however—Snape has no difficulty at all seeing
her as a successful Seeker. She is quick and quiet and exceptionally sneaky, burying it all under a façade of sweet innocence.

The Hufflepuff listing has exactly one change, though five members are due to graduate at the end of the year. That will certainly make tryouts interesting next year; Pomona will have her work cut out for her if she attempts to host tryouts on her own. If she is wise, she’ll ask for Rolanda’s assistance.

However, Hufflepuff tactics never varied by much, no matter the team lineup. If Hufflepuffs have only one major failing, it is that they tend to host the most terrible Quidditch teams, though individual members are often outstanding players.

MacAvoy, Heidi – Chaser/Team Captain
Cadwallader, Jon – Chaser
Applebee, Tamsin – Chaser
O’Flaherty, Maxine – Beater
Rickett, Anthony – Beater
Fleet, Herbert – Keeper
Summerby, Christopher – Seeker

Snape is exceptionally curious to see what has become of the Ravenclaw team. Most of their roster graduated last term, leaving many positions open to new players.

Chang, Cho – Seeker/Team Captain
Chambers, Ronald – Chaser
Bradley, Brian – Chaser
MacDougal, Isobel – Chaser
Corner, Michael – Beater
Turpin, Lisa – Beater
Boot, Terry – Keeper

Not very informative. While Snape is privately pleased that Miss Chang took over the position of team Captain after Cedric Diggory’s graduation in 1995, everyone except Chambers and is a new face. Miss Bulstrode will have to observe and come to her own conclusions as to how they should be treated on the pitch.

Snape nearly snorts tea from his nose when he sees the Gryffindor listing.
Bell, Katie – Chaser, Team Captain
Thomas, Dean – Chaser
Potter, Harry – Chaser
Weasley, Ginevra – Beater
Peakes, Jimmy – Beater
Weasley, Ronald – Keeper
Granger, Hermione – Seeker

That’s almost enough to give him bloody flashbacks. Bad enough that Potter was a Seeker in his first two years, but now the young man is flying on the team in his father’s old position. It’s uncomfortably close to unpleasant memories that Snape prefers to avoid.

Snape taps his fingers on his desk before he folds the roster and seeks out Minerva. She’s in her office, peering down at one of the messiest student scrolls it has ever been his misfortune to view, and Snape dealt with half-blind and quill-ignorant Potter from autumn of 1991 until the spring of 1993.

“Have you seen this?”

Minerva glances up at the Quidditch roster. “Why yes, I have, Severus. Strange how that information is given to all Heads of House at this time of year.”

Snape closes the door. “May I sit?” He waits until Minerva gestures and then does so. “Is the faculty betting pool still anonymous, aside from your knowledge of it?”

Minerva frowns. “Yes, obviously. I will not sully my good reputation for discretion in that matter. You wish to place bets already, Severus?” When he nods, she rolls her eyes, sets aside the disastrous scroll, and gets out her black, leather-bound ledger. “Well, let’s hear it.”

“Slytherin to win five out of eight games,” he says, which gives Minerva pause before she records it. He often bets on eight-of-eight, but not this year. “Granger to be the successful Seeker in every game except against Slytherin.” Cho Chang is excellent, but Miss Granger beat her to the Snitch in almost every game the previous year.

“Hufflepuff to lose terribly. I’m hoping we can all make a different prediction next year,” Snape says. He tries to ignore the idea that Quidditch might not even be a possibility by that point, but if possible, he’s going to do his best to provide the students with some sense of normalcy.

“You and myself both.” Minerva scribbles down his predictions with quick motions of her quill. “I’d like for a challenge to arise from that direction again, instead of it being a given that the poor dears will lose in atrocious fashion.”

“Ronald Chambers losing his temper and going after Anthony Rickett with his beating club.”

Minerva sighs. “Again. Double odds?”
“Please.” Snape hesitates. “Double also on Potter scoring the most points per game for your team aside from the Seeker.”

Minerva nearly drops her quill. “I’m sorry, did I hear you correctly?”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Unless you’re suffering from hearing damage? Yes. You heard me correctly.”

It’s amusing to watch a muscle tic under her eye. “Very well. No wonder you want this to remain anonymous.”

Snape sends a message off via Dobby that evening.


Potter,

Quidditch? Really?

The response is exceptionally prompt.

Sir,

I told you I was going to find something else to do. Besides, broomstick practice might be a very good idea. I’m better on the bike than a broom, but the bike is…well, not subtle. Also, Katie is thrilled that I’m back on her team for another round before she graduates at the end of the year. It would be nice if people would recall that I don’t remember any of this.

She already reports that Oliver Wood has been told, and he is miffed. Be wary of noisy ex-Gryffindors from past years showing up for Quidditch reasons.

Sirius is somewhere beyond the orbit of the Jupiter because apparently Dad was a Chaser, too. Try not to kill him. Quidditch Season is only four months long. You can resist killing my Dogfather for four months.

If you can keep from killing Lucius Malfoy for fifteen years, you can abstain from killing Sirius for four months.

I mean it. No. Not even temporarily.

Harry

The sixth- and seventh-year classes on Monday morning and Friday afternoon become the highlight of Snape’s week. It’s the only time he has students who are in the dungeon classroom solely to learn. While he is never, ever kind about it, even his remarks to the hated Harry Potter are restrained to blatant distaste instead of shouting. One does not shout around potions that often have volatile qualities that may react badly to excessive noise.

Theodore Nott, the bloody fool, tries one more time during the third week of October to start childish
shenanigans in Snape’s classroom. This time, his target is Mister Macmillan, who is so started by the sudden, vicious verbal assault that he misjudges his chopping blade’s trajectory and embeds it in his finger.

Macmillan goes utterly still, too shocked by the pain to shriek. Before Snape can even begin to gather himself, Granger is pointing her wand at Nott.

“GET OUT!” she orders, her eyes ablaze.

“Why you little Mudblood—” Nott hisses.

Granger’s wand twitches. A wide strip of silver Muggle ducting tape is slapped over Nott’s mouth. Snape wants to know that spell, pending immediately.

“Perhaps you did not hear me,” Granger says in a low, dangerous voice. “Get out!”

Nott rips off the ducting tape and goes wide-eyed with instant regret. Then his anger surges forth again. “How dare you!”

“Mister Nott.”

Snape observes Nott’s skin lose all color as he turns to look at him. “Sir, this Mudblood—”

“Is a Gryffindor, and thus is actually being kinder to you than I would be at this moment.” Snape’s voice is low and dangerous, a chill fog spreading throughout the room. “I warned you all that childishness is not tolerated in my N.E.W.T. classes. As of this moment, you are expelled from this class, Mister Nott. You will not be welcome in the seventh-year class, either.”

“You’re taking HER SIDE—” Nott begins to yell.

Snape makes sure no one is trying to place ingredients inside a cauldron, or use a knife, before he slams his hand down onto the nearest workbench. Everyone except Potter jumps in reaction. “I am taking the side of the safety of everyone in this room, myself included. I am very fond of being alive.”

Snape regards Nott thoughtfully. He is silent long enough that Nott begins to shift uneasily on his feet. “The school Gamekeeper has been having some trouble with the Acromantulas in the Forest. I recall that you, like Mister Weasley, have a certain fear of spiders.”

Nott actually manages to pale further. “Professor. Please, I’m so—”

“You were warned. Miss Granger, put down the wand before you join in Mister Nott’s fate.” Granger puts her wand away, but not without glaring at Snape first. “I will be telling Rubeus Hagrid to expect you at eight o’clock this evening, Mister Nott. If you had refrained from shouting at your own Head of House, you would not be faced with this concern.

“Now follow Miss Granger’s advice.” Snape hardens his voice. “Get. Out.”

“My father will hear of this,” Nott whispers, sounding ludicrously like Draco Malfoy in one of his younger, childish snits. “You’ll see!”

Snape affects a mocking lack of concern. “I would be wary of carrying false tales to your father, Mister Nott.” Nott glares at him, grabs his school bag, and leaves—abandoning all his potions supplies in the process.
“Foolish decision,” Snape murmurs, and nods at his remaining Slytherins. “The three of you may take what you like from Mister Nott’s belongings, as it is obvious he does not want them. Do not fight over that cauldron; sort it fairly based on who does not already have a bronze cauldron.” Zabini and Malfoy look a bit disappointed at that declaration, but Miss Bulstrode smiles in grim pleasure before the three of them start to pick over Nott’s abandoned supplies.

Snape turns his attention to the wounded. Miss Patil has pressed a clean and embroidered ladies’ handkerchief around the knife, but she hasn’t tried to remove the blade. Snape regards the tableau, still bearing that same apparent lack of concern. “What was the last thing your knife encountered?”

“Uh—cowbane,” Macmillan whispers. He’s white in the face, but doesn’t seem the sort to faint from pain or bloodshed, or the potential of impending death from cowbane in his bloodstream. Hufflepuffs are always so underestimated; it is good to see Macmillan refusing to blubber over a painful but treatable injury.

“Miss Patil will escort you to the infirmary, Mister Macmillan, where you will inform Madam Pomfrey as to your clumsiness, and the name of the ingredient you were working with when you foolishly embedded your knife in your middle finger.”

“Uh—shite—uh, I’m sorry, sir!” Macmillan gasps in apology. “I was already distracted—”

“By Mister Nott.” Snape scowls as he realizes he missed the beginning of the altercation. His attention cannot be allowed to drift, his focus to fail that badly. “You will need to inform Madam Pomfrey that you have an afternoon of vomiting in your future. I strongly advise that you do not indulge in lunch.”

Snape turns to the Ravenclaw Patil twin. “Miss Patil, you will need to return in the evening after dinner to complete today’s assignment, as you saw fit to interrupt your project to assist Mister Macmillan.” Miss Patil looks like she wants to bristle, then takes another glance at Macmillan’s finger and changes her mind. “Mister Macmillan, you will also need to make up the assignment to avoid a failing grade, but I will allow Madam Pomfrey to inform me as to the first day you will be capable of doing so. There is a lesson within this brew that you cannot neglect.”

Before they can leave, Snape stops them. “Monday begins your first stage of brewing for Polyjuice. This is a lesson both theoretical and practical, so come to class properly prepared, or not at all.” He waits until the classroom door shuts again. “Miss Granger, however, will be beginning another potion of similar complexity.”


Snape lifts an eyebrow. “You raised a wand in my classroom, Miss Granger. Be very, very grateful that a different, more difficult assignment is your only punishment in this matter. Raise a wand in this room again in a way that is not directly related to potion-making, and you will join Mister Nott in exile.”

“Yes, sir,” Granger says stiffly.

“Potter!” Snape barks. “Are you finished?”

Potter looks offended. “Of course I am. It’s Shrinking Solution. We did this in third year.”

“Yes, but unlike your third-year efforts, I expect not only perfection, but experimentation.”

“Experimentation?” Potter leans forward, peering at the chalkboard. Then he takes his glasses off and squints at it. “Oh, bugger, not another prescription change.”
“Prescription?” Bulstrode is cool and curious as she asks the question.

“Uh, Muggle glasses, since I’m a useless myopic mess when it comes to the Oculus potion,” Potter tells her. “They alter the lenses by calling the changes prescriptions if your eyesight gets worse. Terry, what the bloody hell does that last line say?”

“POTTER!”

Potter glances at Snape. “Oh, should I not have asked him that? Sir?”

“Someone please do read the last line to that myopic mess who chose to stand too far from the chalkboard.” Potter’s dissembling in the matter of his eyesight is so well done.


“Today’s lesson is not only about producing a perfect Shrinking Potion, but in altering it afterwards in a way that does not make the solution toxic, but gives it an extra property in addition to its original intent,” Sue Li recites just before rolling her eyes at Potter, who pretends not to notice.

“Thanks. Uh, then I need five minutes,” Potter says. “Sir.”

“I’m holding you to that claim,” Snape tells him, a cruel edge to his smile as he pushes the button on his pocket watch to begin the countdown. “When your five minutes have concluded, pack up Mister Macmillan’s belongings. I will not give you an excuse to pass along to your next instructor if you take too long and are late to your next class.”

Snape only has to contend with eight completed potion samples at the end of class. He regards them thoughtfully after his classroom has emptied. Five of his students’ potions are still varying colors of the original acid green. Of the last three, one is blue, one is yellow, and Potter’s is a brilliant orange. Draco, Granger, and Potter are proving his most consistently adept students, though Malfoy’s skills slip if his mind is on other things. Patil has great potential, but still struggles to have confidence in her own decisions.

Snape holds up the orange flask, glaring at it. For the life of him, he can’t figure out what the hell Potter has done.

The still-green potions produce standard variations. They are successful potions, but not very imaginative. Malfoy’s blue potion shrinks and confounds the living Flobberworm it is tested on. Granger’s performs the shrinking in stages spaced out by increments of three minutes and three seconds exactly. While not what Snape had in mind in regards to altered properties, it is well-done. A proper Shrinking Solution does its work all at once. A timed one could have some practical use.

Potter’s Shrinking Solution gives him an entire glass tank full of perfectly shrunken and vastly multiplied Flobberworms in less than eighteen seconds. Then the glass breaks because the blasted things are still multiplying.

Snape Vanishes them all before he has an entire classroom full to the ceiling of Flobberworms.

He stands there amongst broken glass shards, struggling with a rare feeling of bewilderment. He really wants to know how Potter crafted that alteration. A Shrinking Solution will not trigger most ward alarms set to detect dangerous poisons. Crushing an enemy to death in miniscule Flobberworms has a certain appeal.

Dobby delivers two notes after Snape has retired for the evening. The house-elf looks to be in good spirits. Snape is glad someone is; Hallowe’en is in less than a week.
Sir,

I’m not telling you how I created infinite tiny multiplication of matter unless I get extra credit.

Harry

To Snape’s bemusement, the other note is not from Potter.

Dear Professor,

You are taking advantage of the fact that I mastered the creation of Polyjuice in my second year. Before you even think on it, I looked up the rules, and you are not allowed to take points for incidents that happened in previous years. Strangely enough, you can still grant points, though. The Founders had very strange ideas about how to run a school. I often wonder if they were not constantly abusing certain potions ingredients.

I look forward to Monday’s challenge.

Respectfully Yours,

Hermione Granger

Snape drums his fingers on his desk again, realizing only then that he’s developed a nervous tic. If the stress of what is to come is already bothering him that badly, then he will have to keep a close watch on his own actions and curb any of those tendencies at once.

Respectfully. Aside from Potter’s oddness, when has a student outside of his own House ever used that word in regards to Snape? He cannot recall any other instance in his entire teaching career.

Snape composes two replies that go back into Dobby’s capable, burgundy-tipped hands.

Miss Granger,

Over the course of your cohort’s summer between fourth and fifth years, he discerned how to craft a Memory Projection Potion, one which did not require a Pensieve. As Pensieves are an expensive magical instrument, Potter has created a potion that will ease the financial burden among certain Wizarding families who might have need of such a thing, though he cannot publish until he is of age.

I am giving you a week’s research time before you begin crafting your attempt on Monday, as, like Polyjuice, it can take up to a full month to brew this potion successfully.

No, Mister Potter will not give you hints. If he can figure it out, you are also capable of doing so. You will also not share your ingredients or method of brewing with anyone other than myself. If your attempt fails, I am willing to point out at least one mistake in your process per attempt. (Yes, you will continue this until you get it right, and you will be expected to keep up with your regular coursework.)
Do not use primary feathers unless you want unwelcome results and exceptionally angry birds.

Sincerely,

Professor Snape

*

Mister Potter,

That is called bribery. I approve. Your extra credit is that you may skip a single homework assignment at any point during the rest of the year. Just. One.

Tell me what you bloody well did!

Professor Snape

When he gets the answer, Snape is absolutely incensed because he never thought of it himself. Intolerable lapse.

He does get a second note almost immediately after the first: What did you tell Hermione? She is squealing with joy. Did you soak her letter in Euphoria Elixir? This is disturbing and she is scaring the hell out of everyone else in the Common Room.

Okay, that part’s just funny.

Snape spends the weekend brewing up Potter’s revision until he can do it in his sleep, if he wishes. If he then sends the gift of infinitely expanding Flobberworms to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes with a precise Alio charm, nobody will ever know but him.
By the time Hallowe’en arrives, Snape has firmly resolved that he is not going to remain at the Feast this year. He will not. Albus cannot make him, his attendance beyond opening remarks is not required, and once the meal begins, his Slytherins no longer take notice of his presence.

Snape thinks it shows an extreme lack of taste that Albus casts an illusion upon himself that makes every single bit of skin upon his body resemble his dead right hand. He is, however, smiling and cheerful, and Snape sees no faces among the student body who recognize the horror for what it actually is.

McGonagall looks as if she wishes to set the Headmaster on fire. To Snape’s disappointment, she does not do so. It is Poppy who might actually strangle Albus Dumbledore after dinner, but if Snape wants to witness the event, he has to stay.

Witness Albus’s death at the hands of the matron, or leave. Leaving is preferable, but only just.

Snape is about to walk past the Grand Staircase when he realizes Potter is sitting near the bottom of the steps. His arms are crossed over his knees, his chin resting on his arms. “Potter. Do you need a detention for failing to be where you are supposed to be located at this hour?”

“I don’t know. Sir. Are you offering one?” Potter’s expression is pure challenge. “Because I have to say, as much as I don’t like you, I’d rather scrub a cauldron than go in there.”

“Five points from Gryffindor,” Snape says in a bland tone. “It would be higher, but there are cauldrons that, I have discovered, now truly do need to be scrubbed. Now, Mister Potter,” he snaps, when the Bloody Bat feels like the idiot Gryffindor child isn’t scrambling to follow swiftly enough.

He sweeps into his classroom, notes that the door leading into his office is shut, and then slams the classroom door closed for the sake of outer appearances. The wards light up with gratifying speed. “You haven’t been at the Hallowe’en Feast since 1992. How do you get out of it, Potter? Please share your secret, or I might actually make you scrub cauldrons in truth.”

Potter shrugs. “I went to Professor McGonagall on Hallowe’en in 1993 and said, ‘I remember my parents being murdered today. Can I not go to tonight’s Feast?’ I’ve had a pass to skip it ever since.”

“Clearly, I have been asking the wrong person,” Snape grouses. “I don’t normally see you lurking about in the corridors afterwards, or I would have encountered you in previous years.”

“Yeah.” Potter puts his hands into his denim pockets. Without attending the Feast, there is no need for him to be in uniform, so he’s wearing a hooded black jumper in deference to October’s insistence upon being just cold enough to be irritating. “You are, uh, really twitchy. Already. Would you like to get out of this school for the evening?”

Snape raises an eyebrow.

“Bollocks, I sound like I’m asking you out on a date!” Potter slaps one hand over his face before trying again. “Your young idiot Gryffindor friend would like to see you survive until the winter holiday without actually hexing someone who doesn’t deserve it. I found an Indian place near Diagon Alley in London that Remus says is the closest thing to real Hindu food he’s ever eaten
outside of actually being in India. I skipped dinner because today is terrible, and I’ll bet I’m not the only one who did that.”

“Are you actually suggesting leaving the school, Potter?” Snape asks in a silken voice, trying to peel back the mask enough to feel some sort of genuine amusement in the situation. “I do believe that can be grounds for expulsion when done without permission.”

“Are you a Professor of Hogwarts or not?” Potter smiles. “Firecall Grimmauld Place. I have it on good authority that Sirius and Remus are not home, and Madam Malfoy prefers to retire early.”

“Whose good authority would that be?” Snape asks. He honestly cannot believe he’s doing this even as he gathers up a handful of Floo Powder…but Potter is correct. If he does not get out of Hogwarts for even a spare five minutes, he might skip hexes and move straight on to blatant murder. He’s going to need to discover sufficient distraction for next year, or murder will be a certainty—aside from Albus. He hopes someone worth his time will also volunteer for the privilege once that particular task is complete.

“Dobby told me, but dear Merlin, the amount of hints, bribery, blackmail, and outright threats it took is beyond belief,” Potter says. “You’d think it would be easier to send a pair of idiots out on a date, but no, of course not. You get two people with martyr complexes together and suddenly it’s all noble, self-sacrificing shite as they save themselves from each other.”

Snape has to dust ash off of his robes before he can glare at Potter upon their arrival. “After making me consider the idea that those two idiots will bed each other, you are purchasing dinner.”

“Considering I’m the one with Muggle money and I doubt you’ve got a pence of it on you? That’s probably for the best,” Potter teases.

Snape feels his eye twitch. He had absorbed that detail and still not taken in its full meaning. “Ah. Yes.” He glances down at his robes, scowls, and then removes them, hanging them on a peg in Black’s entryway. His black trousers, shirt, and coat look Muggle enough, if probably out of fashion.

Potter is the one who knows where they’re going, so that’s who Snape follows. They walk past the motorbike in the carriage house and exit out onto an old square area of cobbled stone that would once have allowed a horse-drawn carriage to pass onto the street.

“This section here is under the Unplottable and the Fidelius Charms, so it’s a safe place to land if you ever need it for Apparating,” Potter says, indicating the old cobblestone. “Once we step onto the alley, we’re officially in Muggle London.”

Snape nods. Voldemort’s spies still haven’t figured out that the stretch of alleyway behind Grimmauld Place is the house’s rear exit at ground level. Since it is a Muggle road, he doubts it will ever occur to them. Snape knows who is assigned to watch the house, and they are rather dim individuals who utterly lack imagination.

“They never watch from this side. It’s either the front door or the roof. Voldemort might be intelligent, but his spies are idiots,” Potter says, as if reading Snape’s mind. Then he goes left, taking them directly to the end of the alleyway where it meets a busy cross street. An exceptionally modern-looking crossing light signals for pedestrians to proceed.

“We still cannot help looking like ourselves, Potter,” Snape replies, trying not to stare at the recognizable lineup of car headlights that box them in on either side as they cross the street.

“Nobody from the wizarding world is going to recognize us at all.”
Snape is about to scowl at Potter when he realizes that he’s not hearing a teenager’s overconfident tones. That is absolute certainty.

“Well, at least no one that would actually pose a threat,” Potter adds once they’re safely on the sidewalk. “A lot of the people who run the shops on this strip are getting used to seeing me.”

The mysterious Indian restaurant is only a block further north. Its outside is dark glass so that the inside cannot be seen, but the scents emerging from the entryway are fascinating.

Potter is intelligent about seating arrangements, asking the staff to place them in the rear of the restaurant. The waiter complies, leading them through the restaurant, weaving around occupied tables, until they’re in the very back corner. It means Snape and Potter can both put their backs to a wall; Potter even gives Snape the best view for keeping an eye out for dangerous imbeciles. This close to the kitchen, the scents redolent in the air are amazing, reminiscent of ingredients he’s more accustomed to using in potions than eating.

Snape never drops his guard, but he does gradually begins to relax. He doubts a Death Eater will march into any Muggle establishment until war has been officially declared—it’s too alien, too loud, too modern. Snape spent his childhood in the Muggle world, but things have changed so much since 1979 that he has no idea what to make of at least half of it.

His eyes are caught by the flash of light from another table, where a young woman is holding a device with a screen showing bright digital numbers across the front. A phone number? Phone books are that fancy now? They were barely interested in putting the new digital readouts on the front of microwave ovens fifteen years ago—

Snape leans back in a swift, aborted movement when the wall interrupts his progress. The young woman is now talking into the device, and it sounds just like a bloody phone call!

“Mobile phone,” Potter says, seeing where Snape’s attention has gone. “That one’s a new model, too. It flips open instead of just being a solid, half-sized brick of circuitry.”

Snape waits until a server delivers the tea he asked for, which should at least be something familiar. Muggles and wizards alike agree on tea, if not coffee, and India is the reason Britain is so caffeine-spoilt in the first place.

“You really haven’t been out into Muggle London since 1979, have you?” Potter asks, looking sympathetic.

“No.” Snape is glad the tea is a complex, savory black leaf blend. “If I stayed out of Muggle areas during the last war, I had a good reason not to have a body count composed of those who were defenceless,” Snape admits in a quiet voice. The vehicles outside are not just unfamiliar; they’re sleek, far more compact, and all but foreign. The double-stacker red bus driving by is one of the few things he’s observed to be unchanged by the passing years.

“Smart,” Potter says without a hint of judgement. Weird, strange, confounding young man, who once hated him for ridiculous reasons and now refuses to hate him for valid ones.

Snape slips his wand out of his sleeve long enough to cast a Muffliato charm. The woman on her mobile phone starts frowning, trying to get the other person’s attention, before giving up in apparent disgust. Hanging up seems to involve simply closing the phone, which turns it into a small square that would easily fit into a gentleman’s dress shirt breast pocket.

Muffliato works on mobile phones. He wonders if regular telephones would also be affected.
“In 1969, the American Muggles were trying to go to the moon.” Snape finds himself telling the story without any forethought at all. “My wizarding mother and my Muggle father both thought the idea was ridiculous, but your mother’s family didn’t. Lily invited me over to her family’s home to watch on their television, which had a much clearer picture than mine. I wouldn’t have been able to budge my father away from our television at home, anyway.

“Petunia was of the same mind as my parents, and went upstairs to hide in her bedroom for the duration, calling it all silly nonsense.” Snape sips his tea. “On the twentieth of July, at eight minutes after nine that evening, your mother and I watched as a Muggle man set foot on the moon for the very first time. We were so naïve, so excited about it afterwards. How far could we go, Lily and I asked each other, if wizards and Muggles worked together with those sorts of goals in mind?”

Potter is just watching him, something that isn’t quite sadness lurking in his eyes. “That must have been amazing.”

“It was,” Snape agrees. “Ten years later, I would remember that moment. It was the first time in several years that I’d felt such…such shame.” There; he could even admit it aloud, which would have been unthinkable five years ago. “Muggles went to the moon, and then they went back several more times. The last I heard any news about it, a spatial probe had been launched, one meant to reach the very edges of the solar system, cross those borders, and go beyond them.

“I’d been listening to a charming, depraved bastard preach about wizarding superiority for so blasted long, but what have we done, Potter? Wizarding kind has never gone to the moon. Most wizards you’ll meet, unless they’re late generation Half-bloods or Muggle-borns, will tell you that the very idea is ludicrous and impossible. What the hell have we done that makes us so much better than they?”

Potter slowly shakes his head. “I can’t answer that, sir. I don’t know enough about either group, not yet.”

“If you don’t live long enough to find out, I’ll kill you myself,” Snape mutters, and Potter laughs aloud.

The food is excellent, if far spicier than his palate is used to. Snape contemplates stabbing Lupin with the once-threatened silver ice pick for not informing him of this establishment years ago…except he wouldn’t have gone. He can’t see himself having made this venture beyond wizarding borders without Potter’s cheerful insistence.

By the time they leave the restaurant for the walk back to 12 Grimmauld Place, the crowds have thinned. The sights have become familiar enough that Snape doesn’t tense up at the sound of every passing car, though he still wants to stop and stare at everything like a bloody tourist.

He takes a quick glance at his pocket watch and notes that it’s just nearing ten o’clock. That is a longer period of time than one of his standard detentions, but not for Harry Potter, particularly this year, as his apparent hatred of the boy nears infamous levels. Everyone in Hogwarts now expects those long, grueling detentions to take place, which is not only convenient, but vital.

The music that emerges from open car windows or open windows above the street level shops is reminiscent of what Potter has been giving him, though there are softer and harsher sounds here and there.

One of the songs he hears causes him stop in honest shock. “Good God, is that Black Sabbath?”

“Nah, mate,” a top-hat wearing, cigarette-smoking girl with a nose ring (Why?) answers him, giving
Snape’s clothes a quick glance that speak of approval instead of derision. That’s almost as baffling as the nose ring. “That’s Ozzy Osbourne on ‘is own. Don’t think he’s been wi’ Black Sabbath since th’ early ’80s.” She nods at Potter. “You find this’un under a rock too, Harry?”

Potter smiles. “He’s been out of town for a while.”

Yeah, but least this’un knows how t’bloody dress.” She of the nose ring flicks ash from her cigarette and tips her hat at them. “An’ me Mum wonders why I tore up that magic letter schooling nonsense so I coul’ stay in London.”

“Probably a very wise choice,” Snape manages to say. Then pedestrian traffic separates himself and Potter from Top-Hat Girl, who waves and turns back to the other girl she’d been speaking to. Ozzy gives way to Bush’s “Alien” before the other sounds of Muggle London bury the music completely.

“Who’s your charming friend, Potter?” The idea that anyone would receive a Hogwarts letter and then not attend is mind-blowing.

“That’s Jade. Her mum is a witch, and her father’s a Muggle. Jade just turned twenty-one, but she says her mum is still mad that she didn’t go to Hogwarts. Funny thing, though, you bringing up the moon landing tonight: Jade’s attending uni to study aerodynamics with a specialization in orbital science.”

All right; now Snape understands why someone could turn down Hogwarts. He didn’t even know that was a bloody option!

Potter is smiling again. “Kill Voldemort first, sir. Then you can go to university with the rest of the undereducated cretins.”

“Shut up, Potter.”

They continue to walk without speaking. Potter doesn’t break the silence until they turn onto the darker Muggle lane that backs 12 Grimmauld Place. “We should do this again.”

“We spend too much time together as it is, Potter.”

Potter shakes his head. “Not enough, Mum says.”

Snape narrows his eyes. “It is not yet midnight, Potter. It’s still a very poor day for those sorts of jokes.”

“Joke?” Potter halts and stares at him in consternation. “Snape, I’ve been able to hear and speak to her since you brought the bloody Resurrection Stone to my house! She says we’ll probably lose that when Voldemort dies, since the spell that causes it will die with him, but in the meantime? I’m not fucking joking.”

Snape tries not to look alarmed. “The intent of that stupid Stone was not to create ghosts!”

Potter glances down the street, where two pale-skinned men with bald heads are paying far too much attention to them. “Come on,” he says, nudging Snape’s arm to get them moving again. “I don’t want to hex anyone’s bollocks off tonight, and that would be the least harmful spell I’d be offering them.”

“Skinheads are still a thing?” Snape rolls his eyes. It is a tried truth of the world that some people insist upon remaining stupid.

“Remus says they’re not as bad as they used to be,” Potter replies. “And I’m not talking about
ghosts. Ghosts are... well, like the school ghosts. Mum’s not a ghost. You can use death for more than just Horcruxes. She used hers to create a protection spell, and it means she’s sort of, uh, bound to me?” Potter frowns. “Not quite that, but close enough. The Stone just amplified it a bit—and yes, she knew it would happen when she told you to bring the Stone to Grimmauld Place.”

“She used me.” Snape realizes he’s smiling. “Devious, devious Lily.”

“She says somebody has to be. Dad was terrible at it, Remus got caught because he was too stubborn to abandon the others, Sirius liked to brag, and Peter Pettigrew is an idiot.”

“It didn’t seem like it at the time,” Snape says, some of his humor fading. “It seemed as if they were never caught at anything.”

“I looked up their detention counts once. Don’t tell Professor McGonagall; I’m pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to be doing that, but it was late 1993. I was still figuring out, uh, boundaries.”

“I won’t say a word,” Snape promises in amusement.

“Their individual detention counts were all larger than the total sum of every detention you ever received, and yes, that includes Remus.” Potter pulls his wand from his jumper sleeve and taps it against the carriage house lock before opening the door. “Oh, and yes, Mum says she really is pester ing you in your sleep. Stop being stupid about it, or she’ll send my Dad instead.”

The look of complete horror on his face must have been truly remarkable. Potter starts howling with laughter, leaning against the motorbike while he tries to take in oxygen and laugh at the same time.

Which is exactly why they get caught. At least Snape is the one standing there, arms crossed and looking entirely unimpressed, by the time Black bolts into the carriage house. Lupin is just behind him, and Snape is going to pretend not to notice that the man’s shirt is misbuttoned.


Black puts his hands on his hips, trying to look foreboding. “It took you until your sixth year to actually pull off something Marauder-worthy? Sixth year, Harry?”

Potter is still snickering as he points at Snape. “His face. His face!”

“Yes, his face is unremarkable, we get it,” Black says, which only sets Potter off laughing again.

Snape glares at Black. “Please stop helping!”

“Sirius, you are not supposed to congratulate the student who is not on school grounds when he’s supposed to be. I think,” Lupin says, regarding his giggling, idiotic godchild. “Or is this like Dumbledore’s kidnapping jaunts?”

“I think not,” Snape returns, mildly insulted. “At least Potter’s ideas make sense.”

“Dinner. Dinner that did not involve a Hallowe’en Feast, or Professor Snape hexing people for looking at him wrong,” Potter gasps out. “Can you imagine the look on Professor McGonagall’s face, though?”

“Virtue, Potter,” Snape says dryly.

“Yes, but I’m the one who technically kidnapped you! She’d have kittens, and then we’d have so many more McGonagall witches to contend with.”
Lupin throws up his hands and turns around to leave. “Don’t want to know. Still so very glad that the teacher-student spells regarding propriety were put into place back in the 1700s.”

Snape must be making that face again. Potter laughs so hard he hits the floor.

“Black, you owe me proper alcohol for this,” Snape declares, which at least gets him escorted into the kitchen and away from Lily Potter’s lunatic son.

The next morning is a flurry of activity when he wakes up at Black’s fucking kitchen table with exactly nine minutes to get to his first class of the day. “I blame you,” Snape tells Potter, who grins before turning back to what looks like tea-brewing. Black is resting face-down on the table, still groaning in misery. Lupin is looking at both of them like they’re stupid. Bloody werewolf physiology.

“Do you intend to get caught off school grounds for certain?” Snape asks, just before he steps through the Floo.

“No, I’m the kid who was smart enough not to sign up for early classes on a Friday morning,” Potter returns cheekily, just before shoving a chipped old Muggle mug filled with hot tea into Snape’s hands. “Don’t spill it on the fire.”

“Brat!” Snape declares in a poor attempt at a departing remark. He does not spill the blasted tea, either.

The excellent part of having a working Floo in his office is that he can arrive, sit down in his chair, and enjoy blessed dark, bitter caffeine before rising and striding into class with exactly thirty seconds to spare. He also has the bonus delight of startling an entire class of Gryffindor and Slytherin second-years into fearful obedience.

After a successful class period in which no one dies, hexes each other, or even threatens to do so, Snape retreats back to his office. A blank sheet of paper has been placed underneath the empty mug; whispering the secrecy charm over the parchment reveals the words.

Absolutely not late to class in the slightest. Plan ahead better, Professor.

Snape scowls down at the note. He takes up a quill, scratches through Potter’s message, and adds a new one:

Do not let Black buy alcohol ever again. Has that man ever had proper nectar of the Green Fairy in his flea-ridden life? His is substandard, else no one would have fallen asleep in the middle of bloody well drinking it.

Do not drink Black’s substandard alcohol in a misguided attempt at getting rid of it all. Its only acceptable use is drain cleanser.

Dobby pops into existence at Snape’s polite request, takes the folded sheet of paper, and gives Snape a brief glance. “Kreacher is sayin’ that Master Black is sick and deserves what he gets for not
“Kreacher is entirely correct,” Snape tells the elf. Dobby giggles and vanishes again to take the brief missive up to Gryffindor Tower, where it will be left under Potter’s mattress for future reading and incineration.

Chapter End Notes

These are extremely isolated, largely culturally ignorant characters. Stop equating the author to the characters. If you're not going to message me and yell at me when I have Voldemort murder people, then you don't need to be telling me that my characters are saying "incorrect" things. OF COURSE THEY ARE. THAT IS THE ENTIRE PROBLEM WITH THE ISOLATION OF WIZARDING SOCIETY AND PART OF WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT.*

(Yes, I've received one message too many about this. For the rest of you: Happy reading!)
The second weekend of November brings the first Quidditch game of the new season, which is Hufflepuff versus Slytherin. As expected, the Slytherin team absolutely demolishes the Hufflepuff lineup in a victorious four hundred points over eighty. Even if this has been his Slytherins before Bulstrode became Captain, the results would be similar. Snape glances at Pomona’s disheartened face and mentally begs her to sack them all and start over again just to spare her House the humiliation. The tactic worked quite well for Slytherin. Unorthodox, yes; against the rules? Not at all.

The fourth weekend in November is almost picturesque for the season, with no rain or sleet, light breezes, and the temperature climbing into the forties. The crowds gathered to watch Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw are comfortable instead of miserable. On the other hand, the Quidditch players are already starting to sweat, and the game is only a half-hour old.

It is becoming abundantly clear that Lee Jordan’s replacement as announcer, Zacharias Smith, is a complete idiot. He spends more time complaining about the players than he does on actually commenting upon the game. Minerva looks as if she wants to strangle him, and the students surrounding her would probably assist.

At one point, Potter, Miss Chang, Ginevra Weasley, and Miss Turpin all halt in the air, hovering in a tight cluster while Boot and MacDougal defend against Miss Bell’s attempts at scoring. “I will bloody well pay Lee to come back and announce for us for the rest of the season,” Potter is saying disgust.

“I have exactly one Galleon to my name right now, and it’s yours if you can get rid of this arsehole,” Miss Weasley replies.

Misses Chang and Turpin nod their agreement. “At this point, I think all of us would shove gold at Lee. At least he was…”

“Not an arsehole,” Miss Weasley says, interrupting whatever diplomacy Miss Chang was attempting to vocalize.

“Back to the game.” Potter reaches out to bump gloved and padded fists with Chang while Weasley does the same with Turpin. Then all pretense at friendship falls away as Ravenclaw and Gryffindor try to hammer each other into the ground.

Snape watches, impressed, as Potter puts lie to the idea that he’s better on the bike than a broom. Bell and Thomas do an excellent job of scoring goals with the Quaffle, but it’s Potter who pulls off scoring at times when the Keeper should have been able to block—by being a sly little shite. Boot looks utterly mystified when Potter swings off his broom, holds on with one arm, and kicks the bloody Quaffle through a goal hoop.

The recovery to remount his broom is also excellent, which earns appreciative applause even from clusters of his Slytherins. Snape can hear Black shouting his approval from across the pitch. He glances over in time to see Lupin give Black a hard elbow to the ribs before he tells Black to try and keep it to a dull roar.

It’s one of the rare school games that lasts until the sun is threatening to set. By the time Granger snags the Golden Snitch practically from Chang’s hands, the game’s points are set at an intimidating eight hundred seventy over Ravenclaw’s seven hundred ten. Snape has also guessed accurately;
Potter scored more goals than the other Chasers on his team.

“Woo!” Bradley is shouting as the Gryffindors and Ravenclaws continue to circle in the air, ignoring Madam Hooch’s attempts to get them to land. “That was the best game ever!”

“It was your first game, genius,” Ronald Weasley retorts, grinning. “But yeah—if the rest of the year is like this? This is gonna be bloody amazing!”

Bell, Potter, Boot, Chambers, and Thomas fly closer together. “All in favor of collecting Galleons to replace that complete bleeding idiot?” Boot asks.

“Uh—” Potter says, and points just before there is a crash against the stands, followed by Smith’s amplified, indignant squawking.

“MISS WEASLEY!” Minerva exclaims. Snape hides a smile as he realizes that Miss Weasley intentionally crashed into their bore of an announcer.

“Sorry.” Ginevra Weasley has a look of sublime innocence on her face as she rightens herself and collects her broom. “Forgot to brake, Professor.”

“I’ll hex your—” Smith begins to threaten Weasley, just before he realizes Minerva is staring at him. Zacharias Smith wilts like a dying plant.

“STOP FLYING! SOME OF US WANT TO GO HAVE DINNER!” Maxine O’Flaherty shouts, which causes half the stadium to burst into laughter and shouts of agreement.

“All in favor of also buying Ginny Weasley a new broom for landing on that arsehole?” Thomas asks in tones of utter adoration.

“Let’s see how much it costs to convince Lee to come back, first,” Bell says dryly.

* * * *

Snape is sitting in his office, glaring at the far wall, when there is a teacher’s distinct rap upon his door. “Come.”

Lupin opens the door and closes it again. “I know it wasn’t Quidditch that put that scowl upon your face.”

Snape considers it before reaching out with his wand to tap a secondary brick in the wall, activating the fiery green wards. “Voldemort.”

“Oh.” Lupin grimaces. “What the hell did he want?”

“Nothing yet. I’ve just spent a lot of spare time this year reviewing our plans, and what I know of what’s to come. I’ve been trying to figure out how much Voldemort might suspect my duplicity if he goes into the Department of Mysteries and discovers that the original prophecy globe is still in place.”

Lupin looks surprised. “Sirius didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”
“The Prophet mentioned that quite a number of storage globes were destroyed in the battle, and of course, wrote about Sirius’s little ploy of showing up to assist. But when he arrived, the battle had already progressed towards the Atrium. That isn’t the first place he went. The original prophecy globe’s shelf also suffered a very unfortunate accident.”

Snape stares at the werewolf. “I can’t tell if he’s a genius, or if I’m going to kill Black for not telling me.”

“I think he was worried about the timing of it all, actually. He knows enough about how Occlumency works to recognize that some memories should be a bit more...spread out,” Lupin says.

“He’s not wrong,” Snape admits. “What makes me curious is why Dumbledore did not also voice concern over the prophecy’s destruction.”

Lupin looks unhappy. “I hate to say it, but perhaps he simply didn’t care? The concern was in Voldemort receiving it; Dumbledore knows the prophecy already. A good chess player doesn’t telegraph their concerns to their opponent.”

“Yes, but going by that analogy, Dumbledore was absolutely rubbish at chess last year,” Snape replies. None of this makes him happy—even if the prophecy globe’s destruction is one less thing he needs now be concerned with.

The timing of December’s winter holiday means that the next Quidditch matches run back-to-back. This year it is the first and second weekend of the month, and the first game reveals that someone must have found sufficient bribery. Lee Jordan’s return to the commentator’s booth is met with cheering that makes the very ground rumble beneath the stands.

“Thank you! Thank you,” Lee says, grinning as he speaks into the charmed loudspeaker. He’s decided to act as a proper graduated Hogwarts student; his scarf is composed of four separate sections devoted to each of the differing House colors. “Now we’ve got that over with, here comes the teams for today’s match of witty Ravenclaw against our stubborn badger friends, Hufflepuff! I almost feel I don’t need to announce Hufflepuff at all—their roster hasn’t changed in five years!”

“OI!” Cadwallader shouts from the pitch.

“Oh, hey, one new face! Excellent! That would be Jon Cadwallader as a new Seeker, then!” Lee shouts happily, and goes on introducing the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw roster in a way that Smith hadn’t even bothered with.

Ravenclaw trounces Hufflepuff, but it seems everyone was infected by Lee Jordan’s good cheer. Hufflepuff loses, but by a more respectable fifty points instead of several hundred.

The game Snape has been patiently waiting for comes the very next Saturday. It’s even warmer this month than in November, which proves to Snape that the weather has taken leave of its senses. The wind is gusting along, though, which will give the players an extra challenge to deal with.

“All right, then! Everyone’s favorite spectator sport of watching sly Slytherin and glory-bound Gryffindor try to kill each other—I mean, compete with each other, has begun!” Lee pauses and stares in abject disbelief as the teams come out onto the field. “Professor McGonagall, you are a terrible person. You didn’t tell me both rosters were entirely different!”

“You should do your research, Lee Jordan,” Minerva returns smugly.

“BLIMEY—two fiery Weasleys, Miss Bell, beautiful as ever—ho, Dean Thomas, I bet he does well!—Mister Peakes, who was new to us last year, and the return of Mister Harry Potter! Who, I
see, is not in Seeker’s position!” Lee watches the fliers lift off from the ground. “Dear Merlin, someone tell me that Miss Granger flies on a broom as well as she writes essays!”

“BETTER!” someone in the Gryffindor stands shouts.

“Excellent!” Lee declares. “And Slytherin still has Miss Bulstrode as Captain. Lovely face, tall as a majestic tree, please never be tempted to squash me, Madam! Entirely new faces for the rest of the team—Mafalda Prewett, brilliant ginger hair, there. Oh! Both the Greengrass sisters! This is exciting, they’ve always been a force to be reckoned with, even without brooms involved! Mister Baddock, Mister Pritchard, Mister Harper, you all look sufficiently threatening! And there’s the Snitch released, and there is Miss Prewett already trying to beat the stuffing out of Miss Weasley, apparently mistaking her for the Quaffle! I can tell already that it’s going to be a great game!”

Strangely enough, except for Miss Prewett’s antics, the Slytherin-Gryffindor match looks to be proceeding along the same lines as the Ravenclaw-Gryffindor game. Most of the players seem to be respectful of each other, even if they do not let respect inhibit their skills or propensity towards typical Quidditch violence.

No matter who incited the change in attitude, the game is fabulous to witness. Slytherin and Gryffindor are doing their best to demolish each other, and no player is going to lack bruising by the time the game is over.

Slytherin and Gryffindor’s game runs through until dark. It’s the first time in ten years that the stadium lighting has to be lit so play can continue. The kitchen house-elves bring sandwiches out for the spectators who refuse to give up on watching the game—which is most of them.

“Hermione, find that Snitch before we all fall off our brooms!” Ronald Weasley yells.

“Greengrass is on it!” Bell declares, and Granger darts in that direction. Snape can just make out the glimmer of gold as it zips through the air.

“KATIE!” Potter roars. “Quaffle, right now!”

Snape recognizes the tactic at once. The new Slytherins on the team are slower to catch on, but Miss Bulstrode does her absolute best to keep the Gryffindors from scoring. She fights a losing battle, since her opponents are apparently insane. Though she blocks many Quaffle shots, she can’t defend against them all, especially with Gryffindor’s Beaters keeping Slytherin players away from the goal posts.

Snape watches the score climb, frowning, until a loud cheer announces Miss Greengrass is triumphantly holding up the Snitch. Slytherin loses the game anyway, nine hundred ten over nine hundred points.

Snape glances up just in time to see Potter and Bulstrode slap hands as they fly by each other. Miss Bulstrode has a very rare smile on her chiseled features. Perhaps his own Captain is responsible for this newfound gaming maturity…or she and Potter are conspiring together. Neither would surprise him.

Snape is proud of his Slytherins, regardless. They fought hard and well, and unlike in previous years, they nearly took the game without cheating. Snape is not against cheating as a general rule, but the team before Bulstrode used bodily injury as their primary tool. Not subtle, and not Slytherin at all.

Snape will, however, need to speak with Miss Prewett about not using Quidditch as an excuse to assault distant, estranged family members.
“Now *that* was one hell of a game!” Lee declares, and is immediately scolded by Minerva for language.

Snape glances over at the Gryffindor stands, where Lupin and Black are sitting in their usual spot. When Lupin speaks, Snape can catch the words easily. “He’s right. That was one hell of a game.”

Black nods. His eyes are locked on his godson, and the proud smile on his face makes the marks left by Azkaban seem less harsh.

Snape abruptly stands up and makes his way down the stands. He can’t afford thoughts like that. The Bloody Bat has no friends for a damned good reason.

* * * *

“Before most of you depart for Christmas Break this afternoon, I have some words I would like to say,” Dumbledore says. Snape is expecting Albus’s usual string of nonsense, but for once, the Headmaster does not send the students off on a ridiculous note.

“You heard what the Sorting Hat had to say at the beginning of the year.” Dumbledore peers seriously over his glasses at the students all turned to face him. There are only a few who are not staring the Headmaster in the face; Snape knows them all to have at least one parent as a marked and active Death Eater. “As I mentioned at the beginning of the year: dark times approach. This school has ever been about unity—”

“All right. That tears it. I’ve bloody well had enough!”

Snape turns his head in surprise to stare at Potter, which is what literally everyone else in the Great Hall is doing. Potter’s chair shrieks against the floor as he shoves it back and stands up.

“Mister Potter,” Minerva tuts, frowning, but Potter shakes his head. Lupin half-stands up from the faculty table, frowning, but before he can say anything, Potter is speaking in a loud, clear voice that carries easily throughout the Hall.

“Do you actually mean that?” Potter is asking Dumbledore, a look of flat anger on his face. It isn’t quite ratel temper, but it also is not Voldemort attempting to push through Potter’s excellent Occlumency shields. “Are you serious about school unity? Is it something you really want for us, or is it just words to you, Headmaster?”

“Mate, have you lost your bloody mind?” Weasley hisses, but Potter throws off Weasley’s arm without breaking eye contact with Albus.

Albus finally gives Potter a sober nod. “Yes. I really do mean that, Harry.”

“Then why haven’t you acted on it?” Potter asks.

“One can only do so much—” Albus tries.

“From our perspective, you’ve done nothing but talk,” Potter retorts, and leaves the Gryffindor table. Weasley tries one more time to stop him and fails. The Slytherins are snickering amongst themselves; the Ravenclaws whisper in confusion. The Hufflepuffs just regard the unplanned events with quiet curiosity. It’s the Gryffindors who look half-panicked, and well they should. Whatever Potter is up to
may devastate their points count, leaving them in last place despite their Quidditch wins.

Snape stands up when it seems everyone else is too confused to do anything. “Mister Potter,” he drawls. “Where is it that you think you’re going?”

Potter lifts his hand in a two-fingered salute without turning. Snape is so legitimately startled by this that he forgets to do anything except stare in angry consternation. The boy had not just—!

The only warning he gets is that he sees Potter’s wand drop into his hand from his robe sleeve. Then Potter is turning the corner into the Entrance Hall.

The Great Hall devolves into shocked murmurs of baffled confusion. None of it is loud enough to cover up Potter’s shouted, “Potens anullo clepsydra!”

The next sound Snape hears is of glass shattering, followed by thousands of objects bursting out of their containers. Jewels of red, green, blue and yellow slide across the floor, glimmering in the torchlight as they skid past the entrance of the Great Hall.


“I’ll kill him,” Snape snarls under his breath, rounding the table with Minerva and Lupin practically on his heels. Albus is just behind them, and they end up leading the faculty charge to discover what in the hell Potter has just done.

“Not if I get to him first!” Minerva snaps in a full-blown temper. She’s so angry it’s a wonder she hasn’t devolved completely into Scots Gaelic.

The students all suddenly have the same idea about investigating the Entrance Hall. Everyone is upright and shoving their way towards the exit, muttering or shouting in confusion. “Ho, shite,” Snape hears McLaggen declare, and decides that he’s had enough.

“MOVE!” he roars, the great Bloody Bat at his best. The students in Snape’s way squeak and leap aside, leaving a nice pathway for Snape, Minerva, Lupin, and Albus to walk through. The gap fills in quickly with students taking advantage, cutting off faculty members who were too slow to keep up.

“Sometimes your temper is so very useful,” Minerva says under her breath, but Snape doesn’t respond. He still has to kill Potter.

When they get to the Entrance Hall, it’s to find students staring at the disastrous mess in disbelief.

The devastation is remarkably complete. The four hourglasses that kept the House point tallies have been destroyed. One is hanging off the wall and looks ready to drop at any second. All of the hourglasses will need serious work with repairing charms to be returned to normal.

Potter is standing in front of the destroyed House Hourglasses. He has his arms crossed, his wand still clenched in his right hand. If Snape isn’t mistaken, Potter has also erected a Protego charm; he can see the faintest hint of its magic shining in the air.

Snape wants to blame James Potter, but he can’t. The expression of angry stubbornness on Potter’s face is purely Lily Evans at her fiercest, her most defensive—the times when she refused to allow injustice to continue.

“Mister Potter!” Minerva exclaims, snorting a breath of anger out of her nose. “You will explain yourself at once. Then you will spend the rest of this ruddy school year in detention!”
“I will fight you for the honor of hosting every single one of them,” Snape declares. His Slytherins perk up in interest; the Gryffindors look offended.

“He’s my godson. They’re my detentions,” Lupin growls. “Harry, what in the blazes do you think you’re doing?”

“School unity,” Potter replies, but his expression doesn’t change. “The Headmaster and some of you professors say you want school unity? Well, this,” and he jerks his left thumb back over his shoulder at the broken counters, “is one of the biggest reasons why we don’t bloody have it!”

“I would very much like you to explain further,” Albus intones. He crosses his arms as well, almost mirroring Potter’s stance. There is anger in the Headmaster’s eyes, but enough patience remains to reveal his willingness to listen.

“This isn’t for you, sir,” Potter snaps at the Headmaster. “This is for them. You want student unity? Well, then you’re going to let them hear, listen, and make their own bloody decision!”

Albus looks taken aback, as does Minerva. Snape maintains a scowl of absolute fury; the Bloody Bat knows that Potter is about to get away with something that would get anyone else expelled.

“Now that I have literally everyone’s attention,” Potter says, nodding at the school ghosts that have joined them. Even Peeves is staring at the mess with his mouth hanging open.

Potter’s voice is loud enough to cut through the din of students who do not know when to be quiet. “You know, I looked it up. Everyone seems to think that the system of House points has always been this way, but they’re wrong. The stupid points system wasn’t invented and implemented until 1493.”

That gives Potter the Ravenclaws’ full attention, and other students are starting to realize that something far more interesting than property destruction is happening. “Before 1493, the Houses argued with each other sometimes over the nature of magic, but that’s all it was. Every student in these walls understood that the Houses were in place to foster our individual strengths. The students were united because they were all here to do one thing—learn magic.”

It’s now very quiet, a silence broken only by kicked, skittering gemstones and shifting feet. Albus is still as a stone as he listens. Minerva’s expression has lost its harsh temperamental edge. Even the Slytherins are interested; Snape can tell because they’re feigning absolute indifference.

“1493 is the first year that no descendants of the Founders remained in positions of authority in Hogwarts. The moment they’re all gone, some nitwit decided it would be the wisest thing in the world to pit us all against each other!” Potter’s angry shout rings out in the Hall, making several students jump back in surprise. “There hasn’t been unity in Hogwarts since the counter went up on this ancient wall.

“Don’t you get it?” Potter asks, brow furrowed as his eyes sweep the room to look at every student from every House. “Because of these points and the idea that a House has to ‘win’ over all the other Houses, year after year, how can we ever look at each other as anything other than the enemy?”

Snape has a very uncomfortable moment as he recalls his words to Albus Dumbledore in Potter’s third year.

“You and Minerva are the definitive results of your own Houses—which is as it should be, for a Head of House. I only wish that you both could stop viewing the other Houses as the enemy.”

“They are the enemy.”
“And what are we fighting over, anyway? An ancient, dented silver cup and the right to display it for a year. That’s bloody well it, and it’s not worth it,” Potter says. “We fight in the hallways. Prefects throw young students of other Houses under the bloody Knight Bus in hopes that it will lose that House points. Teachers hold points over our heads for correct answers, and Merlin forbid if you’ve had a bad night, didn’t get to your homework and get the answer wrong.

“If someone messes up, no matter the reason, their own House ostracizes them. We’re supposed to support the people within our own Houses when they stumble, but most of what I’ve seen in the last three years shows that we all do exactly the opposite. Every House, no exception. All of that, for what? To have the highest point tally at the end of the year. We spite each other for the sake of a few gems.

“The House Cup wasn’t even the House Cup. Not at first,” Potter continues. Some of his anger is fading, even though the sternness does not. “It was the school’s Quidditch cup. The Houses understood the nature of sport, and reveled in it—I asked the Sorting Hat if the Quidditch Cup had ever caused this sort of contention, and it said no. No. It said no, not ever! Until those damned hourglasses went up, the Houses could play against each other without trying to bloody well kill each other! That hate didn’t come until we were pitted against each other for every single thing we do in this school. How does that foster unity?”

“It doesn’t,” Granger’s voice rings out from within the crowd, though Snape can’t see her. “You can’t even have a friend in another House without being treated with suspicion.”

“It’s even worse if you’re Slytherin,” a third-year mumbles, but it’s so quiet throughout the Entrance Hall that nearly everyone hears them.

“Especially if it’s ruddy Quidditch season!” someone else yells from the back.

Potter points at Terry Boot—not his wand hand, fortunately. “You! What are you?”

Boot blinks a few times at the unexpected question. “Uh—Ravenclaw.”

Potter points at Seamus Finnegan. “What about you?”

“Gryffindor?” Finnegan answers in bewilderment.

“And you?”

Millicent Bulstrode’s expression doesn’t change. “Slytherin.”

“What about you?” Potter asks Hannah Abbot.

Abbot looks baffled. “Hufflepuff.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Potter is glaring at people again. “What are we together?”

“Hogwarts,” Luna Lovegood answers in her breathy voice. “We’re Hogwarts.”

“Exactly,” Potter declares. “That’s who we need to be. No more of this petty bolloxing shite.”

“Harry!” Lupin barks

Potter glances at his godfather but doesn’t respond to the rebuke. “We’re either together, or we’re nothing. I know some of you don’t realize this, but if You-Know-Who were to march into this school tomorrow, three-quarters of every House would be dead on the ground. Three-quarters of us dead,
and I do mean of every House.” Potter tilts his head. “Doesn’t seem to leave a lot of wizards or witches left behind, does it?”

“Blood purity,” Zabini says under his breath.

“Oh, come off it. The Potters were Pure-blood wizards until my Dad married my Mum,” Potter replies scornfully. “The Zabinis can’t even claim that, so what makes you think Voldemort would let you live?” Zabini’s dark skin turns pale at that declaration.

“Now.” Potter lowers his wand to point down at the floor and the scattered pile of gems. “I’ll repair every single bit of this myself, but only—all!—if every single House still thinks that this shite is a good idea. If the Houses as a united front tell me that they want these counters back on the wall, then back they’ll go.

“But: if we want the House Cup to be a Quidditch Cup again? If the students of Hogwarts want to be judged on their own merit rather than on how many points we can earn for our Houses? If we really want to be a united school? Then nobody puts those counters back. Not you, Headmaster,” Potter says, scowling at Albus. “Not my Head of House, not any teacher in this school. Either you abide by the unity of the four Houses, or you lay off with the House unity nonsense while we go back to hexing each other in the hallways, until Voldemort—” Potter ignores the unhappy gasps “—comes along and happily murders everyone he doesn’t like.”

Potter’s expression turns thoughtful. “And if you think being a Pure-blooded witch or wizard will save you, you should maybe look up the records in the Ministry about how many Death Eaters were found to have been killed not by the Order of the Phoenix, but by Voldemort himself.”

“But—but if we do this, how are we supposed to know if we’ve done well if nobody gives us points in class?” The questioner is a tiny little fourth-year Hufflepuff girl who is still the size of a first-year.

“I don’t know—maybe they could actually tell us. With words,” Potter says snidely. He’s not looking at the Hufflepuff though; he’s glaring at the Professors of Hogwarts, Snape and Lupin included. “If they can open their mouths to grant points, then I’m guessing they can probably use words to tell someone they did something right, too.”

“That’s quite enough, Mister Potter,” Albus orders, but then he sighs. “You have made your point… and I find that I agree with it.”

“Headmaster, you cannot possibly—” Snape begins to say, the Bloody Bat still beyond incensed.

“I can,” Albus interrupts, holding up his hand to request silence. Snape grants it, but grudgingly. “Mister Potter is correct. How can I expect the unity I ask of our students when we dangle a trophy over their heads to fight over?”

Albus turns around to look around at the students. Most of them are quiet, shocked to somberness, though some are smiling in what looks like genuine glee—most of them Ravenclaws. Bloody Ravens.

“You’ve all heard Mister Potter’s proposal,” Albus says. “I will ask you now, and whatever the students of Hogwarts decide, I swear this school will abide by it.

“If you are in favor of the counter being repaired and returned to its place on the wall, the points restored to their previous counts, say Aye.”

There are several Ayes from the crowd, but only a few of them are firm. Most of them are desultory, as if the shouter is only saying it because a neighbor did.
Albus nods. “And if you are in favor of the points system being abandoned, of Hogwarts returning to the way things were done by the Founders—and of the House Cup being a mere Quidditch Cup once more…say Aye.”

Snape winces and tries not to clamp his hands down over his ears when the racket of so many consenting students bounces off the stone walls. That is a blatant majority, one even he cannot pretend to mistake for anything else.

“Very well.” Albus waves his hand, and the gemstones littering the floor disappear. “I will find an appropriate use for them. Perhaps something mindful of our choice of unity over squabbling. When you all return to school in January…I wonder if the air might seem a little bit clearer.”

The students begin shuffling in place, nodding, though many look stunned over the sudden change that Potter just instigated. “Please return to the Great Hall and finish your meal, if you wish,” Albus instructs. “If not, you may return to your dormitories to finish packing up for the train ride home.”

Then Albus turns around and stares at Potter. “You, Mister Potter, are in detention when we return from the winter holiday. Property destruction, cheek, language—you, I think that covers it. There are more diplomatic ways to solve problems, Mister Potter.”

Potter stares back at him, unswayed. “Not in this case, Professor. Not in the slightest.”

“Hmm.” Albus studies the broken hourglasses while frowning. “Could you not have come to me with this concern, instead of acting in such a dramatic fashion, Mister Potter?”

Potter’s eyebrows lower into a full-fledged scowl. “I did. You didn’t notice. You were preoccupied with other concerns.”

“Did you,” Albus says, and Snape hears a note of regret in his voice. “Then know that while I don’t prefer your methods, I myself have been accused of flamboyant gestures. If I refused to hear you, then I cannot fault your choice overly much. I am sometimes a hypocrite, but I am capable of recognizing it when it is pointed out to me.”

Snape grinds his teeth and stalks away, to all appearances in the midst of a great snit. Minerva calls after him, but he keeps going, glaring his way through the crowd so that he can get to his office. The Bloody Bat is furious, and he’s making certain everyone knows it.

Far underneath the mask, Snape knows that Potter is a bloody destructive genius.

Lupin joins him later, gazing with absolute longing at the bottle of Firewhiskey on Snape’s desk. “Please, for the love of God, share that with me.”

Snape rolls his eyes, fetches a clean glass from his desk, and puts it upside down before Lupin. “Have at it, werewolf.”

Lupin drains his first glass before he says anything. “I can’t fucking believe it.”

Snape is resting his chin on his arms, which are resting on his desk, so it means he has to look up to glare at Lupin. “Are you saying you are senile, blind, or just incapable of taking in the possibility that your godson is insane?”

Lupin pours another drink, pauses, and then refills Snape’s glass. Snape sneers at him in thanks. “Insane? No. He’s right, and you and I both know it.”

Snape makes a noncommittal sound.
“How much hell have we all wrought with those hourglass counters, Severus? Houses warring for points with each other. Heads of House so desperate to win the chance to display a cup that we pit our students against each other.” Lupin sips at his drink, scowling. “What I hate is that none of this ever occurred to me before.”

“That is my very problem at the moment,” Snape replies, scowling. “The most obvious roadblock against Albus’s attempts at student unity, and I did not even consider the fucking points.”

Lupin cradles his glass thoughtfully. “How do you think Voldemort is going to react to this change in the school?”

Snape considers it and decides that drinking the third glass Lupin poured him is a worthwhile activity, after all. “I have no idea, and when I cannot predict his responses, I cannot prepare for any resulting outcome.”

Lupin raises his glass. “Ah. Well, here’s hoping you live through it, then.”

Snape hides his face against his arms. “If I die, I’m going to figure out a way to blame you.”
Snape exchanges a few letters over the course of the holiday with Potter. Sometimes he also hears from Granger, who is tearing out her bushy mass of curling hair trying to make the Memory Projection Potion function properly.

Potter,

I cannot believe you did that to the hourglasses.

I find your idiocy in this matter exceptionally pleasing.

Snape

*

Snape,

The hypocrisy was starting to make my teeth ache. Nobody likes a ratel with a toothache.

Harry

*

Harry,

I concede the point. Still, I hope you will not continue to act in such a brash, obvious manner. You were taught to be far more subtle than this.

Snape

*

Snape,

Boldness over subtlety is definitely reserved for when subtlety is not bloody working.

Harry
Snape does make a trip to 12 Grimmauld Place after New Year’s Day. It’s the one meeting that near-everyone in the Order of the Phoenix can attend, and to skip it would be, at the very least, impolite. At worst, Moody would follow Snape around and ask annoying questions. There is still an edge of suspicion regarding Narcissa Malfoy’s presence, so Snape is sure to stand next to her during the meeting. It’s the best way to ensure that most of them are glaring at the Bloody Bat, not at Draco Malfoy’s mother.

“Well? Do you have anything useful, then?” Moody snaps at one point, glaring at Snape.

Albus is now in agreement with Snape that the Order should know of Voldemort’s intentions. Snape gives the Auror a drawn-out look of irritation before answering. “The Dark Lord’s spies are infiltrating the Ministry. I can tell you how, but I cannot tell you who, because that information he gives to no one.” Snape outlines Voldemort’s plan, watching as curious faces slowly settle into anger and dismay.

“And you’re sure you know who none of the spies are?” Moody prods again. It says a lot about the seriousness of the situation that Black isn’t mocking Snape in their traditional manner.

Snape nods. “He is gaining followers at an alarming pace. Anyone he sends to infiltrate the Ministry will not bear a Dark Mark. They will not even have poisons or cursed items. They will do nothing to draw suspicion onto themselves until Voldemort signals them to act, possibly by Protean charms.”

“Merlin save us,” Kingsley Shacklebolt mutters. “We can’t interrogate every single Ministry employee.”

“What about adding Protean charm detection to the security searches?” Nymphadora asks.

“We can do that, but I think it may be too little, too late.” Kingsley shakes his head. “We’re not even certain a Protean charm will be the signal. Damn. This is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Then we plan for a disaster,” Lupin says at once, his voice hard. “We know the Ministry is infiltrated, and from what I’m hearing, it sounds like we’re going to lose it to Voldemort, at least for a little while. We put the plans in place now that will protect the people he will be most likely to attack. I know Hogwarts is already making contingency plans in case of Voldemort’s success, so we should do the same. If Voldemort isn’t using Protean charms, then we damned well should be! A Patronus is an excellent way to communicate, but if you’re in the middle of a battle, you might not get the chance to send one. We need a faster way to gain the attention of other members of the Order.”

“Yes, but a Protean charm is fairly simple. It is meant to inform you of a when, not a where,” Andromeda Tonks says.

“Blood magic.” Snape waits until they’re all looking at him, most of them in suspicion. “If the Protean charms are bound by the blood of everyone meant to carry them, then the person who activates the charm is not only sending a request for assistance, it gives the carriers of other Protean charms the means to find them.”

“Blood magic’s dangerous,” Cedric says, but he looks thoughtful.
“If done incorrectly? Yes,” Snape replies. “Most are not even aware that this can be done with a Protean charm.”

“And how d’you know about it?” Moody asks grumpily.

“Part of that method of summoning is embedded into the Dark Mark,” Snape says in a low voice. Part of his tone is meant to reassure as to his allegiances, but the rest is sincere regret. He hates the damned thing that mars his skin. “It is a far simpler matter to tie that sort of spell to a Protean charm than it is to a mark placed upon a person. Also, do not give me one of these charms once they are made. While I have never been physically searched when meeting with the Dark Lord, that does not mean it cannot happen. If the plots contrived here to defend the wizarding world after the Ministry falls make him paranoid, as the Dark Lord became before his previous defeat, then I will not discount any possibility.”

“All right,” Moody concedes. “How do we know some Death Eater wouldn’t be able to use a Protean charm if they get ahold o’ one?”

“If it’s blood-bound, then only the touch and intent of the living person, and the blood beneath their skin, can activate the Protean charm,” Snape tells them. “Again, same concept with the Mark. Do try to keep up.”

“Does knowing these things get you any closer to removing the Mark?” Nymphadora asks, a surprising amount of sympathy in her voice.

“It will disappear only when the Dark Lord is dead,” Snape says.

As if it’s a signal, Snape’s arm lights up like someone just dipped it in fire. He clamps his hand down over the Dark Mark, jaw clenched, and refuses to let out a sound.

“What the hell is that all about?” Lee Jordan asks, looking concerned.

“That, Jordan, is the Lord Voldemort in a temper,” Snape bites out, shutting his eyes when the intensity ramps, a summons joining the anger he can feel.

“What’s he all out of sorts about?” Ted Tonks asks.

“Without answering the call, I won’t know until I see him later,” Snape answers, relieved when the pain begins to ebb. “It is not as if I do not have a legitimate excuse for not attending to him immediately.”

“That’s bloody awful, Professor,” Angelina Johnson says.

Snape barely resists the urge to roll his eyes. “Welcome to my entire life.”

The meeting afterwards, with those who all share Unbreakable Vows, is the more important one. “He still doesn’t trust you, does he?” Lupin asks bluntly, once the others have all departed by Floo or Disapparated from the house’s front step.

“If I had a tangible copy of the living preservation potion? I think he would trust me enough to accept it, which would allow me to administer our developed toxin,” Snape says. “But without that potion? No, he does not. Maybe after our idiot Headmaster has me kill him, that will be enough for Voldemort to grant me that level of trust, but I’d like to have this part of our plan in place, and active, before that time.”

“And then there’s the whole bit about how we don’t know how to not-kill me yet,” Potter adds. He’s
sitting with his chin propped on his hand, as if unconcerned about the Horcrux he carries. Maybe he truly is; he’s known nothing else since the spring of 1993.

Narcissa frowns. “If the Black library has been exhausted of research, then perhaps the Malfoy library has something that would be helpful. After I know Draco has returned to Hogwarts, I will slip over to the Manor to search.”

“Will you be safe?” Black asks.

Narcissa considers it. “It may take some effort to convince the wards to forget I was there. When the Ministry falls, Lucius will be freed from Azkaban. The wards obey him as Lord of the Manor; he would know of my presence at once. He would then not stop until he discovered my purpose for returning to the Manor, especially as I am now supposed to be allied against him.”

“Are you?” Black asks. Like Nymphadora Tonks, there is a surprising amount of sympathy on his face.

“If he continues to stand with the Dark Lord, endangering our son?” Narcissa sighs as she nods. “I am. I do not wish to be, but my husband has not been the same man I married in a very long time.”

“Perhaps we share a failing,” Snape suggests in the gentlest voice he can manage. Narcissa glances over at him, her brow furrowed. “Perhaps we both saw features and traits in someone because we wanted to see them, not because they ever existed in the first place.”

Narcissa shakes her head. “I would like to hope that my judgment has never been that flawed.”

“Voldemort,” Snape says in a curt voice. “I am well aware of my flaws, Narcissa. It is dangerous to ignore them if they exist, for then they can be exploited by others.”

By the time he can “escape” the Order’s meeting in London and Apparate to Little Hangleton in answer to Voldemort’s call, the meeting is over. Not once does Voldemort act in any way that tells Snape he is under suspicion. It is while he is roaming through the crumbling Riddle Manor that Snape overhears the name that must have instigated Voldemort’s rage.

“My Lord finally located Igor Karkaroff?” Snape asks.

Voldemort is stroking the great head of Nagini, who is curled up around his armchair. “I did, yes. You missed quite the spectacle, Severus. He begged for his life like the lowliest worm.”

“I am not surprised by that at all.” Snape looks at the snake again, who seems more content than usual. “Ah. Did Nagini enjoy her dinner, My Lord?”

Voldemort smiles, scratching his bloodless fingernails along Nagini’s scales. “Yes, I believe she did. Did you have anything you needed to report, Severus? I have heard intriguing rumors of late.”

“If you’re referring to Potter’s destruction of the House Hourglasses, they’re not rumors,” Snape replies. “Dumbledore took a student vote and accepted their decision as part of his school unity idea. At least for this year, there will be no more House Points used within the school.”

“Hmm.” Voldemort continues stroking Nagini’s head without looking up. “Do you think it should be reinstated next year, Severus?”

Snape pretends to think about it. He’s run multiple scenarios through his head during the holiday break to try and find the correct words. “I think, perhaps, it should not. In this, My Lord’s enemy might have done us a favor.”
“A favor, Severus?” That convinces Voldemort to gaze at him again, the disturbing flicker of red in
his eyes. “Of what sort?”

“Dumbledore is partially correct in the need for unity, but not in the way that he thinks. My Lord
wishes for Hogwarts to become a training ground for only those of sufficient blood purity to learn
and reside in. Would it not be better for these children to emerge from Hogwarts as a united army
when each generation graduates? Far better than four distinct factions that would have to be taught
the proper way in which the world works.”

Voldemort gives the slow blinking of a reptile considering his prey. “We will try it,” he decides at
last. “For the first year. If it seems detrimental, it will be an easy system to restore—or perhaps for
something even more encouraging to be put into its place.”

Snape bows low, as is proper before the Dark Lord. “As My Lord wills it.”

* * * *

Snape returns to Hogwarts on the sixth of January. The students will return tomorrow, and classes
will resume on Wednesday. It gives him plenty of time to prepare for the various, minor tasks needed
to begin the latter half of the term, most of them based around checking ingredients stores and
restocking, if necessary. Several potions are brewed and then touched with a Preservation Charm,
which gives him a few examples for the first years to be terrified of until it’s proven they do nothing
harmful.

Then he gets to add the ingredients which show the students how those potions can immediately
become so. It’s usually just one single ingredient that will do it, too. He does it to stress how
important it is to follow recipes exactly until they understand the properties of what they work with,
but some days he utterly despairs of their intelligence. It matters not if he spells it out in specifics;
some of them will never understand.

Potter is a terrible influence. That was not meant to be a blasted pun.

The refraction of multicolored lights attracts his attention; patterns of red, yellow, blue, and green
shine onto the stone floor in the Entrance Hall. The source is the Great Hall, so that’s where he goes,
and immediately stops short in the doorway.

The flags of the team that won the House Cup last year (bloody Gryffindors) are gone. Now hang
flags that seem composed mostly of invisibility cloth, and attached to them are the twinkling
gemstones that had once filled the hourglass counters.

Snape studies the Slytherin flags. Each has a wide black band at the top, with the House emblem
blazoned in the center in the traditional silver and green. The black band has silver edging, and just
below that is a single, solid line of green gemstones. Underneath that line, the gemstones are placed
in a combination of all four House colors set in no particular pattern or order. The effect should be
ludicrous, but it somehow is not. Quick glances at the other flags prove they have been given the
same treatment. All flags have that same black band with the House emblem in the center, though the
edging differs depending on the House’s colors. Gryffindor has a row of red gemstones below a gold
line; Ravenclaw has blue gemstones below bronze, and Hufflepuff has a row of yellow gems just
below a silver line. Snape does note that while there is a blend of all House color gemstones in each
flag, the primary House color outnumbers the other gems.
The light from the many torches shine through the faceted gemstones, which throw spots of brilliant color all over the walls and House tabletops. The faculty table is left neutral, though the occasional hint of a breeze moves a flag, and a spot of color will dance over the dark wood.

Snape is still standing there, watching the flags, when Albus comes over to stand with him. “What do you think, Severus?” Albus asks.

“It is gaudy and garish. Therefore, it suits the school very well.”

Albus smiles. “I can tell that you like it. You always do your very best to never reveal when something appeals to you.” He lifts his head and studies the flags hanging in rows over each table. “Some of my best work, I think. A much more fitting epitaph than a portrait.”

Snape eyes him in disdain. “A reminder of you will be hanging above all our heads. That is not an epitaph, that is a toddler screaming for attention.”

“I always did like attention,” Albus admits, smiling. “You still hope it will not come to pass. Your necessary action.”

Snape scowls. “Yes, I still hope for that. I would prefer to use my skills in other ways and ease your passing, not speed it along.”

“Of course.” Albus gives him a pat on the arm that makes Snape grit his teeth. “I understand. Believe it or not, I would like to be able to avoid it, also. I’ve lived a very long time, and the idea of passing from this life while comfortable in my own bed has quite the appeal.”

“I doubt either of us will be granted that option.”

Albus’s smile fades, and he pats Snape’s arm again. “Dear Severus. I still hope that we will not share the same fate.”

“Of course we won’t. I’m too intelligent than to go about putting on random cursed rings,” Snape retorts, and Albus chuckles. Daft old man.

The students return, and though there is much muttering, pleased or otherwise, about the new flags, Snape catches most of the students gazing up at them often during dinner. When it is not the flags, they are following the differing colors of light as the flags ripple in a nonexistent breeze, letting those splays of color trace over student heads and hats, tables, the food, and the great stone walls.

“I think they’re terrible. Gaudy and rubbish. What was wrong with our old flag?” Snape hears Pansy Parkinson whinge near the close of the evening.

Millicent Bulstrode slowly turns her head and peers down at Parkinson with a look of cool disdain on her face. “I like them,” she says in her smoky voice. She has seen further growth even over the short two-week holiday; a musical quality lurks beneath the smoke now.

Parkinson pales and turns back to Malfoy, Nott, Davis, and Zabini, quickly filling the air with chatter about everything except the flags. When Bulstrode turns around, she notices Snape’s regard. He gives her a very slow blink, code for approval when amongst the crowds of the Great Hall.

Miss Bulstrode returns to her dessert, but there is a small, pleased smile upon her face.

* * * * *
Students and teachers alike slowly adjust to the idea of life without House Points hanging over their heads. Snape has ample opportunity to overhear many interesting attempts at taking or granting points before the speaker cuts off mid-statement, brow furrowing. What then follows is grudging praise or snappish correction. Snape himself slips only three times the first day before he manages to drop the habit, which is a far better track record than anyone else manages, Albus included, who finally stops muttering about points after the first week.

Besides, without points in the way, Snape can just give the dunderheads a single warning before assigning detention. Strange how that seems to straighten up a lot of troublesome classroom quarreling. In less than a month’s time, he has students who spend more time properly concentrating on the task at hand in his first- through fifth-year classes.

Snape does give those classes a warning he usually does not bother repeating when term resumes in January. He tells them all once, at the beginning of the year. That, as far as he is concerned, is enough. If they’re not paying attention, it is not his fault.

This year, given their dramatically changed circumstances, he grants an exception. He reminds the younger students that all answers to any question they may think to ask him reside in their textbooks. The answer may not dwell in an obvious location, but it is, indeed, found within those pages. It is only Snape’s N.E.W.T.-level classes who do not have that same luxury; research outside of class is a necessity. Most of them enjoy the challenge, though one of his seventh-years whines about it under his breath when he thinks Snape can’t hear.

The very same weekend the students return to Hogwarts is the first of January’s two Quidditch matches. The first is Slytherin against Ravenclaw. Snape watches the players’ relations with teammates from the opposing side more than he pays attention to the Quaffle or the Snitch. Lee is excitedly discussing the game in a way that tells Snape that Ravenclaw and Slytherin are as well-matched in skill as his House was against Gryffindor. Cho Chang did an excellent job in choosing her team this year. Cedric Diggory is still complaining about not getting to fly against her as captain for the Hufflepuffs, and that it wouldn’t be an issue if someone had given her the job proper in 1994. Snape really does not try to understand their particular relationship; it seems overly complicated, competitive, and baffling.

A light drizzle mars some of the spectacle, but the score is a pleasing four hundred fifty to three hundred eighty as Slytherin takes the Snitch and the game. Astoria Greengrass flies around the pitch with the Snitch held up in her hand. There are a few derisive calls from other House sections, but the response is overwhelmingly positive as opposed to previous years.

Bloody hell, Snape should have put Miss Bulstrode in charge of the team the moment she entered her second year. With every win that Slytherin makes without the sort of violent cheating that would put other players in the school infirmary, respect for the team among other Houses grows.

Snape notices Albus giving him a pointed look from across the bleachers and glares at him. He has a role to play, which is why he intentionally kept his hands out of all of Miss Bulstrode’s Quidditch decisions. He cannot be accused of trying to side with the enemy if he is not the one making such overtures.

The Quidditch game on the twenty-fifth actually puts his heart in his throat, and it has not needed to reside there since the stupid Triwizard Tournament. He did not miss the sensation.

It should have been a rout as Gryffindor played against Hufflepuff. Instead, one of the Beaters for Hufflepuff takes aim to strike the Quaffle away from their goal posts and hits Gryffindor’s famous
Chaser.

Potter takes the blow right across the face. Rickett’s bat crushes the bridge of Potter's nose and obliterates his glasses. He nearly falls off his broom before grasping at the handle and clinging to it.

“OH, FUCK, I AM SO SORRY!” Rickett’s shout carries across the entire stadium. “ARE YOU OKAY?”

The game comes to a temporary halt, the Snitch ignored by both Seekers. Potter slowly straightens up on his broom with Rickett’s help.

Potter has one hand gripping his broom and his other hand clamped down over his nose, which is streaming blood. Then he turns and looks at Rickett. “Oi, mate, I am not the bloody Quaffle!” he says in a liquidy voice.

“Are you made of granite, you arse?” Rickett asks, looking like he’s about to burst into relieved tears. Miss Bell hollers for a time-out to give both teams time to regroup—and for someone to do something about Potter’s face.

Poppy is waiting for Potter as he slowly circles and lands with his broom, right before he trips over it. It’s only Mister Weasley’s quick reflexes that keep Potter from falling. Snape’s talent at reading lips serves him well: “Mate, seriously, you need to learn to duck.”

“Bad timing, totally my fault,” Potter replies, wincing away from Poppy’s wand. “They should adjust the rules. I imagine Quidditch on a motorbike would be really entertaining.”

“Really dangerous, you mean,” Rolanda says sternly as the Gryffindor team crowds around them. “Oh, back up and let Madam Pomfrey do her job, louts!”

“I’ve got your glasses, Harry.” Miss Granger tilts her head as she examines the bent metal and cracked glass. “I’ll be right back; I’ll need my wand for this,” she says, darting off towards the locker rooms.

“Well! Mister Rickett should definitely be pleased with the strength of his arm, at least,” Poppy is saying. “Fractured the bridge of your nose and your infraorbital foramen!”

“What?” Thomas asks blankly.

“She says Rickett broke my face,” Potter returns, which makes the Gryffindor team start laughing.

“You good to continue, Potter?” Bell asks, once Poppy is done putting bones back where they belong, healing the fractures, and cleaning up the literal bloody mess. Granger has returned with Potter’s repaired glasses, and hands them over with a smile.

Before Potter can answer them, he’s assaulted by a dog. Black wraps up Potter in a massive hug, but Snape can’t see his face to know what he’s saying.

It becomes obvious a moment later. “Fall—I’m not going to fall off my broom! I want to live!” Harry replies, miffed.

“Glad to hear it.” Bell swats Potter on the shoulder after Black releases him. “And once again, the first serious injury of the season goes to you.”

“Again?” Potter is appalled. “Why didn’t anyone tell me this was a tradition?”
“Oh, yeah,” Mister Weasley says. “Jinxed broom, broken arm, broken glasses…”

“HERMIONE!”

Granger shrugs in response to Potter’s indignant shout. “That was then, this is now?”

“Time-out’s over,” Rolanda shouts over the din. “Up into the air, Gryffindors! You have a game to finish!”

“Right then!” Lee’s voice booms out. “Let’s get on with this, and lovely Professor McGonagall is never allowed to call me on inappropriate language ever again!”

“Yes, I am!” Minerva insists, to the amusement of many.

The game ends at five hundred fifty over Hufflepuff’s decent two hundred eighty. There is familiar banter in the air as the fliers circle the stadium, though the bloodstains on Potter’s uniform are rather obvious. That will take more than a simple refreshing charm to fix.

“Well, I can’t take points. What the blazes am I supposed to do to Anthony?” Pomona is saying. Snape turns to see her commiserating with Flitwick and Vector.

“Lines,” Vector says patiently, giving Pomona a gentle pat on the shoulder. “Not being able to take points isn’t the end of the world. Make the poor fool write lines about why he shouldn’t be screaming obscenities across the Quidditch pitch.”

“Lines,” Pomona replies, looking baffled. “Oh. Right. Yes, that is—you know, I think I’d almost forgotten about things like that.”

“The more this new term has progressed, the more I find that I’m pleased Potter blew up the House Hourglasses,” Flitwick says in a musing voice. “I think we’d all fallen into the very bad habit of relying on that system for far too many things.”

“He still blew up the bloody hourglasses,” Vector retorts.

“And I’m sure Mister Potter is enjoying his entire month of detentions with the Headmaster,” Flitwick replies cheerfully.

Snape resists the urge to scowl. No, Potter is not enjoying them, though Dumbledore finally revealed the true fate of the Gaunts. Merope Gaunt, Voldemort’s mother, ran away from her family with Slytherin’s locket in her possession. When Tom Marvolo Riddle discovered his wizarding family, only his uncle remained—another speaker of Parseltongue who wore the Gaunt family ring upon his finger. Voldemort took possession of the ring and slaughtered his Muggle family, the Riddles, turning the ring into a Horcrux. The origin of the ring’s curse remains a mystery, but that ultimately doesn’t matter. An idiot put it on his finger, and now Snape has to contend with an idiot dying Headmaster.

The Gaunt family’s fate, the ring, the Parseltongue lineage—it’s all very interesting information, but still not useful! They know where the damned ring and locket are. If they are also Horcruxes, then the Cup and the Diadem are their priorities, as is finding a way to not kill Potter.

Getting to Nagini is easy enough. Snape just doesn’t expect to survive for very long after killing the snake.

The first week of February, a fifth-year Ravenclaw finally dares to challenge Snape on the idea that all answers reside in her textbook. Snape waits, his arms resting over his chest, while the girl gathers
her words and tries to stop stuttering in fear.

He is absolutely terrifying to most of the student body. It’s nice to know his efforts have not been in vain.

“O-okay.” Miss Smith gulps audibly. “But—but what if I want to consider an alteration to today’s potion?”

“Then you only need to know the properties of the item in question, and how they will react with the ingredients already involved.” Snape refuses to glance in her direction, or gift her with any expression other than irritated disdain.

“Y-yes, sir,” Miss Smith replies. “But, that’s, uh—that’s my difficulty, sir. The combination isn’t anywhere else in the book.”

Snape lifts his head and looks at her. Has it finally come to this? He’s only been waiting fifteen blasted years. He stands up from his desk and approaches slowly. “Show me; do not tell me,” he instructs, glaring at the students around Miss Janice Smith. They all stop trying to peer at the girl’s cauldron and lean away in fear, instead. Better.

Miss Smith points at the original ingredient listed on her textbook page with one shaking finger. Then she points at her choice of alteration, which is bundled in with other potion supplies a safe distance from her cauldron.

Snape feels a lazy, pleased smile spread across his face that causes half of the students in the room to gasp in apprehension. “Used how?”

“C-crushed. Not sliced,” Miss Smith whispers. “One gram only.”

Snape nods and steps back. “Miss Smith,” he says, addressing the entire class, “has just earned the highest grade on today’s assignment. She is now only required to give me a foot of research regarding tonight’s new homework topic.” He glances around the room, ignoring Miss Smith’s whooshing sigh of relief, or the mutters of unfairness from her classmates.

“Miss Smith noticed something about today’s potion that is important. This can be divined from your years of study in this subject if you are actually paying attention, and is also…” He pauses, just for the effect of gulped, fearful breaths. “It is also relevant in your upcoming O.W.L.s.”

Snape lets his gaze sweep the room again in cool regard. “I want two feet from the rest of you regarding an acceptable substitution for aconite in today’s potion. You will tell me how this substitution should be prepared, what is to be used, and how those substitutions will alter the brew. This substitution must create an actual, non-toxic property, not useless cauldron sludge. Miss Smith is partially exempt because she realized one of the better substitutions, and how to use it, so she will be writing about her results.” He thinks about it. “On second thought, I will even accept a poison if it is an elegant one. Any fool can poison someone; this needs be something with finesse.”

Something about that moment creates a pattern among the fifth-years that gets more prominent as the term progresses. Finally, finally, the dunderheads are asking him intelligent questions instead of ones that are already available, and bloody well obvious!

The first game of the February Quidditch Finals takes place in a drizzling monsoon. Snape is not impressed. It looks as if both Slytherin and Ravenclaw are regretting the need to hold the final elimination round, especially as they’re having trouble staying on course, or even staying on their brooms. Real Scottish weather has arrived at last, vengeance against the relative balm of November,
December, and January.

The players can barely see where to fly, let alone where to score. It takes a long time for the team Seekers to chase down the Snitch. It gives Ravenclaw the chance to rack up a respectable four hundred points. It’s a tied game until Greengrass snatches the Golden Snitch out of the air and puts them one hundred fifty points ahead, winning Slytherin the game.

That means the match on the twenty-second of February, the final game of the season, is Slytherin versus Gryffindor. Snape is pleased by that; it’s a fine tradition to maintain.

One of the two downsides to the elimination game on the eighth is that Astoria Greengrass comes down with a horrific case of bacterial bronchitis. She’s still too weak to ride a broom in time for the final game. The other downside is the wind, which yanks at cloaks, buffets them on their seats, and nearly steals away with Filius Flitwick before Sinistra leaps up to catch his foot.

Snape has nothing against Malfoy flying in the Seeker position as their reserve. What he does not prefer is to be underneath Granger and Malfoy as they hover near each other, trading insults.

“Weasel-lover!”

“Ferret!”

“Muggle-born know-it-all!”

“Pompous prick!”

Malfoy actually draws back a bit. “Language!”

“MANNERS!” Granger shouts back, incensed.

“Someone just hex them both,” Snape mutters as Lee Jordan begins announcing the players.

“Welcome to the last game of this year’s Quidditch season. This is the Quidditch Finals, and the winner may take the House—er, the winner takes the QUIDDITCH CUP!”

It’s an admirable correction, and it does elicit cheering. Even Snape is aware of the fact that it’s been a good season, and he is glad he to have witnessed it. It may well be the last time he ever sees his House in the air, fighting so fiercely and effectively for the prize they’re trying to claim.

There is no rain, but the wind is attempting to become a gale. There is a muffled, indignant shriek, followed by dark swearing, as Miss Weasley pulls herself back onto her broom. The only thing that saved her from plummeting down onto the ground was catching her elbow around her broom handle.

“Ginny!” Mister Weasley yells from the goals.

“JUST BLOCK THE BLOODY QUAFFLE, YOU BLOODY TWIT!” Miss Weasley shouts back.

“And as Miss Ginevra Weasley, everyone’s favorite ginger of the batch, has just discovered, we’re dealing with wind gusts of up to forty-five miles per hour!” Lee informs them cheerfully. “If they weren’t illegal for use in the game, I would definitely be suggesting sticking charms to keep your seat where it belongs!”

Miss Weasley isn’t the only one to get knocked off her broom. Daphne Greengrass ducks under a beater’s bat, spins in the air, and then gets shoved several yards to the left, colliding with Baddock.
She ends up clinging to her broom handle by a single hand before Braddock regains his senses and hauls her upright before the next gust of wind strikes. That one nearly sends Peakes into the ground before he yanks his broom handle up to recover; Ginevra’s brother gets clobbered by a draft that sees him colliding with the goal posts. To Snape’s disappointment, it also knocks the Quaffle off-course, keeping Pritchard from scoring.

The game has gone on for an hour and a half before Miss Bulstrode and Miss Bell confer above the bleachers, away from the other players. “Someone is going to get killed if this keeps up!” Bell shouts. They’re so distant, the wind so horrendous, that Snape is all but certain he’s the only one who can make out what they’re saying.

Bulstrode nods. “Madam Hooch informs me that the nearest weather-witch says the wind is soon going to get worse.”

“And no matter who forfeits to cancel the impending disaster, we were thirty points ahead as of last game. We’d win anyway, and that’s not bloody sporting,” Bell says.

Bulstrode scowls when another gust hits them, one that also threatens to take off with part of the stadium. “We’re tied right now, one hundred to one hundred, and Pritchard just lost the Quaffle to the wind. The hell with the goals—we make the game about the Snitch. Best flier wins.”

“Malf...
His House has the Cup. For the first time in five years, Slytherin has the Cup—Quidditch Cup, now, but Snape doesn’t give a damn. It’s still the same silver cup, and he’s witnessed it returned to a House that rightly earned it.

Snape is barely aware of his House’s students exiting the stands in a flood to mob the fliers as they return to earth. His ears are caught far more by the dignified, appreciative applause coming from members of other Houses.

If this is the last gift he ever receives, then it’s a fine one.
The first of March, Draco Malfoy comes to his office. “I’ve got it,” he whispers. Snape is about to chide him about being too hesitant in a safe space when he realizes that it’s terror keeping Malfoy’s voice low-pitched.

Snape stands up from his desk. “Show me.”

“Curfew?” Draco asks.

Snape glances down at the badge on Draco’s chest. “Prefect Malfoy, have you forgotten your own authority? Miss Parkinson has already done much complaining about you not pulling your weight. Or, apparently, not doing enough to snog her senseless.”

“I have way too much on my mind to be snogging anyone,” Draco mutters. “And—yes, sir, I’m sorry about not…Prefecting.”

“Horrible vocabulary, but since the entirety of the English language is based upon making up words, you’re forgiven,” Snape drawls in return, leading the way from his office. “Besides, your lack of attending to your Prefect duties in full has meant that you’ve paid attention to such things that genuinely require your intervention, unlike your peacock-like posturing of last year.”

Draco winces but keeps walking, the tips of his ears bright red. “Yes, sir. I’m…recognizing that, Professor.”

“Newfound maturity?” Snape asks, grimly amused. Narcissa will be pleased.

“When I didn’t have time for Pansy to her preference, she threw an absolute tantrum,” Draco replies. “It didn’t matter what I had to do, or how important it was. She had to be first, and I wasn’t doing a proper job of wooing her. So…I broke it off.”

“Your father would be so disappointed,” Snape comments.

“Good. I—have other plans. If I live long enough,” Draco adds. “So I’ll just sit on that information, if you don’t mind.”

“Wise decision, on both parts.” Snape pauses as Draco leads them to an empty corridor on the seventh floor. “And we’re going where?”

“A room. Uh—I think I heard the Weasel—Weasley twins referring to it as the Room of Requirement.”

Snape glances along both walls. “There is no door here, Mister Malfoy.”

“I know. Watch.” Draco walks back and forth in front of a particular section of the wall, muttering under his breath. After the third pass, a door manifests where none had been before.

“A Room of Requirement being…what, exactly?” Snape asks, hesitating in the doorway before following Draco inside. The room is lit from unknown sources, which is always something to be wary of.

It’s also the closest he’s ever seen to a wizarding garbage pile.

“Apparently, it’s whatever you require it to be. I haven’t tried for anything else; I was afraid I’d lose
Draco explains, leading the way further into the disaster. There are stacks of books, abandoned trunks, robes and hats which are decades or even centuries out of date, broken quills, and all manner of furniture in haphazard piles. Albus would be acting the role of a child let loose in a candy store.

“This is the solution to my, uh, problem,” Draco says, pointing at a dusty, double-doored cabinet that looks to be several hundred years old.

Snape gives the cabinet a careful, up and down inspection. He can feel old magic emanating from it. “Tell me.”

“It’s a Vanishing Cabinet, one of the old transport systems they used before they fell out of vogue. The magic broke down in too many, too often, leaving wizards stranded literally nowhere,” Draco explains.

“I’m aware of the Cabinet’s history,” Snape says. Now that he knows its purpose, he understands the nature of the cabinet’s height and width. “Continue.”

“The match to this one is in Borgin and Burkes’ shop in Knockturn Alley, right in the middle of the bloody store. The magic in that one was fine, but this one had deteriorated. It took me until today to figure out how to repair it.”

“Excellent job,” Snape tells Draco. A younger Slytherin would have preened; Draco just nods in acknowledgement. “What have you told the others?”

“I made a Protean Charm set. Aunt Bellatrix has one half.” Draco shivers. “Mother is right; she’s absolutely barking mad. I need to choose the right time, or endeavor to create one—I haven’t decided on which it will be, not yet. When I do, I will use the Protean Charm, and she will lead a team of Death Eaters into the castle using the Cabinet in Knockturn Alley. They’ll sew chaos, I’ll go pretend to try and kill Dumbledore, fail, and you’ll save my miserable hide.”

Snape nods. “And the ingenuity of using a transport system that will allow Death Eaters into the castle, right past the wards, will do much to save you from Voldemort’s wrath. You did an excellent job. He will…possibly expect other such plans from you.”

Draco swallows. “I’m aware. Mother is hoping that I will be allowed to finish my seventh year of schooling instead of attending to Voldemort.”

“I will try to press the import of the matter upon him,” Snape says after a few moments of pondering. “It is not a guarantee, but perhaps a whisper of how much more effective you would be after a final year of schooling…”

“If you manage it, I’ll owe you a grand favor.” It sounds preposterous, but Draco is serious. “I don’t yet know how I’ll repay that kind of debt, but I swear I will do my utmost to find a way that is most fitting.”

Snape lifts an eyebrow, letting his mouth quirk up in a hint of a smile. “I almost want to refuse.”

“A Malfoy’s favor is foolishly refused,” Draco quotes primly. “In all seriousness—it isn’t as if I won’t have the means.”

Snape decides to disregard that concern for now. “How will you alert me? Is there a third Protean charm?”

Draco flushes dull red in embarrassment. “I tried to extend the charm to more than two objects, but I
could only make it work for two. I’ll need to figure out something else.”

“Then I suppose you will have to abandon more of your duties as a Prefect,” Snape says. Draco looks up, surprise mingled with hope. “A Patronus, Mister Malfoy.”

“Sir, I will honestly say that I don’t know if I’m capable of doing that.”

Snape isn’t deterred by doubt. If he had been, he would either be dead long since, or very recently so. “It’s a good thing you have at least three months to learn it, then. If you can repair the deteriorating magic of a Vanishing Cabinet, Draco Malfoy, then yes, you are capable of learning to cast a proper Patronus Charm.”

Draco swallows and manages a wobbly smile. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, sir. Should we go back?”

“You go ahead. Pretend to at least oversee some of your Prefect duties before retiring for the evening. I wish to explore this rubbish pile before leaving,” Snape says. “How do I get back in, if I wished to?”

“Uh—the phrasing I use is, I need the room where everything is hidden,” Draco tells him. “Repeat it three times while walking back and forth in front of that section of wall. If you focus correctly, it works. If you don’t, the Room won’t return until it thinks you’ve gotten it right. I wouldn’t really bother with exploring. I’ve looked around, and aside from the cabinet, it seems to be mostly garbage—student things hidden for silly reasons.”

“One never knows when silly information is useful.” Snape watches Draco hesitate before nodding in recognition of the lesson. “I would blame the Headmaster for this room’s existence, but I’m not certain he even knows it exists. This pile would be significantly reduced, otherwise. He’s like a bloody magpie.”

Draco’s expression falls. “I still don’t want to do this.”

“He is dying, regardless. When my ability to bind the curse to his hand fails, he will not die at once, but suffer tremendously.” Snape glances down at Draco. “Sometimes, a swift death is a mercy, no matter how unpleasant the circumstances…or how much it hurts the one granting it.”

“I understand. Good night, sir,” Draco murmurs, and weaves his way back through perilously leaning stacks of junk.

The moment Snape hears the door to the room shut with a heavy wooden thud, the Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady manifest in the air before him. It is difficult to resist the urge to step back in surprise, but he stands his ground. “Good evening,” Snape offers, hiding his confusion behind the familiarity of a mask. He has never seen the Baron or the Lady of Ravenclaw Tower in such close proximity.

“We must show you something,” the Baron intones, and leads the way after making certain that Snape is following. The Grey Lady keeps pace with Snape, maintaining her characteristic silence.

The Baron shows Snape an old wooden case lying open atop someone’s discarded chest of drawers. Inside, resting on thick black velvet padding, is a tarnishing silver diadem with a single blue gem placed in the center.

Snape reads the words along the edges, and nearly sucks in startled breath. “Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure. This is what I believe it to be, yes?”
He wants to touch it, but doesn’t quite dare. Unlike the Locket of Slytherin, this is not a treasure of his House.

“it is. We were originally to tell the young savior where this was placed, but the Headmaster has interfered with all our opportunities to do so,” the Baron says in displeasure. “Damn that man and his loathsome timing.”

Snape’s agreement is bone dry. “Indeed.”

“Professor Snape. This is my mother’s diadem,” the Grey Lady whispers, the first time Snape has ever heard her speak. “This is Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem. I…” She starts to cry, silent tears running down her face.

To Snape’s consternation, she then allows the Baron to take her hand. The Grey Lady’s story may not be known to all, but Snape is aware of why the Baron has worn blood upon his clothes for centuries.

“Helena, you blame yourself too much,” the Baron murmurs.

“I allowed him to charm me. I was fooled the same way I once was fooled before, and he has taken my mother’s creation and befouled it forever,” Helena says bitterly.

Snape looks to the Baron when the Lady covers her face. “It is, indeed, one of the Horcruxes you seek. Touch it not; it is not poisoned, but you are sensitive to such Dark magic due to the cursed Mark you bear.” Snape nods, and after a moment of deliberation, closes the lid and latches the case shut.

“How many students know of this room?”

“Not many, though it is often stumbled upon by accident,” the Baron answers. “This Room has sheltered the diadem for many years, but it is no longer safe here. Not when you invite the enemy inside the castle walls.”

“If it were not necessary, I would kill them all as they emerged from that damned cabinet,” Snape mutters.

“Indeed. That is why we help you. All of Hogwarts’ ghosts know of your intentions.”


“You will destroy it?” Helena asks, wiping at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief.

“When the time comes? Yes.”

The Grey Lady, Helena Ravenclaw, offers him a tremulous smile. “Thank you. That is my last remaining task. What is done cannot be undone, and you and I both know that he will not change… but we also know that others do.”

The smile the Baron gives to the Grey Lady is stern, but it hides great affection. “We are ghosts, but we are not static entities. Even we are capable of learning from our mistakes, and of being forgiven by those we have most wronged. Tom Marvolo Riddle will never learn that lesson, and I pity him for it.”

“Nicholas believes we are shades, pale imitations of the people we once were, and that we can never move on from this place,” Helena says. Her voice remains whispery soft, as if she is afraid to speak...
with strength. “That is not true. He is trapped here because he believes it so, the poor dear. He is foolish, but he never meant any harm.”

The Baron looks amused. “When Tom Marvolo Riddle is defeated and all the objects that bind him to life destroyed, the Houses of Slytherin and Ravenclaw will have to find themselves new House ghosts. With our goals complete, we will be moving on, Severus Snape.”

Snape nods, but he doesn’t smile. “Baron, I fear that by the time the war is over, there might be enough souls remaining that it will cause a ghostly scuffle for one’s right to bear the title of House Ghost.”

* * * * *

The week of Easter vacation always begins, irritatingly, on a Tuesday. Albus could just give the dunderheads one weekend through the next, but heaven forbid they go against six hundred years of Hogwarts tradition.

Sod tradition. Fuck tradition. It can go to bits along with the blasted hourglasses.

Snape will admit that he is in just a bit of a mood. “He waits until now to tell you of the Cup and the Locket? NOW?”

Potter is pacing back and forth in the Black family parlor, scowling. “He says he just found out, but I don’t believe him. He’s trying to lead me by the nose, and I hate it.”

“Leading you by the nose to do what?” Lupin asks. Granger is curled up on the sofa next to him, resting her head against his shoulder. Tomorrow, 12 Grimmauld Place will be packed for a non-stop series of Order meetings during the day, crafting the disaster planning that Lupin suggested. Such meetings are one of the only ways Snape can avoid Voldemort during what is supposed to be a free week—and he needed to not be available. Dumbledore was all too willing to oblige. Either he suspects Snape is plotting something to the Order’s benefit, or is doing him the kindness of granting Snape the opportunity to get a decent bit of rest before all hell breaks loose.


For tonight, though, the House of Black holds only the six of them, plus three house-elves. Snape still has no idea what to make of Dobby’s rescue of the house-elf Winky, other than to suggest squeezing her out into a succession of buckets in order to begin a brewery.

“Dumbledore is leading Mister Potter by the nose to be the sacrificial lamb,” Narcissa says in disgust. “There has to be another way to rid oneself of a Horcrux, especially since you did not consent.”

“Consent?” Granger perks up from her half-lidded doze. “What do you mean?”

“What are they teaching children nowadays?” Narcissa mutters under her breath.

“Not bloody much,” Black says. “The only reason we’re sitting in a room with two educated children is because they won’t stop reading.”

“Good,” Narcissa proclaims, and then turns to Granger. “Consent between individuals in an important facet of magic. An Unbreakable Vow, for example—it is powerful magic, and to break it
means death, but both parties involved in the bond must consent to accept it. Without that acceptance, the bond cannot form.”

“Theoretically, Harry should be able to just reject the Horcrux, were that the case,” Lupin says.

“I believe the scar he bears is an attempt to do just that,” Narcissa replies. “Otherwise, prophecy or not, there wouldn’t be a mark upon him to speak of the Horcrux’s existence.”

Potter comes to an abrupt halt. “Would someone’s protective binding spell prevent that, er, ejection?”

Narcissa ponders the idea before shaking her head. “No. If anything, that would assist in the process, since you would be protected from something that is harming you.”

Black’s head jerks around. “Harming him? How?”

“That would be part of the prophecy. You used to be much less dense, Sirius,” Narcissa chides him.


Narcissa’s lips twitch. “Of course. Understandable circumstances, even if they are years that cured you of other intolerable behaviors. Now,” she continues, before Black can utter the miffed comment on his lips, “Neither can live while the other survives. This means that neither can die, or else we would have been shy Mister Potter’s presence after the Triwizard Tournament. Voldemort cannot die until all the Horcruxes are destroyed, so Mister Potter will share in that invulnerability. However, neither will thrive. Living things are not meant to be Horcruxes. The fact that Harry has not faltered is due to his youth, and the protective spell he speaks of.”

“And Nagini?” Snape asks, curious.

“Voldemort feeds her his power in much the same way he feeds her his enemies,” Narcissa replies.

“Either must die at the hand of the other.” Potter grimaces. “Oh. Sacrificial bloody lamb.”


“Dumbledore must believe me to be an idiot, or else he would simply tell me.” Potter is scowling again. “The only way to get rid of this stupid Horcrux in my head is to let Voldemort point his wand at me and utter the Killing Curse.”

“Absolutely NOT!” Black shouts.

“Less loudly: NO,” Lupin adds.

“If we were ready, I would tell Draco to speed up the progress on his special project,” Snape bites out.

Granger is the one to roll her eyes. “You’re all idiots.”

Narcissa muffles an undignified snicker. “She is correct. Shared invulnerability, gentlemen. As long as the Killing Curse is delivered before all other Horcruxes are destroyed? The boy would most likely survive.”

“Most likely?” Black looks outraged.

“Most likely alive is a much more pleasing outcome than most certainly dead,” Narcissa returns dryly. “The ‘dead’ part would come about when Harry survived the Killing Curse while still within a
nest of Death Eaters.”

“How could we even arrange that? Without the second half becoming true, I mean.” Lupin winces when Black glares at him. “It has to be asked, Sirius. Behave yourself.”

Snape tries not to shift and betray intense discomfort. “Draco or I would have to be there in order to Apparate Mister Potter to safety. But to do so betrays one or both our positions as a spy, a position we may need.”

“No if we bloody well end the war before it starts,” Lupin points out. “I am all for this, by the way.”

“The Headmaster would still have to die, wouldn’t he?” Granger guesses, looking at Snape.

Snape nods. “I believe so. Voldemort needs to accept that potion. It would certainly eliminate any protections he might still have in place after the Horcruxes are disposed of.”

“Explosively eliminate. Now that’s something I’d like to see captured on record and replayed over and over again,” Black muses.

Granger makes a face. “Ew.”

“Then it’s still the island for us,” Black says. “Brought you a present, Severus,” he adds, digging into his pocket before tossing an object across the parlor table.

Snape catches the locket by its gold chain. The emeralds on the locket glimmer in the candlelight. This one weighs as much as a proper locket should, lacking the vile heaviness added by a Horcrux.

“Or we could save ourselves the trouble and give this one to Kreacher.”

Black shakes his head. “Vile little bastard knows the difference. If you want a potion to convert into a poison, then we get to go visit a fountain.”

“Tonight?” Narcissa asks.

“No other night would work as well. We’re close enough to the full moon that if this bloody green water makes me ill, I have the excuse to look the part,” Lupin says.

“Why are you drinking it?” Black asks at once.

“Because I’m the bloody werewolf,” Lupin retorts. “We don’t know enough as to what this potion truly does, but unless it smells of aconite? Sirius, at most I’ll have to sick it up afterwards. The rest of us would not fare so well.”

“Tea,” Granger mutters, and gives Dobby a relieved look when he pops into existence a moment later with the entire tray. “Thank you, Dobby.”

“You’re not going,” Black says, turning his glare on her.

Granger just gives him an arch look that makes Narcissa beam with pride. “I’m seventeen, Sirius Black. Not a thing you can do about it.”

Black turns to Potter to argue before wilting when he sees the expression on Potter’s face. “This is what I get for teaching you how to Apparate.”

Potter shrugs. “If Hermione goes, I go.”

“How sweet,” Snape mutters, rolling his eyes.

“Dating?” Potter utters a moment later. “You think we’re—er—she’s dating Viktor Krum. Not me.”

“And you’re dating—”

“Quiet, you,” Potter retorts, giving Granger a flat look. “Not a word. It’s odd enough as it is.”

“I think it’s cute.”

“No, the word is still odd. And weird,” Potter retorts.

Granger smirks and sips at her tea as Potter stalks off for warmer clothes and his Invisibility Cloak, just in case it becomes a necessary tool during the evening. Snape glances at her.

“Cedric and Cho Chang,” she mouths at him.

“I HEARD THAT!” Potter shouts from the hall.

Snape looks back at Granger. “At once?” he mouths back, and she nods.

“I STILL HEARD THAT!”

“It has been a long time since Wizarding Britain had a proper triad marriage,” Narcissa says smugly.

“Please stop trying to marry off my godson before he’s even of age,” Black whines.

Kreacher and Dobby take turns Apparating them to a small, rocky island somewhere off the coast. It would be faster with Winky to assist, but Snape doesn’t trust the sodden elf not to Apparate them into the side of a mountain.

Regardless, the moment they set foot on the rock, the Inferi begin rising from the waters. “Is because you no be using the boat,” Kreacher mutters, swinging around the broken lower half of a cricket bat, daring any of the Inferi to come closer. “It’s part of the trap, Master Bat.”

“We’ll deal with them,” Potter says, raising his wand. Granger is at his back, her jaw set and her eyes hard as she blasts the first Inferi off the side of the island with a solid flash of bright light. “We’ll keep the entrance clear.”

Black looks like he wants to say something, but finally just nods. His godson is not yet seventeen, but he isn’t stupid, either.

The cave has a long, rocky path that leads to a solid wall. “A door.” Narcissa regards it thoughtfully. “The house-elf did not mention a door.”

“Blood magic,” Snape notes. “Feed it, and it will open.”

“He was my brother. I’ll do it,” Black says, taking out a short-handled knife from his boot. He is, at least, sensible enough not to drag it across his palm, but instead pricks the pads of all the fingers of his left hand before smearing five streaks of blood over the stone. The rock vanishes as if the door had never existed.

The rocky path continues onward into a dank cavern, leading to a circular area. It is surrounded by water that is already slapping against stone, stirred by the movement of what lies hidden underneath. In the center of the island, as if grown from the rock itself, is the fountain.
“Dramatics,” Narcissa sniffs. “Honestly, the lengths some men will go to in order to prove their virility.”

“Thank you; I never, ever wanted to think about that,” Black says as he and Narcissa turn to stand back to back, blasting at the Inferi who are beginning to crawl onto the island. “Make it fast, please. With our luck, that bastard figured out infinite Inferi.”

Snape circles the fountain, one ear on the chatter within, and the other on the wand blasts and shouted curses outside. The young ones are doing fine; it’s the green water within that concerns him now.

“Severus?”

“It isn’t aconite.” Snape tilts his head and touches the water. It doesn’t harm him, but splashing out a handful doesn’t change the level of water in the fountain. He cannot touch the locket he sees in the bottom of the fountain, either, even though it should be easy to grasp. “Ah. The Drink of Despair.”

“Charming name,” Black says, setting about half a dozen Inferi on fire with a single wave of his wand. Azkaban did him no favors in fine magical workings, but in cases such as these, Black’s wide blasting range of spells suit the situation.

“No aconite in the potion, but it will still not be pleasant. The only way to remove the water and retrieve the locket is to drink all of it.” Snape glances at Lupin, who just nods and conjures a cup.

Lupin is halfway through the fountain’s green water when he bends over. “Careful,” Snape warns. “If you sick it up, you’ll have to start over again.” He isn’t even certain Lupin could finish the task if forced to begin again. The werewolf isn’t complaining, but he’s starting to look like the morning after a full moon when dosed with normal Wolfsbane potion.

“Oh, I am not drinking this glop again,” Lupin gasps out. “But by God, I am going to drink a lake when we’re done.”

By the time the last few cupfuls remain, Snape has Lupin’s arm slung over his shoulder. “Keep going. You’re almost there, you bloody useless lump of a werewolf!”

Lupin growls low in his throat. He looks like death warmed over, as he did after a transformation with no potion at all. “Shut up or I’ll bite you. This is—I haven’t felt this miserably depressed since my first year after Fenrir Greyback’s attack.”

“Sterling silver ice pick, dipped in liquefied aconite,” Snape reminds him. “And you can’t infect anyone if you’re not currently a wolf, you idiot.”

“Hurry up!” Narcissa orders. “They must sense you near completion, because they grow in number!”

“Just that many more to set on fire!” Black calls out cheerfully, and does just that. The screams of burning Inferi is a horrendous, pleasing sound.

“Apparating to North America. Drinking Lake Erie,” Lupin mumbles, scooping up one of the last cupfuls from the fountain before putting the cup to his lips with an air of utter resentment.

“Isn’t that the one that was rumored to have caught on fire once before?” Snape asks. If anything, this exercise has shown him the differing ways in which the Drink of Despair affects werewolf physiology.

“It did catch fire. It still has to taste better than this.” Lupin turns almost as green as the potion in
question. “Be ready. I really won’t be able to keep from vomiting after this last cup. A werewolf’s body is very good at rejecting poisons, and this definitely qualifies.”

The moment the last bit of the Drink is swallowed, Snape reaches into the fountain and snatches up the locket. Like the replacement, it is much lighter in weight compared to the Horcrux. He quickly drops the second false locket into the base of the fountain. “Done!”

Lupin immediately leans over, vomiting up nothing but pure green fluid. The fountain refills as Lupin rejects the potion, once again full to the brim with the green Drink of Despair.

Snape pockets the locket, breathing out a sigh of relief. The timing on that was much closer than he prefers…and now he has another immediate problem in the form of one enraged werewolf.

Lupin stalks over and punches the nearest Inferi in the face. “AND FUCK YOU, TOO!” he snarls at them.

“BLACK! COME COLLAR YOUR WEREWOLF!” Snape yells in alarm. The last thing he needs is to lose one of the few intelligent allies he has due to a fucking potion incident and a handful of enraged Inferi.

Snape trades places with Black, guarding Narcissa’s back, as Black all but wrestles Lupin away from trying to kill every Inferi in the cave by himself. With his fists. “YOU HAVE A WAND, YOU IDIOT!”

Lupin glares at Black. “NOT AS SATISFYING!”

Black looks at Lupin for a moment before uttering a wandless stunning spell, catching the idiot werewolf when he crumpled in place. “That wasn’t getting us anywhere. Once he’s finally lost his temper, there’s nothing for it but to let it run its course, or to stun him and let him sleep it off.”

“Please, let us leave,” Narcissa insists. Snape follows her out of the cave, flinging back a few more of the more aggressive Inferi with a flick of his wand. Black is right behind him; Lupin is slung over his shoulder.

Outside, the house-elves are keeping score as to whom has taken out the most Inferi. It does not surprise Snape very much to hear that Granger is in the lead. “Time to go, everyone,” Narcissa announces.

Dobby grabs Potter first, while Kreacher takes Narcissa’s hand before they both Disapparate. When they return, Snape orders the elves to first take Granger and Black, along with his lupine passenger. “I’ll be fine as long as you come back immediately,” he insists. “Hurry up!”

The moment the house-elves have departed, with Granger still protesting about leaving Snape alone, Snape erects a ring of fire. “There. Cross that, you imbeciles,” he murmurs, watching in satisfaction as the Inferi repeatedly burn themselves on the flames.

Dobby reappears and glances at the fire curiously. “Why’s the other wizards not be doing that?” he asks.

“Some people have a propensity towards violence,” Snape says, thinking of Miss Granger. If war comes, she is going to be delightfully savage in battle. “I prefer my safety.”

“If yous really be preferrin’ yous safety, yous wouldn’t be spyin,” Dobby says primly. On Snape’s instruction, he Apparates them from the island to the distant shore. The infamous boat is waiting there; Snape takes a moment of great pleasure in turning it into tiny splinters.
He understands Granger’s feelings regarding violent outlets very well.

When Dobby takes Snape back to 12 Grimmauld Place, he is Apparated directly into the parlor. Black has Lupin lying prone on the sofa. The werewolf’s eyes are closed, his skin an unhealthy pallor with hints of green beneath, but he is breathing easily. Granger is sitting on a chair, scowling at her tea cup. The wards are already glowing, the tea tray is restocked on the table, and Kreacher is literally climbing the walls.

Snape watches him. “It will be a moment.” Kreacher just nods and wanders his way across the ceiling on all fours, muttering to himself.

“My brother died to put a fake fucking locket in that cave.” Black holds out his hand. “Please.”

Snape passes it over without a word. As long as Black allows Snape to give it to Kreacher afterwards, it doesn’t matter to him who investigates it first.

Black prods at the locket’s clasp with his wand, checking for traps, before he opens it. Inside is a piece of paper, folded many times to fit within the locket’s confines. Black unfolds it carefully, the aging paper starting to crack along its fold lines.

“To the Dark Lord,” Black reads aloud, brow furrowed. “I know I will be long dead—” Black swallows. “I will be long dead before you read this, but I wanted you to know who discovered your secret. I’ve stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as possible. I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more. R.A.B. Regulus Arcturus Black.”

Black hands the locket back to Snape. “Excuse me for a moment,” he says. He opens the parlor doors and strides out into the entry hall. “DO YOU HEAR THAT, YOU BIGOTED OLD BAT?” Snape hears him yell a moment later. “YOUR PRECIOUS BABY BOY DIED TO HELP US KILL VOLDEMORT!”

“LIES! LIES AND VILE SLANDER! YOU WILL NOT SPEAK OF MY REGULUS THAT WAY, BLOOD TRAITOR!” the harpy portrait of Walburga Black shrieks.

“Here’s the letter, you dried up bitch!” Black counters. “His words, Mother! In his own blasted hand!”

The silence after that is resounding.

When Black returns, he’s folding up the paper to tuck into his pocket. “She left her frame. First time she’s ever left that portrait.”

“She only has one other painting she can go to. I hope Draco enjoys the racket,” Narcissa says dryly.

“I hope he takes the portrait outside and sets it on fire,” Potter counters.

Narcissa frowns, but doesn’t suggest otherwise. “Botheration. Severus, please suggest to Draco that he do so. If she shrieks about Regulus’s actions when Death Eaters are near…”

“I will inform him. At least he doesn’t have to contend with a Permanent Sticking Charm.” Snape holds out the fake locket crafted by Regulus Black. “Oh, Kreacher…”

The house-elf vanishes from the ceiling and reappears before Snape, reaching for the locket. “Master Bat!”
“Not yet,” Snape says, folding his fingers over the locket and its chain to keep a firm grip on it. “We agreed upon a trade, remember? I verify you are giving me what I’ve asked for, and you receive your Master’s locket.”

Kreacher scowls up at Snape. “Master Bat is cruel, making me wait.”

“The faster you find that preservation potion, the faster you have the locket,” Snape replies. Kreacher growls at him before disappearing again with a pop of air that manages to sound indignant.

What Kreacher brings him is not a single piece of paper, or a spell carved onto some ostentatious object in the tradition of the older families, but an entire book. “What Master Bat be needin’ is in the middle,” he says in an irritated mumble.

Snape turns to that page easily, the book falling open to show that it had been held in that position often. The writing is in mixed Old and Middle English with runes scattered around to fill in blanks left by a language still changing from one form to another, so it takes a few minutes to interpret even the title, let alone some of the ingredients.

The moment Snape has it, he holds out the locket without looking up from the book. Kreacher snatches it from his hands, humming in a way that could almost be mistaken for happiness.

“How old is that, do you think?” Potter asks, peering over his shoulder.

Snape expects to feel his shoulders tighten, and is surprised to realize that he doesn’t mind the young man’s proximity. He simply adjusts the book so that it is easier for Potter to view. “It’s older than the fourteenth century, given the spelling. Definitely younger than the eleventh century. Middle English was not yet this developed, but it’s not quite Chaucer’s era.”

“The book was probably written around the time the Hallows came to be, then.” Potter tilts his head. “Given the runes, I bet the potion is much older. They did say that the Founders lived to be really old, even for wizards.”

“Rowena Ravenclaw was considered a renowned beauty until her death in 1092,” Narcissa adds. “Perhaps this spell was once more common.” She gives Snape a pointed look. “I will have a copy, of course. For my part in assisting in the acquisition of the locket.”

“Payment for services rendered.” Snape deliberates over the page. “First, let me make certain that it can still be safely made, and that it works. I won’t give you a recipe for poison. Second: you have to share it with the rest of your family. There will be no hoarding it, as Walburga Black did.”

Narcissa smirks at him. “While you sell it to anyone else who wishes to have it?”

Snape closes the book, wondering what else lies within its pages. “I would be a fool not to do so.”

“I wonder if it works on werewolves,” Black says.

Snape isn’t aware that Lupin is awake until he speaks without opening his eyes. “Let’s feed a sample to Greyback and see if he explodes.”

“Could always send him an owl and tell him someone came up with anti-Wolfsbane,” Potter suggests. “A potion that forces a werewolf transformation when the moon isn’t full. He’d probably love that.”

“If he lives through it, we know it won’t kill a werewolf. If it improves his appearance, then at least he’s something less ugly to look upon when I bloody well fucking kill him,” Lupin mutters.
The intriguing thing about the conversation is that Snape is all but certain he could convince Greyback to try such a potion…after Albus Dumbledore is dead. Too much hinges on him having to kill an annoying, irritating old bastard of a friend. Life is still not fair—but then, it never has been.

“Maybe we should just deliver it by dart gun,” Granger suggests, her chin planted on her hand. “We hit Greyback with your mystery youth potion, and then target Death Eaters with darts loaded with White Fire.”

“Dear Merlin, that’s such an appealing visual. There has to be a legitimate reason why we can’t do it and reduce the ranks a bit. Nothing is ever that entertaining,” Black says.

Snape has to pause; it is, indeed, an entertaining visual. “If we ever missed, and one of those unused darts came into Voldemort’s hands, he would have forewarning of his impending poisoning.”

“Bollocks!” Black mutters. “I knew there would be a good reason.”

“Most unfortunately, yes,” Snape agrees. “That aside, we did get what we wanted from this evening. Now we just have to find out what Voldemort did with that damned Cup.”

Black and Narcissa glance at each other. “You know,” Black says slowly. “I think we may know exactly where to search.”

“It is better than not searching at all,” Narcissa agrees. “We are the only members of the family free from any criminal branding.”

“You think it was hidden within the Black family vault?” Snape asks. It wouldn’t surprise him; if Regulus acquired Slytherin’s Locket, it’s reasonable to assume that he might have found Hufflepuff’s Cup, as well.

“No, I would have seen it. Might not have recognized it for what it is, but I know the family vault well. The addition of a gold cup—I would have noticed.” Black shakes his head. “But if Lucius was given a Horcrux diary…who else was in good standing before Hallowe’en in 1981?”

“I was given nothing, which was part of the mutual deception,” Snape says at once. “Besides, if I had been granted any of his possessions, I would have done my best to destroy them on the first of November that year.”

“Bellatrix.” Narcissa looks resigned. “She is my sister. With both herself and her husband branded as criminals, and no Heirs to the Lestrange Estate named, I have full legal rights to visit their vault. However, I would have to write up a contest of ownership for any property I tried to claim—if Hufflepuff’s Cup even dwells there.”

“How long does something like that take?” Granger asks, curious.

“Anywhere from one week to one year,” Narcissa replies, lips thinning out in displeasure. “It is usually wiser to assume the full year.”

“And by then the Ministry may have fallen, and Bellatrix and Rodolphus can waltz in and out of Gringotts as they please.” Black sighs. “Try it anyway, cousin.”

Narcissa gives him an irritated glance. “You could do so, as well.”

“Not really. I might have been exonerated, but the goblins of Gringotts have long memories,” Black replies. “I can get into my vault, and I can act as legal escort if Harry needs access to the Potter family vault, but that’s it. Besides, the goblins may be more cooperative if it’s a woman in good
Narcissa’s eyebrows rise. “Hmm. I hadn’t thought of that. There may be something in the old treaty that means they cannot store such things in the vaults if its existence is revealed.”

“Can they be trusted with that sort of information?” Granger asks, startled. “Knowing that the Cup is a Horcrux, I mean.”

Black shrugs. “They’re goblins. You could tell them that you were going to bring forth the Apocalypse on the morrow, and they’d still never tell a soul.”
The next morning is the first full meeting of the Order of the Phoenix since the winter holiday. None of them slept well, or at all. Lupin looks like death warmed over.

Snape had no idea the kitchen had an extending charm until Black yells at the wall opposite the fireplace for several minutes. Then, grudgingly, a very old charm begins to activate. Soon, the kitchen is four times its original size—more than enough room to hold all members of the Order. Dumbledore requested everyone’s attendance, and the idea of cramming at least fifty people into Black’s kitchen had not been pleasant. The table is then extended to match the new space, with enough chairs to hopefully seat them all.

Plenty of space is left around the fireplace for members to enter by Floo. By nine in the morning, they’re stepping out or tumbling out, depending on their preference or skill. Others arrive by Apparating onto the front doorstep and coming in through the entryway. Most of them remark on Walburga Black’s empty portrait, where only an oil lamp in the painting remains, burning with a sullen flame.

Thank God for Minerva. She’s the one to all but order everyone to their seats, getting the chaos organized into something that might actually be a functional group.

“You sure you’re up for this, mate?” Bill Weasley asks Lupin in concern.

Lupin gives him a grim smile. “Wouldn’t miss it, Bill. I’ll live.”

“Fuck the full moon, anyway,” Mundungus Fletcher mutters. “Not just the wolves to contend with, but it makes damned near everyone bloody nutters!”

“Do shut up,” Hestia Jones snaps at him. “In case it’s escaped your notice, we’re all bloody nutters. The moon doesn’t have a whit to do with it!”

Fletcher subsides with a few more muttered complaints. Albus coughs to gain their attention. He’s standing in front of the fireplace with Augusta Longbottom’s hand on his arm. The stuffed vulture on her hat glares menacingly at everyone and then sheds another feather. In a few years, Madam Longbottom is going to be striding about with an entirely bald stuffed vulture on her head.

“While we have many things to do today, I thought, perhaps, we could all do with a boost in morale,” Albus says, which makes Snape’s shoulders tense up. Albus’s ideas of morale-improvement have a fifty-fifty chance of being absolutely undesirable.

“About a year ago, one of us came to me with an idea—an idea of the sort that creates great moral quandaries. It was debated quietly for some time before Madam Longbottom ultimately gave her approval. If the two of you would join us, please?”

All heads turn when Albus faces the doorway. Snape feels a great deal of satisfaction at the collective gasp of shock.

“Frank?” Arthur whispers. “Alice?”

Frank and Alice Longbottom look rather embarrassed to be the focus of so much stunned attention. “Yeah, er, hi,” Frank says, wincing as his ears turn red. “Oh, come off it, it’s not that terrible!”

“What the—how did—” Molly gathers herself with a swift intake of breath. “You’re both…all
Alice and Frank glance at each other. “Well…sort of,” Frank hedges. “I mean, we can’t remember anything beyond March of 1981, but I’m told the alternative was much worse.”

“Apparently,” Alice says in her familiar, wry voice, “you can’t be insane if you can’t remember the events that caused the insanity in the first place.”

“You were—you were Obliviated? They erased the last sixteen years of your life?” Andromeda asks for clarification, her brows drawn together in concern.

“Hmph. Someone should have thought of that years ago,” Narcissa observes.

“Obliviate—forgetting. Forgetting was an easier course of treatment than the alternatives?” Granger’s mother asks in apparent vexation.

“In our case? Yes,” Alice answers, and gives Madam Granger an odd look. “I’m sorry, I don’t—and you are?”

Granger’s mother stands up and offers her hand. “Jean Granger, Hermione Granger’s mother.” She tilts her head in her daughter’s direction, who waves at Alice. “Doctor of Muggle Dentistry, entirely non-magical, and completely in over my head.”

Alice smiles back. “Pleasure to meet you. I didn’t realize we were going to be ignoring the Statutes of Secrecy to such an extent.”

“S’not like we haven’t already seen Diagon—”

“Diagon,” Miss Granger hisses at her father.

“Diagon Alley, the bank and the lovely goblins in charge, and so much else,” Doctor Granger says, also holding out his hand. “Doctor William Granger, also of Muggle Dentistry.”

Frank takes his turn to shake Doctor Granger’s hand. “Charmed. I suppose. Didn’t get to meet a lot of Muggles during school. What do you think of our world?”

Doctor Granger shrugs. “Aside from the impending war? It’s lovely. Needs some work, but which government doesn’t?”

Frank snorts. “Probably putting it mildly, but we don’t know much of what’s been going on.”

“Wait—you still haven’t been properly briefed?” Moody looks offended.

“We know that You-Know-Bloody-Who is back, he still has loyal Death Eaters, and that James and Lily—” Alice breaks off, swallowing. “And that we missed many losses, those who died between March and the end of Hallowe’en.”

“Really, Albus?” Poppy says at last, glaring at the Headmaster. “If this was a viable solution, why wasn’t it done at once?”

“D’you know how much I had to battle St. Mungo’s over this?” Augusta snaps, looking cross. “Bunch of great blockheads! Someone finally comes up with an idea that might help my son and his wife, and they’re too busy hemming and hawing over ethics and morality! Finally just signed them out of the hospital, brought them home, and had a wizard with good sense and skill do it proper.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Frank says, a lopsided smile on his face. In appearance, Neville favors his mother,
but his expressions and mannerisms were definitely gifted by his father.

“Now, mind, if they’d tried it right at the start, it wouldn’t have worked, I’m told,” Augusta adds, but she is still displeased. “Nerve damage and needing time for things to heal, or something like that. But the Obliviate just skips over all that, and things worked out fine.”

“Merlin,” Minerva breathes. “Have you seen Neville?”

“Of course we have.” Alice’s face starts to crumple before she bites her lip and refuses to break. Her eyes are glassy as she blinks away tears. “My darling. I missed his childhood, but I prefer this over never knowing him at all. He’s...he’s so excited, and so terrified that he hasn’t lived up to some impossible ideal.” She glares at Augusta, who ignores her.

“And Mum’s volunteered to share memories, so we can catch up a bit. Then there’s the endless succession of photographs. Mum should’ve gone for wizarding documentarian,” Frank adds, but he looks proud. Then his gaze falls upon Andromeda, Narcissa, and Snape, who tend to sit in a cluster; if anyone wants to glare in their direction, they face a united front. “I expected you,” Frank says of Andromeda. “But I will admit, hearing that we have an ally in Narcissa Malfoy was a bit unexpected.”

“That’s how most of us felt about it at first, but so far, I’ve not made her dead yet,” Moody acknowledges. “Merlin. Frank and Alice. You are a sight for sore eyes.”

“Eyes? Alastor Moody, you’ve just one eye remaining to your head,” Frank returns, and the room erupts into half-hysterical laughter. Snape’s mouth twitches, but he ignores the humor, understanding its source. He glances at Dumbledore, instead. Albus give Snape a single, near-imperceptible shake of his head. Augusta wasn’t told where the idea had originated from. Good.

“Who did the Obliviation?” Poppy asks in a brisk voice, deciding that business is better than lingering emotions. Snape does prefer her efficiency, which surges forth at the most fortunate of times.

“I did, though Augusta refuses to tell anyone else who performed it,” Albus says. “It did take some careful planning.”

“The M.L.E. is after me,” Augusta Longbottom says, drawing herself up with pride. “Something about performing a permanent, mind-altering spell against those unable to consent.”

“Never mind that we’re bloody well standing here, able to cheerfully announce our informed consent that yes, this is most preferable to insanity, trapped in a bloody long-term care ward!” Frank growls. Alice pats his arm absently, but her eyes are still roaming the room. Snape suspects she is seeing the faces of those who are never coming back as well as learning new ones.

Alice’s gaze lingers the longest on Potter, who is doing his best to be unobtrusive. Right now, he has no task other than to witness, something Black insisted upon despite Potter still being underage. It’s one of the smarter things Snape has witnessed the Dog decide to do, and then hold fast in the face of many loud protests.

Tonks shrugs when a few heads turn in her direction. “Told the two younger idiots assigned to the case that if they arrested Augusta Longbottom, I’d hex their legs and arms so that they were in opposite places, and it would take one hell of a counter-jinx to fix that mess. Someone will go for it eventually, though. Outstanding warrants that remain on the boards long enough...”

“I’d like to see them try,” Augusta declares, smiling.
“Let’s not do that,” Frank tells his mother. “Albus, I want to go home before the entire day is gone. I’ve got a boy who I’d like to get to know before that bloody arsehole Riddle stirs things up again.”

“Certainly, Frank,” Albus murmurs. “The map, if you would?”

Kingsley is the one to toss a map into the air, unrolling it and causing it to flatten in place, as if mounted to a board. Hogwarts is the most easily recognizable, a glowing red dot sitting in northern Scotland; there are only seven others. “This,” Kingsley says, “is the Ministry of Magic’s map of the known and recognized wizarding schools in the world.”

Minerva stands up and steps forward. She tosses her own rolled-up map into the air, letting it cover the one Kingsley displayed. “And these,” she says in a dry voice, “are the actual number of magical schools in the world.”

“Blimey,” Fred Weasley whispers. The map is alive with dots on every continent, Antarctica included, shining in four different colors.

“Why the bloody difference?” George demands, scowling. “That’s—that’s incredible! That’s a hell of a lot more magic-workers in the world than we’re ever taught about!”

“Language!” Molly scolds him.

“That’s because the Ministry is a backwards pile of sodding—” Ted Tonks begins to rant.

He is shushed by Andromeda. “Manners, dear. However, my husband is correct.”

Albus nods. “The map is incorrect because, as of the International Statute of Secrecy, the Ministry of Magic for Wizarding Britain only recognizes a magical school if it fits the same profile as Hogwarts.”

“Oh, Imperialism. We haven’t outgrown that yet?” Angelina Johnson says unhappily.

“I’m afraid not, dear,” Minerva replies. “Now here: these red dots, the fewest in number, are for boarding schools such as Hogwarts. The blue dots mark all of the magical universities in the world, and they’re quite numerous. They take students ages sixteen and up, provided that said students have completed their primary education. The green dots are magical primary schools. Most often in many other countries, magical children attend school locally and go home at the end of the day. If the distance between home and school is too far, they use a Port Key to travel from school to home and back again.

“These yellow dots,” Minerva waves her hand at dots clustered in island regions, or places in the world where Imperial Britain carried the least influence, “mark those peoples who refuse to abide by the Statutes of Secrecy. They are tribes and nations who have always intermingled magic with their society, no matter who was capable and who was not. They refused to change their ways just because a few fools in western Europe made an uninformed decision.”

“Those groups are listed in the Ministry as having no magical populations whatsoever,” Arthur says, sounding grim. “If we don’t tell anyone they’re magical, no one will be tempted to seek them out and see how easy it is for Muggles and wizards to live together, right?”

“Dear, blood pressure,” Molly murmurs under her breath to Arthur. “Still recovering, you beloved nitwit.”

Arthur sighs. “Yes, dear. Point is, though—you won’t find these schools on any official Ministry map. As far as Wizarding Britain is concerned, only seven magic schools in the world exist, and everyone else is just shit out of luck.”
“Which is why magical population numbers are listed as being so very low,” Kingsley adds with a solemn nod. “If the British Isles knew the true extent as to the world’s magical population, Voldemort’s ideology of protecting the ways of magic from ‘Muggles that would exterminate us’ would be less appealing.”

“Then—then why the bloody hell are we not telling people this?” Katie Bell sputters in outrage. “This could potentially end the war before it even has the chance to start!”

“It is far, far too late for that, even if we were to publish this information tomorrow—if we could even convince anyone to publish it,” Snape says.

Miss Bell turns to stare at him. “You mean that?”

Snape nods. “War, at this juncture, is inevitable. Hence, this week of planning.”

Minerva tosses a book into the air, which hovers in place and opens its pages. “This is the student registry for Hogwarts,” she says. Many seated at the table lean forward, never having the chance to view it before. It is most often regarded as a book meant only for the teachers at Hogwarts. “Not only does it list every magical student in Wizarding Britain, it also lists their blood status—an aspect we cannot remove due to the Ministry’s restrictions.

“But…” Minerva conjures an unrolled scroll, and a shorter but still very long list of names appears on it. “Today, it gives us the advantage, and allows us to begin the disaster planning that Remus so wisely suggested. These are all of the Muggle-born students, either attending Hogwarts now, or who are due to begin their first year in September.”

Jean Granger’s eyes flicker back and forth between the Muggle-born scroll and the world map. “Exchange students.”

“But without the exchange,” Albus says heavily. “With Voldemort active, no other wizarding school will send their children here, especially as the only places safe to send our own children are the schools the Ministry does not acknowledge. We dare not reveal any of these places to the public, or to the enemy.”

“However,” Minerva continues crisply. “These local magical schools mean that we can also relocate the Muggle-born children’s parents, as well. They will be in as much danger from Voldemort as their offspring, and I refuse to leave them in the path of danger. No Death Eater will care that the magical child is absent—they will kill the parents for daring to birth such a child in the first place.”

“And this, ladies and gentlemen, is our focus for the rest of the week.” Albus is beginning to appear more tired, but his eyes are sharp, his jaw set, as he looks around the room. “We have a list of children, and thus we know their current addresses—which means we will not only find them, but their families. The owls were sent out earlier this month, but there are always those who scoff at the idea of mail by owl and magical schooling. The Doctors Granger have been kind enough to spend this holiday in assisting us, helping Muggle parents not only adjust to the idea that their child is magical, but that due to a madman, they are all now in very great danger and must relocate at once. Others will accompany the Grangers to soothe their fears over lost property and wages. Still others will be traveling to each school to make arrangements for new lodgings for each family.”

“We are going to try to have no more than two Wizarding families per school, but I refuse to leave a child alone in a new place with absolutely no one that they can relate to,” Minerva adds, giving Albus a stern glare. “We have already been in correspondence with many schools on several different continents, and most are glad to host our children for as long as necessary to keep them safe.” She grants them a thin smile. “I do believe some words were often mentioned that it is about
time Britain left the Stone Age and began teaching the younger generations that there is more than one way to do things.”

“This means two things,” Albus says, after Minerva takes back the registry for Hogwarts but leaves the scroll hanging in the air. “The first is that the Muggle-borns will still appear on the Hogwarts registry for any Death Eater to read, but there will be no victim waiting for them to find. Once we’ve relocated all who we can, I am going to publicly announce that the Order of the Phoenix is not only active, but it is working to protect those who will be most vulnerable to Voldemort and his followers.”

Snape considers it. As far as cover stories go, it’s likely the best one he will ever have. Voldemort will be in a rage, but that is not exactly an uncommon occurrence.

“The second thing…is that we have a lot to accomplish in a very short amount of time. We must begin at once.” Albus nods in response to the excited rise of voices. “Yes; assignments will be handed out immediately, and if adjustments need be made, they will be. Doctor and Madam Doctor Granger, you are about to become far more familiar with Apparating than you might like.”

“If it helps save children like our Hermione, then I’ll put up with it.” Madam Granger winces. “Is it anything like flying?”

“No flying required.” Miss Granger assures her mother. Madam Granger doesn’t seem convinced.

Snape slips out of the kitchen once everyone is occupied by copies of maps and lists littering the extended table. He is in desperate need of a nap, and Regulus Black’s former bedroom is the one room no one enters except himself, Black, Lupin, or Potter.

Black renovated the space, but refrained from utterly remaking it as he once threatened. The Slytherin silver-and-green motif remains, but is much more tastefully done, more to an adult’s preference than a child’s.

It occurs to Snape as he falls face-first into the bed that Black did so for his benefit, and then dismisses the idea as utterly ludicrous.

* * * *

Snape has the excuse of on-going Order meetings to avoid Voldemort, but he does not participate. For the safety of the children they’re in the midst of relocating, he cannot. Dumbledore has already arranged a “meeting” in which he told Snape that, for his own safety in spying against Voldemort, he cannot know much of what is being planned. If the Dark Lord decides to pry into Snape’s mind, then that is the only memory he will be allowed to find.

Thus, he is free to hide in the library. The book Kreacher gave him is full of fascinating glimpses into history, and more potions than just the one he required. Some have fallen out of favor for reasons he can’t determine; some are outright poisons; some are the precursors to their modern-day versions. A few of those, Snape thinks, were not improved by the passing years.

“I notice you’re not sittin’ in there, helping to coordinate all that.”

Snape glances up at Frank Longbottom. “I’m not, for very good reasons.”
“Still spyin,’ then. That double-agent bit.” Frank nods sagely before sitting down across from Snape, uninvited. “Me Da used to take me to the Muggle films when I was younger’n Neville. Don’t tell Mum,” he adds, smiling. “That buzzard atop her hat would explode, and she’d follow right along afterwards.”

Snape refuses to admit that the idea of either is appealing. “I didn’t know you’d ever spent time in the Muggle world.”

“Mostly theatre and the cinema. Sometimes books. He was partial to James Bond,” Frank says. “Always liked how the bloke solved problems with his head when he wasn’t running around shooting that Muggle gun of his.”

“The books were better,” Snape says, dropping his eyes back down to his own book in hopes that Longbottom will take the hint.

Frank Longbottom is either still far too damned stubborn, or oblivious to the silent request. “That they were. Did you know the bloke what wrote them, Irving, was an actual Muggle spy during World War II?”

“Ian Fleming,” Snape corrects absently. “So was Christopher Lee. Dracula,” he adds, when Frank is puzzled by the name.

“Oh, yes, him! Massively tall bloke. Pulled off terrifying much the same way you do,” Frank says, smiling.

Snape thinks about it and decides that is a compliment. “Thank you. Lee was apparently the more active of the pair during the war. Strange how many Muggle spies turned to drama afterwards.”

“Actors take on a role, no matter if they’re wizard actors or Muggle ones,” Frank says after a few moments of silence. “Maybe puttin’ on that sort of mask makes it easier to forget. Mum says those Nazis made Grindelwald look like an infant throwin’ a tantrum. I imagine there was plenty o’ things that pair had seen that they never wanted to think about ever again.”

“Six million estimated executions.” Snape memorizes the page he’s on, written in Roman numerals instead of Arabic, and closes the book. “Many historians still think the numbers aren’t high enough.”

“Merlin, that’s too much.” Frank hesitates. “I don’t want this war to be like the last one. Forty-four percent of us dead, Albus tells me. Forty-four percent. I know that’s no six million, but that’s still… that’s a lot, and that was only people fightin’ on our side.”

“Those are only numbers for the Order. The numbers for the population as a whole were much worse. We were about ten thousand shy of breaking three hundred thousand in 1975. By the end of 1981, there were two hundred nine thousand of us remaining.” Snape looks at Frank. “Twenty-eight percent of our entire population.”

“So many wizarding names, all of ‘em lost forever.” Frank sighs. “Not again. Not on my watch.”

“Preferably not.” Snape grits his teeth; he doesn’t want to say this, not ever, but if he doesn’t give the man some sort of hint, Neville Longbottom will be fighting in a war instead of attending school, the very place he needs to be. “If your son can get past his terror when it comes to facing those things he truly fears, he will be one of the greatest wizards of his generation.”

Frank blinks at him in surprise. “Never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“You didn’t hear it at all,” Snape replies testily, opening his book and lowering his head back to its
He’ll still be rubbish at Potions, though.”

Frank laughs and leaves him be. Snape waits until he can hear no one else in the library before he conjures a nice, solid rock and flings it at the nearest wall. The plaster crack that erupts and traces its way up to the ceiling is not even remotely satisfying.

* * * *

The second week of April, Albus calls Snape to his office. Snape comes in, notes the terse expression on the Headmaster’s face, and shakes his head. The potion he holds out is violet-tinged gold with the occasional swirl of silver. It’s some of his best work, an addition to the original gold anti-curse potion he should have thought of years ago.

“Drink it,” he orders, when Albus does nothing more than look at the uncapped phial. Snape is on the verge of prying open the idiot’s jaws before Albus finally drinks the stupid potion.

Albus gradually leans back, some of the terseness fading from his features. Truly, the man hides physical pain in ridiculous ways. The best means are to not reveal it at all. “Thank you for the assistance, Severus. I received bad news earlier, and it seems the end is near enough now that even a downswing in mood makes it worse.”

“If I ever teach Defence, the very first lesson I will impart is that one should not wear cursed jewelry,” Snape says in irritation. “What happened?”

“Death Eaters, one assumes—no proof, but at this stage it’s a safe assumption to make.” Albus pops a lemon drop into his mouth, but doesn’t offer one to Snape. Finally, the message has been heard and understood. “Emmaline Vance and Sturgis Podmore were both found dead this week. Sturgis had been missing for days, but Emmaline only went missing last night. Aurors outside of the Order located Mister Podmore’s remains, but Auror Tonks discovered Miss Vance. Nymphadora is a bit upset; they were friends in school.”

“It’s worse than that, isn’t it?”

Albus nods. “Madam Amelia Bones. She’s vanished, but given the fate of Vance and Podmore, it isn’t difficult to discern what has to have happened. I do not look forward to informing Susan.”

Snape finally deigns to take a seat. “They’re going after members of the Wizengamot who would stand against the fall of the Ministry.”

“Mm. I thought they might, but I will admit I didn’t expect them to begin outright murdering those holding Wizengamot seats until after the Ministry fell to Voldemort’s control, not before. You heard nothing of this?”

Snape gives him a flat look. “We both know what it will take for him to truly confide in me. While you still live, he is leery that you might gain information that would force him to alter his plans.”

“Quite intelligent of him.” Albus pops his lips and then blows out a little cloud of steam as the lemon drop finishes dissolving. Pepperup Potion in the centers. Snape wants to roll his eyes, but it is a good idea, given the circumstances. “Madam Bones is not the only one. Octavius Pepper is missing, as is, of all people, Florean Fortescue.”
Snape lifts his eyebrows. “Merlin knows what Voldemort wants with a seller of ice creams.”

“Florean is quite knowledgeable about ancient magic and artefacts. Perhaps Voldemort believes him to be a source of information regarding something of importance.” Albus shakes his head and changes the subject. “Members of the Order will begin patrolling the school grounds tomorrow. Given the attacks and disappearances, we can take no chances with the safety of Hogwarts students.”

“Of course,” Snape says, noncommittal. He knows exactly why they’re to be present.

“Please tell Mister Malfoy that the first half of May would be preferable.”

Snape gives the doddering idiot a glacial stare. “In a hurry then, are we?”

“Hardly,” Albus counters, picking up another lemon drop. He doesn’t eat it; he merely regards it curiously, as if it is some bauble of great value. “But it is coming, no matter my preferences. I would not see our fifth- and seventh-years suffer due to a mere funeral.”

_Mere. Idiot._ “Minerva might cancel the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams, regardless. Your loss will be a great upset. Merlin knows why.”

Albus smiles. “I’ve asked Minerva not to do so. If Mister Malfoy’s timing works out, and she delays the exams by a week or two, the students will have time to…adjust. To grieve, if they’re so inclined.”

“It will be your funeral,” Snape retorts, standing. “The entire school will be utter chaos. Excuse me. While you ponder mortality and murder, I have things to attend to.”

Annoying, doddering old fool with a fondness for cursed jewelry. Snape might have considered being less irritated if Albus would discuss who he was in such a dramatic rush to see via the Resurrection Stone, but no—Albus plans on literally taking that information to his grave. Idiot.

The first person he finds is Minerva, though not by design. “Good evening, Severus.” She pauses at the expression on his face. “Or perhaps it isn’t so pleasant, after all?”

“First half of May,” he says as he walks past without stopping.

Several more feet down the corridor, he hears Minerva hiss, “Bloody old fool,” and feels his mood lighten. At least in this, they are in agreement.

It takes all evening to write up the remainder of the year’s lesson plans. He doesn’t need the assistance to remember them, but anyone covering his classes—if they choose to do so for anyone except O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students—will be lost without some sort of guideline to follow. Minerva will make certain they are followed, even if she has to recopy the plans in her own hand.

At curfew, he sends a note via one of the school’s more hyperactive little owls to Draco. It is a satisfactory five minutes before Draco arrives, out of breath, and shuts the office door behind him. “You wished to see me, sir?”

Snape nods. He is realizing just how much Draco has matured in a single school term, and how far he’s come from whatever pathetic little scheme his father planned for his son. “Sit, please.”

Draco does so, cautiously, as if a venomous viper lies in wait.

One actually does. That was poorly chosen phrasing.
He considers tea, but tea will not soften this blow. “The Headmaster has requested the first half of May.”

Draco pales. He doesn’t need to be given specifics to understand what that means. “Is he fading that quickly?”

“In a sense. He is…” Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. “He doesn’t want exams for O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. students to be canceled due to the sudden necessity of a funeral.”

“Because he cares.” Draco tries to sound scoffing and bitter, but doesn’t succeed very well. Some of the old beliefs still linger, though.

Snape decides that, for once, he will address them. “Do you know why the Headmaster preached of House unity so often, even if he didn’t seem to know how to attain it?”

“I have to admit, Potter blowing up the hourglasses was pleasing.” Draco admits. “But no, I don’t know why, aside from politics and the need to appear as if he cares about all of us.”

“He does. He does care about all of us…which is Albus Dumbledore’s entire problem.” Snape rests his chin on his steepled fingers. “He cares for all, and sometimes that regard causes smaller issues to fall through the cracks. That is a failing, one that once caused him to make a grave mistake.”

“A mistake?” Draco echoes, curiosity hooked.

“Albus Dumbledore believed, when he began teaching, that yes—every House was worthy, that every student was capable of good or ill. Then he became Tom Marvolo Riddle’s advocate during the latter’s admission to Hogwarts.”

“Because everyone is capable of good or ill.” Draco shakes his head. “Well, that didn’t go very well.”

“It didn’t, no. Dumbledore clung to that belief in one’s potential for good, despite the evidence piling up that Tom Riddle was not ever going to be anything other than cruel and remorseless.” Snape leans back in his chair. “By the time I came to school, Riddle was already calling himself Lord Voldemort, and was actively seeking recruits among the older students in Hogwarts. Dumbledore forgot his old beliefs in the face of these Death Eaters, each and every single one recruited from the House of Salazar Slytherin. He stopped viewing Slytherins as anything other than automatically suspect, while favoring the three other Houses above all others.”

“Which is why you act as you do,” Draco says, eyes lighting up. “Why you insist upon us having our rightful place—”

Snape holds up his hand. “In part. I left Voldemort’s service, Draco Malfoy. I returned to it as a spy in the same week. After the war, after the trials, I was studying under Dumbledore’s tutelage, trying to cram enough knowledge back into my brain to pass the bloody N.E.W.T.s I needed to become accredited in my chosen field. I never finished seventh year, Draco,” Snape continues patiently, when Malfoy looks baffled. “Death Eater. Do keep up.”

Draco winces. “Sorry.”

“I don’t know how Dumbledore knew it was on my mind, but one night it was on my lips to apologize for the choices I’d made. Albus Dumbledore told me not to. He said he would never accept an apology from me.” Snape smiles. “I do believe I threw something at him before he had the chance to explain.”
“What did he say?”

“He said he would not accept an apology from me, because it was he who had done me the first and gravest disservice.” The smile fades quickly; it always does. “He apologized to me for allowing Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, to color his entire view of Slytherin and the children of his House. If Dumbledore had been following the beliefs he’d once held, that all of the children of this school are worthy of the same chances, that all hold the same potential, then I would never have been tempted by what Voldemort had to offer.”

“Would you have?” Draco asks. His shoulders are hunched, his brow furrowed.

“I don’t know,” Snape replies in utter truthfulness. “Perhaps. Perhaps not. He thinks it would not have happened, but I will grant Dumbledore that it would have at least been less likely.”

Draco bows his head. “It makes me feel so stupid. I always believed Father when he said Dumbledore was nothing more than an old fool with foolish notions—that blood purity would be the ultimate tried and true test of what Wizarding Britain could be.”

Snape lets out a wry snort. “Lucius has never been half so intelligent as he’s always claimed to be. Thank Merlin that you take after your mother.” Draco glances up at him in surprise. “Draco, my family is one of the prime examples of why Lucius’s philosophy—Voldemort’s philosophy—is doomed to failure. The Prince line, my mother’s family, has died out. So have many Pure-blood lines. Once upon a time, there were thousands of Wizarding family names in Britain that could trace their lineage back not only to the founding of Hogwarts, but to Rome, Greece, the great African kingdoms, Syria, Persia, Babylon, Sumer, and the Americas.”

Draco’s brow wrinkles again in confusion. “The Americas?”

“The world was once a much smaller place, and there are many ancient kingdoms on those continents that are long lost to us,” is all Snape will say in response to that. There is not much more he can add. Scant histories still recount those tales, and most of them are considered baseless, imaginary, or nothing but badly mangled folklore. Wizarding Britain will at least admit that Atlantis existed, and nothing of that great kingdom’s history is left except mangled folklore. “The point is that reliance on blood purity will drive magic into extinction. Thus, if you consider Voldemort’s philosophy, only one man will ultimately benefit.”

“Him,” Draco realizes, and his mouth turns down in a frown. “Well. Then I definitely plan to survive this disaster.”

“Oh?” Snape hopes Draco manages to do so. He doesn’t hold out much hope for himself. “What are you planning to do afterwards, then?”

“If he’s not already dead, I will give my father an absolute coronary by announcing my intention to court Astoria Greengrass.”

Snape nods. “Yes, that would definitely assist in the process.” The Greengrass family are Pure-bloods, yes, but they are also very much disapproved of by most of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

Draco looks down at the floor again. “Sir…I don’t want to kill Albus Dumbledore.”

“Good news, then: you are going to fail miserably at it.”
One of the last bits of student drama Snape overhears that year is entirely unexpected. Snape pauses before he can turn the corner, intrigued, as he hears Mister Weasley stutter his way into embarrassing himself before he’s interrupted by a familiar voice. One of the Patil twins, but Snape needs to hear more from her to discern which one.

“Stop stuttering, Ron. What did you want to talk to me about?” Miss Patil asks, sounding irritated. “I’m in a bit of a rush.”

“Just five minutes, okay?” Weasley pleads. “Then you can do…go…things.”

“You’re really not going to get very far if you keep stuttering,” Miss Patil observes dryly.

“Well, I—I wanted to say that I’m sorry.”

Miss Patil sounds off-put. “Sorry? For what? Unless you’ve wronged me in a way I’m not yet aware of…”

“Nah, you’re aware of it.” Weasley sounds like he’s cringing. “I’m apologizing for, uh, the Yule Ball.”

Ah. That will be Padma Patil, then.

There is a beat of silence. “Ron. The Yule Ball was two years ago.”

“Yeah, I know,” Weasley replies. “But uhm—okay, so I realized something. Give me a second here. I’m not great at this sort of thing.”

“I hadn’t noticed at all.”

“That really isn’t helping.” Weasley clears his throat. “Harry told me off the other day about Lavender and—and a few other girls. He said that I was thinking with my prick instead of my brain. I said, ‘Course I was! I’m a teenage boy!’ That’s what every teenage boy does.”

Patil snorts. “In my experience? Yes, that seems to be the dominant response.”

“Well, whenever you manage to make Harry angry, you know you’ve stepped in something, right?” Weasley sounds bemused. “So, I did my best to try to think instead of just, ogle, y’know? And when I thought about it, I realized why Hermione is so hung up on Viktor Kum, even if I think the bloke’s the Quidditch version of a tree stump.”

“All right then,” Miss Patil says slowly. “Enlighten me, Ron.”

Weasley hesitates. “It’s—he saw her. Hermione. Krum asked Hermione to the Yule Ball before Hermione ‘accidentally’ forgot to stop Madam Pomfrey from shrinking her teeth until they were just a bit too large instead of…well, you remember the awful jokes. He asked her before Hermione put on that ball gown and did her hair up in a way that looked amazing that night, y’know?”

“She did look charming,” Patil admits. “I was highly irritated with you for being distracted, but Granger…she surprised me.”

“That’s the point, though.” Weasley sounds serious. “Viktor liked Hermione before all that. He liked her before she did anything to her hair other than her usual bushy curling mess. He didn’t care about her teeth, before or after. Viktor looked beyond all that and saw her. He saw Hermione Granger,
smartest witch in our school—yes, you are exceptionally intelligent, Padma, but we all know who’s going to get top marks in our year, and it’s not you or me.”


“I was terrible to Hermione. I told her we might as well go to the Yule Ball together, since it was obvious she didn’t have a date, either. Not like anybody was gonna ask.”

“Please tell me she slapped you,” Patil says, angry. “Please tell me she knocked out your teeth.”

“Nah. Hermione’s too nice, some days. I would’ve deserved it, though. I apologized to her later, but there was no recovering from it—I was a right prat. She should’ve slapped me,” Weasley says. “But it made me realize that I hadn’t treated you the way you deserved, either. You did, y’know. Deserve better.”

Weasley utters a muffled curse and scuffs his shoe against the stone floor. “You were gorgeous that night. Truly, an’ I mean that. I was so busy staring at someone else, spiting the man she was with, that I didn’t even say it. I didn’t notice, not like I should have. So: I’m really sorry, Padma. I hope you’ll forgive me for being an idiot.”

“I—” Snape hears a book bag fall to the ground. Before he can be concerned that he’s about to have to clean up Weasley teeth, he hears the very distinct sound of two teenagers making out in the hall.

Snape turns around and goes straight back the way he came. They’re both of age. Not from his House, not his problem.

* * * *

When the end of his final year of teaching under Albus Dumbledore comes to a close, it happens quickly. Afterwards, Snape can recall it all in crystal clarity, but the process itself seems like it was nothing but a rush of frenetic motion, shouting that fell directly into silence.

Draco’s Patronus alerts him after curfew the evening of the fourteenth. The corporal leopard mists in through the walls of Snape’s quarters, opens its mouth, and speaks in Draco’s voice: “The Astronomy Tower. Merlin fucking knows why.”

Snape blinks a few times at the frustrated disgust in Draco’s voice. “Go on,” he tells the Patronus. “Heard and understood.” The leopard vanishes.

“DOBBY!” Snape yells, unnecessarily loud in his own private space. The house-elf appears while Snape is scratching out swift, messy last words to alert Minerva as to what is about to happen. “Give this to Minerva McGonagall, but—” He counts the time in his head. “Delay by five minutes. I hate to do so, but without a delay, someone could be badly hurt.”

“Understood, Master Bat,” Dobby says, taking the letter and vanishing. Snape idly considers the merits of tying Kreacher’s ears in a knot for spreading that title as he uses the Floo to shove what few belongings he will need at once through the flames, letting them land on the floor in front of the fireplace at Spinner’s End. If the werewolf gets there before he does, Lupin is going to find a haphazard, ash-covered mess.

That done, Snape leaves his quarters, activates the wards that will keep literally everyone out but
himself, and runs. He knows Draco planned to send Dumbledore poisoned mead for the occasion. It seems Albus decided that dying under the light of the stars was preferable to collapsing over his own office desk.

Or perhaps it isn’t the stars at all he is thinking of, but the quick escape of those who will need it.

By the time he fights his way beyond the stairwell to the tower, there are at least three members of the Order on the ground, unmoving but for the slight rise and fall that signifies wizards and witches who still yet breathe. It is the only remaining relief he will have on this night.

Atop the Astronomy Tower, awaiting him, are Draco Malfoy and Albus Dumbledore. Albus is slumped over the ramparts of the tower, an air of grieving amusement in his eyes. The Headmaster’s wand is on the ground, many feet distant from Albus. Draco’s wand is still pointed at Albus, but he’s trembling so much that even if he could manage the curse, he’d miss.

Snape glances at Albus, evaluating his gray skin and the fine tremors in his hands as he attempts to remain on his feet. The poison Draco chose for the mead is far more effective than the boy realized it would be, given the curse Albus already suffers under. If it were not for the plans of the evening, that would be a fatal dose.

Four Death Eaters are already waiting for him, as well: Amycus and Alecto Carrow, Corban Yaxley, and of all blasted beings, Fenrir Greyback, who already stinks of blood.

Snape feels his heart freeze in his chest. No, not that, he cannot. He wills the emotion away, reaching for blankness, for stillness. It is not the full moon, no matter Greyback’s apparent descent into beast-hood.

“We’ve got a problem, Snape,” Amycus Carrow says in a show of great impatience, though his eyes and wand are both pointed at Albus. “The boy doesn’t seem able to do as Our Lord wills it—”

“Severus…”

Snape grinds his teeth. Dying in moments or dying later; the result is now the same.

He shoves his way past the Carrows and Yaxley, treating them as the unimportant lackeys they are. Even Greyback seems to shrink and fall back in response to Snape’s cold regard.

Albus gives him two slow blinks, and then slips words into the forefront of Snape’s mind. Dear boy, best of all of us. If I could make this right, I would.


“Severus, please…”

Unlike Bartemius Crouch, Junior, this is no easy task. It seems like his wand weighs more than the heaviest of bricks as he raises it, but the motion is smooth, perfect control.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The spell strikes hard, more powerful than Snape expected. The burst of green light sends Albus’s body tumbling over the tower wall to plummet to the ground far below.

Snape breathes out once and then seizes Malfoy by the collar, as if in disappointment. “Out of here, quickly.”
The skirmish inside the castle does very little to slow them down. Greyback, Amycus and Alecto stay to fight, the fools, but Yaxley is at his back as Snape shoves Draco along until they’re outside.

Potter doesn’t catch up to them until they’ve run halfway across the grounds, on their way to the castle gates. Snape turns to see Potter charging directly at them, head lowered, face set in grim expectation. One last part of this farce to perform.

“Run!” Snape orders Draco, who doesn’t hesitate before fleeing towards the gates.

“Expelliarmus!” Potter shouts, and Draco’s wand goes flying off into the darkness.

“My wand—” Draco bleats in shock.

“KEEP RUNNING, YOU IDIOT!”

The duel Snape and Potter share would almost be amusing under other circumstances. Draco has come far, but Potter progressed to frightening levels of skill in the last year. They can barely voice curses at each other before they’re blocked, and it’s time to try another, and another.

Then that bastard Yaxley gets involved, striking Potter’s unprotected back with an unexpected Crucio. Potter is down, screaming, and all at once the only color Snape can see is blood red.

“NO!” he roars, and blasts Yaxley off his feet with a sharp jut of his wand. He has to cover this, has to—“Remember the Dark Lord’s orders! Potter is for him, not for us!”

“S’not fair!” Yaxley shouts, and sets Rubeus Hagrid’s house on fire like a petulant toddler.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Snape mutters.

Potter is lying on the ground, gasping for breath. His wand is still clenched tightly in his hand—not disarmed then, and not defeated, either, especially since he is doing a very good job of keeping that wand lifted in the air for his defense.. Snape comes upon him, wand pointed down, and waits.

“G’nkillme, then?” Potter asks, and makes a face. “Oh, practicing that’n. Tha’s terrible.”

The peal of mad laughter Snape lets out is fitting for this moment. “No. As I said: the Dark Lord wants you. We’re to leave you here, Mister Potter. Do enjoy your nap in the dirt.”

“Bastard,” Potter retorts, and puts enough venom into the word to sound like he means it. The hex he casts is easy to block, but Snape can’t offer the same token gesture in response; he’s too concerned that it would work.

Then Snape has no choice but to flee. He hopes Potter recovers his wits quickly enough to quench Hagrid’s burning home.

*          *          *          *          *

A few mornings later, there is a knock on the rear door to the house on Spinner’s End. Snape is using his wand and a wad of old silk to clean off the items that landed in the soot. The books deserved better treatment, but it could not be helped at the time. It’s the first chance he’s had to come home, and the only people who know of this building’s location are a few Death Eaters, Narcissa, Voldemort, and one annoying werewolf.
Snape gets up, wand at the ready, and leans against the door before he peers through the tiny pane of spelled one-way glass. Then he growls, unbolts the door, and all but drags Potter inside.

The werewolf is a blasted tale-teller. Snape is going to kill Lupin. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” Snape yells.

“Well, yes,” Potter replies, running a hand through his perpetual disaster-hair. “Left most of it behind in a tunnel back in 1993, remember?”

Snape realizes he’s gasping for breath and drops onto the nearest armchair, trying to still his sudden panic. “Someone could find you here, you utter brat!”

“Won’t be here that long. I needed to bring you something,” Potter says. “The funeral is today.”

Snape swallows. “I’m—aware of that.”

Potter nods and pulls a wad of Invisibility Cloak out of his robe pocket. “I thought you might like to be there.”

He stares up at Potter, not sure if he’s finally cracked under years of stress. “I—you what?”

“I thought you might want to attend Dumbledore’s funeral,” Potter repeats patiently, shaking the Invisibility Cloak for emphasis. “Besides, you liked him better than I did.”

Snape lets out a short, hoarse bark of laughter. “Many liked him better than you did, and many more liked him far more than even I did. Potter, this is complete idiocy.”

“It’s only idiocy if you get caught,” Potter corrects him patiently. “Come on, stand up. I’ve figured out how tall people can wear it without showing off their shoes.”

“Really, now.” Snape stands, driven by curiosity if nothing else. Potter’s trainers have been visible beneath the edges of the cloak for the last year and a half.

“Yeah, it took me a while. I mean, school robes and old cloaks aren’t really designed the same way. Nobody really wears cloaks the old way,” he continues to chatter, while sliding invisible fabric up Snape’s arms, over his back, and finally, over his head. “Not even the Death Eaters are wearing them correctly.” He fastens something at Snape’s collar that causes the fabric to drift together, forming a seamless line in the front.

Potter steps back and regards his handiwork. “That’ll do. Much better than just tossing it over your head and hoping for the best. Take a look,” he instructs, gesturing towards the parlor mirror.

Snape steps forward and sees nothing. The hood is not pulled down over his face, but his features are invisible, regardless. He lifts his hands, and they are also hidden from sight. “What prompted this discovery?”

“Well…” When Snape turns around, Potter looks uncomfortable. “The Invisibility Cloak of the Deathly Hallows—it’s supposed to be Death’s own Cloak, if the legend is true. I looked up the old engraved images from the oldest books, and the cloak around the form of Death was worn in a very specific way. I copied it, and suddenly…it worked. It worked exactly the way it was supposed to.”

Snape pulls back the hood, feeling uncomfortable. “Is that why you disarmed Draco? The Hallows, Potter?”

Potter gives him a surprised look. “Actually, I just didn’t think it was a good idea for Voldemort to
have such easy access to the Elder Wand if he ever figures out Dumbledore had it. The wand is going into the tomb today with the Headmaster, and it can stay there, as far as I’m concerned. Unless—you want it back. It belonged to your family, after all.”

Snape sits down heavily in his chair again, aware that he can’t see most of his own body. “No, Potter, I do not want it back. My life is cursed enough without adding a cursed wand to it.”

“I don’t think your life is cursed,” Potter says, surprising him. “Insanely, monstrously difficult, yeah, but cursed? No.”

“What makes you believe something so patently ridiculous?” Snape asks.

“Well…” Potter takes off his false glasses and folds them up, putting them into a robe pocket. “You have Narcissa and Draco. Sirius and Remus like you—I think they even enjoy the fact that you make a point of yelling at them as often as possible. Hermione thinks you’re tremendously brave—”


“Sorry, I’m not telling the smartest witch in Britain that she’s wrong,” Potter replies. “Point is, we all actually give a damn about you…because you’re worth it. I—I like you. I mean…you’re the first friend I ever had.”

Snape gives Potter a blank stare. “What?”

“I hadn’t figured out people yet,” Potter says, stuffing his hands into his robe pockets. “Hermione, Ron, the Weasleys, Sirius, Remus—they were all helping me, but I didn’t know how to relate to them. Not like…not like you’re supposed to. We’re all friends now, family even, but then it was still confusing. I think maybe they were all still trying to see if they could get the old Harry back. If they tried the right memory, the right combination of words…

“You’re the first person who didn’t do that. You’re the one who didn’t care about the old me not being around anymore. You cared about the person sitting in front of you.” Potter glances away. “So, yeah. You’re my friend. You’ll have to learn to cope with that somehow.”

“Cope,” Snape repeats, feeling numb. Then he glances back down at the invisible fabric that hides him from view.

He’s wearing Death’s own Cloak of Invisibility to attend the funeral of the man he killed. It’s the sort of irony Snape well understands.

“I’ll be there. At the funeral. I’ll return the cloak…afterwards. By house-elf.” Snape manages another swallow when he can’t seem to manage more than three words at a time. “Hogwarts?”

Potter nods. “Yeah. Hogwarts.”

* * * * *

The funeral is atrociously dull. Snape isn’t certain why he stays for the entirety, lurking in the background like Death waiting for the soul of the deceased.

Albus looks to be at peace. With his death, the curse on his hand faded, and it looks the same as the
rest of him.

That is possibly the best thing Snape gets out of the entire funeral—the curse is lifted. Albus will not be sealed into that white marble tomb, clutching the Elder Wand in his crossed hands, with the mark of Voldemort’s curse on his skin.

It seems as if the entirety of Wizarding Britain turns out for Albus’s funeral, and large chunks of Europe decided to join in. As Snape predicted, it is chaos, but it is, at least, polite and orderly chaos.

Fawkes sings during the latter half of the funeral. Snape feels like something within his chest is going to shatter. If that blasted bird doesn’t shut up, he’ll seal it in a block of ice and drop it in the ocean.

When the tomb of Albus Dumbledore is finally sealed with the heavy, final thud of stone striking stone, Snape turns and walks away. The worst is behind him; the harshest of tests still lie ahead.
They passed. Excellent marks. Hermione and Harry have graduated Hogwarts.

There is another note later, this one in Black’s much more excitable scrawl:

Best marks out of the entire batch. Getting drunk. If you can safely away, join us.

They like you. Snape shakes off the memory of Potter’s declaration and pens a brief response for Dobby to take back to Black.

I cannot. Have several dozen on my behalf…and congratulate them. They most certainly earned it.

Snape had already been planning something for the month of July. Two graduating students just make the timing seem correct instead of random, which Snape prefers. Gifts and letters arrive at 12 Grimmauld Place the day after the Hogwarts’ graduation ceremony, delivered by a goblin that owes Snape a favor in regards to a very stubborn case of arthritis in his aging wife.

It occurs to Snape as he prepares the last letter that he is, in effect, saying goodbye. If so, then at least he has done a proper job of it.

To Miss Hermione Jean Granger, Graduate of Hogwarts:

Albus Dumbledore had a will, one he updated in the months before his death. He wished to wait until later for it to be read to you and your friends by Ministry employees, but I talked him out of it. Stupid, useless idea.

The Headmaster left you his copy of The Tales of Beedle The Bard. Before you scoff, as I know you have your own copy, consider that this particular book is over three hundred years old. Languages evolve and change rapidly.
From myself, you now have your own copy of *Moste Potente Potions*. It was formerly my own, and as such is filled with suggestions on how to improve some of the disasters this book contains. If you truly wish to push yourself towards Wizarding university level, this book and your N.E.W.T. scores will serve you well. It is useful for far more than the brewing of illicit Polyjuice Potion in a ghost’s favorite bathroom.

You will have to discern how to gather the necessary Non-Tradable materials on your own.

Kindest Regards,

Professor Severus Snape

*

Mister Harry James Potter,

You are infuriating.

You are not as infuriating as Albus bloody Dumbledore. In his will, he left you the Golden Snitch you captured in your very first game as Gryffindor Seeker by attempting to swallow it. That is not how one plays Quidditch. It is probably for the best that you do not recall such ridiculous tactics.

The point to this gift is that there is a specific item inside. Albus thinks it should be discovered when the time is right; I say it’s a rubbish idea. To discover what is inside, touch the Snitch to your lips and tell it that you’re about to die.

Yes, even if it’s not true. The spell attached to the Snitch will not know the difference. It only awaits your voice and those words.

I strongly advise you to find a way to secretly carry this item on your person at all times. It is not safe to leave unattended.

*From myself, I give you a very old edition of *Moste Potente Potions* in pristine condition. It is very, very stolen, but the tracking spell has been removed, and…well, the former owner is far too dead to be concerned about its whereabouts. (Not my fault.)*

Unlike Granger, you’ve borne my influence already. Now it is time to strike out on your own.

*Do not write in this damned book. Unlike Granger’s copy, this one should remain unmarked. Flat parchment sheets are an excellent substitute for my youthful margin-scribbling.*

*Be careful, you idiot.*

Respectfully Yours,

Professor Severus Snape

*
To Mister Ronald Bilius Weasley:

One hopes that your friends have informed you, at least in part, of the situation at hand. When you are through yelling and raging like the ginger you are, please read the rest of this letter.

Congratulations on your new relationship. Try not to ruin it through foolishness. Your father and your eldest two brothers are gentlemen; it is still not too late to learn to become one, as well.

Fred and George are beyond all hope. I believe Miss Johnson must have suffered a permanent Quidditch-based head injury to agree to become betrothed to George. Alicia Spinnet must suffer the same affliction.

Albus Dumbledore has entrusted you with the ownership of his valued Deluminator. It can not only retrieve lights to darken the area around you, it can also be a light in dark, unforgiving places. Experiment as you will, as it is harmless, but it has more properties than I can describe. I have been told they depend upon the owner of the device.

Merlin knows what the Deluminator will make of you.

Best Wishes to you in the Year to come,

Professor Severus Snape

*

To Sirius Orion Black and Remus John Lupin,

I hate both of you.

That being said…congratulations: you are fooling no one.

Lupin, you are terrible at buttoning shirts in a hurry. Just put on a blasted robe the next time your atrocious activities are interrupted.

Black, if you become a werewolf Animagus due to your lecherous ways, I reserve the right to laugh at you.

I suddenly find myself intrigued by an idea. Can a werewolf also become an Animagus? If so, would it take a different form than the curse of the wolf? Inquiring minds with nothing to do but bow and scrape to a madman wish to know.

Lupin, enclosed with this missive is the recipe for normal Wolfsbane Potion. Black can supply the money needed to procure the ingredients to make it in large batches. If you wish to convince the bloody werewolves not to side with Voldemort—and time is running out in this regard—then I would suggest handing out free Wolfsbane just before the full moon. Perhaps it would be wise to hint that there is a better version available for those who side with the Order against Voldemort. Bribery is a useful tool and should not be disregarded because of such silly things as morals.

Black, do yell at him to stop whinging about accepting charity. It’s an annoying character flaw. It is not charity if you’re in a relationship, it is called marriage.

I cannot believe I just had to write that. I genuinely blame you both.
Black: you currently have two Heirs, even if you have yet to publicly acknowledge the second. Soon it might even be three, but none bear the Black family name. Potter cannot change his, or else that line ends with him. Malfoy has a similar difficulty. I suggest asking Auror Tonks if she’ll consider an alteration. Given her attachment to her father, Tonks-Black might mollify her sensibilities. Whomever she eventually marries can be ordered to take the Black name, and then they can have ever-changing little Metamorphmagus babies, however the bloody hell that came about.

(Seriously. How. There is no history of Metamorphmagi in your entire damned lineage.)

Please stop pretending not to be involved. It is tiresome.

Professor Severus Snape

*

Dearest Narcissa,

You must go Malfoy Manor on this very day. I will send word if it suddenly becomes unsafe to do so, and tell you of a different day. If you do not hear from me, assume all is well and proceed.

Remove anything from that massive pile of brick that you wish to retain, whether it was originally yours or not. Draco will be there, waiting to help you. We have concerns that the Manor may not last through the entirety of the upcoming war, either by destruction or pillaging by those who should certainly know better.

Once you have emptied the Manor to your satisfaction, and saved those items that are part of Draco’s inheritance, do not return. Draco will tell the story of his “thieving mother” and will be forced to adjust the wards, and they will not be set to do nice things to those it considers to be intruders. Be cautious, but be thorough. Dobby still knows the Manor well; if you ask him nicely, he may be willing to assist you.

When this is done, divorce that miserly arse before the Ministry falls. Draco will automatically inherit through the old blood magic, as Lucius is in Azkaban. That title will not revert even if Lucius is freed from prison. In that sense, you will have one less concern as to your son’s safety.

Enclosed is a broach I discovered lost in a room in Hogwarts while I explored it this spring. I believe that its lovely silver leaf with berries of black pearl will suit you well.

You may consider it a bribe, if you like, though I have nothing yet in mind.

My Best Wishes to You,

Professor Severus Prince Snape

*

To Mister William Arthur Weasley and Miss Fleur Violette Delacour:
Congratulations on your impending marriage. I am sure you will thrive, no matter what others believe. You both carry the courage of your convictions, a strength that very few are brave enough to bear with pride.

While it appears to be a mere Muggle horse shoe, this is an item of the old traditions in truth. If you hang it above your doorway, one who enters the house with ill intent will quickly discover that there is a large U-shaped bit of forged iron embedded in their skull. I’ve witnessed its use one time. Believe me, it is quite the deterrent.

Do not give up on old allegiances to those the rest of the wizarding world find unsavory, for they are loyal and steadfast if you can hold their trust. They are also very fond of (temporarily) gifting children with items of great protective strength. These beings enjoy children, but fortunately not in the same ways as the Green Folk of old.

William, please do not let your father try to make deals with the Green Folk. A snake already attempted to eat him this decade, and that is probably all the adventure he needs beyond what is to come.

I wish you great happiness, though it may often seem otherwise.

*

To the Auror Nymphadora Asterope Tonks:

For the love of Merlin, please ask Oliver Wood out on a date before the young man explodes.

*

To Madam Andromeda Cassiopeia Black Tonks & Edward Deacon Tonks:

When the time comes, do not run. Go to ground.

For the love of God and Merlin, do not run.

* * * *

Draco comes storming into Riddle Manor that evening. He slams his coat down onto the back of an old chair so hard that it cracks directly down the middle and goes straight to Bellatrix. “Did you tell her?” he snarls at his aunt.

Bellatrix gives Draco a careless up-and-down glance before shoving her spoon back into the cup she’s holding, retrieving another small bite of something that resembles raspberry gelato. “Tell who what, Drakey?”
Draco makes a displeased face and steps back in apparent frustration. His acting, Snape thinks, is superb. Just like his brilliance with the Vanishing Cabinet, it shows a level of ingenuity that his father lacks.

“Did you tell my mother the new key to the wards on the Manor, Aunt Bella?”

Bellatrix shrugs. “Haven’t had the pleasure of Cissy’s company since I had the pleasure of watching Cousin Sirius hand over valuable information for free. Any fool could have told him that Baby Regulus was dead.”

“What is this?”

Draco does not flinch, but his expression tightens before he stands tall and turns around in one smooth motion, completing it with a bow that is Malfoy-trained, but definitely Black-perfected. “I apologize for my hasty entry, My Lord. I just discovered the Manor in a terrible state.”

“I see.” Voldemort stands in the doorway that leads into the crumbling parlor. He is resting his wand against his hand in a deceptive, gentle manner. “What news then, young Mister Malfoy?”

Draco stands. “My mother,” he grates out, “got past the wards on the Manor. She all but emptied it, My Lord. Many items specific to the Malfoy family line are gone.”

“I see. I am sorry for your family’s loss,” Voldemort replies, assuming a sympathy that is too chill to be genuine. “Are they replaceable?”

“Some,” Draco admits, after a moment of seeming deliberation. “But not all. I was to offer you the services of the family library, but I fear many of the tomes My Lord would find most useful are long gone.”

“But not all. Not yet, at least.” Voldemort taps his wand against his palm. “Can the wards be altered, the theft halted?”

“I can’t truly restructure the wards, no. Not until—” Draco pauses mid-sentence, his head jerking to one side while his hands bunch up into fists.

Bellatrix smiles. “Oh, dear. Baby sister has just divorced Lucius.”

“I didn’t think it could happen that fast,” Yaxley grunts.

“Lucius is in prison,” Snape tells the other man in a voice that just barely hides his displeasure. “It is very hard to contest a divorce from within Azkaban.”

Voldemort seems amused by the drama. “Well, Draco?”

“If he is imprisoned, and she divorces him… I’m of age. The wards and the Manor belong to me.” Draco looks shocked. Then he shakes it off and drops to one knee before Voldemort. “Would My Lord care for a residence more suiting to your status?”

“Is it safe for our purposes?” Voldemort asks.

“It is Unplottable, and unless someone is told of its existence by those who hold its secret, no one outside of My Lord’s most loyal will ever find it,” Draco says.

Voldemort places his hand on Draco’s head, a whisper of movement that is a mockery of tousling some beloved child’s hair. “Well done, Draco. As with the Cabinets, you continue to surprise me.”
What use have I for your father when I have you?"

“His face has been known far longer than mine among Pure-blood circles,” Draco offers, rising when Voldemort signals he do so. “That could be useful, even if other aspects are not.”

“True, true.” Voldemort glances around at his assembled Death Eaters. “Pack up what little we’ve gathered here. It seems we are undergoing a change of address.”

Snape waits until Draco has disappeared into a different room to shake off the lingering feel of Voldemort’s hand. Then he leans closer to Bellatrix. “Are you eating frozen blood?”

Bellatrix licks off the spoon and holds it to the tip of her tongue, giggling. “Florean Fortescue made it.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “That is most unsanitary, Bella.”

Albus would be so disappointed by Florean’s death. Snape just doesn’t want to know what Bellatrix did with the rest of the body.

The full assembled might of the Death Eaters gathers in the third week of July. This is when the full plans for the Ministry are laid out, and Snape feels his stomach tighten in displeasure. The agents already in place within the Ministry are going to open doors and passageways to what is now a small but effective, bloodthirsty army. Their targets are already marked: those who are considered blood traitors; those who will not bow to Voldemort; those who are Muggle-born. Snape is relieved that the day in question falls on William and Fleur Delacour’s wedding day, so that Arthur will not be inside the Ministry when it begins.

He cannot help Percival Weasley, who still has a position within the Ministry. The idiot has maintained his absolute loyalty to the government while disowning his family. If he is intelligent and keeps his mouth shut, he may survive the incursion.

Too many others will not. He can do nothing for them.

He has spent what little free time he has brewing potions at Spinner’s End. While he lacks access to his laboratory at Hogwarts, he spent years and funds to recreate the setup in the basement of his hated childhood home. There, he can work uninterrupted on more delicate—or more illegal—projects.

Snape has been attempting, with utmost care, to recreate the preservation potion. Walburga Black and those before her apparently did not believe in the concept of notation. Two of the listed ingredients in “Ilding a Aparylgl of Ælif” have multiple possibilities. He takes care with his shield charms, and actually shatters a bronze cauldron, before getting a result that is not immediately explosive.

He knows the first one isn’t right, but he can’t find his way forward without testing each attempt. The aging Flobberworm it is tried upon also explodes, just as the previous failed potions. Not an auspicious beginning, but it’s a start. Even failures are ways in which to learn.

When the second Flobberworm simply flops over onto its side, dead, Snape starts over. He sits down with quill, parchment, and a stack of books, writing out every conceivable translation and meaning to every single word and rune the formula contains, beginning to end.

It doesn’t take long to realize he was incorrect in his initial translation. The potion is not, “for the preservation of youthful life,” as he’d previously thought, but, “prolonging a something of eternal life.”
Aparpyng isn’t even a real bloody word. Damned transitive periods in English language—at least if the creator had used a rune, Snape might be able to find it for proper translating. He won’t know what aparpyng really means until he gets the formula correct. The term might imply that the preserved youth is literally skin deep, or it was simply the only word the potion’s creator knew to use that wasn’t French. Idiot; at least French would be less of a complete mess than these instructions.

Snape wanted to be handing the Dark Lord a poison disguised as preservation before the fall of the Ministry, but no, oh no. Instead, he is translating someone else’s ancient, shoddy work!

By morning, he is more than a bit peaked. He is also staring at the translated list of ingredients in absolute dismay.

1 Cauldron of Finest Golden Pyrite, Large

Where is he supposed to find a cauldron made of pyrite? Snape can’t recall ever seeing one of those before in his entire life, let alone hearing of one being used for anything.

It does, however, make him suspect that aparpyng is meant to mean appearance.

It’s still not a real word.

1 Stirring Rod of Purest Silver, the Length of the Brewer’s Left Forearm

Snape scowls down at the page. Pure silver is not an effective stirring device; the metal is too soft to effectively stir a thick brew unless the rods are twice the normal thickness of a standard glass rod.

Measuring Scales of Purest Gold

Much like the cauldron, Snape knows of no potion that requires golden scales. Either it is the potion’s age and old alchemical beliefs of the time influencing this potion’s creation, or there really is much that the wizarding world has lost over the centuries. It is well-known that Merlin charged the Four Founders, greatest of the magic workers left in the eleventh century, to create a school devoted to magic. Perhaps this book is a prime example of why the ancient wizard gave the Founders that final command before vanishing from history.

All Phials of Storage, Measurement, and Preparation to be of the Most Flawless Quartz

Annoying, but not impossible. Crystal would have been easier, but he triple-checked; the book most assuredly means the stone, not glass.

1 Mortar & Pestle, Carved from the Stone that Held the Sword

“All right. Now you’re making shite up,” Snape mutters, resting his forehead in his hands as he stares down at the list. How the hell does one acquire a mortar and pestle carved from the stone that held Excalibur?
Moreover, since when is that blasted sword real? Merlin and Arthur represented the last gasp, the final attempt in the British Isles of Muggle-Wizard cooperation before the Muggles picked up Christianity’s penchant for burning things it didn’t approve of. The sword exists in the Muggle tales, but there is not a single hint of it in the wizarding stories.

Maybe that division had been deliberate. Intriguing.

Perhaps Snape can request that Minerva ask Albus’s portrait if such a thing exists—no. The Black family has to have one in their possession if Walburga Black was truly using this potion until 1985. Kreacher might require a bribe to search for it, or Snape can find the time and go stumbling about up there in that overly-large wasteland of an attic by himself.

He would attempt to ask Walburga’s portrait as to its location, but after Draco burnt the portrait’s match in Malfoy Manor, she has not been seen. It makes him wonder if even magical portraits can become deceased.

No. Bribery is far preferable. Black once got lost up in that stupid attic for three days.

Methodology, at least, makes sense. All dry ingredients are to be powdered only under the light of the full moon. All ingredients can only be stored for a single lunar cycle, regardless of any preservation charms employed. Dry ingredients must be kept in the dark between preparation and use; wet ingredients must be stored, untouched, on a windowsill struck by the light of sunrise each morning. Living ingredients can be kept anywhere, but the lunar cycle still applies.

All wet ingredients can only be decanted and measured under a new moon. That is also when the potion must be brewed, sunset to sunup. If the process isn’t complete by sunrise, the entire potion is ruined.

The list of ingredients itself is the bone of contention, the bane of his entire night.

6 Antipodean Opaleye Dracon Scales, Naturally Shed by a Female Dragon with Egg

Not Welsh Green, which is far easier to acquire—and part of his earlier blunder. The rune seemed at first glance to stand only for “dragon” before Snape went hunting for his father’s old Muggle magnifying glass and held it over the lines.

2 Yntsa of Blood of a Scorpion-tailed Chimera

Two ounces of blood from one of the most dangerous creatures in the world. Of course.

1 Yntsa of Acromantula Venom, Brewed With 5 Yntsa Honey and 1 Penig Perfect Dandelion Petals for 10 Passes of the Sun Across the Sky

Merlin, why? What possible benefit could Acromantula venom have in this potion?

8 Yntsa of an Enemy’s Blood

A full cup of blood. Snape taps his fingers over that one. Nowhere in the formula does it specify if
the blood needs be taken from a defeated enemy, or a defeated and dead enemy. That is an important distinction, dammit! Just as important: the enemy of the recipient, or the enemy of the brewer?

He finally finds that information, a footnote buried near the end of the book’s pathetic attempt at an index. Enemy of the brewer. Preferable if brewer and recipient are the same being, but not required. Excellent.

Perhaps he can just kill someone he hates—no, that list is far too long. Stun an enemy, steal their blood while they live, and then kill them afterwards?

Snape wonders if anyone would miss Corban Yaxley if he were to suddenly vanish. He does currently rank near the top of his list of people Snape wants to see made dead.

A Single Blooming Water Lily, Gifted by a Kelpie

What. He would kill the maker of this potion if they were not long dead.

I Penig of the Softest Down from an Adult Snowy Owl, Freely Given

That, Snape can manage.

Three Strands from a Male Unicorn’s Tail, Plucked With Permission

If the unicorns still try to follow Snape all over the Forbidden Forest, that is possibly also easily done, though he’s never asked them before. He usually collects tail and mane hair that is left behind on trees and brush.

Three Strands From a Thestral’s Tail, Removed by Crescent Moonlight

What the hell?

A Fire Crab, Shell of Emerald Alone, Alive and Whole

Oh, good. Now he is off to Fiji as well as his necessary visit to New Zealand.

8 Penig of Hair Harvested from a Defeated, Slain Pogrebin

Now Russia is also involved in the construction of this potion. Great.

WHY?

3 Kneazle Whiskers, Stolen
Oh, that will be such fun. He had best take those whiskers from an animal living somewhere Snape never, ever plans to return to. Maybe Russia.

_All Juices Collected From 5 Freshly Squeezed Horklumps_

That is honestly the most normal thing he’s seen yet.

_7 Leaves from a Wiggentree, Freely Given by its Guardian_

Excellent. Now he is also talking to sticks. He loathes Bowtruckles. He also loathes fairies, and gathering at least a dozen of those is now a requirement. The only thing a Bowtruckle prefers over eating Fairy eggs is attempting to mate with an actual Fairy.

God, this is complete misery, and he hasn’t even properly started yet.

_3 Yntsa of Mooncalf Dung, Freshly Collected_

Snape gives up. This list has gotten too stupid to be anything but entirely serious.

_1 Single Drop of Veela Blood, Collected by Means of a Dead White Rose Thorn_

Oh, now he is not only going to Fiji, New Zealand, Russia, and Germany, he now has a stopover in France. Snape is going to teach himself necromancy, dig up this potion’s creator, bring them back to life, and then feed the bastard to Nagini. Maybe she will choke on him and save him the trouble of having to kill her. How in the entire name of God is he supposed to—

Ah. Well. How does one bribe a Delacour, then?

_1 Live Golden Snidget, Crushed in the Hand Just Before Use_

Merlin, he’ll need to fund a Snidget breeding program just for this purpose. If he sells this potion, the birds will be extinct in less than a month.

The final ingredient is the one thing that may ruin the entire plan.

_Hair From The One To Be Made Youthful_

Voldemort, after the ritual of Blood-and-Bone, does not have hair. At all. Too much of the reptilian dominated the process. Snakes do not have hair.

Snape quietly, and with great dignity, beats his head against his workbench in frustration.

On the twenty-fifth of July, one week before the scheduled fall of the Ministry, Snape seeks out
Voldemort for a private audience. He waits long minutes in silence, as if ignored, but he knows better.

“Rise, Severus,” Voldemort says at last, without bothering to turn around. “I had thought you busy with other projects.”

“I was,” Snape replies. There is a painful twinge in his knees as he gets back onto his feet. Voldemort’s temper grows more uncertain the closer the clock ticks down to what he considers his impending victory. The Crucius Curse of two days ago is still playing hell with Snape’s joints. “However, I have been researching something of interest, as well, an item that I thought My Lord might take a particular interest in.”

Voldemort finally turns around. “Show me.”

Snape refused to bring in the entire book, not on the chance Voldemort would claim it as his own. Instead, he holds out the page he removed from the stitched bindings. All of the information, original and translated from both sides of the page, is already copied onto new parchment at home, just in case.

Voldemort’s eyes dart over the original runes with its mixture of Old English, Middle English, and someone’s complete inability to use or spell real words. “A preservation spell?”

“Oh what I also first thought,” Snape says. “It is actually a potion to prolong the appearance of youth. Walburga Black is confirmed to have used the potion through 1985, which is the year her beauty and health both failed her, just before her death. The impression I get from the potion is that it is also capable of restoring lost youth.”

Voldemort glances up at him without lifting his head from the page, a humorless smile on his face. “Severus, I did not think you minded my visage.”

“I do not. My Lord knows that I have a fondness for the reptilian,” Snape returns evenly. He isn’t surprised that Voldemort realized the potion’s purpose right away. To assume Voldemort lacks intelligence of any sort is to blithely sign one’s own death warrant. “However, as My Lord himself told me: one attracts flies with vinegar, but with honey, one attracts bejeweled birds.”

“1978.” Voldemort’s thin lips spread out in a rare smile of genuine delight. “I did not know if you recalled that.”

“I forget nothing My Lord has told me,” Snape counters. “The potion is in two parts. The first grants the returned youthful appearance. The second makes it permanent.”

Voldemort’s head twitches upwards, betraying his interest, but his voice remains even. “Permanent?”

Snape nods. “Yes. The effects will be permanent, for as long as My Lord shall live.” It is the complete truth. “I would need absolute freedom until the end of August to gather what is necessary and brew the potion, but once that is done? It awaits only My Lord’s pleasure.”

“And if you plan to give me poison, Severus?”

“I did not kill Albus Dumbledore merely to feed you ineffective poisons,” Snape says in tired frustration.

“Ineffective?” Voldemort hands the page back, but when Snape reaches out to grasp it, it is not released. “Why do you believe them to be ineffective? You are very, very good at your job, Severus.”
“Dumbledore.” Snape lets the scorn and disbelief he’d felt in that moment fill his voice. “He believes that as long as Potter lives, you are invulnerable. The opposite, he thinks, is also true. Dumbledore spoke of it being in the prophecy My Lord was so interested in acquiring from Sirius Black.”

The page is released; Voldemort nods. “You will have your month, Severus. I will send the Carrows along to Hogwarts after the Ministry is ours, the better to begin preparing the school in your absence.”

Snape knew that Voldemort planned to make Hogwarts attendance mandatory for all Pure-blooded and Half-blood students. The Carrows, however, are a new and unwanted addition. “Very well. As long as they defer to Professor McGonagall in my absence.”

“McGonagall, Severus?” The dangerous glint of red is back in Voldemort’s eyes.

Snape breathes out a sigh of unfeigned irritation. “Whether or not the Carrow will be decent teachers remains to be seen, but My Lord—who do the Carrows know of running an entire school? McGonagall may have no love for me, or for you, but she will remain in Hogwarts due to her desire to educate, not to mince politics.”

“Hmm. I remember. She always did have a disdain for such things,” Voldemort admits softly. “But if she steps too far out of bounds…”

“She will not,” Snape promises. “If she does, she will answer to me.”

“Ah; a Headmaster and his Deputy Headmistress. You will indeed have quite the scorecard, Severus.”

_Hopefully not_, Snape thinks, bowing properly before taking his leave.

He Apparates to several different locations, cloaking himself with a Disillusionment Charm. He waits for several minutes each time, alert for anyone attempting to follow.

Anyone willing to follow him into the Scottish and Welsh dragon reserves gets what they deserve, anyway.

By the time he arrives in London, it’s fully dark. One of the many things that no one ever discusses about the Cruciatus Curse is how much it bloody well _hurts_ to Apparate afterwards, especially if it is multiple times in a row. Snape knows if he tries to land in that small, charmed area of the front doorstep of 12 Grimmauld Place, he might miss. To miss is to accidentally reveal the house, and he refuses to take Potter’s home away from him.

Instead, he Apparates to the Muggle alleyway that runs behind Grimmauld Place. He lands just outside the door of the old coach house. The darkness is broken only by the faint glimmer of lights, the distant hints of Muggle London visible just beyond the end of the road.

A call for Dobby gets him immediate house-elf attention, though the elf looks surprised to see him sitting on the ground next to the warded coach house door. “Master Severus!” Dobby peers at him in concern. “Is you injured?”

“Technically, no.” Snape tilts his head at the house. “Is it a politic time to be here?”

Dobby gives the question serious thought. “It’s bein’ more than yous six. Master Ron is here, Master Bill with his battle scars, Mistress Fleur, and Master Sirius’s cousins. That is bein’ okay?”

“No idea, but I’ll have to take the chance. I need to speak with the others.” Snape considers the sign
of weakness and decides he doesn’t care. This is the only place in the world he dares to reveal anything of the sort. “Help me inside, please.”

Dobby helps him to stand, pulling Snape’s arm over the elf’s thin, boney shoulders. The Apparition is so gentle it’s almost unnoticed but for his arrival in the kitchen…and the sudden trio of wands that are now pointed at his face.

“Trickery!” Fleur growls out. Her wand is getting dangerously close to the beginning movements of a rather painful hex. “Traitor!”

Then Kreacher pops into the air in front of Snape and Dobby, brandishing his half-broken cricket bat. “YOU NO BE HURTIN’ MASTER BAT!” he screeches at full volume, shocking Fleur Delacour, William Weasley, and Ted Tonks into nearly dropping their wands.

“What the hell is—oh, for fuck’s sake, put your wands down,” Lupin says in irritation as he comes down the stairs. “Our own blasted house-elf brought him in. Or do you think Dobby adopts everything he sees?”

“Winky,” William and Ted both say at once.

Snape bites back a dry snort of laughter. “They have a point, Lupin.”

“Severus—” Lupin breaks off in alarm. “Christ, man, you look like hell. Sit down.”

Dobby helps Snape to sit in the nearest kitchen chair. He tries not to let on that he nearly misses it entirely. “I’s be getting’ the tea,” Dobby says, and hurries off to the other side of the kitchen.

William finally lowers his wand. “I feel like I’m missing significant information”

“I feel the same,” Fleur mutters. Her accent is still very French, but has lost some of its more pronounced traits.

Snape sees what Dobby meant by scarring now. It looks like someone with claws slashed William across the face—

“Fucking Greyback,” Snape hisses.

“Yeah, him.” William just looks annoyed. “I’m not a werewolf, it not being the full moon that night, but I sure as hell can’t sleep through a full moon anymore.”

Ted scowls and goes out to the stairwell. “ANDROMEDA!” he roars. “YOU SAID YOU WANTED TO KILL HIM!”

“Oh, let’s just flood the kitchen, then.” Lupin rolls his eyes. “Kreacher, I won’t let them kill your favorite Bat. Please go fetch Harry, Sirius, Narcissa, Ron, and Hermione for me.”

Kreacher shakes his cricket bat at Fleur and William. “You’s behavin’!” he snarls, and disappears with his typical, indignant-sounding pop of air.

Andromeda makes it down the stairs first, and notices Snape at once. “You—am I killing you, or merely maiming you?”

“I’m only two days recovered from one of the worst bouts of Crucio I’ve ever received in my entire life,” Snape retorts. “You will have to wait in line for maiming.” He turns to Fleur and William. “Did you like the horseshoe?”
William frowns before sliding his wand back into his shirt sleeve. “Really good for denting heads, is it?”

“Mounted or used as a blunt instrument, to your preference,” Snape replies, and tries not to close his eyes. Now that he is not in immediate danger, all his body wants to do is sleep.

Andromeda understands at once. “Apparating after Crucio is harsh. How many times, Severus?”

“I lost count.”

“You need a Restorative Draught, or a Pepperup. Or both,” Lupin observes.

“I ran out. Last week.” Snape gives his trembling hand an irritated look. “I haven’t had time to make more, and I can’t exactly go anywhere at the moment to purchase it.”

“You could have come here, you idiot,” Potter interjects, leading the way down the stairs ahead of what sounds like a herd of blasted elephants.

“I did,” Snape retorts. “Or one of us is hallucinating.”

“You’re definitely the one closer to that,” Potter shoots back, rummaging around the inside of his robe before producing three corked phials. “Right now, else you’re going to fall over and be truly embarrassed.”

“You’re the one who tried to eat a Snitch,” Snape grouses under his breath, yanking the stopper before downing a Restorative Draught. The taste is off. “What the hell did you add?”

“Don’t remember eating a Snitch.” Potter takes the empty phial away and shoves the next in line at him. “And you know the idea you had about adding Felix Felicis to one of the better potions for curse-treatments? It actually works pretty well in a lot of things.”

“Luck in replenishment.” Snape considers it as the fog trying to settle in on his thoughts fades away again. “Good idea.”

“Of course it was. It was your idea.” Potter stops and stares at him, holding three empty phials in his hand. Snape can tell he wants to ask more than one question, but Potter is flanked by multiple people who are angry, confused, and likely still want to hex Snape into oblivion. “What’s happened?”

Snape lets out steadying breath. “I need help, or none of us get our wish in making Voldemort exceptionally dead. Not reaching for my wand,” he adds, when Fleur’s wand tip twitches again. For good measure, he shakes his wand out of his sleeve and leaves it lying on the table. Andromeda eyes it, but doesn’t move to take it.

Snape pulls folded sheet of parchment from his robes. This is a second copy of his translation efforts, one that Voldemort did not get to view. “This is the preservation potion Walburga Black was using…and these are its ingredients.”

Curiosity slowly overrides caution. By the time Narcissa joins them, Snape is trying not to feel penned in by too many people in close proximity.

“This list is insane, and that’s not including the cauldron,” Black says, frowning. “Hair from the one to be made youthful again.”

Snape meets Black’s eyes. “Yes. I’m going there, first. If I can’t find anything, then there is nothing we can do. We continue with the other parts of the plan and then hope someone just hexes the
“Well, it’s nice to know that there is a plan,” Ted says. “Enemy’s blood, huh? Want one of us to volunteer?”

Snape rolls his eyes at Ted. “No, you idiot. Or did you miss the part where it said enemy? I wouldn’t have told you to bloody well hide, otherwise.”

“Hide. That was your handwriting. I wasn’t sure.” Andromeda makes an amused sound over the list. “An Antipodean Opaleye. That just happens to be my Patronus. It’s too bad that a Patronus does not have scales to shed.”

“Hide from what?” William asks, while Ted is still scowling over the realization as to where his warning came from.

“The Ministry falls a week from today. Plans are already in place to create some sort of forced Muggle Registration system.”

“Which will be little more than a means to round up Muggle-borns and execute them.” Granger looks disheartened. “We’ve overlooked a huge, terrible problem.”

“We were so worried about the children and their parents,” Lupin whispers, his face paling.

“We didn’t stop to think about adult Muggle-born witches and wizards.” Andromeda presses her lips together. “Can anything be done?”

Snape shakes his head. “Not at this juncture—not to prevent it. Mitigate it, perhaps. Once the Ministry falls, the Order is going to have its hands full in rescuing those who are intelligent enough not to go register. Those who do? Once they walk into the Ministry, it may be too late.”

“I wanna know two things, first,” Ronald Weasley says, speaking up. He crosses his arms and glares at Snape from across the table. “I already heard it from them.” He gestures at Granger and Potter. “But I wanna hear it from you. Did you kill Professor Dumbledore?”

Snape gazes back at Ronald Weasley. “Yes, and no.” William sucks in an angry breath but says nothing.

“S’what they said. How’s it both?” Weasley asks.

William puts his hand over his eyes. “Albus Dumbledore’s blasted withered hand. I asked him about it over the holidays, and he brushed me off. What did he do, Professor?”

“Dumbledore discovered a cursed ring in the residence of Voldemort’s maternal family. Recognizing it, he immediately put it on without first checking to see if it was enchanted or cursed.” Snape shakes his head. “It’s been almost a year, and I’m still so fucking angry at him for being so damned foolish!”

“How long did he have?” Andromeda’s dark eyes are clear and focused.

“He might have made it through the end of June, but after that—what was being done to contain the curse to his hand was already failing,” Snape tells her. “He asked for a swift death rather than extended weeks of excruciating suffering.”

“And thus ensured you got to be a proper, trusted spy.” Weasley looks a little less combative. “If you’re spying, why are you trying to help Voldemort with this, then?”
“Ron, you play chess,” William says, glancing at his brother. “It’s a feint, but the ruse has to be genuine. The trap is the part that you don’t want your enemy to see coming.”

“The trap is the easy part to prepare—Voldemort believes it is the second necessary element of the potion.” Snape taps the potion. “But first, I need this, and I have only one month to gather everything. It must be completed on the new moon—which is the eve of the first of September.”

“Oh, good, the night before school begins,” Lupin says. “Minerva says I’m finally out of a job again, too, since it won’t be safe to go back. That’s a familiar state of affairs.”

“Second question, then.” Weasley seems resigned. “What the bloody hell is a yent-sa?”


“Right, then. And a penig?”

“About one point six grams,” Potter says. “Even at that weight, I’d still need almost the entire month to get that much down from Hedwig.”

Snape looks to Fleur. “Miss Delacour: Veela blood, even a single drop, is one of the hardest stumbling blocks I have.”

Fleur nods, looking unhappy. “The Ministry of Britain falls on my wedding day.”

William lifts her hand and kisses the back of it. “Hey, it means we’ll never be able to forget our anniversary, love.”

Fleur grants him a sad smile that is still full of great beauty. “Professor Snape, you are promising me that this…this potion, it is to stop Voldemort, yes? Truly, that is your goal?”

“I’ll swear it under Veritaserum if you ask it,” Snape replies, utterly serious. “Voldemort killed my best friend, and then caused the death of one of the few individuals on the face of this planet that found me even remotely tolerable. I want to see Voldemort suffer, Miss Delacour, but I will settle for mere death.”

“Then you will have the blood you need, and the thorn it is gathered with. I will make sure it arrives in this house for safe-keeping,” Fleur says, her blue eyes dark with promise.

Snape inclines his head. “Thank you for such a gift.” Then he turns to Kreacher. The house-elf is standing on the table. “How often did your Mistress need to use this potion, Kreacher?”

Kreacher shifts on his feet, eyes glimmering as he thinks. “Every five years, Master Bat. Give or take a few months, if they’s had been stressful years.”

He won’t need to worry about repeat doses, then. Voldemort is going to be dead before that will ever be necessary. “Do you still wish to help avenge your Master, Kreacher?” Snape asks in a soft voice.

Kreacher stops shifting in place and stares directly at Snape. “Yes, Master Bat. Kreacher wants that more than anything else.”

“Then I know, somewhere in this house, is a pyrite cauldron, golden measuring scales, quartz laboratory equipment, and a mortar and pestle carved from stone.” Snape stares back at him. “If this is to succeed, I need those things. While some can be bought, and others crafted, the pieces carved from stone cannot be found anywhere else.”
Kreacher pulls on one of his ears, whining. “Mistress said those must always be bein’ secret.”

“Yes. I know, and I am sorry. But you can hold your promise to her, or avenge Regulus. It cannot be both.”

Kreacher whines again. “Master Regulus,” he whispers. “I’s be findin’ them. They be hidden, Master Bat. Master Sirius, Kreacher will be needin’ room on the table to put things.”

Black nods, a terrifyingly somber expression on his face. “You’ll have it. I want my brother avenged as much as you do.” Kreacher nods once and then disappears.

Dobby utters a faint cough and holds out a cup of tea with trembling hands. “I’s no wantin’ to interrupt.”

Snape accepts the cup before the distressed house-elf can drop it. “Thank you.”

“I feel like none of us know you at all,” William says in a rueful voice. “We don’t, do we?”

“You know parts of me,” Snape allows. “But to be true to the role I must still play? No. You do not.”

Lupin taps his hand on the piece of paper. “Dobby, please fetch parchment, quills, ink. We need to write down what we each of us will be acquiring, so Severus knows what items he will need to concentrate on collecting. I want this done now, while this is fresh in our minds.”

“There has to be someone in Knockturn Alley still selling Chimera blood. They will guarantee me it is of the proper species, or I will make them very dead,” Narcissa says in her familiar, business-like way. “I do believe I will be able to acquire the Acromantula Venom as well.”

Two harsh difficulties down. “Thank you, Narcissa.”

“How is Draco?” Narcissa asks, the business-like demeanor falling away for a moment.

“Playing his role so well that it fills me with pride,” Snape replies. Narcissa’s answering smile is golden light, mirrored by Andromeda’s dark moon pleasure.

“Then consider the gift that arrived with your letter as payment for what I am to acquire,” Narcissa says, and Snape nods. He hadn’t planned that when sending the broach, but it’s now very convenient.


Kreacher starts bringing down items from wherever they were hidden, one at a time. The golden scales glimmer in the light, true-toned in the way only pure and ancient gold will shine. There isn’t a hint of dust, as if dust doesn’t quite dare to settle upon them. The roll of cloth Kreacher brings next is a carefully packaged collection of solid sliver stirring rods, each the perfect diameter to hold up against a thick potion without bending out of shape. Then comes the cauldron, which is rough on the outside, just as a pyrite sample would be. The inside is as smooth as polished glass, without a single crack or flaw to be seen.

“This would have taken some patient skill to craft,” Andromeda says, running her fingers along the inside of the stone cauldron. “Pyrite is very fond of crumbling. If there is a charm on it to keep it stable, I can’t sense it.”

“I wonder what properties it has,” Potter says, shoving his glasses back up into his hair again.
“Bronze is earth, gold is sun, silver for the moon, brass for medicinal antibiotics, vocal injuries, and sound, pewter for simple, quick brewing…where does pyrite fall in the list?”

“Fool’s gold stirred by silver.” Snape rubs at his forehead and digs through his memories. “Harder than all other cauldron metals unless you can afford platinum. Semiconductor. A sulfide of iron and sulfur. Iron is a stabilizer. Sulfur is a treatment for certain skin ailments, preservation agent, antibacterial and antifungal properties, treats arthritis, thyroid disorders, assists in healing wounds…”

“I have no idea what half of that means,” Weasley complains, and is shushed by his older brother and Granger at the same time.

“Silver, highest electrical conductivity of all metals, thermal conductive properties, catalyst in chemical reactions, water purifier and sanitizer.” Snape picks up one of the rods, which is as thick as his two of his forefingers held together. “Electrical qualities for proper chemical conversion of all ingredients, even and equal distribution of heat, medicinal qualities, preservation and purification, all stabilized by iron. That is utterly brilliant.”

“Why gold scales, then?” Fleur asks. She’s had her eye on them the entire time in envious delight. “We did not discuss such fine differences in Beauxbatons.”

_Because the Beauxbatons Potions teachers are idiots_, Snape thinks. “Gold is the least reactive of all known chemical elements, wizard or Muggle. It won’t react with oxygen at any temperature, but any item placed directly on these scales might pick up on gold’s anti-inflammatory properties.”

“So it’s not always about sunlight and masculinity, then,” Granger says thoughtfully.

“No. Not always.”

“Is that why you’re such a bas—uh, harsh teacher?” Weasley amends his words after getting a hard elbow to the ribs from Granger. “Because you expect us to memorize it all the way you sound like you have?”

Snape frowns at Weasley. “No, it’s because I expect you to actually _read your school textbooks._”

Weasley grimaces. “I do try. They’re bloody dull.”

“How the hell did you actually manage to get an E on your Potions O.W.L.?”

“Beats me,” Weasley says. “I was sure I’d done so badly it would be a Troll-level failure.”

William pushes his way past Ronald. “What did Fred and George get on their Potions N.E.W.T.? Mum thinks they won’t tell us because they failed.”

“They got Os, the complete ingrates,” Snape grousers, but William starts laughing. “If the daft little geniuses had applied themselves to all their coursework the way they applied themselves to crafting chemical formulas, they would have been top of their class. Higher marks than Percival.”

“If Percy ever gets his head out of his own arse, we have _got_ to tell him that!” Ronald says, grinning. The expression dies almost before the sentence is completed. “Merlin, the Ministry. Will he—”

“He disowned you all, the last I’d heard,” Snape says, pretending to be absorbed by further study of the pyrite cauldron. “He’s a Pure-blood, and he’s intelligent enough to keep up the ruse of preferring life under Voldemort.” He sighs. “Idiot should have been a bloody Slytherin.”

“That would’ve been different,” William says, putting his hand over Ronald’s face as the latter
splutters indignantly over the idea of any Weasley ever being a Slytherin.

“The Hat wanted to put me in Ravenclaw,” Black says, smiling at Ronald’s sputtering. “I decided that wasn’t enough to spite my parents and asked for Gryffindor instead. Poor Sorting Hat nearly had a conniption fit. Said I was already brave, if I was daring my family’s wrath, and should focus on becoming wiser, instead. Told it I could get wise in any House.”

“You failed at it,” Snape drawls, but Black just grins in acknowledgement.

Lupin nods. “The Sorting Hat told me before I could so much as get a thought into my head that if I tried to argue with it the way Sirius had, it would be highly displeased. Since there was a talking hat on my head threatening me, I didn’t dare to think a word.”

“I didn’t know you could actually…y’know, talk back to it,” Ronald says. “Not until Harry did it, anyway.”

“Fred and George did.” William has his arm curled around Fleur’s shoulders. “They said if it tried to put them in separate Houses, they’d take turns eating it. Pretty sure the Hat knew they weren’t bluffing.”

Andromeda clamps her hand over her mouth, muffling what sounds like delighted laughter. Ted smiles. “I knew I liked them for a reason. Quite practical.”

“Minerva tells me that you, young man, were almost a Hat-stall.” Lupin points at Potter.

“Uh…yeah.” Potter glances at Ron. “You going to disown me if I say that I spent almost five minutes arguing with the Hat because it wanted Slytherin?”

“When did you remember that?” Granger asks, while Snape turns his head and scowls at Potter.

Wrong. Bloody. Damned. House!

“I didn’t.” Potter shoves his hands into his robe pockets. “When I spoke to the Sorting Hat last year, it told me I insisted on Gryffindor. It had no idea why, though, and neither did I, since I didn’t tell the Hat why I didn’t want to be in that House.”

“Malfoy,” Ronald says flatly. “On the train. He acted like a complete prat, and it really left you lookin’ narked. I said you could’ve made friends with him anyway, and then you told me off for suggesting it, because he’d just insulted me. S’not like it was the first time that had ever happened.”

“And the moment my son was sorted into his favorite House…” Narcissa frowns. “Honestly, divorcing that man was not enough.”

“Well, I’m glad the Hat lost the argument,” Granger says. “Slytherin House wouldn’t exactly have been all that nice to Harry.”

“They’re better now,” Potter counters, but Granger shakes her head.

“They weren’t then,” Granger stresses. “The Hat was wrong.”

“No.” Snape pauses with his finger still resting on the cauldron’s lip. “The Hat isn’t wrong. It’s just too early.”


“One of Albus’s ideas.” Snape realizes he’s frowning. He hadn’t expected those words to be spoken
to him at the conclusion of the Yule Ball. Since he’d had no idea what to even do with such a concept, he’d buried the notion. “Dumbledore believed that we Sort too soon. That it should be an act reserved for the third-years, not something for first-years.”

“Stepping all over centuries of tradition. The Board of Governors would have been so pleased,” Narcissa says dryly. Kreacher arrives with two boxes full of dusty quartz jars and bottles, eyes the tableau in apparent disgust, and disappears again.

“Oh, forget them. That would have irritated everyone!” Black grins. “Can we do that anyway?”

“You’re not even sitting in the Wizengamot like you’re supposed to be,” Snape counters. “You don’t get a say.”

“I hate the bloody Wizengamot!” Black retorts.

“One cannot precipitate change without participating in the process,” Fleur says primly.

“When they throw you in jail for twelve years without a trial, then we’ll talk about participating.” Black crosses his arms and scowls.

Fleur draws herself up, indignant. “I think not!”

Kreacher arrives with the last of Walburga Black’s secret treasures. “This bein’ it,” he announces. They all stare at the mortar and pestle with varying expressions of disbelief. “That’s from the stone that’s supposed to have held Excalibur?” Granger asks.

“I admit, I did expect something a bit more…flash,” Andromeda says, while Ted nods in consternation.

“I admit, I did expect something a bit more…flash,” Andromeda says, while Ted nods in consternation.

“Looks like any old rock you can kick over in a field,” Ronald says.

“And it’s all but soaked in ancient magic,” Lupin mutters. “I might have to leave the room. That blasted thing is loud.”

Snape regards the dull grey stone mortar and pestle. He can’t sense whatever Lupin can, but it does have a feel of great age. The inside of the bowl is perfectly smooth, though the outside shows a rougher carving hand. There are no decorations on the bowl or the pestle, which has a faint gleam to it from the oils of many generations of use by human hands.

He can’t take any of these items with him. The others are replaceable, but not this one thing. “Where did Walburga do her brewing?”

“Probably in the kitchen,” Black answers, but Kreacher is already shaking his head.

“Can’t be takin’ these things from the house, not from the Black house, no, no, no,” Kreacher is muttering. “Oh, but I’m not supposed to show anyone that room, not even the blood traitor son! No, no, no!”

Black winces. “Oh, I think I know which room he means.” Then he startles Snape by kneeling down in front of Kreacher, who is yanking on both of his long, palsied ears. “Kreacher. For Regulus?”

Kreacher stops yanking at his ears, looking wretched. “Givin’ away all of Mistress’s secrets,” he whispers. “Kreacher is a bad house-elf.”

“Not at all. Kreacher is the most loyal house-elf the Black family has ever had,” Black counters.
“She would have told Regulus. He wouldn’t have kept those secrets from you, Kreacher. Not from his loyal friend.”

The ancient elf’s eyes well up with tears. “Friend,” he whispers. “You’s be followin’ Kreacher. I’ll show you.” He turns around and glares at Dobby. “Only the six! Not these others, Blacks or not Blacks! Dobby is makin’ sure they don’t see!”

Dobby looks baffled. “Dobby is makin’ sure of it,” he repeats.

Kreacher takes them to the furthest end of the first floor hallway. Hanging on the wall is a painting of a very familiar man—Phineas Nigellus Black, former Headmaster of Hogwarts.

Phineas eyes Black, Lupin, Granger, Potter, Narcissa, and Snape before he glares down at Kreacher. “You! You take these blood traitors away from here at once, house-elf!” Phineas barks immediately. “No blood traitors in my house—”

“You’s be shuttin’ it at once!” Kreacher yells back. “You’s only a painting, not the Master of this House! Master Sirius is helpin’ Kreacher to be avengin’ Master Regulus, and you will be lettin’ him do it!”

That seems to rattle Phineas. “Regulus is truly dead?” he whispers.

“Killed by Voldemort. You remember him—upstart Half-blood who thinks he’s going to rule all of Wizarding Britain?” Black asks, giving the painting a flat, angry stare.

“Killed by Tom Marvolo Riddle. Oh, a sad pox has fallen upon my House,” Phineas mutters, shaking his head. “At least there is a proper Slytherin standing before me!”

“I told Albus you were listening to every word,” Snape replies, unperturbed. Phineas Black is not an idiot.

“And there is, at least, also a proper Black here.” Phineas peers at Narcissa. “Great-grandniece, dear Narcissa.”

“Andromeda is downstairs,” Narcissa says in a sweet voice, which sets Phineas off on a round of entertaining swearing.

“All of my family! Blood traitors! Ruination of my House!”

“Oh, shut up,” Snape orders the portrait. “Open the damned door. The faster you let us inside and grant me free access to what lies beyond your portrait, the sooner I can kill the murderer of the grandnephew that you did like.”

“The words of a proper Slytherin,” Phineas murmurs. “Very well.” His portrait lets out a click and then opens with the grinding squeal of hinges that haven’t seen maintenance in long years. The smell of dust strikes Snape full in the face, almost making him sneeze.

Kreacher leads the way through the open doorway. “Careful, yous all should be being,” he states. “Sometimes Master Pollux’s creations wake up.”

Black shudders visibly. “Oh, that idea will lead to some grand nightmares tonight. Bellatrix never seemed to mind, but there is a reason why Andromeda refuses to overnight here.”

“She told me.” Narcissa lifts her foot and brings it crushing down on something that scurries out from beneath a cabinet. “If that ruined my shoe, I’m billing you, Sirius.”
“Of course,” Black agrees, glancing around the room. “I haven’t been in here since dear old Uncle Pollux was still alive. Creepy old bastard.”

Snape finds it interesting that Kreacher doesn’t complain about Black’s disparagement of that particular ancestor. That’s more disturbing than the remains of whatever Narcissa stepped on, which has no recognizable parts whatsoever.

He looks around while Black mutters disparaging things about his uncle. There is a fully stocked cabinet, though nothing is labeled. Even if there was something still of use, Snape would be unable to trust it. Some people have no blasted sense at all.

The workbenches are large but dusty, covered in a complete laboratory of standing glass and crystal beakers. The lack of dust rings tells Snape that the items Kreacher sought out had not been stored here. A complete lineup of every type of cauldron imaginable hang from the walls; a lead-lined, multi-paned window lets in light, and there is an hooded exhaust port right next to it in case of dangerous fumes. In a second cabinet lies a collection of tools, also in every conceivably useful metal. The bastard even has a platinum cauldron in his collection.

In short, it’s ideal.

“Kreacher,” Snape says, pulling Kreacher’s attention away from his sad perusal of the room. “Will you put all of the items still set up in this room onto a single table—that one,” Snape points at the smallest one, “and then bring everything you discovered back to this room? If you wish your Mistress’s items to be hidden, this is an excellent place for it.”

“Kreacher be doin’ it immediately.” Kreacher glares at Black. “And you’ll not be takin’ them!”

“Kreacher, I don’t even want to be inside this room,” Black replies. Muscles under his eyes are starting to tic. “Uncle Pollux had some very interesting ideas about how children should develop immunity to poisons. I hate this room.”

Lupin winces. “And that’s my cue. We’re done here,” he says, escorting Black outside.

Narcissa’s mouth has turned down in displeasure. “I am suddenly so very, very glad that Mother came to share in Andromeda’s displeasure for overnighting in our father’s family home.”
Godric's Hollow

The first place he goes to in Godric’s Hollow is the Parish Church Cemetery of St. Clementine. It’s habit, begun long ago. The oldest graves lie in the center, and the graveyard grew out and around them in a vast circle before finally being fenced off for good. The early 1980s had seen the last burials for the ancient graveyard; a new cemetery was consecrated on the outskirts of the village.

He always goes at night, for utmost privacy. The old cemetery never gets necking teenagers, unlike most Muggle graveyards. There are too many actual ghosts lurking about, and they are nosy.

Ignatius Peverell’s stone is starting to look so worn that it’s difficult to read his last name. Snape hesitates a moment, glancing around to ensure that he is alone, before he holds out his wand. The carvings grow deeper, revealing the Peverell brother’s name, year of his birth, and date of his death in clear relief once more. He does the same to Antioch Peverell’s stone, distant ancestor of the Prince family line.

Snape is not really surprised when the ghost peeks out from behind his own stone. “Hello, great-grandchild.”

“Hello. I still don’t want your bloody wand,” Snape replies, lighting his wand and lifting it over his head. Cadmus’s grave is always the hardest to find, as if the former owner of the Resurrection Stone would prefer all parts of his life to remain hidden.

“That is good. It will not be yours.”

Snape finishes refreshing the relief on Cadmus’s gravestone. He has no affection for Voldemort’s maternal lineage, but Cadmus himself had not been evil—just burdened by sadness.

“I’m so glad you’re finally seeing sense,” Snape tells the ghost.

Antioch appears as a very young man when he fully manifests, a reminder that he’d left behind children who were likely no more than toddlers when he gained and lost an all-powerful wand on the same day. “I suppose. Are you going to make your usual visit?”

Snape nods. “That is a stupid question.”

“Might I accompany you?”

“Can I stop you?” Snape counters, tucking his wand back into his sleeve before making his way towards the rear of the cemetery.

“Not really.” Antioch sounds cheerful. “This graveyard has been ever so much more active since you decided to bleed on her grave, you know. Why, I’ve had company for the first time in several hundred years!”

“Please go bother them, then.” Snape halts in front of the single stone that was placed over James and Lily’s grave. The inscription was not chosen by anyone in the wizarding world, who would at least have remembered that James Potter had a middle name, and that Lily had not been born a Potter.

James Potter        Lily Potter
No, this was Petunia’s work. Her last “gift” to Lily, and one final attempt to utterly distance herself from her younger sister. It’s only the inscription that doesn’t make sense. Snape believes it must have been added by someone else. Even if Petunia had been so inclined, he knows from bitter experience that many stonemasons charge by the letter. She would have paid the absolute bare minimum it was tactful to get away with.

Snape regards the stone in the hush of a night that’s already rounded the clock past midnight. “He did it. Not that the two of you busybodies aren’t already aware of it. Your son graduated Hogwarts a year early. I haven’t seen the records yet, since I’m a bloody fugitive, but Lupin swears he and Granger beat out every single seventh-year they were up against.”

“My great-grandnephew graduated Hogwarts early, and accomplished it well.” Antioch sounds proud. “Wonderful.”

Snape drops his wand back into his hand again. “Do you think Petunia will ever come back here?”

“Your dear friend’s sister?” Antioch snorts. “That one’s not been here since she made certain the stone was dropped over their grave, almost before the gravediggers had finished burying the coffins.”

“Then I suppose Petunia will never get to discover that I’m fixing her nonsense.”

“Do you know who added that last line?” Snape asks, lowering his wand when the stone has been properly re-carved. He always wanted to do it before, but didn’t feel as if he had the right. At least now he knows that Lily won’t mind.

Antioch turns secretive. “Now, why would I know a thing like that?”

“Leave it,” Antioch says after a few minutes of ridiculous dithering. “It belongs there.”

“Why?”

Antioch presses down the pleats on his tunic, which still bears a dark stain from where the cloth soaked up his blood. “Some things are not even for the dead to see, Severus Prince. Either you will discover why, or you will not. Just as I will, or I will not.”

He turns on his heel and leaves. “Snape.”

“I’m not going to call you by a name even you don’t like claiming!” the ghost retorts crossly. He follows Snape to the cemetery gate, but no further. Unlike his brothers, Antioch is tied to the land he is buried in. His reasoning, much like the identity of who added that last, odd inscription to James and Lily’s stone, remains a mystery.

The house is harder to face. He did it once, in 1981, and that was quite enough for one lifetime. The cottage is entirely grown over with dark green ivy, making it almost impossible to see the old stone and glittering windows.

A hint of wintergreen and warm citrus fills the air. “I get the bloody hint,” Snape mutters. He leaps over the gate, which has rusted solid, and ignores a plaque that rises in the center of the old walkway as he passes by.

The grass is waist-high, littered with rubble that threatens to trip him. The upper floor of the house is still blown out on the side that had once been a toddler’s bedroom, left open to the elements. Snape glances in the direction of the old explosion. The rubble is heaviest in that area; a child’s stuffed toy trapped under a splintered piece of wood. Something about the tableau bothers him, but he isn’t certain what.

Snape pulls out his wand and rests it across his open palm. “Locate mihi, Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

There is a moment of quiet despair when nothing happens at all. Then, finally, the tip of his wand begins to twitch towards that great pile of rubble in the garden.

Snape steps forward carefully, avoiding wood and stone as he watches his wand point him in the correct direction. He has no idea what he’s going to find, but at least now he knows there is something, somewhere.

His wand stops moving when he’s beyond the debris, almost out of the rear garden and into the woods behind the house. He turns around in a full circle, but the trail ends here.

He frowns. “Lumos,” he murmurs, and lowers the bright end of his wand closer to the ground.

Snape stares at what the light of his wand reveals. “That’s impossible,” he breathes. Then he turns around and glances up at the blown-out side of the house.

It’s pristine. It might as well have been blown apart yesterday.

“A fucking preservation charm,” Snape whispers, appalled. Not applied to the plants, or to the rusted iron gate, but everything else is held frozen by a powerful preservation charm. That’s why the toy under the broken board disturbed him—neither have rotted from exposure to the elements.

Ministry idiots, Snape thinks darkly, pulling out a clean, unused paper bag to place his discovery into. What should be property that Potter inherits was not only confiscated by the Ministry of Magic, it’s been turned into an eternal shrine to murder.
Once the bag is rolled shut and placed inside his robe, Snape bites back a scowl. What else remains untouched?

The front door is unlocked. Either the Ministry is too trusting that no one will climb over the fence, or they’re just stupid.

Once inside, Snape looks around with his jaw hanging open. “THE ENTIRE BLOODY HOUSE?”

No. Absolutely *not*. Even his vague sense of ethics thinks that this is a travesty, an unforgivable lapse of manners in regards towards the dead.

“Lily. If you don’t want me to do this, now would be a very good time to inform me.”

If anything, the scent of wintergreen and citrus grows stronger. That, Snape knows, is not a denial.

He nods and gets out the other bag he carries, one with an Undetectable Extension Charm. “Of all the bloody foolish absolute *nonsense!*” he snarls, and sets to his task.

*          *          *          *

Potter greets him at the door of 12 Grimmauld Place. “You’re back!” Snape thrusts the bag at him; Potter takes the hint, and the bag, and stops blocking the doorway. “You look like you want to murder someone. Or you actually did.”

“The latter,” Snape says, and trudges his way towards the stairs that lead down into the kitchen.

Potter follows right behind him. “Anyone we’ll miss?”

“Yaxley.”

“I asked if it was anyone we would *miss*,” Potter returns dryly. “Do keep up.”

Snape feels an unwilling smile cross his face. “A valid point.” He’d wanted to save Yaxley for the potion, but the fool had crossed his path at Spinner’s End, trying to spy on him.

Snape took Yaxley’s body back to Malfoy Manor. He dumped a dead man at the feet of numerous surprised Death Eaters and told Voldemort that Snape won’t be able to concentrate on what Voldemort wishes for him to do if he’s being stalked all the time…and also, truthfully, that Yaxley drew a wand on Snape first.

Voldemort suspects Yaxley wanted to weed out the competition in order to merit more favor. Snape thinks Corban Yaxley was just stupid.

“What’s in the bag?” Potter asks.

“Many things, Potter,” Snape answers. The kitchen is almost too bright, occupied by people who are also far too cheerful for six in the bloody morning.

“Didn’t expect to see you this soon,” Lupin says. The smell of cheap Muggle coffee lingers in the air, which is why Narcissa avoids the kitchen like the plague itself until Lupin is done contaminating it. “Good news?”
“In a sense, yes. The potion will most likely work if we can get everything else.” Snape watches Potter drop the bag onto the table, restraining the urge to wince. There is a Cushioning Charm built into the bag for multiple reasons, and that is definitely one of them.

Black looks up from over the edge of the Prophet. “There was something left of him?”

“Yes. Did any of you idiots sleep last night?”

“No.” Potter watches as Snape retrieves the paper sack from within his robes and places it on the table. “That sounded…uh, heavy.”

“What sounded heavy?” Weasley asks, coming into the kitchen in his bare feet, still scratching at his chin.

Snape can’t resist. “That,” he says, pointing at the paper sack.

“Oh, hey, what this?” Weasley unrolls the bag, reaches in, and then drops the bag in shock while leaping back an impressive several feet, coming to rest against the wall behind him. “WHAT THE BLOODY FUCKING HELL IS THAT?”

“That was truly worthwhile. That moment might actually get me through the rest of this year,” Snape says, leaning back in his chair to regard a white-faced Weasley with pleasure.

“NO, REALLY, WHAT THE FUCK IS IN THE BAG?”

“I am going to regret this, I know I am.” Black picks up the sack and, without looking inside, dumps its contents onto the kitchen table. “Oh,” he says, displaying the aplomb of a Black raised by Pollux, Cassiopeia, Orion, and Walburga Black. “That’s…unsanitary.”

Lupin points at it. “How in the entire hell was something like that still there, looking that…”


“THOSE ARE PLANTS! THAT IS HALF OF SOMEONE’S BLEEDIN’ SCALP!”

Snape ignores Weasley’s hysterics. “Have either of you ever been back to Godric’s Hollow?”

Black shakes his head. “Just the once that same night, when I got Harry out of there and gave him to Hagrid to look after.”

“Only one time, a few days later. I didn’t go in—whole place was cordoned off, anyway,” Lupin says. “I haven’t tried since the Ministry confiscated it.”

Potter suddenly scowls. “The Ministry owns my parents’ fucking house?”

Snape props his elbow on the table and rests his head on his hand, pleased. “Not anymore, they don’t—and please do not upend that bag,” he says to Potter. “I have no wish to be buried by the contents of an entire house.”

That finally rouses Black’s temper. “They left—they left everything? EVERYTHING?”

“Every single thing, all of it under a very strong preservation charm. The only thing that it didn’t keep out was the plant life.”

“So…you stole everything, and then…you finished destroying the house,” Lupin says, like he almost doesn’t believe it.
Snape releases an annoyed sigh. “The Ministry crafted a memorial to murder, Lupin. There is nothing that is ever going to make that appropriate. I don’t care who killed whom. If Wizarding Britain needs a memorial so badly, they can go visit that stupid statue in the town square!”

There is a long pause. “There’s a statue?” Black asks, horrified.

“It really is kind of an ugly one, too,” Weasley offers. “What? I’ve seen it!” he protests when Lupin, Black, and Potter all stare at him. “Just, uh—whose…uh, whose scalp is that?”

Potter grabs ahold of his own wild mess of hair and pulls. “Does that look like my hair, Ron?”

“Nope. No, it does not. That would be Voldemort’s hair. All right, then.” Weasley backs away. “I’m just going to go disinfect my hands. With boiling water. Maybe fire, too.”

“Pour alcohol on your hands and then light that on fire,” Snape suggests. Lupin gives him a disapproving stare. “What? It’s effective, and skin grows back.”

“You destroyed a house last night,” Lupin counters in irritation. “You’re not allowed to pretend that lighting one’s hands on fire is a sensible solution!”

Snape stares at him.

Lupin sighs and covers his face with both hands. “You’ve done exactly that, haven’t you?”

“I told you that it’s effective sanitation.” As he is placing the trophy back into its paper sack, Snape hesitates. “The others who were here yesterday?”

“Agreed to a minor Obliviation. I’m nervous enough about adding Ron to the mix, but he refuses to be parted from Hermione and Harry, given what we may all be up to after the first of the month,” Lupin says. “Now I’m running too high on the number of Unbreakable Vows I’ve taken. Oh, and Fleur no longer knows the specifics of why she’s fetching a drop of pure Veela blood, but she’ll acquire it after the fourth and deliver it as soon as she can safely visit again. She’s aware that it must be no later than the third week of August, Severus.”

Snape nods, tucking the paper sack away in his robes again. “Thank you. I was—concerned.”

“The horror,” Black says under his breath.

Potter gets up from the table, smiling. “My bag?” he asks, patting the satchel.

“Until you unpack it, yes. There are things in there I still need,” Snape replies.

“Got it. I’m going to keep Ron from setting his hands on fire. Hermione keeps a bottle of surgical spirits with her for basic disinfecting.”

“Disinfecting what?” Lupin asks.

“The entire lavatory, probably,” Potter says, and makes his way up the stairs.

“Maybe it could do something about the smell of dust that never fades,” Black mutters. “I’ve tried everything.”

Snape is about to make a disparaging remark when something far worse occurs to him. “Black…did the house smell this way when you were a child?”

Black pauses in the middle of lifting a tea cup to his lips. “Now that you mention it? No, it didn’t. I
just assumed that Kreacher wasn’t up to cleaning it as well anymore, and then it stood empty from ‘85 to ‘93 except for him…”

Lupin groans in dismayed realization. “Oh, no. The one Narcissa stepped on was bad enough.”

“You think the walls are infested by my uncle’s creepy…whatever they are, and that they smell like dust.” Black puts his teacup down and rests his face on the tabletop. “Merlin, no. There is no pest control in the world likely to be effective enough.”

“You’re wizards, you idiots.” Snape points his wand at the wall. “Vocare Creatura.”

Kreacher pops into startled existence on the table. “Yes, Master Bat?”

Snape lets out a brief sigh and ignores the fact that Black is laughing at him. “That was an accident. My apologies.” Kreacher glares at them all with undisguised suspicion before disappearing again.

“Let me try,” Lupin says, fighting a smile. “Hmm. Adduc animalis arcanam!”

“Congratulations. You have summoned Granger’s cat,” Snape says as the half-Kneazle’s distinct and swift thump-thump-thump emerges from the stairwell. The orange beast comes strolling in a moment later, acting as if it intentionally chose to be present.

“Narrowing it down then, huh?” Black runs his fingers along the runes carved into his wand. “Evocant animal intra moenia!”

There is a thump and a startled squeak. Granger’s cat immediately streaks in that direction.

“And that would be a mouse.” Lupin thinks about it. “Vocare in creatione Pollux!”

“I’m so glad you were specific!” Black yelps, right before there is an extremely loud thud against the inside of the kitchen’s plaster wall. A crumble of plaster dust rains down from the ceiling.

“That was definitely not a mouse,” Snape observes. They listen to the whatever-it-is skitter around inside the wall before falling silent again.

“At least we figured it out,” Lupin says.

“Mm. Destrueri latebras creatione de Pollux!” Though it’s muffled by plaster, Snape can hear the same crushing sound made by Narcissa’s shoe when she stomped one of the creatures to death in the laboratory. “Exoskeleton. Interesting defensive mechanism.” Even Granger’s cat is staring at that part of the wall in apparent bafflement.

“They’re probably lethally poisonous, too. Fuck, my house is infested,” Black says in dismay.

Lupin grins. “Destrueri latebras creatione de Pollux!” Another crushed exoskeleton sound erupts from a different part of the wall. “Not for long, it isn’t.”

“Destrueri latebras creatione de Pollux!” Black looks satisfied by the next crunch. “We could keep score.”

“We should get the kids involved. We could be done by lunchtime,” Lupin says. “Severus?”

A new toxin to study, or the peace of mind of knowing he won’t wake in the night to one of those things crawling into his bed? Decisions, decisions.

“Destrueri latebras creatione de Pollux!” Snape gives Lupin and Black a bland look. “I do believe
I’m in the lead.”

“Oh, you bastard,” Black growls, and points his wand at the wall again.

“Have you all gone mental?” Weasley asks them later, staring at them as they point wands at the hallway walls on the first floor.

“I’m not mental, I’m winning!” Black shouts.

“That’s because you’re cheating,” Lupin retorts.

Weasley flinches when one of the creatures is crushed to death inside the wall nearest him. “What was that?”

Snape can’t resist the opportunity, not when it’s been presented twice in one day. “Vocare omnia latebris creationes de Pollux!”

Weasley jumps away from the wall when the sound of at least fifty exoskeleton creatures strikes the inside plaster. He yanks out his wand. “SOMEONE TELL ME THE VERSION THAT MAKES THEM SQUISH!”

By the time they make it to the second floor, Weasley has lost his terror of the things in the walls. He’s trying to rack up enough points to catch up after the kitchen extermination.

Granger comes out of her bedroom, still picking knots out of her hair with a large-tooth comb. “What are you all doing?”

Weasley casts the charm and causes another of the things to die with a squalling crunch. “Mum missed an infestation in 1993!”

“That’s probably for the best,” Granger says, raising an eyebrow at the spectacle of four grown wizards crushing mystery creatures that lurk in plaster walls. “Who’s winning?”

“I am!” Black shouts again.

Oh, that will never do. “Destruecreaturarum omnium”—fuck, I can’t use that one,” Snape realizes in disappointment.

“I should think not!” Black looks appalled. “We are not crushing all living creations of Pollux. Now, if you want to modify that spell so it squashes only Bellatrix…”

Snape lowers his wand. “That isn’t doing much to convince me not to try it.”

“Destruecreomnifaalsicreationes de Pollux!” Lupin shouts.

Snape shuts one eye against the sound of many creatures being crushed to death at once. “Well-played.”

Weasley is scowling. “Not bloody fair. THIRD FLOOR IS MINE!” he declares, and runs for the stairs.

“IT IS NOT!” Black and Lupin race up the stairs after Weasley.

“You’re not going to follow them?” Granger asks, watching Snape return his wand to his sleeve.

“No need. I already got to kill someone I hate this morning,” Snape says.
“Hmm. That’s funny. We’re all still alive.” Granger smirks at him before going back into her bedroom, shutting the door.

Snape stares after her, aware that the expression on his face has to be undignified. “You’re spending too much time with Narcissa!” he finally rallies.

“Oh, you don’t get to blame me for that one,” Narcissa murmurs as she passes by, her chin proudly lifted into the air. “That is all your fault, my dear.”

Snape gnashes his teeth and retreats to the first floor laboratory. Now that he knows the potion can be made, he has cleaning to do.

He also has to renew the preservation charm on part of a madman’s scalp. That was definitely not in Snape’s job description when Albus hired him.

At some point during his tasks, he falls asleep in the laboratory, which is not an uncommon occurrence. He isn’t used to doing so in one that is a new space, but then, he hadn’t slept the previous two nights.

What awakens him is a loud skittering in the walls. Snape lifts his head. “Destruere omnia falsi creationes de Pollux,” he mutters, and goes back to sleep to the sounds of multiple small insect-things being crushed to death.

Snape awakens early on the morning of the twenty-eighth of July, stretching to relieve the soreness in his neck. This room needs a cot for the long spaces between certain brewing steps. The house-elves can Apparate Snape here directly, keeping him hidden from other members of the Order who will be far more likely to kill him first and worry about questions afterwards.

He seeks out Potter, who is sitting on the floor of his bedroom with the door open. There are neat little piles of things surrounding him, taken from the house he’d lived in until Hallowe’en in 1981.

“You could have just left it all there.”

“I could have,” Snape agrees, leaning against the open doorway. “But they belong to you. If you want them disposed of, it’s your right to make that decision, not the Ministry’s.”

“Disposed of.” Potter picks up a stuffed toy, a koala bear with a blue ribbon. There is still grass in its tufts of white fur from lying in the garden. The bear is small enough that he can easily hold it in one hand.

“I remember it being both hands,” Potter whispers, placing his hands around the bear in a wide grip until the toy is supported only by his fingertips. “To hold it. Both hands. It’s sort of funny, right?”

“I don’t think so.”

“No.” Potter puts the bear aside. “I can still remember Dad bringing that home. It was a giraffe at first. Every day he turned it into something new, some animal from far away. Teaching. He liked teaching, I think.”

“Perhaps he simply loved you,” Snape counters softly.

Potter nods. “That, too.” He glances up; his eyes are dry, but red-rimmed. “Do you need your bag back?”

“I do, but first we need to find an empty space to finish emptying it.”
Potter frowns, glancing around at what he has removed. There is a pile of vinyl records Snape recognizes from Lily’s own collection, several stacks of books, and the toys. “There’s more than this—you brought the furniture?”

“It’s yours,” Snape repeats, annoyed. “Some of those items have been in your respective parent’s families for generations. They didn’t deserve to be destroyed, or to be part of a mausoleum that people weren’t even allowed to see. Besides, most inheritances are received when one comes of age. You’ll be seventeen in three days.”

“Birthday. Right.” Potter frowns and then waves him over. “Look. Either I’m hallucinating, or that’s you.”

“You’re not hallucinating,” Snape says of the photo that Harry is holding out for his inspection. Lily had convinced a friend at Hogwarts to let her borrow a wizarding camera for the summer months in 1974. The two teenage ingrates captured are either waving or making ridiculous faces in response to being viewed. “I’m surprised she kept any of them.”

Potter gives him an unimpressed look. “I quote: you are a stupid berk.”

“That is not news,” Snape replies. He’s still vaguely uncomfortable with the idea that Lily is literally speaking to her son, and that is a directly related message. “I need that satchel back at some point in the next year, Potter.”

Potter nods and picks up the satchel. “Okay. Uh—there’s a bedroom down the hall that’s still completely empty. Used to be Walburga’s. Sirius hates it in there, but it’s just a room to me.”

Snape is grateful that James and Lily were dwelling in a cottage at the time, not a larger home, and that shrinking spells exist. He helps Potter unpack the rest of the bag. There is flatware and dining ware that were either inheritance items or gifts, paintings that move and paintings that do not, photographs in frames and in books. There is also all of the furniture except the appliances, but Snape rescued Lily’s turntable. Speakers will have to be acquired and convinced to function in a wizarding household, but otherwise, it’s in pristine condition.

“Huh. Actual records and a player. I’m not sure who’s going to be happier—Remus or Sirius,” Potter observes. “Not sure who most of those bands were, though.”

“Lily was fond of Janis Joplin. God knows why. Aretha Franklin. The Runaways. Fleetwood Mac.”

Potter glances at him. “What about you?”

It’s been a long time since he’s given it much thought. “Pink Floyd. Joni Mitchell. Jimmy Hendrix. The Doors.” Snape lifts his head, focusing on memory instead of names. “We both liked Queen, though Petunia hated the band because of Freddie Mercury.”

“Why?”

“He was gay—or bisexual. Not sure I recall,” Snape answers. “Most of us who spent any time in the Muggle world liked The Ramones, but Led Zeppelin and Jefferson Airplane were near the top of the list, too.”

Lily and James had dwelled in a home that blended Muggle technology and wizarding spells, the best ideas from both worlds, without being ostentatious or ridiculous. Snape had turned in a slow circle in every room, thinking how utterly, bitterly unfair it was that he’d lived while they died. “They were happy there,” he says, the words sticking in his throat. He hadn’t meant to say them aloud.
“Yeah. They were.” Potter is holding a wizard-crafted Cuckoo Clock from the late 1700s, fifty years before Muggles figured out how to mechanically create the same effect for the emerging bird. “I hated this clock. So did Mum. Dad said it was his grandfather’s least ridiculous possession, so that’s why it got to be in the kitchen and the—the other clock was upstairs.”

Snape nods. He couldn’t recover that one; it had been destroyed in the explosion from the rebounding spell. He’d found only perfectly preserved pieces.

Potter bites at his lip, a habit Snape has never seen him indulge in. “I can’t ask Sirius this. It reminds him of how many people are gone that he knew and liked, aside from Mum and Dad. Remus, too, since his parents are dead. Snape, why don’t I have any family? Other than my aunt Petunia, I mean.”

Snape takes the clock from Potter and places it on a side table. It has multiple drawers with Extending Charms, which makes it an excellent storage device. “During the first war, Voldemort targeted the family members of those he realized were fighting against him. He started with those who were Muggle-born, or who were considered blood-traitors.”

Potter swallows. “Oh. I knew they were dead, but I didn’t know…how.”

“By the time anyone in the Order realized what was happening, many of those murders had already taken place. James Potter’s entire family was wiped out—your grandparents, great-grandparents, and a great-uncle—the one married to Dorea Black, I believe. Otherwise, there were only a few distant cousins left to the line. Lily’s family suffered the same fate, though only her parents and a childless great-aunt on her father’s side were left. Petunia survived because she had already married Vernon. She was living in Surrey as a perfectly ordinary, stereotypical Muggle, and had divorced herself so utterly from Lily and their parents that she might well have truly been a different person.”

“Did you hate her? For surviving?” Potter asks.

“I haven’t stopped hating that woman,” Snape replies, and then rubs at his forehead. “The school registry. Your original address would have been on it for receiving your first owl. All three of those idiots may be in danger after the first of August.”

“Should we do anything?”

Snape looks at Potter. “That is not a decision I can make, and not only because I can’t stand Petunia Holly Dursley. That will have to be up to you, Harry.”

“They would probably hate it here. I wonder if Hermione’s parents would be willing to shelter them,” Potter says. “Maybe they’ll like dentists more than they like wizards.”

“I highly doubt they will much like anyone.” It was obvious to anyone with eyes that James Potter was of mixed ancestry, a trait Potter shares; Madam Doctor Granger would not be to Petunia’s ill-thought preferences. “I say you’re giving the Doctors Granger an unjust and undeserved punishment.”

“Maybe.” Potter looks around the room again. “I—I really don’t know what I’ll do with any of this, but…you’re right. It should be my choice, not anyone else’s. Thank you.”

Snape is more or less prepared when Potter hugs him. He still isn’t sure what to do about hugging, but there are worse things in the world. “Thank me by surviving this war.”
“There are two more things before I leave here today,” Snape tells them all over breakfast.

Narcissa is wrinkling her nose over the smell of Lupin’s coffee, but is present because Snape asked. “Please hurry and say them so that I can escape this room.”

“The first—once the Ministry falls, it will not be safe to contact me in any capacity, house-elf included. I can request Dobby or Kreacher’s presence if I know I’m in a safe location, but they have no way of knowing the same about me beforehand. I will keep you informed if I can, but if I cannot…then that is simply the way it must be.”

“The laboratory?” Black asks, listening with a hard-edged frown on his face.

“Direct transportation inside and out by house-elf. Phineas will not have to lie to anyone as to whether he’s seen me—and that man is an awful damned liar,” Snape says, which causes Granger to utter an amused snort. She must have noticed Phineas’s failing in that regard. “The room was soundproofed long ago, so there will be no chance that anyone in the Order suspects your occasional houseguest. Whatever ingredients are collected for the potion should be placed in the room when you’re certain no one else is here, though I request that you please knock first. I might be…irritable.”

“Paranoid,” Lupin interprets.

“Justifiably so,” Narcissa murmurs. “Go on, Severus.”

“If there are too many warm bodies, Kreacher can be trusted to place the ingredients inside the room.” Kreacher gives Snape a stern, vigorous nod that makes his ears flop up and down like a bat suffering a brainstorm. “Once the potion is completed, I don’t dare return here afterwards. Not until we’re sure of what must be done regarding the Horcruxes. Narcissa?”

“I began the process, but…” Narcissa shakes her head in irritation. “The Ministry falls in three days—two, if the attack begins of a morning instead of the evening. We’re out of time. I hope that the Cup of Hufflepuff is *not* located in the Lestrange Vault.”

“Not impressed by the Horcrux argument, were they,” Black comments.

“They seemed more inclined to believe it a tale crafted in regards to a very public family feud.” Narcissa pauses. “Or they are perfectly aware of its true nature, and someone has terrified them into never revealing its existence.”

“I can at least give you all good news on an entirely different front.” Snape reaches into the satchel he’d emptied of Potter’s family belongings and pulls out one of the few other things it holds.

He places the ancient wooden case onto the table, flips the latch open, and stands back. “Touching it is unpleasant. Under no circumstance is *anyone* to ever attempt to wear it unless you’re in a hurry to end up dying from the same curse that felled Albus Dumbledore.”

Narcissa is the one to open the lid, and then drops it in surprise so that it falls onto the tabletop with a muted thunk. “Oh.”

Lupin leans forward, both eyebrows lifted. “Rowena Ravenclaw’s Diadem. Where did you find that?”
“Technically, I did not. The Grey Lady and the Baron showed me its location, hidden in a junk room inside the Room of Requirement.” Snape gives the tarnished silver a quick glance before looking away. He is in no mood to chance another reaction like the one generated by Slytherin’s locket.


“Has there been any luck among the Malfoy library’s stolen books?” Snape asks.

Narcissa shakes her head. “No, but I’ve barely had the chance to start. While the others do their jobs for the Order, I will be spending my days in the library on Mister Potter’s behalf.”

Potter smiles at her. “Thanks,” he says, and Narcissa inclines her head in acknowledgement.

“Any chance you could kill Nagini in advance?” Black asks.

“No. Not until we’re absolutely certain that we’re ready. If I betray my position, Hogwarts loses its Headmaster, and someone far more frightening than me is put in my place.”
The Ministry's Fallout

The Ministry falls on the first of August. As predicted by both sides, it’s a near-flawless coup.

Snape does one thing, the only thing he dares. The Patronus he sends to Minerva is a vocal one, though it’s Lily’s voice he grants it. “Tell them to run. Now.”

Four teachers from Hogwarts with Muggle-born blood take Minerva’s advice, though Snape knows that there will be Death Eaters hunting each one. He cannot help them, not when they weren’t willing to leave prior to the Ministry’s fall. He and Minerva will both have to hope that they have the skill to escape Britain undetected.

Professor Sasha Willowood does not flee. Death Eaters find the art teacher in her home and kill not only her, but her entire Muggle bloodline.

Voldemort inspects the school over the weekend. Snape does not witness it, but the Carrows later seem pleased with the speech given about the new ways things will be done at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Voldemort then leaves the Carrows behind as new teachers to help replace those who will not be returning.

The announcement on the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, regarding Snape’s placement as Headmaster of Hogwarts, is not something he ever wanted to wake up to. He looks the part of the Bloody Bat, at least. Judging by the articles, the *Prophet* is playing the part of Voldemort bullhorn under pretense of reporting Ministry doings to save their own skins. Snape can’t blame them for wanting to survive, but he hopes they can keep the gleefulness to a minimum.

The traditional faculty meeting occurs two weeks early. Snape Apparates to the school gates and stares up at the old castle. It’s the first time he hasn’t felt like he’s come home. It’s more like finally arriving to fight a battle, one that already promises to be long and exhausting.

The faculty lounge has been extended, the individual seating turned into one long table. They’re all waiting when he arrives, sweeping into the room without a sound. Most of the faces at the table are, unsurprisingly, full of barely suppressed rage as they witness his approach.

Minerva is sitting to the right of the head of the table, with Rubeus Hagrid standing behind her. Alecto Carrow sits across from Minerva; Amycus is seated at the opposite end of the table. Between them are Filius Flitwick, Poppy Pomfrey, Aurora Sinistra, Septima Vector, Bathsheda Babbling, Sybill Trelawney, Pomona Sprout, Firenze, Rolanda Hooch, and Irma Pince.

They stayed. They all stayed.

They’re idiots for doing so, but Snape is still grateful to see them.

Alecto and Amycus are far too used to the way Voldemort prefers to do things. “What are you waiting for?” Amycus asks, cuffing Hooch on the back of the head. “Stand up for your betters!”

“Amycus.”

Amycus pauses mid-motion. “Yes?”

“Sit. Down.” Snape hisses. “Strike a fellow instructor again without provocation, and you are going to discover if the ceiling above the Great Hall actually exists.”
“But—” Alecto tries, and then looks offended when Snape glares at him.

“Stop bleating. I don’t have time for it. We have exactly four weeks to prepare this school for a very different sort of school term, and I do not have the patience for your nonsense!”

“Yes, that’s right. Different,” Amycus says, his voice dripping delight and scorn. “Things’ll be different around here, so you’d all best just—”

Snape lifts his wand. “Stupefy,” he mutters, and hears it echoed on his right. Alecto collapses face-first onto the table just as Amycus topples out of his chair. “Really?”

Minerva pockets her wand with a disdainful sniff. “They won’t ever shut up, otherwise.”

“No, they tend not to,” Snape agrees.

“Just what kind of different sort of school term are we to be expecting, then?” Sinistra asks, giving him a haughty, cold stare.

“I have been charged with protecting the children attending this school,” Snape says, privately pleased when half of them don’t believe him, and the other half look unhappily surprised. “That is what all of us will be doing, to the absolute best of our ability. It is the job we agreed to perform when taking up posts at this school, and it is the job we will continue to do, regardless of what others might plan.”

“And if we refuse, you’ll do what? Kill us?” Babbling asks.

Snape narrows his eyes. “If you refuse to perform your job of teaching and protecting these children? No. I’ll fire you. At that point, you can try to outrun Voldemort’s Death Eaters and his Snatchers, and when they catch you, you can explain your failure to him.”

“The Carrows have said they’re taking over Defence, except they’re calling it Dark Arts,” Flitwick says in a cautious voice.

Snape glances over at Alecto, who has begun to snore. “Not fucking likely. Where is Slughorn?”


“I’ll get him later. He’s got a damned job to do, whether he likes it or not. And Marchbanks?”

“Leery, but I think it will be possible to convince her after today,” Minerva says, a hint and warning both. “She is willing to take on Art or Music, if any student dares to show an interest, and can act as a stand-in for any of us should anything...untoward occur.”

“Very well.” Snape rests his hands onto the table, glancing around at these people who have been working with him for fifteen years. “Alecto is going to be teaching Magical Theory by the textbooks she is given. Amycus has the absolute joy of handling those students who have an interest in Ghoul Studies.”

“They won’t like that very much,” Firenze observes, an utter lack of expression on his face.

“Then I will happily make them like it,” Snape replies, glancing down at his wand.

“Imperius? For the entire school year?” Hooch is beginning to look alarmed.

“If that is what it takes? Yes.”
“Who will be teaching our new Dark Arts class, then?” Pomona growls. “You?”

“Myself, or one of the Carrows. Pick one,” Snape returns blandly. “One of us believes that defence is still a valid part of the subject. The others do not.”

“You,” Trelawney says at once in a trembling whisper. “Someone dies if it isn’t you.”

“He killed Dumbledore!” Sinistra glares at Trelawney as if she’s just betrayed them all.

Snape decides it’s wiser to just ignore them both. “Madam Pomfrey, any student who has class with either of the Carrows needs a block of free time in their schedule just afterwards in order to visit you.”

“You don’t think their subjects will stop them from being exuberant, do you?” Poppy looks tired already, and the year hasn’t even begun.

“Exuberant is the wrong word entirely, and no. It complicates scheduling, but Alecto is far too fond of Cruciatius for the possibility to be ignored.”

“Can we not just…dispose of them, and find someone else?” Vector asks, giving the nearest Carrow a distasteful look.

“There are other, worse options available, and they would not be options we would be allowed to choose.” Snape lets that sink in. “Once Slughorn has been dragged in, quite likely kicking and screaming, he is going to be covering Potions for the first- through fifth-years, and Alchemy for anyone third-year and up.”

“Sixth and seventh?” Flitwick asks, eyes narrowing.

Snape rolls his eyes. “Please. That idiot didn’t know what he was doing in the higher level classes when I was a student. I’m not even sure I trust him with the younger students, but at least their potions are less volatile.”

“The Carrows have threatened to burn any book they find unacceptable in my library!” Madam Pince suddenly bursts out.

“Then bloody well set them on fire, first,” Snape counters. “Sybill, Firenze, your classes remain split along the previous lines. Third- through fifth-years belong to Trelawney; Firenze, you have the rest.” Firenze inclines his head, but gives Trelawney an amused look when she mutters under her breath about horses and false fortunes.

“The Dark Lord named the Carrows as Co-Deputy Headmistress Deputy-Headmaster, but they’re too bloody stupid for the job. As far as I’m concerned, Minerva McGonagall still has the role, even if none of us can actually use the title properly.” That starts an irritating rumble of muttering. “Shut up. The rest of you will continue with your jobs exactly as you did previously.”

“If you’re acting as Headmaster, then you will need a new Head of House,” Minerva points out. “You cannot be both. Impartiality, Severus.”

Snape clamps his hand over his face and resists the urge to scream. There is only one candidate who isn’t a Carrow. “Bloody. Fucking. Slughorn. Is. Useless.”

Why couldn’t Albus have hired at least one other Slytherin to teach in this school? God, why?

“Until he’s pried out of hiding and brought here? Yes,” Minerva agrees in a mild voice.
Minerva nods. “I didn’t disagree with your original choices…so, yes.”

“Good. That means that idiot can’t change them based on trying to ingratiate himself to someone with money,” Snape mutters. “I’m going to go get our new idiot Slytherin Head of House. Then I’m going to be largely unavailable for the rest of the month.”

“Why?” Rubeus asks, the first time he’s spoken. His voice is a low, dangerous rumble. “What’ve ye got goin’ that’s more important than these kids?”

Snape glances at Hagrid. “Something that I would actually prefer not to be doing.”

Retrieving Slughorn is fun, at least. Snape didn’t realize that the kicking and screaming was going to be literal. It almost makes up for the fact that he has to trust the old fool with his Slytherins’ well-being for a year.

* * * *

Fuck Russia. Fuck everything about Russia. It’s cold, bleak, miserable, filled with Muggles who cannot bloody drive, and if Snape ever tries to return, he’ll probably be eaten alive by clowders of incensed Kneazles. If the cats don’t get him, entire lumps of Pogrebins will.

He calls for Dobby and allows the elf to take him to the laboratory at 12 Grimmauld Place, storing both ingredients properly until he’s ready to use them.

* * * *

When he approaches a small tributary in Loch Glass, there is no sign of horses or people of any sort. That is only to be expected. He is not a child, and thus is not easy prey. “Equum vocare aqua.”

A dappled gray mare comes trotting out from behind a boulder that should have been too short to hide her presence, standing in lapping water that just covers her hooves. “I am really sorry, but I need a favor.”

The horse tosses her head and turns around to leave.

Dammit. “Aqua quiete,” Snape murmurs. The loch’s gentle waves come to an abrupt halt as the entire deep lake becomes utterly still.

The mare turns around, her eyes wide in alarm. Kelpies are not fond of still water; it goes against their very nature.

“I did apologize first,” Snape says, unimpressed. “I request a single water lily, in full bloom, and then your water will move once more—and it will not freeze with the winter this season. It will remain mobile until the ice comes again, over a year from now.”

The kelpie snorts and trots off behind her boulder. Snape waits, arms crossed, until the kelpie comes
back out into sight. Clutched in her teeth is an entire water lily. The petals of the flower have freshly opened to reveal its center. She drops it at the water’s edge and then nudes it forward until it is resting on dry land.

Snape bows. “Thank you,” he says. He points his wand at the loch. “Igitur aqua moveretur ad annum. Try not to eat anyone this year.”

The kelpie snorts and retreats to hide behind her rock once more. Snape waits a few minutes, wanting to be certain a potentially angry water horse is gone, before he summons the water lily directly to his hands. There is a hint of stickiness to the leaves that is easy to remove with magic.

One more nigh-impossible item down. Several more to go.

* * * *

A trip into the Forbidden Forest in the second week of August sees him surrounded by an entire herd of unicorns. Snape tries not to draw his wand in instinctive panic.

Instead of attacking, they resume their habit of traipsing around him, taking turns nuzzling against his robes and hands as they snuffle his clothes to investigate where he’s been. “You’re still all idiots,” Snape murmurs, stroking soft noses and letting his hands get caught in silken, curling manes. “I really have no idea why you find me so bloody fascinating.”

One of the mares pushes her way through the herd and butts at him demandingly with her nose until Snape grasps her head, stroking her forelock.

Good and evil are about more than thought. They are deed and choice.

Snape almost falls backwards in surprise. The mare rolls her eyes at him. “My deeds, my choices, do not remotely qualify as good,” he insists, scowling.

You would be surprised. The mare turns her head. As if in response to silent bidding, one of the more rambunctious young stallions trots forward. Then the unicorn turns around and presents his rear, swishing his tail.

Three is an important number. Three are the braided unicorn hairs that dwell within your elder wand. The mare nudges him again. The hair of my tail has served you well. Let this one’s hair serve further purpose.

“Yours,” Snape whispers, and then rests his head against the unicorn’s silken face. Her horn brushes against the bridge of his nose; it is cracking in the way that suggests it will soon fall off as a new horn grows in. “Thank you.”

The wand chooses those best suited. She sounds smug. Take what is needed. It is freely given.

The stallion gives Snape a miffed look when the three hairs are plucked. “Freely given,” Snape reminds the unicorn, trying to sound cross and failing at it. “Thank you.”

With that act, most of the herd disperses. The older mare who spoke to Snape takes his robe sleeve in gentle teeth and guides him forward. She shows him to the most plentiful patch of Horklumps Snape has seen outside of Hogwarts’ own greenhouses.
When he drops off those gathered ingredients at 12 Grimmauld Place, an emerald-studded Fire Crab is roaming around in a glass tank filled with saltwater, sand, shells, and minnows. Six gleaming dragon scales, the color of Australian fire opals, are stacked neatly under the windowsill.

A glass-stoppered test tube lies next to the dragon scales. Inside is a dried and dead rose stem. A single drop of blood hangs off of the end of a thorn, frozen in time by a dual Preservation and Immobilizing Charm.

There is a bottle, black-glassed and corked, standing next to the test tube. The fluid inside is viscous and dark with a simple label in curling script: *blood of a chimera, scorpion-tailed*.

Next to that is a clear bottle with a lead stopper. The shriveled remains of a label lie in pathetic bits on the windowsill. The milky-white fluid inside has a stench which oozes through glass and stopper both. Snape reminds himself not to touch that one without wearing dragon-hide gloves, or he risks being poisoned by Acromantula venom.

Two more difficulties avoided. “Thank you, Narcissa.”

A Golden Snidget is fluttering around in a cage, trilling out notes that sound as beautiful as the bird looks. Snape tells himself immediately to not become attached to a potion ingredient. He has no choice. If not that Snidget, then another.

Ten passes of the sun across the sky. He has to find dandelions now.

Where the hell is he going to find perfect dandelion petals, though? It’s nearing autumn, not spring. At least honey he can buy blasted near anywhere.

He returns to Grimmauld Place on Kreacher’s arm three days later, covered in mud, dung, soaked to the skin, and hating existence. To hell with dandelions. He’s going to blow up the next several hundred he sees. The honey is provided by a farmer selling from their own hives down in Cornwall, the same place he found dandelions still willing to bloom like it is the brightest, warmest spring morning.

He still needs thestral tail hair, but can’t get it until the twenty-eighth of August. That pushes things uncomfortably close to the limit. The potion didn’t specify, but one does not harvest anything from a thestral unless it’s a waning moon, not a waxing one.

There is a precise one point six ounces of pure white owl down waiting for him in a sealed weighing flask. In a corked test tube are the six Wiggenweld leaves that Lupin promised to retrieve. Perfect. Snape was in no mood to go hunting for fairies to offer up as mating baubles for a Bowtruckle’s indulgence. He would rather—happily—go kill someone for a cup of enemy’s blood. He just has to choose, stalk, and appropriately murder the right sort of target.

He would go to Azkaban and kill Lucius if it wouldn’t still make Draco unhappy. He—

Snape feels a wide smile spread across his face. Now *that* gives him an idea.

Getting into Azkaban is easier now. There are no Dementors left, as they’re out terrorizing the countryside on Voldemort’s command; the guards are all loyal to the Dark Lord. They let Snape into the prison with no questions asked, possibly assuming he’s there to see Malfoy. Voldemort is still debating on whether he is going to free Lucius now, or let the man stew in a jail cell until the onset of fall.

“Hello, Dolores.”
“You!” Umbridge crosses the cell and swipes through the cell bars at Snape, much the same way Bellatrix had attempted when he’d spoken to her in the spring of 1995. Her hair is longer, but she has somehow convinced someone to let her prison uniform remain a sickening shade of pink. “I’ll have your job! I’ll be out in no time, and then the Minister—!”

“Crouch is dead. His replacement is dead. Pius Thicknesse doesn’t know you even exist.”

Umbridge scowls before her expression clears. “Oh. I see. You’re one of his. Well, that’s excellent. You know I can be very useful. If you’ll just tell the Dark Lord—”

“That you’ll be useful?” Snape smiles at her. “Well. You’re certainly useful to me.”

An *Avada Kedavra* would be noticeable by its flash of green light, but as Potter once pointed out, *Incarcerous* is an excellent substitute. Even better, except for some choked sounds at the start, the process is all but silent. By the time she finally stops twitching, Dolores Umbridge once again looks like a toad.

Snape considers the matter before directing the end of the conjured rope up and over a protrusion in the wall, tying it in place. Suicides in Azkaban are not exactly uncommon. It is also much easier to collect blood from a hanging specimen than from one still lying on the ground.

He wonders on his way out, all but ignored by the guards, if Umbridge’s death will finally lift the remainder of that damned blood quill’s curse from Potter’s hand.

The sixteenth through the twenty-fifth, he remains exclusively at 12 Grimmauld Place, though only its two sober house-elves are aware of his presence. On the eighteenth, from sunset to sunup during the night of the full moon, he prepares and measures the dry ingredients to their precise proportions. They are then stored in their quartz containers inside a dark, locked cupboard.

When those ten days have passed, much of the preparation for the potion is complete. He has Acromantula venom infused with honey and dandelions, a combination that turns it from milky white fluid to golden sunlight.

That doesn’t make it any less toxic, though. Maybe.

Snape gets out one of the minnows from the Fire Crab’s tank, places it into a small beaker of water, and adds a single drop of the golden venom.

Immediate dead fish. Definitely still toxic. He’s going to need a small aging mammal on which to test the completed potion to discover if it’s truly safe.

Snape disposes of the fish, bottling the full amount of golden venom in quartz to place in the windowsill. If the last major ingredient aside from thestral hair hasn’t made it to the laboratory by the twenty-seventh, he’ll retrieve the Mooncalf dung himself.

He collapses onto the cot face-first, pulling a threadbare blanket up over his head to block out the first rays of the morning sun. He needs to sleep before Apparating back to Hogwarts. There is something he has been putting off, and it needs to be done before term begins.

When he wakes up, there is a new CD sitting on the table with its plastic wrap—the cellophane—removed. Snape reads the label after attacking a tea tray left on the floor next to the cot.

*Creedence Clearwater Revival.* He recalls...something about that name. It hadn’t been an album he or Lily owned, though. Perhaps their music played on the radio before Hogwarts, or during a summer vacation when he could get away from the house to visit Lily. Snape pockets the disc,
“Finally going up to claim what you’ve earned, Murderer?”

Snape pauses next to the gargoyle statue that guards the door to the Headmaster’s office. “Are you going to follow me around all term, Professor Sinistra?”

Sinistra crosses her arms and glares at him, her brown eyes flashing like smoky quartz against her dark skin. “If that’s what it takes.”

“You will become very tired, and you will fall behind on grading, if you decide that stalking me will consume all of your spare time,” Snape counters. He did not have enough tea before leaving London to deal with this.

“My time; thus, my choice.” Sinistra nods at the gargoyle. “It has a password. You won’t even make it up the stairs, Murderer.”

Snape glances at the gargoyle, which is staring up at him patiently. “Crumple-horned Snorkack,” he says, and the stone door slides upon to reveal the revolving staircase.

“What the hell?” Sinistra breathes.

“Oh, please. We both know Dumbledore’s sense of humor left much to be desired,” Snape returns in annoyance as he steps onto the staircase. At least Dumbledore had been kind enough to make his last password not related to sweets. “Are you coming, or are you going to stand in the hall and shout at my backside some more?”

He hears a scramble as Sinistra follows him and ignores it, waiting for the staircase to deposit him at the top of the stairs. He strides forward and stops in the center of the room.

Every painting in the office, from floor to ceiling, is awake and staring at him. They begin talking excitedly amongst themselves, though there are those, Snape notes, who still look disapproving. Bigoted old bits of canvas.

“Severus!” Phineas exclaims in greeting, peering down at him. “It is about time you showed yourself.”

“I’ve been busy.” Snape glances over at Fawkes’s stand and nearly leaps back in shock.

The phoenix is on his perch, snoring. Flames are licking up from his wings. The bird is no longer the more traditional scarlet and gold, but deep blue with white-tipped wings, the sign of a fire burning hot.

“No one has seen Fawkes since the funeral,” Sinistra whispers.

“Fawkes is no longer his name,” Dumbledore’s voice informs them.

Snape looks at the painting centered over the desk, directly above and behind the chair. The previous Headmaster of Hogwarts always gets that place of honor until the paintings are shuffled to make room for a new addition. Dumbledore is smiling genially at both of them.
“But—he killed—how did Snape know the password to the stairs?” Sinistra stutters out.

Dumbledore adjusts his spectacles. “Because I gave it to him, dear. He was my chosen sucessor, after all.”

Sinistra draws herself up, her magic almost sparking around her in violet anger. “You-Know-Who appointed this traitor as Headmaster!”

“Did he?” Dumbledore smiles. “How unusual. Since when can the Ministry appoint a Headmaster of Hogwarts? That can only be done by the previous Headmaster when they are plotting their death, or their retirement. If they die before that time, the Deputy Headmaster or Headmistress assumes the role. If they are unavailable, the faculty must vote. The Board of Governors has the most power over the school, and they can only name a new Headmaster if the current one is charged with a crime. The Ministry has no true authority here, Aurora.”

Sinistra glares at Snape. “I—don’t understand.”

“Good,” Snape replies. “Don’t. Don’t understand. The only thing you need to keep in mind is that I had to burn records inside the Ministry to make sure that no one discovers that you, Professor Sinistra, are Muggle-born.”

Sinistra’s dark skin goes pale. “I know nothing of what you’re talking about.”

Snape rolls his eyes. Wizarding prejudices. “You do know what I’m speaking of, and if you are wise, you will tell no one of your origins. There are no other competent teachers of Magical Astronomy in all of the British Isles—not ones who would be willing to come to Hogwarts now, at any rate. These dunderheaded children need you teaching them more than they need to witness a Muggle-born’s murder.”

Sinistra presses her lips together, her eyes still too wide. “I see.”

“No, you don’t, and I don’t care. Get out!” Snape orders. Sinistra, to her credit, takes one last look at Dumbledore before doing exactly that. He waits until the door is closed before slumping down in one of the chairs placed before the headmaster’s desk.

“Severus, my boy. This is your office now. You should be seated behind that desk, not in front of it.”

Snape lifts his head and glares at Dumbledore’s painting. “I am not sitting in that overstuffed, overly ornate, horrendous monstrosity that you called a chair!”

“It is your chair,” Albus replies gently. “You may change it however you wish.”

Snape eyes the chair. “I’ll think about it.” He knows it will need to be done before any student enters this office, and that time comes soon. Slughorn may be resentfully acting as Slytherin Head of House and teacher at the moment, but Snape’s older Slytherins will be seeking him out, instead. Those meetings are going to require a level of political finesse he isn’t certain he’s capable of.

Albus picks up a lemon sherbet from a jar within the painting. Of course there is a jar of candy. Snape should have expected that. “How is everyone faring, Severus?”

“Very few died during the taking of the Ministry, which is a minor miracle.” Snape pauses. “No, Yaxley and Umbridge are dead, but they’re the enemy, and thus do not count.”

“Umbridge might have been salvageable.”
Snape rolls his eyes. “Umbridge immediately volunteered to happily and willingly serve Voldemort. If you believe that to be salvageable, you and I have different definitions of the term.”

“You were salvageable,” Albus points out.

Snape eyes him with dry resentment. “I came to you because I wished to be quit of Voldemort’s plans. That is not the same thing.”

“No. It is not.” Dumbledore quietly rolls the lemon sherbet around in his mouth.

“Professor Willowood did not flee as she was warned to. She and her entire family are gone.”

Dumbledore sighs. “I had a feeling she would not. Sometimes there is no help for the choices that others make. The remaining Muggle-born instructors are still evading capture?”

“As far as I am aware?” Snape nods.

Edessa Sakndenberg blinks down at Snape from her portrait, two rows above Phineas. “Your project will succeed, you know.”

“That part? Yes, I’m aware, but thank you for the encouragement,” Snape says. “It’s the other part that is going to be frustrating.”

“You know something I do not?” Dumbledore politely asks the Moslem witch.

“We all know something you don’t. You were too busy dying in noble fashion,” Phineas retorts in annoyance.

Snape glances at Dumbledore again. “I don’t suppose you are aware of the location of Helga Hufflepuff’s Cup.”

“Alas, I am not.” Dumbledore blows out another breath of steam. It seems he retained an affection for his last batch of lemon candies. “Slytherin’s Locket, I suspect—”

“We have that already.”

“Do you?” Dumbledore, for once, looks genuinely surprised. “Well. Good work, Severus.”

“Never overlook the house-elves,” Snape replies, smirking. “The Baron and the Grey Lady revealed the location of the Diadem here in Hogwarts. It is now in a safer location.” As much as Pollux Black’s laboratory is safe for anything, but it is, at least, a room no one can enter without Phineas’s express permission, which he has only granted to two house-elves and six allies bound by Unbreakable Vows. “Nagini’s location is also rather obvious.”

“But for the Cup, you are ready,” Dumbledore whispers, shocked. “Then Harry—”

“NO!” Snape is on his feet, leaning over the desk to glare at Dumbledore’s portrait, before he realizes he intends to move. “Absolutely not, Albus!”

“My boy, there is little choice in the matter—” Dumbledore tries.

“There is always a choice. We are researching the matter by means you did not have access to in life. I will allow Voldemort to point a wand at Potter if it truly is the last resort, the only option, and not a moment before!”

Dumbledore gives him a stern look. “You made a promise, Severus.”
“I did. I promised to watch over the boy, not guard him as your sacrificial lamb,” Snape growls back in reply. “To Lily I made a blood oath, and I will not break it.”

“You made—” Dumbledore leans back in surprise. “After all this time, Severus?”

Snape scowls at the painting before drawing his wand. “Expecto Patronum,” he murmurs, and Lily’s doe leaps from the tip of his wand to settle in corporal form on the stone floor. She glances up at the painting, miffed, and begins to explore the room.

“Love,” Snape tells the portrait, restraining the urge to shout at magicked paint and canvas with utmost difficulty, “does not end in death, no matter if it is love for a friend, a relative, or a spouse. In all your years, in all your wisdom, how is it you do not recognize that?”

Dumbledore watches the doe wander around his former office. “Ariana.”

Snape gestures for the Patronus to return to him, resting his hand atop her head. It feels like bristly, solidified fog beneath his hands, but without any hint of damp. “Who is Ariana?”

“She was my sister, the youngest of us three,” Dumbledore says. He takes off his half-moon spectacles and polishes them with his robe sleeve. “You asked who I was in such a hurry to speak with that I would put on a cursed ring without proper care, and it is she.”

“Did you?” Snape asks.

“Not at first. The curse struck before the Stone could be used.” Dumbledore looks sad. “Then, when I picked up the Resurrection Stone, she appeared before me. She was weeping. I dropped the Stone at once.”

“Coward,” Snape says. “You cursed yourself to an early death, and then would not even speak to your own sister?”

“I killed her,” Dumbledore whispers. “Or I might have. I wanted to ask her, but when faced with my sister… I discovered I couldn’t bear to know the answer.”

“Killing your own sibling seems a bit dark for your preferences,” Snape observes in apparent disinterest.

“Mm. Does it? I was not born old and doddering, you know,” Dumbledore says. “Before Gellert Grindelwald decided to take on all of Wizarding Europe in his war, we were… we were close friends. In those early days, we shared ideals.”

“Is this why you were in such a hurry to corrupt yourself a spy?” Snape asks, feeling bitterness steal over his thoughts. Not only a pawn, but a pawn because of someone else’s guilt? That is even less preferable than mere pity.

“In part,” Dumbledore admits. “You see, Ariana had been assaulted by a vile group of Muggles before she was trained in magic, and it—it broke her. She was never the same. Strong emotions had a terrible effect on her. Aberforth, once he heard that I intended to leave with Gellert… there was an argument. Ariana flew into a rage, her magic out of control, which had felled our mother the previous year.

“At the end of it all, my sister lay dead on the ground, and none of us knew who had killed her. I refused to go with Gellert.” Dumbledore sighs. “In a single day, I lost my sister, the trust of my only brother, and the love of my life.”
“You and Grindelwald.” Snape lifts an eyebrow. “I hope he was better looking in his youth than he was during the war.”

“He was.” Albus takes up another lemon sherbet, unwrapping it from its waxed paper with slow deliberation. “Constant use of Dark magic for evil purposes seems to have a detrimental effect on the physical. Grindelwald might have remained hale and lovely, if he’d been willing to split his soul as Voldemort did. I’m glad he did not. Grindelwald had many, many failings that I recognized too late, but murder for the sake of vanity, at least, was not one of them.”

Snape is quite done with discussing Albus Dumbledore’s love life. “Why did you say Fawkes is no longer his name? Is that why he is a different color?”

Dumbledore frowns at the sleeping bird. “Fawkes was the name he chose to bear while acting as my lifelong companion. When that was complete, he no longer needed the name, so he discarded it. His coloration is the result of an intense burning, the hottest of flames signaling a phoenix’s transition from an old life to a new one. He will gradually resume a phoenix’s more traditional red and gold plumage.”

“If he is done with you, then why did he return here?”

“He has chosen a new loyalty,” Dumbledore replies, as if stating the obvious. “Whether that is to a person, or to the school itself—that you will have to discuss with the phoenix when he awakens. Given the flames he emits, I suspect it will be on the first day of school. He always did like the start of a new term. He quite enjoyed seeing the young ones view the castle for the first time.”

Snape returns to his quarters, rooms he hasn’t been inside since May. He’d placed all of his personal belongings from his office in here, so no one could discover and puzzle over the Muggle stereo and its plastic stacks of compact records, among other things.

His rooms are surprisingly spotless. “Voca Dobby.”

The house-elf pops into existence a moment later. This time he is wearing socks that represent all four Houses of Hogwarts, which Snape finds amusing. “Yes, Master Bat?”

“Who has been cleaning here?” Snape asks. He highly doubts the house-elves of Hogwarts were so sanguine about Dumbledore’s death that they would continue to do so.

“Winky, Master Bat,” Dobby answers. “She is doin’ better, but not to do much, so Dobby oversees her cleaning just one place.” He hesitates. “She be likin’ to clean for an important Slytherin, Master Bat.”

“Does she?” Snape considers it. He is not in any great hurry to own another, not when he knows what it’s like to be owned, himself, but house-elves are what they are. It is the abuse of their willing service that he finds distasteful.

Dobby nods his head rapidly up and down. “Yes, she do, Master Bat. Winky is drinkin’ much less after bein’ here.”

Dammit. “Bring her here, would you? I would prefer to keep the other house-elves of Hogwarts out of these rooms. Tell them it is for their own safety—imply what you like, whatever you think will convince them—but they must stay away from my quarters until Voldemort is dead.”

Dobby nods again. “Dobby be doin’ that at once!” he says happily. Dobby enjoys his freedom, but Snape isn’t foolish enough to think that other house-elves would prefer the same. Winky has been constantly inebriated proof of that.
Snape conjures a tea towel. After some thought on Dobby’s words, he Transfigures it so it is black but for the silver and green Slytherin crest on the front, like the bands on Dumbledore’s recreated flags.

Dobby and Winky appear a moment later. Winky smells less like a distillery, and is doing her best to stand up straight. “He’s bein’ here!” she squeaks upon sight of Snape, and tries to flee. Dobby’s grip on her arm keeps her from doing so.

“Master Bat be wantin’ to ask you something,” Dobby insists. “Winky will stay and listen to Master Bat!”

Winky shrinks back at Snape’s approach. “Winky is listening, Master Bat.”

Snape regards the black tea cloth. “It has been several generations since anyone of the Prince family line had a house-elf, but I find I have need of one now. Dobby tells me that you were rudely abandoned by your previous household.” He holds out the tea towel. “Your decision.”

The house-elf takes the towel in trembling, pale brown hands. “You’s meanin’ it? Real service?”

“You have been offered such before,” Snape reminds her.

Winky shakes her head so violently that her own ears slap her in the face. “Master Sirius pays a house-elf,” she says in disgust. Snape glances at Dobby, who shrugs in a complete lack of concern for the disparagement.

“Then I won’t insult you by offering you money,” Snape says, which makes Winky brighten. “You will be treated well, cared for—you will not be hit, nor will you attempt to damage yourself. That is an order, no matter how you feel about a mistake you think you have made. Is that clear?”

Winky glances up at him in confusion before slowly nodding. “No hitting,” she whispers. “Winky is of Master Severus’s service now.”

I have a house-elf. Albus Dumbledore, I am still blaming you for everything.

“Good,” Snape says, without letting his expression change in the slightest. “There are other rules that must be followed, for the safety of all, and I must tell you what your duties will be.”

Winky listens attentively, all hint of depression and miasma clearing from her eyes as she does so. When that is done, Snape sends her off for a bath that she seems happy to indulge in. Finally. The elf’s appearance is much improved by being clean, and being free of the threadbare, befouled outfit she’d refused to discard, the last thing forcefully given to her by Bartemius Crouch. The black, Slytherin-embossed tea towel is infinitely preferable.

“I wants one, too,” Dobby says. Snape rolls his eyes, conjures another tea towel, turns it black, and then places all four House emblems on it. “Blame Mister Potter for the colors clashing,” he says dryly.

Dobby is too busy running around in circles with his prize. “Thank you, Master Bat!” he says, and vanishes with a pop of displaced air.

Winky sniffs. “He’s bein’ too undignified for a proper house elf.”

“Perhaps.” Snape glances down at her. Safety. Dammit. “I’ve just realized that the Headmaster’s office—my office—will need to be treated with the same lack of house-elf interference as these rooms have been during my absence. Can you attend to the cleaning duties of both? Do not lie and
take on more work than you can do on your own.”

Winky looks offended, but she does, at least, consider before answering. “I’s be thinkin’ so. Winky will be tellin’ you if it be too much.”

“Thank you. There is one other thing.” Snape kneels on the ground next to her, which makes the house-elf’s eyes widen in distress. “What you overhear me discuss with any other being, living or portrait, or even what we ourselves discuss, must remain secret from all save one person. That person is Harry Potter, but he will not ask you any questions unless something happens to me. If it does,” he continues, ignoring the house-elf’s mounting fear, “Mister Potter will become your new master. He is kind and fair, and the Potters have also lacked a house-elf who understands the true nature of service for decades too long.”

Winky gives him a slow, sad nod. “I’s be swearin’ to all of that. You’s bein’ a kind master, to be thinkin’ of Winky if badness happens.”

“I really hope it does not,” Snape says, but in his heart he believes otherwise.

*          *          *          *

He spends the evening of the twenty-sixth and all of the twenty-seventh preparing for the start of term. That requires signing off on time-tables, requests for materials, and confirming the permission slips received back from owls for students eligible to go to Hogsmeade, even though he would prefer the students not venture beyond the school grounds until the war is over.

“Normalcy,” Snape mutters to himself, making sure those signed forms are delivered to their respective Heads of House. “You wanted the dunderheads to feel as normal as possible. That means Hogsmeade and bloody Quidditch. Learn to cope.”

Each Head of House visits him in the headmaster’s office—he still can’t think of it as his own—to discuss the coming year, and to seek final approval for matters that exist solely within their own Houses. The only pleasant visit of the batch is his time with Minerva. She knows of his true purposes. The others, Snape thinks, suspect his motives might be more in line with Slytherin ideals than with Voldemort, but are not foolish enough to voice those suspicions aloud.

Slughorn just wants to complain about Snape’s choice for Head Boy and Head Girl of Slytherin. “Draco Malfoy and Millicent Bulstrode. They are just not…fitting enough,” he blusters.

Snape gives the man a level, glacial stare. “Millicent Bulstrode is a competent leader who reformed the Slytherin Quidditch team into a group that won the Quidditch Cup by their own skill and merit. Draco Malfoy may not have demonstrated much in the way of leadership last year, but this year he will surprise you.”

“Mister Malfoy’s father is in…prison,” Slugorn says, as if prison is a dirty word.

“And that is Draco Malfoy’s fault how, exactly?” Snape counters. “Those holding the rank of Head Boy, Head Girl, and the Prefects stand as they are. Go away, Slughorn.”

“Very well.” Slughorn huffs and gets to his feet, turning to leave.

“One more thing.” Snape’s voice is low and deadly. In this, he will mean every word.
Slughorn looks back over his shoulder. Whatever he sees on Snape’s face causes him to swallow. “Yes?”

“I was once your student. I remember well how you blind yourself to true talent in order to ingratiate to those whom you believe have important connections.” Snape gives the man a disparaging up-and-down inspection. “You will not do so this year. You will give all Slytherins their due consideration, or I will personally hand you over to the Dark Lord. You will also do the same for all of the students in your classes, regardless of House affiliation.

“You abused your position as Slytherin’s Head of House once before, Horace Slughorn. Do so again, and it will be the last mistake you ever make.”

Slughorn’s eyes widen. “Yes, H-Headmaster,” he blurts, and then practically flees the office.

“Severus,” Dumbledore chides.

“He fucking earned that warning,” Snape retorts. “Don’t you dare pretend otherwise.”

“I particularly liked the threat about feeding him to Tom Riddle,” Phineas says gleefully.

Snape listens to the Clearwater album while preparing the lesson plans for the “Dark Arts” class. It isn’t going to vary much from what Lupin has had laid out for several years, but certain token appearances must be made to satiate Death Eater children who will report their doings to their parents. His reputation as a teacher will serve him well; he won’t have to change his methods of instruction. Except for concentrating on more violent creatures and stronger methods of defence for anyone above second year, Lupin was already veering students back towards what the curriculum always should have been.

Damn Quirrell and Lockhart, anyway. Snape is truly glad Potter remembers nothing of their horrendous instruction.

Snape realizes he’s scowling as he listens to the music. “Bad Moon on the Rise,” indeed. He calls for Dobby and slips the newly-clad house-elf a note.

Regarding CCR: Very funny, Mister Potter.

Dobby lingers instead of disappearing at once. “Master Harry Potter is wanting to know if yous be needin’ assisting with the special potion.”

Snape pauses before opening up the lunar calendar on his desk. Brewed the night of the new moon…

“DAMMIT.” He is so used to following the cycles of the full moon, for Lupin’s benefit, that his count was off by a day. The new moon does not begin on the nights between the thirty-first and the first, as he’d thought. It’s the night between the first and the second of September. Snape will have to spend the entire day at Hogwarts for its opening day and Start-of-Term Feast, remain awake all night brewing a potion, and then spend the entire day afterwards teaching.

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose. He hasn’t made that sort of blunder in a long time. “Tell him yes, but only if the house is empty of those who would be concerned about his night-long absence. Thank you, Dobby.”

“You’s welcome, Headmaster,” Dobby replies cheerfully, and departs.

Snape tries to master the expression of sheer horror on his face. He is not fond of hearing himself
After dark, when he has done all he can to prepare for the new term, Snape leaves the castle. His walk across the grounds is accompanied by the faint sounds of night insects, the swoop of bats overhead as they seek out breakfast. Only a single light is burning in Rubeus Hagrid’s hut.

Once underneath the canopy of the Forbidden Forest, Snape allows his eyes to adjust to the dark. He cannot advance upon a thestral herd at night with a light burning, or they’ll flee. It is why most care for the creatures is performed in daylight.

He can hear that he is being followed by hooved creatures. Not centaurs, who stopped being curious as to Snape’s doings once they realized he only came into the forest to stare at the ground and the trees, seeking out potion ingredients.

Snape is in the middle of calming a thestral, his hand resting on its trembling back, when he hears a voice. If it hadn’t been for the minor immobilization spell, his chosen thestral would have bolted. As it is, the entire herd rearranges itself so that its youngest are in the center of a new protective circle.

“What d’ye think yer doin’ to my thestrals?” Hagrid booms.

“To begin with? Not being loud,” Snape replies. He is searching for black hairs on a black creature in near pitch-black conditions. It isn’t an easy task. “What do you want, Rubeus?”

He can hear the man shift on his massive feat. “Same question as afore, really.”

“I need thestral hair. I am acquiring it.”

“That’s all?” Hagrid asks, sounding startled.

“No. I’d actually planned to slaughter the lot of them, leaving us without a means to haul the carriages up from the train platform,” he retorts in his driest voice. “Yes. Thestral hair. Tail hair. At night. In the bloody dark.”

“You killed Albus Dumbledore.”

Snape rolls his eyes, carefully dropping one of the thestral tail hairs into a quartz tube to join the others. He has more than three, but he hasn’t been getting excellent specimens. He suspects the potion requires perfection. “In a manner of speaking.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean?” Hagrid asks. He is coming closer, but at least the thestrals have calmed down, and do not keep him away. There; that should be enough. Snape corks the test tube and releases the thestral. The thestral turns its head, probably to glare at him, before trotting away.

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“An’ why the hell are the unicorns here?”

Snape glances around, spying the unicorns, which always appear to give off their own light in the darkness. “Being themselves. They live here—oh, for God’s sake,” he breaks off as one of the younger ones runs right at him. Its horn is still but a stub, a glancing blow that will bruise but not pierce. Then the overgrown colt begins to rub against him like a cat.

“What?” Snape demands of Hagrid, who is staring at him in disbelief.

“Why’re they doin’ that? They barely let me touch ‘em!” Hagrid exclaims.

Snape glances at the half-giant. “Are you susceptible to Obliviate?”
Hagrid is too startled to lie. He’s terrible at it, regardless. “Nah. S’the giant part. Repels that spell just like it does most things.”

“Then stop. Asking. Questions.”

“Not until I know what’s going on!” Hagrid yells back.

“Please also stop being stupid,” Snape replies, annoyed. “Behave yourself. The first-years need a cheerful imbecile to greet them, not someone petrified with fear.”

“That s’posed to be a threat?” Hagrid rumbles.

“No, it’s potential. I have what I came here for.” Snape nods at the mare whose tail hair makes up the braided core of his wand and then Apparates before Hagrid can say anything else.

The mooncalf dung is in a large, covered quartz beaker sitting in the windowsill. It is fresh enough to still glitter in the light. Snape puts the collected thestral hair into the cabinet and closes the door, locking it again.

That’s it. That is everything that is needed.

“Voldemort. I am going to kill you, and you’re even going to allow me to do so,” Snape murmurs. The thought makes him smile.
A New Term Begins

Snape is so grateful that Minerva McGonagall is sitting next to his chair at the Start-of-Term Feast that he knows he is going to have to figure out a suitable gift, and then present it for no apparent reason. Perhaps for All Saint’s Day, after Hallowe’en is over with and ignored. Her husband was Catholic enough that she still retains certain observances.

The Sorting is still her job, no matter what the Carrows might prefer. He gives them a warning glare when Amycus tries to interfere, and they fall into sullen obedience. Without the Muggle-borns, it is the shortest Sorting that Snape has ever personally witnessed. He will miss them; they are often some of his best students, but it is far preferable that they be in distant lands this year.

When the Sorting is done, the tables are not even full. The house-elves must have put out enough chairs for the entire school registry, which still lists the Muggle-borns. When Snape stands up, he waves his wand in a single gesture, banishing the empty table and chairs at the end of each of the four rows. The first-years gasp, as do an appalling number of students who are old enough not to fear such a simple display of magic.

He has to give a speech. Minerva is making him. She actually threatened to hand him over to the squid in the Black Lake if he did not. A lesser present, then; his gratitude only stretches so far.

“Good evening.” Snape glances out at many faces, most of whom gaze back in confusion, resentment, or outright hostility. “To those of you who are new: welcome to Hogwarts. This is not going to be an easy year, and none here are going to pretend otherwise.”

Alecto giggles. Snape pauses and turns his head slowly, pinning her with a deceptively bland expression. She ceases giggling, but is still smiling.

Snape lets his eyes deliberately track up towards the flags, which remain as Albus made them last winter. The strips of green, blue, yellow, and red seem more prominent at the moment than usual. “Some things remain as they are. Others do not. Muggle Studies is not on offer this year, as there is no acceptable teacher for the subject.”

Alecto begins giggling again. Snape grits his teeth, gets out his wand, and slaps her with Granger’s Ducting Tape Sealing Spell without saying a word. Alecto’s eyes widen as she starts trying to pry at the tape.

Snape returns his attention to the students. Flitwick looks like he’s trying to bite through his lip in order to keep from smiling. “Good manners, the ability to follow instructions, and keeping a level head will avail you much this year. It would serve you all well to keep that in mind.

“The idiot with the tape over her mouth is named Alecto Carrow, who will be teaching Magical Theory. Her twin brother, Amycus Carrow, is your new instructor for Ghoul Studies, for those who have interest in the subject. Professor Griselda Marchbanks, some of you will remember from your O.W.L.s.”

Some of the students begin whispering at that announcement. Marchbanks merely inclines her head at the student body in a graceful nod. “She has agreed to take on the burden of both Art and Music in place of those who are wisely not with us—or in one unfortunate instance, deceased.” That is met with several gasps, which Snape ignores. “Apparition Lessons may be taught by a new instructor in the spring, as Master Twycross seems to be unavailable.”
“Dead, you mean,” someone from the Gryffindor table calls out.

“No; unavailable. If he were dead, I would actually tell you,” Snape counters in a cool tone. “His current whereabouts are unknown, and he has answered no owl sent by the school. If he cannot be located, other arrangements will be made for those of age, or those nearly so, to learn to Apparate. I am sure it will thrill you all to know that Professor Binns has cheerfully retained his post as teacher for History of Magic.”

That gains him an unwilling chorus of groans and hesitant smiles. “Dolores Umbridge, however, is quite dead, and will not be returning to teach in any position.” That gains him much more genuine smiles, especially from those students who endured her “detentions.”

“I know that I am not the person you would all prefer be standing here. I,” Snape emphasizes, “would also prefer not to be standing here, since I hate all of you. However, we are stuck with the decisions that others made, and we will all have to learn to cope with what we dislike.” Snape taps his wand against the arm of his chair, a signal for the kitchen elves to place the food upon the tables, before he sits down. It is an uncomfortable monstrosity, much like Albus’s chair in the headmaster’s office, but this one he can’t Transfigure into something more fitting. The Carrows would bloody well talk too much about it.

He feels like he just ran for five miles. Damn you, Albus Dumbledore.

Minerva glances at him from the corner of her eye. “Well done,” she murmurs.

“Fuck this job,” Snape replies, which nearly causes Flitwick to choke on the first bite of food he takes.

Snape has already spoken to Draco, so the only student who dares to come see him in his new office after dinner is Millicent Bulstrode. All Prefects, teachers, and Head Boys and Girls of their Houses have the gargoyle’s password, a much more entertaining one: *Polyjuice thievery*.

It’s almost too bad that those students who would most understand the joke are graduated or unavailable.

“Sir,” Miss Bulstrode greets him. She is standing at attention, almost as stiff as a soldier.

Snape regards her quietly for a moment. “Has Slughorn already managed to botch being Head of House so quickly?”

Bulstrode’s lip twitches. “He is…er. Socializing in the common room. Sir.”

Snape rolls his eyes. “With those he deems acceptable, or with all?”

Bulstrode’s chin drops a little. “With all, but he keeps catching himself, as if he wants to exclude students and then remembers not to.”

“Good. If he returns to his exclusionary ways, tell me. He has been warned that such behavior is utterly unacceptable.”

“Unacceptable to whom, sir?” Bulstrode asks. Her expression is bland, and her eyes are devoid of thought. Someone did a very good job of teaching Millicent Bulstrode how to Occlude.

“Unacceptable to me.” Snape notes that her eyebrow twitches upwards, a moment of surprise quickly quelled. “The Quidditch team is still yours, Head Girl. Your control over how it functions remains yours.”
Bulstrode frowns. “The Carrow Professors seem to feel otherwise.”

“The Carrows do not have nearly the kind of power that they seem to believe. Puffed-up cretins,” Snape counters. Bulstrode’s face smooths out again. “If they interfere with your duties in any fashion, please inform me. I will deal with it, as it is my job.”

“I understand, sir. Thank you for your time, Headmaster.”

Snape waits until Bulstrode’s hand is on the doorknob for one of the double doors. “Is your chosen partner well, Miss Bulstrode?”

Bulstrode’s hand twitches over the doorknob. “As well as can be expected, Headmaster.”

“That is good to hear. Good night, Miss Bulstrode.”

Bulstrode gives him one last glance, but he doesn’t miss the faint hint of a smile on her lips as she slips out. That’s one Order member he knows is well. There are many, many more he’ll have no way to learn about unless their deaths are bragged of in front of Voldemort.

“That may endanger her,” Brutus Scrimgeour’s portrait observes.

“Her parents disowned her over the summer. Miss Bulstrode will not be allying with Voldemort, and neither will her graduated Gryffindor girlfriend.”

“Lovely alliteration,” Dumbledore says.

“Shut up, Albus.” Snape stands up from his chair and leaves the office, heading downstairs. Once there, he tells the gargoyle he will be away all night, and to send anyone who needs assistance on to Minerva. The gargoyle nods but says nothing rude in response. It makes Snape wonder if the statue was rude for fun, or rude because it got sick of Albus Dumbledore’s ridiculous passwords. Snape imagines if he had to recite candy names for forty years, he’d be irritated, too.

Kreacher pops into existence the moment Snape is beyond the gates of Hogwarts. “You’s bein’ late,” the house-elf complains as Snape allows him to take his arm.

“Student needs come first. Let’s go.”

Potter is already standing in the laboratory at 12 Grimmauld Place. All of the quartz containers are sparkling after a fresh scouring; the pyrite cauldron is in place; the silver rods are laid out on their protective cloth; the golden scales are gleaming in the light from many burning candles. Half of the wet ingredients have already been properly measured out and are waiting to be used.

Snape knows at once that something has gone wrong. “The potion?”

Potter understands those times when Snape disregards formalities. “No, no, the potion’s fine. It’s just been a long evening.” He rubs at his eyes; his glasses are resting atop his hair again, the place he leaves them when he doesn’t need to continue the ruse. “Voldemort’s people went after Vernon, Petunia, and their son.”

Snape bites back several words. Some are harsh anger; some of them are too gleeful about the potential body count. “How bad?”

“My aunt Petunia says that she recognized Death Eater cloaks—that Mum sent her a warning about them during the first war.”
“I’m absolutely astounded that Petunia Dursley paid any attention to correspondence from your mother at all.”

Potter nods. “That’s what I thought, too. Either way, it meant she grabbed Dudley and ran for the cellar. The Death Eaters kept looking for them in normal rooms, not in the old bomb shelter beneath the house. Vernon didn’t run. There wasn’t much left of him.” Potter stares at the wall. “I don’t even know why they bothered. They knew I didn’t live there. Voldemort knows I don’t fucking live there!”

“It was an attempt to hurt you,” Snape says. “As it was when the same was done to your parents’ families.”

“It was a stupid attempt,” Potter retorts, scowling. “Either way, you are definitely going to want to avoid the house. Until we come up with a better solution, Petunia and Dudley are both staying here. So are Hermione’s parents.”

At Snape’s baffled look, Potter explains. “The wards. The wards on all the homes—they were put up by people who worked for the Ministry. When the Ministry fell, so did the wards.”

Snape abruptly sits down on the cot. “Oh, God.” He hadn’t thought of that at all.

“Nobody thought of that,” Potter says, as if reading his mind. “Everyone is safe, though—well, except Vernon Dursley. The moment Arthur realized what was happening, he and Molly sent messages to everyone, the same way Kingsley Shacklebolt did. Thank goodness Muggles can see a Patronus, or Hermione would be an orphan now. Molly was smart enough to hook their fireplace up to the Floo Network and leave them with a jar of powder. William and Jean wouldn’t have made it out in time without it.”

Snape breathes out and nods. The results of such oversight could have been far worse. “Petunia was training to be a Muggle nurse before she married Vernon. If wounded come into the house, she will be able to assist.”

“Okay.” Potter tilts his head at the table. “There isn’t anything else to do right now except this.”

“No, there isn’t.” Snape sheds his robe and rolls up his sleeves. It bares the Dark Mark, but Potter, at least, doesn’t care. “Let’s get to work.”

Most of the ingredients were ready in advance, but brewing the damned thing still takes the rest of the night. The liquids are slowly poured into the cauldron, which sits over a very gentle flame. Anything more intense and the pyrite will begin to break down. The potion doesn’t stop feeling less lethal until after the drop of Veela blood is added.

“That’s weird.” Potter tilts his head, as if listening. “Did that just change in tone?”

“Tone?” Snape asks as he uncorks the chimera blood, the last remaining liquid ingredient.

“Yeah, tone. It suddenly sounds less…angry.”

Snape lifts an eyebrow. “I do not hear it by tone. I simply know. To answer your question; yes, it changed. It is no longer immediately lethal.”

Potter’s brow furrows. “Does everyone know that, if they do this long enough?”

“I don’t know. It is not something other Potions Masters discuss.”
Potter rolls his eyes. “Well, that’s stupid. Discussing our jobs. The absolute horror. We might learn something new.”

“Stop being sarcastic for a moment and double-check the liquid’s brewing time,” Snape returns, amused when Potter offers a two-fingered salute before picking up the translations. “Virtue, Potter.”

“Already compromised, probably,” Potter replies. “One hour. Gives us time to line up all the dry ingredients. Those can be added in a procession without needing to do anything between. We don’t stir again until that’s done, and then our lovely friend the Fire Crab can be dropped in.”

“Thankfully.” Snape pulls out his pocket watch and flips it open, grimacing at the time. “Sunrise is a few minutes before six o’clock. We have four hours until that time.”

“Then it’s a challenge.” Potter opens up the cabinet. “You know, that potion doesn’t say if the recipient’s hair has to go in before or after sunrise.”

“Nor does it list a dosage.” Snape glances at the cauldron. “That is going to make quite a lot.”

Snape and Potter glance at each other. “Three hours,” they both say at the same time, and return to the task at hand.

By five o’clock, the potion is done but for the addition of hair, and the cauldron is full. To Snape’s senses, it feels correct. “What do you hear?” he asks, curious.

“Like a pleasant chime—a good wind chime,” Potter replies, and then points at his ear. “But I’m not really hearing it. Maybe it’s more like an impression. What should we dip it out with?”

“No idea. I’ll take silver if you take pyrite.”

“I can’t believe Pollux Black had a pyrite dipping spoon,” Potter says.

Snape glances up at the cauldrons lining the walls. “I can.”

Their test subjects are two well-aged mice. Under Granger’s stern instructions, her cat ventured into the attic to find and deliver them. Alive. There is no telling how many the cat ate first, considering that Potter reports Crookshanks emerged from the attic fat and happy.

Snape uses a set of tweezers to pluck a bit of fluff from the back of one rodent, dropping it into the small beaker of fluid the exact same color of the cauldron it was brewed in. The potion lets out a little puff of smoke, but doesn’t change color. Potter’s does exactly the same.

“I really hope I’m not about to give you a very painful retirement,” Potter mutters under his breath, seizing up his test rodent. He shoves a quartz pipette into the rodent’s mouth and administers a few drops before putting it back in its cage.

The mouse sits in place for a few minutes before resuming its mousey business, which is to eat a small collection of sunflower seeds. The mouse remains its current age.

“Well, at least it didn’t die,” Potter says. “Your turn.”

Snape repeats the procedure with his mouse before dropping it back into its cage. The rodent shakes itself and then, before their eyes, reverts to the form of a young mouse just past the juvenile stage.

“Silver.” Snape pours the remaining contents of the sample beaker into the sink after Potter gets rid of his. “All right, then—Ow!”
Snape turns around to glare at Potter, who is dropping three of his hairs into a clean quartz graduated cylinder full of pyrite-colored fluid. The same puff of smoke emerges. “POTTER!”

“What?” Potter holds out the cylinder. “No way to know if it works on humans unless we try it.”

“I can’t use that,” Snape returns in a snarl.

“Why not?” Potter asks.

“Because I—” Snape shuts his mouth and glares at Potter. “I cannot actually think of any logical reasons not to use myself as a test gerbil for this potion.”

“Nope, didn’t think you could.” Potter puts the cylinder down on the table and shoves his hands into his trouser pockets. “You walk into Voldemort’s circle with proof that it works, and he’s that much more likely to drink both potions. If you go in with anyone else as a confirmed test subject, you’re probably just condemning them to death.”

“Considering that my choices are all in this household?” Snape slaps his hand over his face. “Go and fetch Narcissa. We know it works, but it needs to be tested with a hair placed before sunrise, and one that is placed after sunrise.”

While Potter is gone, Snape readies five more graduated cylinders, making sure they’re full to the top measuring line of sixteen ounces. He is, quite honestly, just guessing, as the potion doesn’t list the actual dosage. If it takes more than this to gain five years of youthful appearance, then the potion’s effects will simply wear off sooner.

He considers doses for the Doctors Granger and dismisses the idea. They’re already testing something ancient and nigh-unknown. He has no idea what it would do to a Muggle.

If the potion works at all.

Snape eyes the liquid remaining in the cauldron, which is still holding at least twenty ounces. He retrievest he last ingredient from its hiding place in the cabinet, removes the Preservation Charm, and then plucks three perfect hairs that had once belonged to Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Snape fills one last cylinder to the sixteen ounce point and drops in the three hairs, watching the now-familiar puff of smoke rise into the air. He then marks the outside of the container with his wand, leaving a charcoal-like impression of a reptile behind before plugging it with a quartz stopper.

He gets out another clean beaker and puts a spoonful of the liquid inside before capping it. He’s not letting anyone drink an after-sunrise sample until after the old mouse has another taste.

Snape is cleaning the cauldron when Narcissa arrives. She is scowling as Potter closes the door behind them. “Severus, it is five-forty in the morning. Tell me you had good reason for waking me before I kill you.”

“We finished the potion, and it worked on a mouse. We need to perform two tests.”

Narcissa glances at the cylinders standing in a row along the table. “I see. Yes, that is an acceptable reason. The test?”

Snape holds up the first cylinder, the one Potter had contaminated without so much as a by-your-leave. It’s been marked with a far less serpentine S. “Voldemort’s dose is completed and ready. This is to find out if hair must be administered when the potion is complete, before sunrise, or if that hair can be added at any point afterwards.”
“And we’re trying to figure out what the dosage is,” Potter adds.

“I do hate it when people do not record all relevant information.” Narcissa frowns and releases her hair from its nightly braid. “Harry, if you would, please.”

“Three plucks,” Potter warns her. Narcissa’s brow twitches when each one is pulled, but she doesn’t complain. Instead, she grabs the hairs from Potter’s hand and tosses them into the nearest cylinder.

“Narcissa!” Snape glares at her as she uses her wand to mark the quartz with a dragon’s wing. “That ruins the point of the second test!”

“No, it doesn’t. I simply want to sample the formula while I have the chance,” she counters, smirking at him. “Harry, dear, go wake Sirius and Remus. They can be our after-sunrise test subjects.”

“Make it fast. We have twelve minutes,” Snape says. Potter nods and bolts from the room, though his shutting of the door is done with only a faint click to keep from rousing the rest of the household.

He returns in five minutes with Lupin and Black. “I’m glad they’re in the same room. Running all over the house would get attention,” Potter informs them.

“Please tell me there is a very good reason you have made me get up before dawn,” Black rasps, sounding much like his cousin.

Narcissa picks up her cylinder, still smirking at Snape. “Bottoms up?”

“No,” Snape retorts. “Science, woman. Four ounces. If nothing happens, another four ounces. Keep repeating until one of us tells you to bloody well stop drinking it.”

“Or until you run out.” Potter glances at a wristwatch on his arm that is definitely magical, but does a very good job of pretending to be Muggle. “Four minutes. You’d better both start drinking. Biological variants might be a factor too, remember?”

“This is my fault,” Snape mutters, and regretfully puts the cylinder to his lips. It tastes like nothing in particular, but on the back of his tongue is the faintest hint of honey. Considering that is one of the least of the ingredients involved, it’s an odd taste to be dominant. “Why honey?”

“Wildflowers,” Narcissa comments after her first four ounces are gone. “Should I stop?”

Potter shakes his head. No change, then. “Well, neither of us are dead, so no,” Snape replies.

“They expect us to drink this shite too, don’t they?” Black asks in a low voice after the next four ounces are gone.

“Probably.” Lupin doesn’t seem to be looking forward to the experience.

“Wild strawberries,” is Narcissa’s next observation.

“Fucking dandelions,” Snape grumbles. “Dandelion honey,” he clarifies, when Potter just looks at him for clarification. He is, to Snape’s pleasure, taking very good notes of the proceedings.

“Flavors that are more pronounced as the doses progress. Huh. I wonder what Voldemort will taste?” Black wonders.

Snape nearly chokes on the next four ounces of pyrite-colored fluid. “I hate you.”

“Nah, otherwise you wouldn’t have bothered filling four more cylinders,” Black returns, smiling.
“Lilies,” Snape murmurs. It’s no longer a flavor, but an impression.

“Roses. That’s twelve. Make it sixteen?” Narcissa asks, gesturing with the cylinders and their last four ounces. “You’ve not changed, so I’m assuming I look the same, also.”

Snape closes his eyes. “If I die, you can’t have my belongings. My will is up to date and goblin-verified.” The last four ounces make him feel like he’s standing in the Forbidden Forest in full daylight, his face buried in a stubborn, idiotic unicorn’s mane.

When he opens his eyes, Narcissa is staring at him, blinking back tears. She looks like she did before Draco was born, flawless perfection, platinum blonde hair without a hint of the white that came to her early.

“Are you going to tell them what the last part is like?” she whispers.

Snape shakes his head. “No. That is far too personal.”

“Exactly.” Narcissa gives him a close inspection. “You always did look handsome as a fully grown adult, even after you let stress age you so.”

“We appear to be twenty-one?” Snape asks. Those are younger results than he expected, and possibly very inconvenient.

Narcissa’s eyebrows quirk up as she smiles. “I won’t know until you tell me.”

“Flawless,” Snape says, which makes Narcissa’s smile widen.

“I wonder if anyone is on the market for a beautiful young lady from the House of Black?”

Snape doesn’t respond. He’s busy plotting; he’s going to need some sort of Illusion Charm for Hogwarts. A very, very good one. If Minerva asks, he might confide in her, but he’ll need some sort of cover story for those who can see that kind of magic. Hiding the stress of a Headmaster’s life, perhaps?

“Six o’clock. The sun is up,” Potter says without speaking of Snape or Narcissa’s appearances. “Time for the second half of the experiment.”

“Mouse first, Potter,” Snape interrupts. He holds up the beaker with its test sample.

Potter snatches more hair from the back of their decrepit mouse, who is starting to develop a bald patch. He drops the sample into the test tube: same puff of air, and no change of color. The mouse just seems resigned to its reintroduction to the quartz pipette.

The mouse does seem surprised by the potion’s abrupt activation. It starts grooming itself at once in confusion.

“Well. I guess it doesn’t matter, then,” Potter says, and offers his godparents a merciless grin. “Next!”

“I don’t want to look twenty-one again. No one took me seriously!” Lupin complains as Potter takes three hairs from his head.

“Remus. You looked like you were twenty-one at age fifteen,” Black says in stern fondness. “Shut up and drink the magic goop.”

“What about you?” Lupin asks, rubbing the back of his head before he accepts the cylinder. “Hell,
“There is nothing in here that will harm a werewolf. At most, you will spend the day in a lavatory,” Snape says, unimpressed.

Sirius looks a bit more enthused. “Even if it only lasts for five years? Azkaban made me look like I’m fifty, not nearing thirty-eight, Remus. I’ll take a bit of youth while I can get it. At least when I’m forty-three, I’ll look a bit closer to the way I should.”

“Shut up and drink it!” Snape orders them. “Even if it doesn’t work, it’s not fatal, or we’d have dead mice!”

“That’s really not the way to encourage someone to do something,” Lupin tells him sternly. “Bollocks.”

Black shrugs. “Bottoms up. It’ll be fun to make up lies to tell everyone at breakfast.”

When they hit the twelfth ounce, Lupin turns bright red. Snape does not even want to know.

When they’ve finished the potion, and it has done its work, Black and Lupin stare at each other.

Black was right, Snape thinks; Lupin looked twenty-one when he was still a teenager. This is the appearance of a man who hasn’t gone through the stresses of puberty accompanied by years of unmedicated lycanthropy.

Black looks like a somber, matured version of the rake that attended Hogwarts. “What? Why are you staring at me?”

Lupin puts the empty quartz cylinder down, seizes Black’s face, and kisses him. Black is wide-eyed and baffled until his brain apparently catches up with current events.

Snape rolls his eyes and turns away. “Please! Some of us have no wish to witness you trying to consume each other’s tongues!”


“He started it!” Black gasps out when Lupin releases him.

Potter had seated himself on the old cot while taking notes, but he’s looking at each one of them now with a thoughtful frown on his face. “You know, I don’t think it’s about being twenty-one. I think it’s more like the potion peels away the damage of what you’d look like without…well, as Madam Malfoy said: stress.”

“Azkaban is stressful,” Black concedes.

“Lycanthropy,” Lupin says flatly.

Narcissa shrugs. “Raising a child. It is actually work, you know.” She eyes Snape. “Spying.”

“Also stressful work.” Snape glances at the quartz-stoppered cylinder with its serpent mark. “With still more of it yet to do.”

“What are we going to tell people?” Lupin asks.

“I’m not telling anyone anything. I can’t,” Snape answers, picking up the cylinder and placing it into his satchel. “The only people who get to see this are you lot, followed by Voldemort when he demands proof of the spell’s functionality.”
“Right. Secrets and spying.” Black sighs. “I’m claiming it’s from great sex.”

“Sirius!”

“I’m kidding!”

Snape leans in close to Narcissa. “Those are for Andromeda and Ted, if you think they would be willing to accept it.”

Narcissa’s eyebrows rise. “Thank you,” she replies softly. “It is a fine bribe.”

Snape shakes his head. “Not this time, Narcissa. Even if it is only the once.” He straightens, aware that Narcissa is trying not to stare at him in consternation. “I need to leave. Hogwarts begins its day early, and I have to teach. Dobby!”

The house-elf pops into existence and then looks startled. He glances up at them all and then apparently seems to decide that it’s wisest not to say anything. “Back to Hogwarts, Headmaster Bat?”

Headmaster Bat is a far more appealing title than Headmaster alone. “Yes, please.”

“Ask for Dobby again this evening,” Potter says, rolling up the scroll holding their notes. “I’ll send him to you with a sealed container of White Fire.” Snape nods in acknowledgement.

“Don’t kill the Carrows before lunch!” Black calls out just before Dobby returns Snape to Hogwarts’ front gates.

* * *

Minerva laughs at him. Snape behaves himself, and does not hex her.

Then she compliments his appearance.

A binding hex it is, then. It’s irritating that she’s still cackling when he leaves her office.

Aside from that encounter, Snape keeps up the illusion all day. Laughter aside, he trusts Minerva to do her job.

It’s not until he’s safely in his own quarters late that night, in private, that he drops the illusion. It’s a draining charm to maintain; he will have to come up with another long-term solution.

While washing his hands in the sink of his own lavatory, Snape glances up and sees his reflection for the first time that day. He finally understands Narcissa’s reaction. He also nearly falls backwards through the open doorway in surprise, but he isn’t telling anyone else that.

Once he’s gotten over the fact that yes, he truly does look far younger than he’s grown used to, Snape peers closer. He thinks Potter’s description of the potion’s effects is apt. It did not de-age him so much as remove the many, many marks caused by a stressful life. Most of the wizards of his generation came out of the first war looking almost a decade older than they really were.

For Snape, the stressful nature of war has never really stopped. It hadn’t even occurred to him that he looked closer to fifty-five than thirty-seven until being presented with such blatant evidence.
If I survive, he thinks, as he readies himself for bed, I am taking a vacation. Snape doesn’t even care where that vacation takes him—not the Arctic Circle—as long as he can simply…stop. He would like, for one summer, to truly be on vacation from his teaching job. One summer when he isn’t planning for a madman’s return. One summer when he isn’t responding to said madman’s return. One summer that isn’t based upon plans to bring about the downfall of someone he hates.

One summer when he isn’t beholden to anyone but himself.

* * * *

“Why is Dean Thomas not in Hogwarts?” Snape asks Minerva in private, one of the few times he gets the chance. The bloody Carrows have been all but nipping at his heels since the term began, and it’s irritating. “He’s a Half-blood.”

“A Half-blood who cannot sufficiently prove it.” Minerva sighs. “His father was a wizard who, er, ‘dipped and split,’ as I once heard it referred to as. His mother is a Muggle, and it’s her name Dean is listed under. Dean knows his father’s name, but since his father hasn’t been seen or heard from in years…”

“Dammit.” Snape resists the urge to grind his teeth. Claiming magical heritage isn’t enough for that damned Commission. “Is there anyone else in a similar position we missed?”

“Three.” Minerva adjusts her spectacles. “They’re listed on the registry for Hogwarts as Half-bloods, but the magical parent is either dead or unavailable. Miss Singh dared the train and came here, and is safe as long as she doesn’t leave again—Pomona has already made sure that Miss Singh is aware she can’t leave Hogwarts for the winter holiday.

“Mister Balaji and Mister Van Burm are either on the run, or escaped to their countries of origin before the Ministry could send out those cursed Snatchers.”

Snape sits down heavily in front of Minerva’s desk. “This is worse than overlooking the Muggle-born adults. They’re at least educated enough to have a chance at defending themselves.”

“We don’t know Balaji’s and Van Burm’s fates, and I won’t consider them lost until it’s confirmed,” Minerva replies in a crisp voice, pinning him with a stern glare. “Mister Thomas is a seventh-year Gryffindor with a full school year and some months of training under our extracurricular Hogwarts’ Army. He will be fine, and I won’t hear otherwise.”

When Snape is free to see Voldemort that weekend, Lucius Malfoy is once again among the ranks of the Death Eaters. “Lucius,” Snape greets him, his voice a careful, guarded neutral.

“He is very intelligent, yes,” Snape says of Draco, whose lips rise in a very brief smile. “I do hear, however, that Narcissa did not share in your enthusiasm.”
The joyful mask on Lucius’s face falters. “Yes, well. We all know that the Dark Lord has a…he has proper ways of dealing with traitors.”

“Indeed.” Snape turns away, inwardly cursing. He is not going to feel sympathy for Lucius Abraxus Malfoy.

Choices. Snape tries not to growl at the ghost of Albus Dumbledore. He isn’t sure Lucius is that intelligent.

He isn’t even certain Lucius is going to live that long. The man doesn’t look healthy at all.

“Severus,” Voldemort greets him, once Snape has made his way past the Death Eater’s inner circle. Draco is part of it; Lucius is not, standing further back in the ranks. “How is life at school?”

“Tedious and nigh-intolerable, My Lord,” Snape replies. “The Carrows, at least, are succeeding at their posts.”

“I’d hoped one of them would take up the position for Dark Arts. I know where your true pleasures lie,” Voldemort says, a false smile on his face. Bellatrix’s titter becomes full-blown laughter when he eyes her in disdain.

“My Lord, the Carrows might teach certain lessons. They are not even remotely capable of teaching all of what My Lord’s service would require. I would rather the lessons be taught correctly the first time.” Snape is relieved when Voldemort merely nods. Technically, Snape was disobeying Voldemort to assign the Carrows to new positions, but his reasoning is sound.

“Have any of Hogwarts’ remaining teachers overstepped their bounds?” Voldemort asks, studying his wand. He often does so if he is contemplating using it, but since that is almost always the case, Snape refuses to let the sight bother him.

“They are afraid, My Lord, as they should be,” Snape answers. “Most are, as I thought, more concerned with teaching and protecting wizarding children than they are with defiance. Rubeus Hagrid might prove to be a different matter. He is stubborn, and still…displeased with the events that took place this past spring.”

“Have you a replacement in mind if he goes too far?”

“Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank. She is a Pure-blood who knows the subject material, and she also knows how to keep her silence if she disagrees with my decisions.” Snape waits a moment. “Updating you on Hogwarts and its affairs is not the only reason I am here.”

“Oh?” Voldemort looks up. “Is it finished?”

“Have you a replacement in mind if he goes too far?”

“Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank. She is a Pure-blood who knows the subject material, and she also knows how to keep her silence if she disagrees with my decisions.” Snape waits a moment. “Updating you on Hogwarts and its affairs is not the only reason I am here.”

“Oh?” Voldemort looks up. “Is it finished?”

Snape nods. “It is.”

“I see.” Voldemort taps his wand against his palm in a lazy, repetitive beat. “Does it work?”

“My Lord knows that I would not give him any potion that I would not first test.” Snape braces himself and pulls the charm from his pocket, hiding it within his hand—the illusion is tied to a feather the yet unnamed phoenix deigned to give him.

There are several gasps, as well as hints of derisive laughter. If the fools think he took on an illusion, they are about to be sorely disappointed.

“Not fair,” Bellatrix sings out, grinning at Snape. “Where is mine, Severus?”
Snape gives her appearance a moment of careful scrutiny. “Whatever for, Bella?”

She giggles at him. “Flatterer.”

Voldemort is the only one who does not react in some fashion. “Interesting. You have brought it with you?”

Snape reaches into his robes to the satchel hidden beneath. He draws out the quartz cylinder with its stopper still in place. With his other hand, he removes a smaller capped cylinder, filled with eight ounces of bright green fluid.

The derisive laughter dies. Perhaps it is the expression on Voldemort’s face, which is disturbing to behold…or perhaps it is the realization that Snape’s appearance is no crafted illusion. Snape can see Lucius, and the expression on his face is one of great longing.

As if Voldemort will allow anyone else in his ranks to experience this potion. “Well done, Severus.” He accepts the cylinder full of pewter liquid, peering at before letting it swirl around in its container. “I have to admit, based on the potion you showed me, I was not certain it could be made, much less completed in the time you specified.”

“I have always been honest with My Lord regarding my skills,” Snape lies. He has been mostly honest. “The first potion, My Lord, is pleasant to the tongue—or it was for me. The second is not.”

“What is the second one like, then?” Voldemort asks.

“It burns,” Snape replies after almost a full minute of silence. “It is, quite honestly, like eating fire.”

“But survivable, no doubt, else you would not be among us,” Voldemort notes. His smile is always more terrible when it is genuinely meant. “Must I do anything in particular?”

“Drink the whole of the first one. Allow its effects to come to fruition.” Snape gestures at the wide mirror that graces the Malfoy’s fireplace mantel. He is doing a very good job of not gazing too long on his own reflection; it’s still too damned odd. “When it is done, drink the second. That is all.”

Voldemort nods, pulling the quartz stopper from the bottle. He discards it in a way that makes Snape resist the urge to grimace. If he wishes to attempt repairs, it will be difficult to find all of those pieces.

“If this is a trick, Severus—”

“You will kill me?” Snape smiles and inclines his head. “Every action I take, I do so knowing that you might choose to do so.”

“Always the clever tongue, Severus,” Voldemort says, and puts the cylinder to his lips.

Snape has to remind himself to keep breathing, to act as if this is entirely normal. Others are not capable of that level of self-control, and there is a hush in the grand parlor as Voldemort drinks.

Voldemort is at least thoughtful enough not to simply toss the cylinder aside when it is empty. “A peculiar succession of flavors. I am not sure I would dub them pleasant, but they were not entirely displeasing.” Then Voldemort turns around and faces the mirror, observing the changes already in progress.

When it is done, it is like seeing the shade from Tom Riddle’s diary all over again. Voldemort’s hair is dark and thick; his skin is fair and clear; his eyes have regained the jewel blue he was once famous for. At most, his is the appearance of a man in his late twenties, one with pronounced sculpted cheekbones and the lean physique of a scholar who recalls that health of the body is as important as
health of the mind.

“It has been a long time since I’ve seen this face,” Voldemort murmurs. Even his voice is renewed, vibrant and striking in tone.

Snape glances around the room again. Bellatrix is not the only one who looks like she has fallen in love anew.

Without prompting needed, Voldemort uncaps the bright green cylinder and downs it in several swallows. He grimaces the moment it is done; a puff of smoke emerges from his regrown nostrils as he breathes out. “You were honest in your assessment, Severus. It does indeed feel like being set on fire from the inside out…but the sensation already fades.”


“Pleased?” Voldemort turns around, gesturing for Snape to stand up. “Loyal one, this is a favor that I will never forget.”

“How much?” Lucius asks in a mild voice.

“A literal small fortune,” Snape tells him. “No, I am not in jest.”

“You will be fully reimbursed. Perhaps doubly so.” Voldemort has turned back to the mirror, exploring the fine lines of his cheekbones with one perfectly manicured, long-fingered hand. “The results are worth every sickle.”

“My Lord is most generous.” Snape takes a breath. “For anyone who thinks to request their own, such a thing will wait until Hogwarts’ summer break next year. It takes a month to gather and to brew, and I must be fully devoted to that task. My Lord Voldemort has made it clear that Hogwarts is my first priority.”

Voldemort smiles in a way that Snape thinks might bring on unwelcome flashbacks about the first war. “Exactly so.”

*          *          *          *

When Snape returns to Hogwarts an hour before midnight that night, he walks straight to his quarters. No one is around to comment on his appearance except for the Baron, who simply raises both eyebrows before disappearing through the nearest wall.

Dammit. He forgot to put the feather charm back in his pocket. Snape decides to be relieved that the Baron is well-versed at keeping secrets.

He makes it to his quarters and shuts the door harder than he intended, wincing at the thud of wood against stone. He nearly drops his wand as he removes it from his sleeve, and it takes several tries to find the right spot in the stone to activate his wards.

The wash of pale blue fire is not soothing. He wants it to be, but it is not.

Snape sits down on his sofa, points his wand at the fireplace, and manages to light it without making the firewood explode. The burst of heat is so intense and loud that Winky appears with a startled
“Master Severus?” She peers up at him. “Is you bein’ needing anything?”

“No. Thank you. I’m fine.”

Winky frowns. “You’s not bein’ fine. Winky will get the tea.”

Tea. Tea sounds lovely.

Winky returns with tea, Dobby, and Potter.

“That,” Snape grates out, pointing at the other two, “is not tea.”

“No, this bein’ the tea,” Winky says, putting the tray down on the table. “Dobby is a sensible house-elf, if one havin’ wrong ideas about service.” She takes Dobby by the hand; they both disappear with a loud pop.

Potter stares at him. He’s in a t-shirt and denims, but otherwise barefoot. “I have no idea. All I know is that I just got kidnapped by a house-elf.”

Snape lets out a laugh that nearly emerges as a sob. “I can see that.”

Potter’s eyes widen in alarm. To Snape’s utter dismay, Potter comes straight to the sofa, sits down next to him, and wraps his arms around Snape.

The most embarrassing part is that Snape clings right back. He does not want to. He cannot afford this sort of…this sort of weakness.

“Shut up,” Potter says in a fond voice. He shifts around until Snape’s head is resting across Potter’s chest. “Mum says you’re being ridiculous.”

“She always says that,” Snape says, gritting his teeth when his voice is a tremulous mess.

“Yeah, well. She’s usually right. What happened, Snape?”

Potter. The one person on this planet who listens to him about his name.

The one person who might understand that Snape has lost the right to claim the other one.

“The potion. He drank it. Both of them.” Snape tries to stop shaking, but all it seems to do is make things worse. “I’d forgotten. What he looked like. Sounded like.”

“Oh. PTSD. Post-traumatic—”

“I know what PTSD is, Potter,” Snape growls. “I simply wasn’t expecting it.”

Potter holds him until the shaking begins to ease. “Mum says you lied to Winky about being fine.”

“I would have been.”

“You’ve spent a lot of time telling me not to be stupid. My turn. Don’t be so fucking stupid,” Potter hisses at him. “You were not all right. You haven’t been all right in a long damned time. Just, for once, be fucking honest!”

“Certainly.” Snape swallows against a dry feeling in his throat. “When Voldemort is dead.”

“That doesn’t count.”
“You were not specific enough, then.”

Potter laughs. “Fair point. I wasn’t, was I?”

“You’re out of practice.” Snape gingerly pulls away. He can’t tell if he’s embarrassed, ashamed, or far too grateful that Winky is a traitorous, loyal house-elf.

“Only against you. You’re not around as much. Nobody is as good at keeping up,” Potter replies. “Winky went to the trouble of fetching tea. It would be a shame to waste it.”

At least when Snape is handed a cup, his hands have ceased shaking. “Were you on your way to bed?” He knows it has to be after midnight by now.

“No, I was just reading. Still trying to find out if there is a way to remove this stupid Horcrux without dying.” Potter hesitates. “The trap works, by the way.”

Snape almost drops his cup anyway. “WHAT?”

Potter glances at him. “The trap works,” he repeats. “Voldemort thinks he’s getting into my head, but he only gets to see what I’ve put out for him to look at. While he thinks he’s rifling around, I’m literally doing the same thing to him.” He takes a sip of tea. “He wasn’t smart enough to create a Legilimency trap. He thinks Occlumency is enough. Not so much when the connection goes both ways, it turns out.”

Snape breathes out. “You remember to vary the contents of the trap, yes?”

Potter nods, unconcerned. “I do. He’s really damned dull, though.”

Snape is surprised into smiling. “Is he?”

“Yeah. Scary intelligent, don’t get me wrong, but most of his concerns hinge on being in charge, not dying, being in charge, and not dying. Gets old after a while. I’m hoping the trap is useful at some point, but for now? Dull and daft madman.”

“He isn’t dull in person, Potter.”

“No. I imagine he’s not,” Potter agrees, staring down at his tea cup. “No matter what he looks like.”

Snape studies Potter’s posture. “Potter?”

“I’m going to recognize him when I see him again,” Potter says softly. “I’ll know his face. I don’t know what that’s going to be like.”

“It is my great hope that you never have to.”

The phoenix’s name enters his head on Hallowe’en when Snape walks into the headmaster’s office that morning. “Pyrrhus.” Snape glances at the phoenix, who is awake and preening his feathers. Gold is starting to creep into the feathers closest to the phoenix’s skin, but white-tipped blue still dominates. “Flame. Very subtle.”

Pyrrhus stops his grooming and looks at Snape. The sound he utters is a very mute version of a phoenix’s falcon-like cry.

“Yes, I’m aware that Fawkes was a Norman word for bird,” Snape replies sarcastically, not sure if they’re even having the same conversation. “The Greek word for fire is still not subtle.”

The bird shifts on his perch before fluffing his wings. He stares at Snape with eyes as blue as his feathers.

“Oh, just figure out an excuse for me to skip tonight’s Feast,” Snape mutters, burying his face in his hands. He’s talking to a bird that cannot talk back. Excellent.

He doesn’t get to skip anything. He will literally have to be dying to miss a school function.

At least watching his Slytherins demolish the other teams during Quidditch is entertaining. Their only real competition is still the Gryffindors, though they have a new Keeper, two new Chasers, and Ginevra Weasley has taken the Seeker’s position. She’s quite good at it, too, though Granger was more adept at observing gameplay, making predictions on the outcome, and acting accordingly.

If Snape stands and applauds more vigorously during Slytherin wins, that is his concern. It also still fits the profile that Voldemort and the Death Eaters expect of him.

He’s still proud of them, though.

Aside from the duties of preparing for a new school term, and the classes Snape has chosen to teach, the job of Headmaster is not very difficult. It’s something even Minerva observes one evening in December. Most of their time, so far, has been taken up by responding to the owl-sent scrolls of anxious parents who wish to know if their children are still safe. There are other duties, of course, but without a Minister for Magic demanding time, as Fudge did to Albus, it is a relatively light workload. Aside from letters, Snape spends most of his time grading essays from dunderheads, something he is quite practiced at.

Snape has some radical ideas, conceived of by Albus himself, damn his dead hide, that he would dearly like to implement. When Minerva asks him about such things, Snape says, “The problem, Minerva, is entirely political.”

Minerva’s quill pauses over the response letter she’s crafting. “Albus was on the Wizengamot.”

“Chief Warlock, no less. And neither you nor I have a seat on that illustrious body,” Snape replies, his voice dripping scorn. “You’re a Half-blood and Scottish. Most of those fools see both as a failure in breeding.”

Minerva sniffs in disdain. “If they would get around to recognizing the Scottish wizarding families
properly instead of only the English ones, our government would be far more effective.”

“Not to mention the northern Irish, the Welsh, the Isle of Man, the Cornish wizarding community…” Snape puts his quill down long enough to rub at the bridge of his nose. His head aches, more and more, as the term progresses. He needs to stop clenching his jaw.

Possibly he also needs to sleep instead of lying awake at night, listening to the illicit Potterwatch broadcast through the band on his magic-converted compact record player. Lupin and Potter were in a skirmish last night with Death Eaters when they were discovered while escorting a Muggle-born wizard and his family to safety. There were no fatalities on the Order’s side, but such fights are becoming more and more common.

“The Prince family once had a seat on the Wizengamot.”

“Then it should be yours,” Minerva says flatly. “You’re the last of their line. You’ve told me so yourself.”

“There are two difficulties.” Snape glances down at his letter, erases the last three words in a row that he misspelled, and begins again. “The first: I would be required to change my name to match the seat. I’m not entirely opposed to that.” He is, but his reasons are his own. “The process, however, is mind-bogglingly complex, and I worked for Albus Dumbledore for over fifteen years.”

“I am pretending I did not hear that remark,” Dumbledore’s portrait replies while pretending to be asleep.

Minerva shakes her head, but her eyes hold more fondness than lingering grief. “You would think such practice would make the process easier.”

“One would think.” Snape double-checks the letter before signing off on it, rolling it up to join the pile waiting to be sealed and taken to the school owlery. “The second problem? I would have to buy my way onto the seat, regardless of familial blood. The Prince family was destitute before my grandparents kicked free of this mortal coil and did us all the grand favor of departing. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“But we’ll need that money.” Minerva pins him with an earnest look over the rims of her spectacles. “We’ll need that sort of political leverage, Severus.”

He stares back at her in disbelief. “I am not remaining Headmaster of Hogwarts when this foolishness is over with!”

“Why not? Albus chose you.” Minerva’s expression never wavers. “Voldemort might have also done the same, but Albus Dumbledore chose you first. He did not only do that because he expected it of Voldemort. Albus would not have given you this job if you couldn’t perform it to Albus’s expectations. Granted, some of his expectations left much to be desired, but you care. You care. That’s one of the most important things a Headmaster should be capable of, no matter the method in which they choose to express it.”

“Then Albus should have left me a small fortune in his will,” Snape growls, bending his head back to his scroll. “Without any kind of political clout, I’ll never hold this position. Not in the face of the Board of Governors, Minerva.”

“Hmm. Problematic, yes,” Minerva mutters, but when Snape glances over at her, she has also resumed the speedy scratch of her quill over parchment.

*Foolish woman,* Snape thinks in irritation. He doesn’t outright talk of his fate, given Minerva’s
visceral reactions if he so much as hints at it, but he is not going to pretend to himself that he’ll see the end of this war. Minerva will make a fine Headmistress when the time comes, one the Wizengamot won’t dare challenge—not for several years, at least. That will give Minerva plenty of time to become a political force to be reckoned with. Black would fund the entire endeavor just to watch the Wizengamot and the Board of Governors cluck and panic.

Thank God and Merlin both that there are students who stay over at Hogwarts during the winter holiday weeks. There are actually more students who stay than leave, choosing to remain in one of the most defensible buildings in Great Britain than go home and chance an encounter with overzealous Snatchers, Death Eaters, or both. It gives Snape the excuse to not attend to Voldemort more than a few times over the holiday.

The Dark Lord is enjoying his newfound appearance of humanity and youth. Snape is patiently waiting for the day when he chokes on it.

There are enough Slytherins who have also chosen to remain at Hogwarts that even Draco has a reason not to attend Voldemort constantly. He has to be there with the students, providing necessary supervision. Draco reported once during the first half of the term that another new Death Eater among the seventh-years wondered why Draco wasn’t pushing the other Slytherins to join Voldemort. Draco retorted that currently, that was not his job, or did the blind idiot not notice the badge on his robes?

Snape gave him his first legal taste of good Firewhiskey for that brilliant response. Draco had been less than impressed by the beverage and said so. Snape also complimented him for that decision; it is a terrible habit to indulge in, but some wizards cannot afford well-crafted wines.

On the first of January of the New Year, Winky pops into existence while Snape is sitting in front of his fireplace, sipping at the beverage in question. There had been a Feast earlier in the day to welcome in the New Year that he hadn’t been able to skip, as was his former habit. He’s still picking streamers of crinkled paper out of his hair.

“Master Severus? Winky is wantin’ to know if you is safe for havin’ company right now.”

Snape gets up and fetches his wand, tapping the place on the wall to activate the gentle blue fire of his wards. “It is now. Thank you, Winky.”

Winky wrings her hands. “Don’t be thankin’ me,” she whispers, and disappears again.

A few minutes later, Dobby arrives, bringing Potter with him. “Go ahead, Dobby. I’ll give you a call when I’m ready to go back, okay?”

Dobby wrings his hands, much the same way Winky had. “Okay, Master Harry Potter. You’s goin’ to be fine. Yes?”


Snape sets aside the glass of Firewhiskey and sits up in alarm. “Dear God, who died?”

“Died?” Potter blinks a few times and shoves his glasses up into his hair. “Oh. Nobody. Not yet, anyway. I did meet him, though.”

It’s suddenly hard to breathe, even though the truth of Potter’s survival is standing right in front of him. “When?”
“Not long ago. Mid-November. We were raiding Azkaban, trying to get some of the imprisoned Muggle-born adults out of there. One of the Death Eaters must have sent word, and he decided to show up to oversee the battle himself.”

“What happened, Potter? And bear in mind that the Taboo Curse does not function inside of Hogwarts.”

“That’s good, then.” Potter tilts his head. “Dueling practice was a very, very good idea. Voldemort didn’t try for the Killing Curse, though—maybe he was too distracted by everyone else Apparating prisoners out. I left before he had the chance to try it, though. If we’d stayed longer, other people would have died.”

“Is anyone actively dying?” Snape asks, trying to gain clarification. The house-elves were half-panicked; Potter just seems resigned.

“No, Well—no.” Potter stuffs his hands into the pockets of his denim trousers and sighs. “I wanted you to hear it from me. There isn’t another way.”

It doesn’t take long for Potter’s meaning to become clear. Snape stands up. “There has to be—” he starts to say, but Potter is already shaking his head.

“We’ve looked at everything. Everything, Snape. Anything and everything that is still legible and translatable. There’s nothing.”

Snape turns away; he is going to start screaming, otherwise. He did not expend so much effort, work this hard, this long, putting up with thrice-bedamned Voldemort, for this to be the only solution!

“Mum says…” Potter hesitates. “Mum says this doesn’t violate your oath. The one you made to her. It’s not the same thing.”

Snape rounds on him. “The hell it’s not!” he shouts.

Potter just stares back at him, unfazed by Snape’s temper. “It isn’t. This isn’t a failure of protection. This is someone of legal age making a choice, Snape.”

“A stupid choice,” Snape retorts.

“Believe it or not? I actually want to do this as intelligently as possible.” Potter gestures at the sofa. “Sit back down. If we don’t plan this out properly, someone really will die, and it would be our damned fault.”

“Our.” Snape shakes his head and flops back down onto his sofa. “Plan, how?”

“The only Horcrux we lack, aside from Nagini, is the Cup.” Potter settles gingerly on the edge of the sofa, as if expecting another verbal explosion. “Madam Malfoy’s petition to claim the Cup from the Lestrange Vault is still a legal action in progress. The goblins have until the twenty-fifth of March. After that, if they refuse to turn it over…we’re going in to get it.”

“How?” Snape asks, intrigued despite himself. Gringotts has never, in its entire existence, had a successful burglary.

Potter makes a face. “It’s probably best not to ask. That is also still a plan in progress, but it has to succeed. We don’t have a choice.”

“All right. And afterwards?” Snape asks, covering up terror with irritation.
He can’t see another friend die by Voldemort’s hand. He can’t. He’s all but certain the act would break him.

“Well, Madam Malfoy, and all our research, suggests that if the other Horcruxes are still in place… hitting me first means I’ve got the best chance of living through it. Again.” Potter’s shoulders hunch forward. He suddenly looks as tired as Snape feels. “I’d still rather not, you know. I’m not in any mad rush to die.”

Snape has to stop grinding his teeth and swallow before he can answer. “I’m aware. How are we to plan around an event that hasn’t happened yet, then?”

Potter smiles. “Snape, if we successfully steal that stupid Cup, you’ll know it’s happened. Everyone in Britain will probably know about it. When it does, Remus, Narcissa, and Sirius will bring the other Horcruxes here.”

“Why here?”

“Bait,” Potter answers. “Hogwarts is the only thing Tom Marvolo Riddle ever loved aside from himself.”

Snape tries not to wince. Sometimes the similarities between his, Potter’s, and Riddle’s early childhoods make him very uncomfortable. “And then what?”

“Well…that’s the part you’re really not going to like.”

* * * *

The wait between the night of the first of January and the twenty-fourth of March is frustrating, but not a detriment. He continues teaching, and if anyone notices that Snape is teaching students to defend as much as he’s teaching them to attack, they’re intelligent enough not to say anything about it.

Thomas, Van Burm, and Balaji are no longer the only missing faces when term resumes after winter break. “Miss Lovegood’s status as the daughter of both witch and wizard is well-known. Where is she?”

“Filius has sent owls, but Xenophilius doesn’t answer them.” Minerva presses her lips together. “Without leaving the school—”

“Which is not safe for any adult here who hasn’t pledged to Voldemort,” Snape interjects.

She nods. “We’re aware. We will simply have to hope for the best, Severus.”

“Hope is stupid. I’ll be back in an hour,” Snape tells her, turning on his heel and heading for the Entrance Hall. He Apparates the moment he emerges from the school gates. The Lovegood home is not difficult to find, and is an interesting conglomeration of artefacts, odd warding devices, odd attracting devices, and straight-up wizarding junk. It’s mindful of the Burrow, but with less sanity involved. He remembers the tale of the Death Eater who disappeared, thinks about it, and makes a point of leaving his wand hidden in a mailbox that looks to have been scavenged from a Muggle junk pile. Either this is a key method of announcing a lack of ill intentions, or the Lovegood house guardian is intelligent enough to discern the meaning of “harm” for itself.
Xenophilius is not at home. The house has a feeling of emptiness to it that speaks of it being vacant for longer than a week, perhaps two. Snape runs his hand along the front door, sensing a trap built into the entryway. A spell to alert another—Snatchers. It’s a variant of the Caterwauling Charm that enforces curfew in Hogsmeade.

Despite his advice to Ted Tonks the previous summer, Snape hopes that the Xenophilius took his daughter and ran before the Death Eaters came.

The radio’s illicit wizarding broadcast of Potterwatch is a mixed blessing. Snape can keep track of news of the Order that way, sort of. Everyone is using a blasted nickname, so unless he hears a voice, it’s hard to be certain who is being discussed. “Lightning” is rather obvious; “Streak” less so. “Royal” is Shacklebolt, probably the last high-ranking member of the Ministry remaining who isn’t loyal to Voldemort. “Badger” appears to be Cedric Diggory. Lupin was granted the unimaginative nickname of Romulus, but then, there are very few who are not aware of his loyalty to both Orders. “Scar” is most likely William Weasley, the name chosen not for his altered appearance, but because it helps confuse Voldemort sympathizers who might also be listening. Fred and George Weasley are taking turns at reporting as “Rapier.” Snape is all but certain that “Puddle Jumper” is Oliver Wood; “River” is their announcer, Lee Jordan. Lee’s replacement as Quidditch announcer, a fourth-year Ravenclaw, could cause snails to choose eternal slumber, he’s so bloody bad at it. “Snake” is Katie Bell, a choice that Snape finds to be…

He can use the word. He can.

It’s charming. He idly wonders if Miss Bulstrode is aware of the nickname.

Dean Thomas is on the run from the Muggle-Born Registration Commission until the end of January, when news of him falls off the airwaves. His death is not announced, but Snape observes Weasley and Longbottom stealthily putting food into their robe pockets during mealtimes and discerns that Dean, and possibly others, are being hidden somewhere accessible to Hogwarts students. Not Hogsmeade; Snape made sure that statue with its hidden tunnel to the Shrieking Shack was sealed off on the castle’s side.

He isn’t sure where they’ve been hidden, but is glad he doesn’t know. If Voldemort discovers that there are refugees in Hogwarts, Snape can say, with utmost sincerity, that he has no idea where they could be hiding.

He suspects. He is not going to act on those suspicions.

In February, the death of “The Man in the Hat” is announced, which means Dedalus Diggle is lost to the Order. Then it’s Hestia Jones. Then Charles Weasley, “Dragon,” is thought to be deceased until he pops back up again and kills four Death Eaters when he does so. Snape might often mock Weasley ginger, but he also knows that one does not cross them in battle. The Prewett twins almost bloody killed him twice over in 1979.

As if Charles Weasley’s victory is a signal, Hagrid gives in to temptation and hosts a “Support Harry Potter” party. Snape buries his face in both hands, waits as long as he dares, and then sends a Patronus to the hut, warning Hagrid with Lily’s voice that the Carrows are coming. The guests scatter, Hagrid flees into the Forest, and the Carrows spend the next two weeks complaining non-stop about how the “freak giant” wouldn’t fall to their curses.

Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank shows up at Hogwarts when asked, a grim expression on her face. Snape can tell that she expects her posting to be horrid, and is aware of when she realizes, with unsettling surprise, that it isn’t.
“What did you expect?” Snape asks her in irritation. “Children chained to the walls? Starvation and privation?”

“Quite honestly? Yes,” Wilhelmina replies, still giving him a suspicious look.

“They are children. This is a school. I taught Potions in this institution for sixteen years without harming or murdering any of the dunderheads, even when they had done something truly, utterly stupid that endangered those around them.” Snape eyes her. “Keep your politics to yourself, and your time here will be worthwhile. Do something as foolish as Rubeus Hagrid…”

“I can do that.” Wilhelmina scowls. “Where is Rubeus?”

Snape rolls his eyes. “Merlin knows. Please just take over his classes so that I don’t have first years being carted off by pixies.”

Alastor Moody dies that same week. There is no word on how; River can only announce Moody’s name, along with several others. Potterwatch is also how Snape learns of the deaths of Dirk Creswell, Mundungus Fletcher (No great loss, that) Mary Cattermole, and Richard Alderton.

When Snape discovers the Carrow twins in Moaning Myrtle’s lavatory, tied up in several different colors of Incarcerous ropes, he shakes his head and leaves them to suffer. He has no idea whom they angered, but it was definitely more than one person.

“Why didn’t you help us?” Amycus demands in a full temper hours later.

“Oh. Should I have?” Snape leans in close and smiles at Amycus. “Let’s rewind time. I will rescue you and your incompetent sister, and then I will tell Voldemort that you are such utter failures that children bested you and left you in a ghost’s favorite bathroom. He will be glad to hear that their training is progressing. The two of you, I think, will not fare as well.”

Amycus pales and backpedals so fast that when Minerva opens the headmaster’s office door, he nearly falls backwards down the revolving stairwell. Snape is disappointed when he recovers his balance at the last second. That, at least, would have been an explainable, regretful incident. It isn’t as if Amycus has more than one class to teach. Anyone with even passing knowledge of ghouls could take on that class load without being overburdened.

During the first week of March, the marriage of “Puddle Jumper” to “Quicksilver” is announced. It takes Snape a few minutes to puzzle out that Quicksilver has to be Nymphadora Tonks. Wood is a good man, if irritatingly Gryffindor when it comes to Quidditch. He hopes that Andromeda and Ted enjoy the idea of having Wood for a son-in-law.

It’s a short-lived moment of joy for the Order. Late at night at the end of the second week, Edward “Ted” Tonks is confirmed killed during a skirmish with Death Eaters north of Leeds. His loss makes Snape feel like he’s taken a hard strike to the gut, and the sensation won’t fade.

Ted was with allies. There should have been no difficulties.

“Sources on the ground say that Mad Bella was involved,” River says, sounding heartbroken. “Possibly also a few Strange bits and a scuttling Crab.”

Snape has a new goal. He is going to live long enough to at least ensure that Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Crabbe are dead and dust. Ted’s family will have what vengeance it is in Snape’s power to grant.

The twenty-fifth of March passes with no word from Potter. Dobby and Kreacher do not bring any
messages.

The petition to gain the Cup through legal means has failed. It is now up to Potter’s mysterious bank theft attempt.

Potter and Granger are brilliant problem-solvers. Weasley is a deadly chess player. Black and Lupin are insane; Narcissa is a sensible, venomous counter for them. If anyone can succeed at breaking into Gringotts, steal a single prize, and get back out again, it’s them. It has to be. As Potter stated—they have no choice.

That is when the waiting becomes intolerable. Snape roams the castle in the ultimate personification of the Bloody Bat, snarling at anything living that crosses his path. He restrains himself if it is a first-year, but beyond that, he’s lost the ability to control his temper. Some of it has to come forth, or he will make mistakes that are not salvageable. He can apologize to terrified children, if he survives long enough to do so. He can’t apologize to them if he slips in front of the Dark Lord.

It is also very disturbing how many followers that “River” reports Voldemort is amassing. Snape wants to regret the potion that gave Voldemort a youthful face to provide such temptation, but he cannot. That potion is going to be Voldemort’s undoing. If those following him are stupid enough to be fooled by a pretty face, Snape has no concerns as to whether they live or die.

No. He can’t even go that far. He has too many Slytherins with Death Eaters for parents, and Slytherin House is not the only one suffering that curse. Snape’s House was not alone during the first war, but this time the additions from the other Houses are more pronounced.

Snape thinks the only thing that saves the student body as a whole is their unity. The students of Death Eaters who don’t share in their parents’ beliefs comfort each other, regardless of House. Albus preached this sort of unity often, but Potter gave it to them by destroying the hourglasses.

Then Ginevra Weasley and Neville Longbottom get caught trying to steal the Sword of Gryffindor from the headmaster’s office.

They are sitting in chairs before the desk. Snape is sitting behind it, resting his forehead on his hand. “Why,” he says, without looking up, “why on Earth would you think this an intelligent or wise thing to do?”

“If I speak freely, am I going to wind up dead, Headmaster?” Miss Weasley asks in pure, fiery defiance.

Snape looks at her. “If you were going to end up dead for attempted petty theft, don’t you think you would not already be so?”

Weasley scowls at his response. “School unity. Sir.”

Snape shakes his head. “You mean Gryffindor unity. Or do you forget who that sword was forged for?”

“No, she means school unity,” Longbottom pipes up. Snape glances over at him and finds no trace of fear on the young man’s face. At last, at long last—Neville Longbottom has grown a spine.

“Explain.”

“We know we might have to defend ourselves at some point, and that time’s coming pretty soon,” Longbottom says. “We’ve got wands, but sometimes the only thing that works against certain kinds of evil is Goblin-forged silver.”
“Which you taught us yourself. Professor,” Weasley adds, blinking innocently.

Snape gets up from his chair and goes over to the shelf to his left, staring down at the item on the before him. The Sword of Gryffindor is useful for many things, yes. It is a werewolf deterrent, if not a slayer. Vampires are not fond of it, though it is more silver’s reflectivity than fear of injury. Goblin magic ensures that the blade is as strong as steel…but it was Albus Dumbledore who took the basilisk fang that destroyed Tom Riddle’s Horcrux diary and used the remaining venom to coat the blade. It is now a weapon that will kill anything it slices through, and that makes it a very dangerous item, indeed.

These children were never taught to Occlude, but they are also hiding at least five fugitives within the castle. Outside of Minerva’s sharp gaze, their actions have not been noticed by any professor of Hogwarts, or the Carrows. More students have joined in on their food raids—students from all Houses.

Decision made, Snape picks up the Sorting Hat, which emits a sleepy grumble at being bothered. He brings it over and hands it to Neville Longbottom.

“Uh.” Longbottom winces when the Hat yawns, its torn brim opening wide, before it settles again. “What?”

Snape sits back down behind his desk. “That is the hat of Godric Gryffindor, a fact that very few people pay attention to. It’s treated like charming fancy rather than historical fact. Albus, please tell them the mythology.”

Dumbledore’s portrait lets out a snort of falsely disturbed sleep. “The Hat? Oh, yes, the Sorting Hat! Lovely item. Belonged to Godric Gryffindor, you know.”

“They know,” Snape grates out, already on the verge of losing his patience.

“Ah. I see. Well, Neville, Ginny: it is said that only a true Gryffindor can call forth the Sword of Godric Gryffindor.”

“Draw it forth from what?” Weasley asks, baffled.

“Why, from the place it resides until it is needed, of course,” Dumbledore replies. “If you do use it, make sure none but an enemy touches the blade. The results will be quite fatal.” The portrait then pretends to go back to sleep.

“Get out of this office,” Snape tells Longbottom and Weasley, who are both staring at Dumbledore’s portrait. “Yes, he is always that bloody cryptic. You will be serving detention every night this week with Professor Grubbly-Plank in the Forbidden Forest. Failure to serve will lead to steeper punishments.”

“You mean the Carrows,” Longbottom says, glaring at Snape.

“No. I mean things even I cannot protect you from.” He waits, and then scowls when the Gryffindors refuse to budge. “Must you be deaf, as well? Leave this office immediately!”

The Bloody Bat’s shouting gets them moving. They are out the door and gone, with the double doors swinging shut and clicking closed behind them.

“You gave them my hat?” Godric Gryffindor’s portrait yells indignantly from far above Snape’s head.
“Oh, shut up. They’ll give it back.”

Easter vacation week is supposed to be the seventh through the fourteenth of April. Snape taps his fingers over the calendar before he shows it to Minerva. “Should we?”

Minerva presses her lips together. “I’m not sure I can make that decision, Severus.”

Snape feels like banging his head against the nearest stone wall. “Call a faculty meeting. Please do not invite the Carrows.”

Minerva nods and goes to do so. Snape glances over at Pyrrhus. “I don’t suppose you have any advice.”

Pyrrhus cocks his head and then erupts in blue flame. Snape rolls his eyes over the dramatics. “Please, I know you’re not that dense.” The phoenix is still peering at him through the flames, which are beginning to burn gold as well as blue.

“He wants something to do. One can only guard for so long before a stretch of the wings is necessary,” Dumbledore’s portrait advises.

“I don’t know what he could do.” Snape feels so utterly exhausted, and yet he has to keep going. Even the youthful appearance potion does nothing to hide the fact that he is starting to look like an underweight corpse. If he were ever to lift the charm in her presence (absolutely not) Poppy would not approve in the slightest.

Snape rubs at his forehead. “Pyrrhus, would you be kind enough to patrol the Hogwarts grounds and forest? If Potter is correct about Voldemort, we may have spies lurking nearby. Don’t disturb them unless they are causing genuine mischief, but I’d like to know of their presence, please.”

The phoenix perks up at once, bobbing its head up and down. Snape takes that for a yes, gets up, and opens the tower window. Pyrrhus flies out into the darkness in absolute silence. A moment later, the blue and gold of his feathers is completely lost to sight.

“He is quite good at hiding, when he wishes to be less dramatic,” Dumbledore offers.

“I could have used that information in September, Albus.”

Snape waits until Marchbanks, Slughorn, Grubbly-Plank, Trelawney, Hooch, Firenze, Sprout, Babbling, Vector, Sinistra, Pomfrey, and Flitwick return with Minerva. “The Easter holiday. We all know that the attacks in the countryside are getting more pronounced. Skirmishes have been fought in Muggle cities and villages. We decide now: do we send the children home on the train for the week, or cancel the holiday and keep them here?”

The faculty that has worked alongside him for years on end have grown accustomed to the idea that Snape is not here to torture children. Flitwick looks to be chewing on his mustache before he nods. “Here. The train could come under attack.”

“Bloody London could come under attack,” Slughorn retorts. “The train, the platform, everything in between—so much could go wrong!”

Snape turns his head when he hears Pyrrhus land on his perch in a flutter of wings. He promptly bursts back into flame, but it is the controlled burn of contentment, not of renewal. “Five?” Snape asks in surprise. “Where?” The answer is not a verbal one, though Pyrrhus trills aloud. It’s a picture of his head, the stone rise that gives one a literal bird’s eye view of the entirety of Hogwarts. “Dammit.”
Why would there be Death Eaters already watching the school? The Carrows are within, as is Snape and Draco. There is no need to do so unless…

“Unless he’s laying the first part of the trap,” Snape realizes.

“Is that bird actually talking to you?” Vector asks crossly.

“In a sense. Apparently.” Snape runs his hand over his face. “Listen. Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain…until it isn’t.”

“They’re coming here. When?” Hooch asks, her odd yellow eyes already narrowed and ready for battle.

“I don’t know. Not yet. If what I’ve heard is true, we’ll all know at the same time.”

“You’re a Death Eater,” Sinistra insists, glaring at him.

“I am Headmaster of this school first!” Snape shouts back, incensed. “There are six hundred children within these walls who do not need to face a battle they are not old enough to fight in, and nowhere near prepared for!”

His words are met with abrupt silence. Snape takes a calming breath before continuing. “The old escape tunnels from the 1700s. Are they still useful?”

“Those were sealed off by the Carrows in August,” Minerva says in disdain.

“Which means they did a terrible job of it.” Snape shakes his head. “And when their inept blocks are removed?”

Marchbanks and Sprout glance at each other. “We can find out,” Sprout finally says. “I’ve got the strongest earth-sense of any of us. If there is any hint of structural instability, we can shore it up.”

“The caves come out at the far side of the lake, well away from the school,” Minerva says. “We can move the boats there and hide them with a Disillusionment Charm.”

“Brooms,” says Hooch. “Brooms with the boats. Two avenues of escape. Everyone in this school is now capable of flight, even if they don’t like it very much.”

Snape nods. “Drills for every student of every House. If this school is betrayed, from within or without, they’re to leave. The Prefects, Head Boys, and Head Girls will be their escorts, the last to escape through the tunnels to keep any of the underage students from slipping back inside.”

“You think there will be a fight.” Slughorn looks deeply unhappy. “No matter what we do to comply with You-Know-Who’s orders.”

“Voldemort. Say his name. It’s bloody Voldemort,” Snape growls. “The Taboo Curse does not apply in this school. Stop fearing the word, and be more concerned with the madman behind the name!”

“Or call him Tom Marvolo Riddle. That one always irritates him so,” Dumbledore’s portrait chimes in.

“Leave out the Marvolo,” Phineas suggests. “Tom Riddle, the name of his despised Muggle father. Oh, he turns such interesting colors!”

“But—but he killed you!” Babbling exclaims at the painting in near-desperation.
“Of course Severus did. I told him to,” Dumbledore replies cheerfully.

“You did what?” Hooch stares at the painting in anger. “Why would you do something so…so… foolish?”

“Because I had already committed my foolery,” Dumbledore says, unconcerned.

“Albus was dying.” Poppy lets out a deep sigh. “He did not have much time left. He was dying of a terrible curse. The *Avada Kedavra* was a kindness.”

“And it saved another from dying who did not deserve it,” Dumbledore adds.

Snape doesn’t bother to turn around. He would quite possibly set the painting on fire with the strength of his glare alone. “Albus, do shut up.”

“I think it’s a bit late to pretend that you are not in service to the Order of the Phoenix,” Dumbledore says in a gentle voice. Pyrrhus, the betraying feathered fiend, trills out an affirmative.

“But we must keep acting as if it is *exactly that*!” Snape yells, finally rounding on Dumbledore. “Every chance of our success in winning this war depends on that continued deception!”

“Well, we’re all used to you being a complete ruddy bastard,” Vector says. “We wouldn’t exactly be treating you any differently.”

“There is still the matter of the Carrows,” Firenze points out in his stern voice.

“The Carrows.” Flitwick shakes his head. “I say we bind them, toss them out onto the covered bridge, and then blow up the damned thing. We can claim it as an act of sabotage that those two stooges were trying to halt, and they failed at it. Badly.”

“As much as I really like that idea—and I do,” Snape says, “the Carrows have to remain alive until the last possible moment. The bridge, however…preparing to destroy the bridge is an excellent idea.”

“Seamus Finnigan still has a deft hand with explosives.” Minerva smiles. “And oh, there is such a collection of Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes contraband in the dormitories. Most shameful.”

“All right. No holiday. Minerva, I leave it up to you to arrange for the students to come up with the most creative destruction of the bridge that they can possibly conceive of. The closer it is to our side, so that, perhaps, a few dozen Death Eaters plummet into the gorge…”

Minerva smiles. It’s the same expression she bore on her face during the first war, and it sent many Death Eaters running in terror. “Inter-House cooperation at its finest, Severus.”

“Yes. Shore up the tunnels, if they need it. Move the boats. Hide them. Find every unused broom in this school and place them accordingly. Arrange the drills.” Snape lets his shoulders settle down, forcing the tension to leave his muscles. He can’t afford that sort of pain right now, either. “I have no idea how much time we have. Make it happen. Now.”

“And the Carrows?” Poppy asks, giving Snape a stern look.

Snape holds out his wand. “They’re going to become very unobservant for the duration.”

“Good.” Poppy smiles. “I’ll help you to ensure it.”
The week of the Easter holiday, Hogwarts is a madhouse. Snape does his best to avoid most of it, roaming the corridors least traveled by students. He’d wait it out in his quarters if his nerves weren’t demanding he pace the long stone hallways. He’s had no word from Potter, the house-elves, or anyone from 12 Grimmauld Place.

That is how he stumbles across Dean Thomas in the seventh floor hallway. Mister Thomas is opening the door that leads into the Room of Requirement. His eyes grow entertainingly wide as he freezes in place.

“How many have we saved?” Snape asks in a quiet voice, meant to carry no further than Thomas’s ears.

“Uh.” Thomas swallows so loudly it’s an audible gulp. “Someone tried to kidnap Luna over the winter holiday. So, uh, her and her dad. Alicia Spinnet. Katie Bell stops by every few days. Cho Chang, Hagrid, Gabrielle Delacour, Tonks, Oliver, and Lee sort of take turns. The others are Muggle-born wizards and kids who didn’t make it out of Britain before the Ministry fell.”

Snape nods. “Get inside. At any point, there may be an evacuation of the school. If that happens, charge someone responsible with the task of leading those who are underage out of this castle through the old escape tunnels in the dungeons.”

Thomas still looks completely bewildered. “Uh—yes, sir?”

“Survive, Mister Thomas. You still have to sit your N.E.W.T.s.”

“Uh,” Thomas repeats, but Snape glares and gestures for Thomas to go into the damned Room. He finally does so, the door closing behind him. The entrance disappears immediately. Snape continues on by, wondering if that is why Minerva has made a few pointed comments about Seamus Finnigan’s unusual schedule.

He makes a point of not entering that particular corridor again for the duration of the holiday. Instead, he finds Filch, who has been hiding in his office.

“Argus.”

“Headmaster,” Filch responds, grudgingly rising to his feet. His cat twines around his ankles. “What can I do for ye?”

“You can answer a question. Are you loyal to the students of Hogwarts, or to yourself?”

Filch looks insulted. “Hogwarts! I might not appreciate everyone’s weak ways with treating children and not givin’ proper detentions, but I’m for Hogwarts!”

“Good. You claim to have a collection of medieval torture devices. I would like to see them.”

Filch tilts his head forward. “Are we finally goin’ to be giving proper detentions, then?”

Snape smiles. “If by detentions, you mean using magic to turn your devices into creations that will attack anyone who tries to harm a student in this school, then yes.”

Filch considers it. “Not as much fun as a proper detention…but better than my babies getting’ no use
at all.”

“If an evacuation is called and the tunnels implemented, I want you down there first. I want you to guard the escape route for the younger children,” Snape says.

The old caretaker scowls. “Got no wand, Headmaster. No magic. What good am I?”

“You may be a Squib, but just like a Muggle, you are not helpless. I know you can defend yourself, and others, with no wand required.” Snape gives him a dry look. “You and Mrs. Norris have always been stalwart guardians of this school. Are you going to run from your duty now?”

Filch draws himself up. “No, Headmaster. I’m not. Neither will m’dear Mrs. Norris. We’ll be at the boats. Any Dark wizard comes up on those kids won’t like what he gets. My word on it, Headmaster.”

Snape inclines his head. “Your word has always been honorable. If we do not speak again before the evacuation…I know you will do your job well. You always have.”

Filch’s lip trembles before he lifts his chin. “Aye. I will.”

The last night of the holiday, two days after Easter Sunday, Snape dreams of Lily. It is not entirely uncommon, but it is often just flashes or feelings. Sometimes it is simply memory of moments when they were happy, as if Lily is trying to bolster his flagging spirits as best she can.

This is different. This is Lily, James, Antioch…and two more: a young man who bears a close resemblance to Antioch, and an old, gray-bearded man who could have been their father, but is not.

“Come here.” Lily is gesturing him forward to a table, one that looks a great deal like the ancient dark wood of the faculty table. On it, waiting for them, is a scroll.

“This is important. You’re going to remember it,” James says. He is giving Snape a serious look through his glasses, which always refined and brought out the hints of gold in his dark brown eyes. “You won’t know what it means until the moment comes, but at least then you will understand.”

Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus unroll the scroll so that it lies flat on the table. “The last enemy to be defeated is death, Severus Prince.”

Snape rolls his eyes at Antioch. “Stop that.” He considers the ghost’s words as symbols and runes form on the scroll. “That statement does not apply to literal death, or to the aspect known as Death, does it?”

Ignotus, the only one of the three brothers to live a long, full life, grants him a gentle smile. “It never has.”

“Come here, Sev,” Lily says, returning his attention to her, and to the scroll. “Watch.”

Lily reaches down and touches one of the black runes on the paper. She slides it around, turning it in different directions. “I’m demonstrating. Try it, Sev.”

Snape reaches out to touch one of the runes. It feels solid beneath his hands, moving about freely on the paper. “That’s amazing.” He looks at the rest of the symbols. “These runes. What are they from?”

“My son’s wand,” James answers. His face is still grave and somber. “In June of 1994, Garrick Ollivander sat down with a length of ebony wood. Into that wood he placed a single thestral tail hair whose end was wrapped around the shard of a basilisk’s horn—the basilisk that lived in the Chamber
of Secrets.” James smiles, the side of his mouth curling up in a lopsided smile with no hint of mocking cruelty. “Ollivander then, without any awareness of what he was doing, wrapped this new ebony wand in carved silver lime.”

“Wood of courage, wood of sight,” Snape murmurs.

“The Elder Wand also has a core of thestral hair. It is part of what gives the wand its strength,” Antioch says. He looks sad as he speaks, though Snape has no idea why.


Snape nods and joins her in moving around the collection of runes. They have never made sense of them—not even Voldemort could translate them, to his ire. That was a *Cruciatus* casting that had hurt for days afterwards.

Realization comes when he and Lily slide two of the runes together. They align perfectly.

Snape frowns as Lily’s deft, clever hands help him join piece after piece, until he realizes that what he touches are not runes at all. “They’re puzzle pieces. Ollivander didn’t carve words. He carved a picture and hid it in plain sight.”

“The Ollivanders always were good wand makers,” Cadmus Peverell says, peering down at the forming picture with an expression of great fondness. “Got my first wand from one of his distant great-grandfathers.”

When the picture is complete, Snape can only stare at it. The runes, pieced together, reveal a very specific design.

The wand carries the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. On either side of the Hallows are two figures, wands pointed directly at each other.

Lily smiles at him when Snape looks at her. “There is more than one way to become the master of death,” she says quietly.

Ignotus pats the runes. “Who says that such a thing was the Hallows’ original intent?” Then he disappears.

“Stories grow and change as the years pass.” Antioch begins to fade away.

Cadmus stretches his arm across the table until he is resting his fingertips on Snape’s shoulder. “I am so sorry that the last of my line has been the bane of so many. Thank you for making sure we have not been forgotten.”

“I don’t blame you,” Snape whispers, but Cadmus is already gone.

Snape looks down at the image again. “James. Is Harry carrying another Elder Wand?”

“No.” James pushes his glasses up his nose with one finger. “What happened in the tunnel before the Chamber of Secrets was never meant to be. The wand Lockhart held was not his. It should have failed him.”

Snape glances between Lily and James, unnerved. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Dumbledore holds the Elder Wand in his hands, safely hidden away in his tomb. Potter has Death’s Invisibility Cloak and the Resurrection Stone, but he has also stated in absolute certainty that he doesn’t want to bear all three of the Hallows.
“It means that Harry is one of the few who can wield the Elder Wand without being susceptible to the curse attached. It means that when the Elder Wand comes to his hand, he will understand exactly what he is capable of doing with it,” James says.

“That is Albus Dumbledore levels of cryptic,” Snape retorts. “Lily, do you know what he means?”

Lily smiles at him. “Yes.”

Snape jerks awake to the darkness of his quarters, illuminated only by the gentle glow of his active wards and the final embers from a dying fire in the fireplace. His heart is pounding in his chest; he is soaked in sweat.

He gets out of bed, washes his face in the sink, and gets out the scroll with its copy of the runes on Potter’s wand. It does not take him long to redraw them the way he saw in his dream, circling each rune as he uses it to ensure that he’s done it correctly.

Potter’s wand truly is covered in the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Wand, Cloak, and Stone, and the figures who have wands pointed, ready for battle.

_Dear God, what the hell is going on?_

Chapter End Notes

Actually, it's Norman for falcon, but still. *Bird.*
On Friday, the twenty-fourth of April, Snape wakes up to the realization that he fell asleep over the headmaster’s desk. A pile of unfinished grading beneath his face served as his pillow.

“The bathroom upstairs is luxurious,” Dumbledore’s portrait informs him.

Snape mutters something rude in response and trudges up the stairs that lead to Albus’s old quarters. By rights, he could have claimed them, but Snape has lived in a dungeon for sixteen years. Dungeons are more defensible than towers. It seems foolish to quit the habit when Wizarding Britain is in the middle of a war.

His response to the bathtub is still a very disgruntled Why? every time he sees it. Like the Prefect’s bathroom, it seems to be a waste of space. If he wants to go swimming, there are lakes and beaches in the south of Britain that are serviceable enough.

He aches, though. Potions only do so much to relieve muscle tension when he himself is the one making it worse, every day. Soaking in the hot water of the oversized stupid pool of a bathtub might actually bring about some relief.

Snape is startled awake again when he hears the pipes rattling. He grabs for his wand on the stone ledge and then lets his head thump back with a sigh. “Myrtle! For the thousandth time, this habit of yours is still bloody rude!”

Moaning Myrtle zooms around the room, laughing at him. “Please, Headmaster. I’ve seen everyone in this school naked at least twice over. Some more than twice!”

Snape ducks his head to rinse out any remaining hint of soap from his hair before wiping water from his face. “Myrtle. Do not make me change my mind about having you exorcised.”

Myrtle stops zooming around the room and draws herself up haughtily. “Then maybe I shan’t inform you as to what’s happened.”

Snape grabs a violet towel with an unfortunate number of twinkling, spangled lights woven into the fabric. “Turn around, woman!”

“Hmph. A ghost has to get her jollies from somewhere. Honestly, you’re far too sensitive. Headmaster Dumbledore never minded in the slightest!”

“That’s because Albus was gay!”

“Oh.” Myrtle seems to think about it. “Is that why Seamus and Dean—”

“Please just…do not complete that statement.” Snape waits until the ghost turns around before climbing out of the bath, wrapping himself in a towel that is easily large enough to hold two more people. “What has happened?”

Myrtle turns around and sits down while still hanging in the air, her legs primly crossed. “Well, Headmaster: it seems as if someone has robbed Gringotts.”

Snape feels his heart skip a beat. It isn’t a pleasant sensation. “Successfully?”

“That’s the rumor!” she says, and dives back into the pipes.
Blasted ghost. That was just informative enough to make him rush through putting on fresh clothes, though the robes he wears over them need only a cleaning charm to be ready for the day. He pulls out his pocket watch as he goes downstairs and then pauses on the final step, just staring at it.

He holds the watch up to his ear. It is still ticking.

He slept through breakfast, and is on the verge of missing the beginning of lunch. “I had classes!”

“I had Headmistress Elizabeth visit Minerva this morning to let her know that your classes would need coverage until after lunch. You’ve not been getting enough rest, Severus.” Dumbledore gives him a stern look when Snape glares at him. “You are very good at waking yourself without assistance. If you did not wake, then it is rest you needed.”

“That is not your decision to make!”

“Of course not. We all took a vote,” Dumbledore replies, and the portraits chime in. “The decision was nearly unanimous, but dear Brian’s been dead so long that we think he’s forgotten what sleep is actually for.”

“SLEEP IS FOR THE WEAK!” an ancient portrait near the ceiling roars.

“Besides,” Dumbledore continues, “did I not hear something about a theft from Gringotts?”

“I hate you.”

Snape makes his way into the Great Hall to discover that the entire student body is present, chatting about the event in question at high volume. Snape snatches a copy of a *Prophet Breaking News* edition from the hands of a startled sixth-year Ravenclaw and studies the front page story as he makes his way towards the faculty table.

He’s made out exactly three words before he comes to an abrupt halt, staring down at the newspaper.

“I’m just saying,” Miss Patil of Ravenclaw’s voice rises from the din, “who in their right mind would figure out a way to break into the most impenetrable bank in the entire world, only to steal their dragon?”

“Someone who’s really mad for dragons?” Broadmoor of Hufflepuff comments.

“Well, it wasn’t Charlie,” Ginevra says, pointing at Broadmoor with a chip. “He’s mental for dragons, but Bill would skin him alive for stealing from the goblins.”

Snape turns around, gives the Ravenclaw back her newspaper, and goes to eat his lunch. When he seats himself next to Minerva, she’s smiling. “Rest well?”


“It was not actually a difficulty. Griselda didn’t have either of her classes to teach today, and relished the idea of getting to see what horrors you’ve been introducing our children to during our lovely Dark Arts course. I do believe she was pleasantly surprised.”

Snape tries not to make a derisive sound, and almost succeeds. “Please tell me you didn’t let Slughorn go near my seventh-years in Potions.”

“Perish the thought. I sat through their lesson myself. Fascinating group this year, even though there are only eight of them.” Minerva applies herself to her lunch. “Miss Patil and Mister Malfoy have
quite the competition going as to who will ultimately make the best batch of Felix Felicis.”

“Padma Patil has it,” Snape tells her.

“Really? Betting against your own House?” Minerva asks him, treating him to an amused look.

Snape glances over at the House tables. The flags all hang as they had at the beginning of the year, Slytherin to Gryffindor to Ravenclaw to Hufflepuff, but the seating has become mixed. The intermingling of students is most prominent in the latter three Houses, but even Slytherin has students of other Houses at their table, and there are a few green-and-silver badges scattered throughout the rest of the Hall. The students don’t dare to seat themselves so when the Carrows are present, but when they are not…the divisions are noticeably less.

“Mister Malfoy has many talents,” Snape says, “but in this instance, Miss Patil has crafted the better potion.”

“Wonderful.” Minerva waits for the din of student noises to increase as less eating and more talking dominates when the meal starts to conclude. “Grand Larceny of Goblin Property in the form of One Dragon,” she repeats the Prophet’s headline. “Do you know anything about dragon theft, Severus?”

“In complete honesty? Not a thing.” Snape cannot wait to find out, either.

Winky pops into his office after he oversees the afternoon classes for Dark Arts. If the N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s can be held properly, the fifth- and seventh-years are going to excel in this particular subject, be it defence or offence.

Snape is seated at his desk, trying to grade while ignoring the continuous murmur of conversation from portraits commenting on dinner. It’s something he’s grown used to since September. Pyrrhus is on his perch, eying the live rodent roaming around on the floor that is about to be his evening meal.

“What is it, Winky?” Snape asks without looking up. Broadmoor’s parents have written in no less than sixteen times over the course of the year, wishing to know if their precious child is still safe. Snape started making things up after letter nine. He is fairly certain the subtlety is lost on them, else there would have been Howlers galore.

“Bringin’ word from London, Master Severus,” Winky says, and gives him a formal bow. “They’s be sayin’ now, please.”

Snape is up and around his desk in a heartbeat, wand raised. It takes only a gesture to release the protections on the headmaster’s fireplace that keep it separate from the Floo Network. “Go and tell them it must be immediately. I need to seal it off again after their arrival.”

When the flames turn green and one hand is held out imperiously towards him, Snape grasps Narcissa’s hand and guides her out of the fireplace. “Thank you,” she says. The smile on her face is not cool graciousness, but genuine warmth.

Lupin and Black are just behind her, though Black sneezes before dusting soot from his robes. Black and Narcissa have not abandoned the habit of the more traditional Black family battle robes worn if they know in advance that they’re preparing for a fight. Lupin’s beige robes are more towards standard, but he’s wearing a kilt Mór thrown over one shoulder in his family colors. Most are not even aware he’s entitled to wear them. The only reason Snape recalls their existence was an unfortunate wand-crossing with Lyall Lupin during the first war. That had been yet another instance where escape was certainly the better part of valor.

The first words he’s spoken to any of them since the second of September are, “A fucking dragon?”
Lupin looks heavenward while Narcissa laughs under her breath and begins to explore the office. Phineas fluffs himself up in his portrait, as proud as any bird, to have his great-grandniece and grandnephew in his former office. “It wasn’t supposed to be a bloody dragon,” Black says, but then his countenance breaks into a broad grin. “Still, if you’re going to throw someone off the trail…why not?”

“How are they? They should have been here before us,” Lupin says.

“Apparently, they were too busy stealing a dragon,” Snape retorts. “Black. I would very much like details, please.”

Winky brings them all tea, followed shortly thereafter by dinner. One of the older Headmasters disappears from his frame, telling Snape that he is off to inform Minerva so she can make excuses for his missing two meals in one day.

The plan, once revealed, is actually sensible. Sirius Black went to Gringotts with the reasonable request to see his vault, which is located only two down from the Lestrange family vault. His godson followed along behind Sirius, hidden beneath his Invisibility Cloak, which is undetectable by charms. This venture, it seems, involves a set of goblins—one to open the vault, and the other to operate something called “clankers” which cause the Gringotts dragon to retreat, allowing access to the oldest family vaults.

After the dragon backs away, both goblins are treated to strong Imperious Curses…and Granger and Weasley are removed from the purse that Miss Granger had altered with an Undetectable Extension Charm. Snape wants to make a derisive comment, but he would be a hypocrite to do so. He stuffed the contents of an entire house into his own version. It is also a good idea, one that Weasley himself suggested. One goblin goes with Black, to continue the ruse, while the other goblin opens the Lestrange vault for Potter, Granger, and Weasley.

“After that, I don’t know what happened, but something tipped off the goblins.” Black is leaning back in his chair, his fingers twitching on occasion as he resists the urge to tap them against the armrest. “There was a tremendous racket from outside, and what sounded like half of the damned tunnel collapsing. Gisheesh and I were trapped inside the Black vault for a few minutes. By the time the goblins dig out the vault, the dragon and our three thieves were long gone. The goblins discovered that the Lestrange vault was standing open, with Gishillish sitting amidst a pile of copies of Hufflepuff’s Cup.

“I’ve never seen a goblin frightened of anything, Severus,” Black adds, frowning. “They knew who that Cup belonged to. I decided the wisest course of action was to leave.”

“Was no one suspicious?” Snape asks.

“Oh, suspicion, certainly.” Black shakes his head. “I pointed out that I was trapped in my own vault during the theft, and that I also wasn’t the one who had departed by stealing their dragon.”

“No one knows Harry, Hermione, or Ron were present. They will not lose access to their family vaults—or in Hermione’s case, access to the bank itself,” Narcissa adds.

The door to the headmaster’s office clicks open. Snape has his wand in-hand, ready to Obliviate or potentially kill a Carrow, and discovers that Potter, Granger, and Weasley have finally joined them.

“The goblins don’t know it was us,” Potter says, a nauseated expression on his face, “but Voldemort does.” Then he stumbles and nearly falls but for Weasley’s quick catch.
“Granger, shut the door,” Snape instructs, biting back a stupid urge to bleat in concern. It’s bloody damned obvious that something is wrong. “Potter?”

Weasley helps Potter to sit in the chair that Black vacates. Potter shoves his glasses up into his hair. “We can write a new edition of a book on Legilimency and Occlumency,” Potter says with a wan smile. “Apparently, if you leave a Legilimency trap in place for too long, you can’t sever the connection. No, he’s not in my head—he’s got a lot more important things on his mind right now than to try to figure out what I’m thinking,” Potter says quickly. “But he knew about the Cup. One of the Death Eaters guarding the front doors must have sent word. He—he panicked. He killed a lot of goblins, and several Death Eaters who were in the line of fire. Unfortunately, not Bellatrix.” Potter grimaces. “Sorry, Madam Malfoy.”

“Harry. My name is Narcissa, and no apology is necessary.” Narcissa looks grim. “My sister is mad, and a danger to everyone. If Voldemort had killed her, he would merely have saved another of us the trouble of doing it ourselves.”

Snape glances over at Narcissa, again noting the battle robes. “I thought you weren’t going to be fighting on behalf of the Order of the Phoenix?”

Narcissa gives him an arch look. “The Order of the Phoenix is no longer Albus Dumbledore, Severus. That aside…I’m here to fight for my son’s future, and the future of our beloved silver and green.”

Snape nods. “Regardless of the reason: I’m glad you’re here. If any of those idiots outside have an ounce of sense, they will run from you in absolute terror.” Narcissa smiles, pleased by the compliment.

“What took the three of you so long to get here?” Lupin asks their trio of dragon thieves. “It’s almost ten-thirty, Harry. We thought the three of you would be at Hogwarts long before us.”

Granger gives Weasley a look of displeasure as he dips a chocolate biscuit into his tea. “We had to wait for the dragon to fly low enough for us to jump into a lake. Then…then Harry was caught up in what Voldemort did to the goblins. He tried to keep it out, but it was…”

“He was exceptionally fucking angry,” Potter says in a flat voice. “It’s like being swamped by a tidal wave. The trap holds, but I can’t help but pick up on what he’s doing or feeling.”

“We got into Hogsmeade after dark when we could travel,” Granger says, and Weasley snorts.

“Immediately set off some kind of Caterwauling Charm. Great fun, that was. Got to meet Aberforth Dumbledore proper, though. Grumpy, that one.”

“Aberforth has a tunnel in the Hog’s Head Inn that connects to the Room of Requirement,” Granger continues. “Everyone was, er, glad to see us. It seems as if half of them thought Harry dead already.”

“Not yet, I’m not,” Potter mutters.

“Aberforth is sending for more members of the Order.” Granger bites her lip. “We know Voldemort is coming here.”

“The Horcruxes.” Snape lets out a long breath. The day he’s been waiting for is finally here.

Potter nods, giving Winky a grateful look when she all but shoves tea and biscuits at him. “Voldemort is going to each of the original hiding places, right now, to see if the other Horcruxes are gone. It won’t take him long to discover that they are. Maybe he’ll think the fountain Horcrux is
intact, but he’ll definitely be concerned about the others.”

“And the last Horcrux left is supposed to be within Hogwarts,” Lupin says. “Voldemort might suspect we have that one, too, but no matter what, he’s definitely going to try to get in and retrieve it.”

Snape crosses his arms and paces across the room. “How long do we have?”

Potter suddenly grits his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. Lupin snatches the teacup from Potter before he can spill its entire contents. “He knows about the ring. He’s on his way to the cave.”

“Not long, then.” Snape glances at Dumbledore’s portrait.

“Not quite to plan, Severus,” Dumbledore says.

“That is because you are bad at planning,” Snape replies, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt sleeves and rolling them back underneath the edges of his coat to allow greater freedom of movement.

“Edessa, please go to Minerva and inform her that everyone needs to be roused from bedrooms and towers. I need to see all Heads of House in this office; everyone else is to make certain the students assemble in the Great Hall for the evacuation of Hogwarts.”

“You’ve been planning to get the kids out?” Lupin asks, and Snape nods. “Thank God.”

“The folks in the Room of Requirement—they, too?” Weasley asks.

“Yes. They may not be safe there. Voldemort originally hid the Diadem Horcrux in one of the Room’s aspects.”

Lupin looks at Snape. “I know how to find them. I’ll go collect everyone—perhaps find out if the other members of the Order have arrived yet while I’m at it.”

“Ginny says that the words are, ‘I need the room that is safe’ to get into the right Room,” Weasley tells him. “I’m, uh, guessing you know how it works.”

Lupin smiles. “I’m a bloody Marauder, Ron. Of course I know how it works. I’ll see you all in the Great Hall,” he says, taking his leave.

“Does Voldemort know that you’re here?” Snape asks, rounding on Potter.

“If not, he will soon.” Potter is resting his forehead against one hand, his expression pinched. “Told Ginny, Seamus, and Neville to spread the rumor, but we made sure we weren’t seen.”

“Rumor, but not certainty. The Carrows will report your presence, regardless.” Snape finds himself clamping his hand down over the Mark. “Ah; that would be them doing so right now.”

Minerva comes striding in by opening both double doors, followed closely by Filius Flitwick, Pomona Sprout, and Horace Slughorn. “We’re here, Severus—Harry!”

“Hello, Professors.” Potter stands up to greet them. He does an excellent job of hiding the pain Voldemort’s mental interference is causing him. “Have a good school year?”

“It’s much better now,” Minerva says, and pulls all three Gryffindors into a hug. “Ronald, you owe me a seventh year.”

Weasley smiles after she releases them. “Not bloody likely, Professor.”
“Sirius Black!” Slughorn exclaims. “Excellent student, I remember. Excellent family—”

“Not now, Horace,” Black snaps.

“The time has come for those of us who will remain to defend this castle—yes, that includes you, too, you simpering coward,” Snape tells Slughorn when the man turns pale. “You’re a wizard and Head of the House of Slytherin. Bloody well act like it!”

“Evacuations. All right, then.” Pomona rubs her hands together. “I’ll go ensure that the protections for the tunnels will hold, and tell Filch that he’s to head out now. The man claims he has a musket that will fire even under magical conditions. I hope he doesn’t need to use it.”

“Every healing potion, every anti-toxin, every counter-curse potion that is in this school, make sure Poppy receives them,” Snape tells Slughorn. “Go do it now, and then meet us in the Great Hall. Minerva? Filius?”

Flitwick smiles. “Allow me,” he says, and raises his wand. “Protego horribilis!”

Snape can feel the shielding added to the protections already on the school like it’s creeping over his own skin. Most unpleasant sensation. “Minerva?”

Minerva looks giddy. “Piertotum Locomotor!” she shouts.

Snape glances around as the three stone statues that decorate the walls of the headmaster’s office pull themselves free from the walls. “Hogwarts is threatened!” Minerva intones, her voice echoing in a way that has to be carrying throughout the castle. “Man the boundaries! Protect us, and do your duty to our school!”

“An addition, please.” Snape takes out his wand and holds it against Minerva’s. “Piertotum locomotor indelebile defensionem immittis!”

Minerva grins. “Oh, that’s a lovely one. I’ll have to remember that.”

“It won’t hold for long, but it will extend their usefulness.” Snape goes to the window and opens it, leaning out far enough that he can see the shielding over the castle grounds. The additional wards Flitwick placed glow in shimmering ripples of gold against the night sky. The Death Eaters watching the school will be reporting back to Voldemort soon to tell him of that particular development.

Pyrrhus trills at him. “Yes, I want you out there,” Snape says. “No matter what, there will be a fight on these grounds tonight. Help who you can—and don’t let anyone kill you!”

The phoenix looks highly offended, ruffling his plumage. He never managed to return to his old scarlet, remaining the blue of hot flame touched by gold.

“I don’t care if you’re bloody immortal. You won’t be doing anyone any good if you’re a pile of ash in the courtyard!”

Pyrrhus seems to think that is acceptable logic. He trills once more and launches himself from his perch, sailing through the open window.

“Where did another phoenix come from?” Black asks, staring in the direction Pyrrhus has gone. Pyrrhus’s blue flame is visible for a moment longer before he vanishes.

“That used to be Fawkes. His name is now Pyrrhus.” Snape turns away from the window to find Narcissa giving him a smile that is far too smug for his preferences. “What?”
“You know, a phoenix can only make themselves heard by those they’ve chosen to be loyal to,” she says.

Snape decides to ignore her. “Fascinating. Minerva, Filius, I’ll join you in the Hall shortly. If the Carrows turn up, act as if…” Snape’s gaze falls on Potter. “Act as if it’s a school-wide search for Undesirable Number One, please.”

Minerva lets out an unladylike snort and leaves the room. “Oh, it’s going to be a delightful evening.”

“Expecto Patronum,” Snape murmurs once they’re gone. The white doe manifests and then phases through the nearest wall on her preassigned mission.

Draco Malfoy comes bolting up the stairs a few minutes later. “Sorry,” he gasps, leaning over to catch his breath. “Soon as I could.”

“You arrived quickly enough. Do you have your chosen item?” Snape asks, while Black looks on with his expression set in displeasure. It isn’t Draco Malfoy’s presence eliciting the reaction, either.

Draco holds out part of a pewter ladle’s handle, its edges filed smooth, bent so that it fits into the curve of his palm. “Yes. Will it do?”

“A Headmaster of Hogwarts has full control of its defenses, and can adjust them accordingly, young Heir,” Phineas says. Malfoy glances up at the portrait in surprise.

“He means yes,” Snape interprets, taking the ladle. “Easy to hide. Well done,” he says, pretending to ignore Draco’s relieved smile. He places the tip of his wand against the metal. Not a two-way Port Key, not and expose them all to danger—or worse, accidentally send someone unprepared out to meet it. He closes his eyes, mentally sorting through possibilities, before the solution becomes obvious. “Portus ad areolam Hogwarts.” It’s one thing to create a Port Key that will function on the grounds, but crafting one that will allow someone to be brought directly into the castle is another matter entirely.

“A one-way Port Key. Excellent,” Narcissa observes. “If one is holding it already, then the incantation to use it is the same?”

“Yes.” Snape feels lightheaded for a moment before the sensation passes. He glares at Dumbledore. “Let me guess: that is also something I will become accustomed to?”

Dumbledore doesn’t smile. “I dearly hope so, yes.”

Snape nods and then leans close to Draco as he returns the new Portkey to Draco’s hand. “It will only work outside of the castle,” he says, and then, in a lower voice: “Potter is your priority, not me. Do you understand?”

Draco’s expression tightens as he accepts the Port Key. “I’m getting both of you, or none of you. Sir.” He then goes to his mother, who embraces her son, then pulls his head down to plant a kiss on his forehead. Draco is now nearly six inches taller than his mother; they are both wiry and thin in a way Lucius was not until after Azkaban stripped vitality from him.

“Harry?”

Potter turns around and embraces Sirius Black. “No. Don’t. I’m coming back.”

Black has his eyes closed, his expression grieved to such an extent that Snape has to look away. “I know you are.”
“There is one more thing,” Granger says, after Black and Potter have released each other.

“Right. That.” Potter glances at Snape. “Voldemort has the Elder Wand.”

*          *          *          *

The Elder Wand. Dammit. He never wanted that dream to become anything remotely approaching reality.

Snape had been near Albus’s tomb only scant days ago, and it seemed undisturbed. Of greater concern: he’s not sure how Voldemort gained entry to the school grounds without being detected. That means the Dark Lord has already found and exploited a weakness in the existing wards. The protections on the castle might fail much faster than any of them anticipate.

He signals for Black, Narcissa, Granger, and Weasley to wait outside the Hall. He can hear Minerva arguing with the Carrows, who want to torture students for information until one of them will give up Potter’s hiding place.

Snape strides into the Great Hall, aware that Draco is taking his place among the Slytherins. “Is everyone present?”

“Yes, Severus,” Amycus says, all but prancing on his feet in happiness. He isn’t the only one. Several of the seventh-years look triumphant. That will not last long.

“We’ve not found him yet, but it’s only a matter of time.” Alecto raises her wand towards the first student. Her actions are interrupted not by a teacher, but by a voice that echoes through the school like it’s trying to pry its way into Snape’s skull.

“I know that you are preparing to fight,” Voldemort announces. “Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and you shall be rewarded. You have until midnight.”

Snape glances at his pocket watch before putting it away. A mere half-hour. How entirely generous of him.

“Well?” Nott yells at the Gryffindor line-up. “Hand him over!”

“We don’t have him, you stupid git,” Finnigan says, rolling his eyes.

“But we’ll find out, won’t we?” Alecto says, a curse already on her lips as she points her wand at Finnigan.

A burst of green light travels just past Snape’s shoulder as he raises his wand and sends the exact same thing towards Amycus. The twins fall to the floor, dead, at the same moment. “Minerva!”

“I’ve been wanting to do that since bloody September!” Minerva retorts. “Harm my Gryffindors, will they? I think not!”

Snape lowers his wand. “Indeed.”
Potter pulls off his Invisibility Cloak and looks down at the dead Carrow. “What about all that talk about the proper moral path, Professor?”

Minerva raises an eyebrow. “Right time and place, Mister Potter.”

As expected, Pansy Parkinson steps out of the Slytherin line-up. “He’s there! Potter is right there! Someone grab him!” she says in her irritatingly shrill voice.

The other three Houses turn to face her, but Bulstrode is faster. She stuns Parkinson with a casual flick of her wand. “Do shut it, please,” she says in a mild voice, leaving a startled couple of sixth-years to catch Parkinson before she hits the stone floor.

“PREFECTS!” Bulstrode shouts. Every student with a Prefect badge on their robe jumps as if they’ve been prodded by a hot iron brand. “Do your duty to your Houses, and evacuate the children of your House to safety, just as we’ve rehearsed! Slytherin House—now!”

Macmillan, Hufflepuff’s Head Boy, pipes up before the first Slytherins can leave the Hall. “What if we want to stay and fight?”

“If you are of age, you may stay,” Minerva says, but Snape knows by the thin press of her lips that she’s not fond of the idea. It is also not surprising when every single Head Boy and Head Girl choose to remain: Susan Bones of Hufflepuff, Padma Patil and Terry Boot of Ravenclaw, and Parvati Patil and Seamus Finnigan of Gryffindor.

Several of Snape’s older, unMarked Slytherins are glancing at each other. “No matter whose side you believe yourself to be on, no one will ever ask you to go into battle against a parent or a sibling. Not against your will,” Snape tells them in his soft voice, the one he uses when he most wants them to pay attention.

“I’m staying,” Bulstrode declares at once, and glares at her Housemates, as if daring them to contradict her.

“So am I,” Daphne Greengrass says, which causes Astoria Greengrass to utter a choked sob before she turns to leave with her fellow Slytherins.

“Aw, hell, So am I,” Blaise Zabini says, but he’s scowling. “The Dark Lord isn’t exactly fond of my grandmother.” Marcus Jones and Edward Hopkins bracket Zabini, ready to stay and fight.

Snape glances around at other students who are of age while the underage Gryffindors are escorted out by their Prefects. If he takes no action, he’s leaving the school vulnerable to the enemy before Voldemort’s Death Eaters ever breach the wards.

“Portus et signantur hostium extra munimenta Hogwarts.”

With multiple startled squawks, every Marked Death Eater among the seventh-years vanishes from the Hall except for one. Bulstrode gives Malfoy a dirty look. “Aren’t you Marked?”

Malfoy smirks back at her. “Am I, Bulstrode?”

“Every marked enemy,” Marchbanks realizes. “A very well-worded distinction.”

Snape gives her a perfunctory glance. “I thought so.” The spell will dump those Marked young ones across the gorge, beyond the edges of the school wards…and far from where Voldemort is lurking.

“What—what about our things?” a second-year Ravenclaw asks as her House turns to leave. “Our
trunks, our owls?”

“We’ve no time to collect possessions,” Madam Hooch says, gesturing with a curt nod of her head towards the exit. “The most important thing is to get all of you out of here safely, right now.”

The faculty double-checks the Hall after the Hufflepuff’s departure, seeking out those who remained who should not have. “Jimmy Peakes and Colin Creevy! You will leave this Hall at once!” Minerva shouts, cuffing the ear of Creevy when she finds him milling among those students who are of legal age. “This is not a debate, or a matter for Hogwarts’ Army!”

“Well, it is a little bit,” Ginevra Weasley says. She’s standing in the doorway with Lupin, Black, Narcissa, Shacklebolt, Tonks, Wood, Bell, all three Diggorys, Thomas, Lovegood, Susan Bones, Chang, Krum, Granger, Jordan, Johnson, Spinnet, Aberforth, the Longbottom family, and every single blasted Weasley, Percival included.

“You’re not of age. You’re leaving with the rest of them,” Molly tells her daughter.

“Not a chance in hell, Mum,” Ginevra replies, which causes Molly to stare at her in consternation.

“Are you ready for this fight, Headmaster?”

Snape gives Ginevra a brief examination. He recognizes the expression on the girl’s face, and knows full well that she won’t leave this castle unless someone stuns her and carries her out. “Molly, she is already involved.” Snape’s gaze goes back to Ginevra. “Miss Weasley, the Great Hall will need a guardian, a role just as important as those played by ones who choose to go out to defend the castle’s outer walls. If you wish to stay and be useful, that is where you will remain, or you will be tied up and left in a broom cupboard for the duration. Is that clear?” Miss Weasley blinks a few times, startled, before nodding her agreement.

“The Great Hall?” Slughorn asks.

“The school infirmary isn’t large enough,” Snape replies, ignoring the rolling wave of unhappy murmuring those words illicit.

Shacklebolt looks less than impressed by Snape’s continued presence. “Didn’t you kill the previous Headmaster of this school?”

“No,” Potter says, and Snape glances at him in surprise. “It was a ruse.”

What?


“A ruse. Headmaster Dumbledore was dying. No one killed him,” Potter says. The lie is so blasted convincing that Snape could almost believe it. It’s taking a hell of a lot of effort not to stare at Potter, which is what everyone else is doing.

“We were here, Harry! We saw the green light of the Killing Curse!” Tonks declares.

Potter sighs and points his wand at the ceiling, where it emits a burst of bright green light that is exactly like that of an *Avada Kedavra*. “Not like that isn’t easy to mimic or anything, is it?”

“Dying of what?” Arthur asks, starting to frown.

“Yes.” Poppy looks suitably somber. “It was nigh well a miracle that he survived as long as he did.”

“But someone claims a death, and the Order retains a valuable spy.” Shacklebolt nods. “I’m convinced.”

“I’m so thrilled,” Snape drawls. “We have very little time remaining before this castle comes under attack. I apologize, but I must leave you all to defend against the first volley.”

“Excuse me?” Alice asks, pursing her lips. “What’s more important than Hogwarts?”

“Killing Voldemort,” Snape retorts. That is something that should have been quite obvious “My job is not done. If you’re all fortunate, I’ll be too dead to irritate you further.”

“Please stop being foolishly dramatic,” Narcissa instructs, giving him a cold glare. “It’s beneath you.”

“No. Merely realistic,” Snape replies, and then looks at Potter. What in the hell are you doing? Saving your reputation from someone else’s foolishness, Potter answers. Then his thoughts are fully Occluded against Legilimency once more.

Snape can’t spare them another moment. The Mark on his arm has been growing steadily more painful. He takes to the wind with a speed that will appear like Apparition except for those very few who know otherwise.

“Severus,” Voldemort greets him upon his arrival. The Dark Lord has turned the Shrieking Shack into his base of operations. With him are the Death Eaters from Voldemort’s innermost circle. The others, Snape knows, are already waiting for Voldemort’s word to begin the attack. Nagini is not free to roam, but in a magical, protective cage that hovers in the air behind Voldemort.

“I was expecting you before this.”

Snape drops into a low bow. It’s an easy way to avoid looking at Voldemort’s restored, pristine visage. He bloody well hates PTSD, though those moments are now far less frequent. “My apologies, My Lord. There was a skirmish in the castle once…certain loyalties were revealed. I escaped the moment I was able. The Carrows did not succeed in doing so. Before I left, Mister Malfoy, at least, remained undetected.”

“You have often said the Carrows were subpar, an assessment I did not disagree with,” Voldemort says. It’s a blatant lie and they all know it, but none will ever dare say so. “What news do you bring from Hogwarts, Severus? What is their decision?”

“They will not turn over Potter, wherever it is that he is hiding. They will fight back.”

Voldemort smiles. “I expected nothing less. Sometimes those lesser than us must learn harsh lessons before they will submit. Go, my loyal ones,” he instructs.

“Not you, Severus.” Snape refuses to let his shoulders stiffen in response to that soft, commanding tone. “Do not become an active participant in this battle. Observe from above and report to me any progress we make.”

“As My Lord wishes.”

“I do,” Voldemort says. He’s holding Dumbledore’s wand in his hand, studying it with an expression of faint amusement. “It is midnight. We begin.”
Given the number of wand blasts that Snape can see from his vantage point in the air, there are more defenders of Hogwarts than he’d counted before leaving. He suspects younger students slipped away from their Prefect guardians and made their way back into the castle, and the thought fills him with hollow grief. Brave young dunderheads. He hopes they’re from the extracurricular, secretive remedial Defence group that the students involved named Hogwarts’ Army. It means they’ll have a better chance at surviving.

Voldemort has amassed a frightening amount of followers. The wards hold for a while, and there are plenty of adults who have no compunctions against shooting the Killing Curse through the protective wards of Hogwarts in order to eliminate a few extra Death Eaters.

When the wards fail, the enemy advances across the covered bridge, which soon explodes in dramatic, colorful fashion. There is no one nearby to see Snape smile in grim satisfaction as quite a number of Death Eaters fall screaming and burning into the gorge.

It doesn’t seem to have taken long at all before the Mark on his arm burns as Voldemort calls his Death Eaters. Snape takes a quick look at the battle before responding; not every Death Eater is receiving this summons. The others still fight on.

When he returns to the Shack, the feel of all of his internal organs trying to clench together is highly unpleasant. Draco Malfoy has arrived, his wand pressed against Potter’s neck.

Snape merely lifts an eyebrow at the tableau and joins the inner circle, which puts him next to Draco in a way that will appear to be unintentional—merely the nature of the way in which the circles formed. Voldemort has called his three innermost circles to the Shack to act as witnesses for whatever is about to take place. Pettigrew is among those standing in the second tier, but Lucius is not with those of the third tier.

Bellatrix is still alive, though. Most unfortunate.

Voldemort is pretending to ignore their captive. “Report please, Severus.”

“My Lord, their resistance is crumbling.”

“And it does so without your help,” Voldemort says, which makes Bellatrix laugh.

Snape refuses to respond to the jibe; he merely takes it as the warning it has to be. Instead, he lets his eyes fall upon the wand Voldemort holds. “A victory against Hogwarts, assisted by Albus Dumbledore’s wand? An ironic tool to use, My Lord.”

“Yes, and in so many ways.” Voldemort smiles over the wand in a way that is chilling to witness. “It is the Elder Wand, Severus. Dumbledore had it himself, all this time. The Wand of Destiny. I took it from its previous master—stole it directly from his tomb.”

Snape tries not sigh in irritation. That is damage that will likely need to be repaired later. “Then surely My Lord will be successful, especially with Potter in our grasp.”

“My grasp,” Draco says in a harsh voice, glaring at Snape. “I’m the one who found him lurking in the castle after you decided to flee, Headmaster.”
Snape gives Draco an unconcerned glance. “Of course, Mister Malfoy.”

“Draco is correct. I will not forget who brought Harry Potter to me,” Voldemort says, looking up from his study of the wand. “You have done much for me, Severus, but the Carrows often reported that you thwarted their efforts to teach more…effectively.”

Snape merely stares back. “I prefer living students, capable of growing to adulthood as victorious wizards, rather than broken young corpses whose potential the Carrows were blind to.”

“Ever the teacher.” Voldemort’s smile would be beauteous to behold if it were not for burning lack of humanity in his eyes. “You have done much for me, Severus, but…we are almost there. I will, however, grant you the honor of living long enough to witness the death of the son of James Potter.”

Snape braces himself without moving at all. He knew he would not survive this war; this is not a surprise. “But—” he says, as if in mild surprise. “My Lord, I have done much for you, including the restoration of self that you asked for. The one I trained to join your ranks has even brought you the enemy you’ve sought most—”

Voldemort interrupts him in a calm, measured voice. “I have a problem, Severus.”

“A problem, My Lord?”

Voldemort holds out the Elder Wand, looking down its length with an air of deceptive casualness. “Why doesn’t it work for me, Severus?”

Snape keeps his voice blank with misunderstanding. “My Lord, I do not understand. It is the Elder Wand, one that performs extraordinary magic for the one who is its master.”

“But I have performed only my usual magic. I am extraordinary, but this wand—no, it has not revealed its wonders to me, not as promised. I feel no difference between this wand and the wand I procured from Ollivander years ago.” Voldemort looks at Snape again. “I have thought long and hard on this matter, Severus.”

Ah. Voldemort believes Snape to be the master of the Elder Wand, and Snape will not deny it. To do so is to implicate Draco, and he will not condemn one of his Slytherins to death for the sake of his own skin.

“Mister Potter. Are you aware of who the true master of the Elder Wand is?” Voldemort asks, granting his captive another unsuccessfully charming smile.

“Yeah,” Potter says, glaring defiance at Voldemort. “Looks like it was never meant to be you.”

Voldemort laughs in his old, musical tenor that always left Snape with a sour taste in his mouth. “That can be altered. I know why it does not see me as its true master, Harry Potter. You already know, do you not, Severus? You are, after all, a clever wizard.”

Snape does not speak, though he notices Draco swallow. Potter shifts on his feet, aware that something not to plan is about to happen, but none of them are in a position to prevent it.

The Dark Lord lets out a false sigh of regret. “You have been a good and faithful servant. I regret what must happen.”

Draco glances at Snape, one word lurking just behind his eyes. *Now?*

*Not yet!*
Snape grits his teeth. He cannot yet fall, not while the Horcrux within Potter still survives. “My Lord—”

“The wizard who killed the wand’s last owner is the Elder Wand’s true master. You are the one who killed Albus Dumbledore, Severus,” Voldemort says, and the expression on his face has become amused cruelty. “While you live, Severus, the Elder Wand cannot truly be mine.”

Snape flinches involuntarily when the Elder Wand slices through the air before him. He feels nothing, not even a wound. No green of an Avada Kedavra lit the air.

Then he hears her body sliding along the floor at great speed, freed from the magical cage that protected her from harm. Voldemort emits a single word in Parseltongue.

Nagini strikes once, quickly, but her aim is true. Fangs slide into his neck.

Snape hates the shrill scream of pain that leaves his lips, but can do nothing to prevent it as he drops to the wooden floor. It is burning, blinding pain, great agony—

He has enough strength of mind remaining, underneath the pain, to consider that Arthur Weasley is a lying weasel. He downplayed exactly how excruciating it would be to die this way.

“I regret it,” Voldemort says again. His voice is as chill as Snape’s impending grave. “Nagini.”

“NO!” Potter darts in front of Nagini. The hiss he lets out is as loud as his shout, a command that halts Nagini before she strikes again. She rears back in surprise.

Voldemort regards the tableau curiously. “How interesting. Perhaps the Carrows were correct to suspect your loyalties, after all.”

Snape can’t help his pleased smile. “It is truly disappointing that I will not be here to witness you burn,” he rasps.

"Burn? Oh, I do not think that will be a concern of mine. Your actions will be for naught.” Voldemort hisses again, and Nagini retreats. She is still shaking her head, as if confused by Potter’s conflicting demand.

“Mister Harry Potter.” Voldemort lifts the Elder Wand. “Time to die.”

Snape barely hears the spoken words. The flash of green light seems overwhelming.

Potter drops to the wooden floor next to Snape, his apparent death soundless. Just as when Cedric Diggory returned them both from the Little Hangleton cemetery, Potter isn’t moving. Not breathing.

Snape feels his breath catch. He won’t know. He won’t live long enough to know—

Draco’s hand clamps down on Snape’s shoulder. Beneath his hand is the feel of unyielding metal. “Should I finish dealing with our traitor, My Lord?” Draco asks. The feral smile on his face that is far more mindful of Narcissa than Lucius.

Voldemort gives Draco an indulgent nod. “If you like. I trust you to—”

Before Voldemort can finish speaking, Draco grabs hold of Potter’s arm. “PORTUS!”

There Port Key transportation hurts more than the damned snake bite. There is blackness, and then Snape is lying on his back on cool stone. The feel of Hogwarts surrounds him, the magic like a scent in his nose and a warm touch to his skin. The sound of pitched battle echoes out from every
direction.

The last thing he hears is Draco screaming for Bulstrode’s help.

* * * *

When Snape opens his eyes to find the blurry ceiling of the school’s infirmary over his head, he is so surprised that all he does is stare at it, his eyes tracing familiar stone lines. He never expected to wake up.

“There you are. Oh, thank Merlin.”

Snape turns his head to see Poppy rushing over to him. There are no other beds in the infirmary except his own. “What—”

“Shush,” Poppy says at once, frowning at him. It’s an unnecessary order; speaking that single word hurt far more than he expected it to. She waves her wand over his body, performing diagnostic spells and muttering under her breath. “There is still some lingering damage in your throat. Wait. Lie still.”

Snape doesn’t argue, not yet. He’s still trying to figure out why he’s alive.

Poppy returns with a basic Restorative Draught, plus two potions of Snape’s own design. One is a very effective painkiller. The other is the golden-shimmering Felix Felicis-enhanced poison cure. Snape created the additional silvery violet swirls by adding ground-up bezoar in a tincture of rosemary oil with powdered asphodel. He drinks all three willingly, even though the painkiller, much like Muggle aspirin, tastes like trying to eat the bitterest of chalks.

“Better?” she asks him after a few minutes.

“Yes. Help me sit up.”

“Severus,” Poppy tries, but he just looks up at her, shaking his head. “Very well.”

Snape’s head swims as she helps him to sit upright. His robes and his coat are both missing, and his white shirt is stained in a broad swath of red that extends all the way down to his trousers. He reaches up and finds a bandage still on the right side of his neck, the place where Nagini’s fangs pierced his skin.

“Leave it,” Poppy says tersely. “The wounds are still healing. I suspect that process will continue for several days yet—but it is healing. For the first hour, I wasn’t certain if you would live.”

“Well, I was certain that I was going to die, so we’re even.” Snape drops his hand; pressure on the wound makes it ache, despite the painkiller.

Poppy glares at him. “If you are up to it, the others need to speak with you.”

Snape glances around, realizing that he’s heard no sounds of battle. “What’s going on?”

“Voldemort,” she says his name in scathing tones, “has granted us an hour’s reprieve to collect our wounded. It began ten minutes ago. Afterwards, we’re to exit the castle, meet with the enemy and treat with them—to tell that bastard if we’re continuing the fight, or if we’re going to surrender.”
“Surrender,” Snape growls, out, even though it hurts his throat, “is not an option.”

“Quite,” Poppy agrees, and hurries off to retrieve those who want to speak to him. She returns with Black, Lupin, Draco, Ronald Weasley, Granger, Narcissa, Katie Bell, and Bulstrode. They’re sweaty and dusty, robes torn from battle. Black and Weasley both look like they tried to stop someone’s slicing curse with their faces, but the damage is already healing under thick lines of dittany. Bell’s hair is tied up so a bandage can wrap her forehead, keeping a sweet-smelling herbal poultice in place over what must be a head wound; Draco’s left arm is resting in a makeshift sling, but otherwise he seems fine.

All of them except for Narcissa and Bulstrode are struggling to hide panic, though there is a flicker of concern even in Narcissa’s cool blue eyes. “Where the hell is Potter?” Snape asks.

“We don’t know,” Lupin answers in a tired voice. Black clenches his jaw so hard Snape thinks he can hear the man’s teeth breaking. “No one does.”

“Draco?”

“I had him,” Draco says. He’s wide-eyed, but his expression is grim. “I swear to you, I had a firm grasp on you both. Then we landed and got separated in the dark. When Bulstrode came with Bell and Madam Longbottom…you were there, but he wasn’t.”

Snape swallows down nausea and disbelief both. He has no idea what that means. None. There is also no time to contemplate it. “How many wounded?”

“Many.” Bell swallows, grieved. “Greyback was here, but he was not the only werewolf in his, er, condition. Some of us are alive, if badly hurt. Others are—they’re not.”

“The full moon was on the eleventh. The injured will be fine.” Snape braces himself on the bedframe to stand up. He nearly falls on his face before Poppy catches him. “Good God, woman, what did you give me?” The nausea has returned, along with the distinct taste in the back of his throat that signifies one Blood Replenishing potion too many.

“I dumped all three of your crafted antivenins down your throat,” Poppy informs him. “Given the sheer amount of venom in that single bite, it seemed wiser than a single dose.”

“No wonder I feel like I’m going to be ill,” he mutters.

“No, that would be from nearly dying,” Poppy counters tartly. “You need rest.”

Snape nods in faint agreement before looking at the others. “Not now. They need us in the Great Hall. *Vulnera Sanentur* for cursed wounds, such as werewolf injuries—yes, I know it’s bloody redundant!” he snaps when Granger starts to open her mouth. “Sometimes redundancy is useful. Repeat it three times while tracing the wounds with your wand, and you must sing the incantation or it’s not nearly as effective. Dittany afterwards. It will prevent the worst scarring, but not all of it. If *Vulnera Sanentur* doesn’t seem to help, attempt *Maledictus Sanare Vulnera*, used the same way. If that one doesn’t help, then nothing will. Go!” he adds in irritation, when the others just stare at him. That scatters all but two.

“You can barely stand up,” Poppy says in a huff.

“And I would like other people to remain alive to be able to do so,” Snape retorts.

That, Poppy does not argue with.
“Leader,” Lupin accuses him as Snape makes his unsteady way out of the infirmary.

“Fuck you too, werewolf.”

Lupin smiles. “My apologies; I have other plans.”

The Great Hall nearly makes him stop in his tracks. What keeps Snape moving forward is that he has seen two wars, and far too much horror, to let the scene before him cause him to falter.

On conjured cots, bodies lie in repose, the utter stillness of death. Many of the dead are too small to be grown adults, and God, but that hurts.

Snape nods at Millicent and Draco before striding forward, hiding the worst of his weakness but for the bandage and his bloodied shirt. His Slytherins take the hint and move in opposite directions, wands out, preparing to assist.

Snape finds himself at a Gryffindor’s bedside first. Lavender Brown is in horrific condition, torn and raw from multiple werewolf injuries. Parvati Patil is at her bedside, tears running down her face as she holds her friend’s hand.


“Don’t be ridiculous.” Snape ignores the fresh blood saturating his sleeve as he examines Brown to find the full extent of her wounds. “If I can survive being bitten by the largest venomous snake the world has ever known, you can recover from a few pathetic werewolf bites.”

Brown smiles. “Don’ want t’be a werewolf.”

“It’s not the full moon, idiot.” Snape begins the incantations, tracing every wound. He feels nausea well up again and ignores it. No, he isn’t in the best sort of shape for performing magic of any sort, but he refuses to stand by like a useless lump. These students are his responsibility.

“Are there any Blood Replenishing potions left?” he asks Patil without looking up from his task.


Snape holds up two fingers. Patil scrambles off to search for them. Snape watches blood continue to ooze from Brown’s wounds and shakes his head, beginning anew with *Maledictus Sanare Vulnera*. That, at least, has a much more immediate, visible effect. The scarring for Brown will be unfortunate, but better scars than death.

Patil returns with the two phials. The doses are smaller than Snape prefers, but given the sheer number of wounded, he suspects Poppy is trying to make their reserves last for as long as possible. Patil helps Snape to convince Brown to swallow each dose, though her brow furrows in distaste each time.

“Still…do’ n’want t’be a wolf,” Brown slurs.

“You will not be a werewolf,” Snape repeats, shaking his head. “At worst, you will share in William Weasley’s delight for rare red meat.”

Brown blinks up at him a few times. “M’a vegetarian.”

Snape bites back a smile. “Not anymore.” He rests his hand on her forehead, using the briefest touch of wandless magic to force Brown to sleep. “Stay with her, Miss Patil. If you suspect her condition is
It’s not a surprise to see Firenze wandering the hall, a bandage on his flank, as he delivers water to those too bed-bound to get it for themselves. It is a surprise to see Trelawney out of her tower, a scowl on her face and blood crusting her forehead as she roams around with her wand, conjuring new cots for the injured as they’re brought in. Clutched in her free hand is a bag half-full of small crystal balls.

“Lobbing crystal at the enemy, are we?” Snape asks.

Trelawney gives him a grin that would be most suited to the mocking smile of one of the Greek Fates. “This is my home,” she replies. “My students. Some of those who fell today will regret what they carry into the afterlife.”

“Good to know.”

Frank Longbottom is one of those lying still on his cot. Augusta is sitting next to him, patting her son’s pale hand over and over again, as if that will bring life back to his body. Alice is standing nearby, holding a tearful Hannah Abbot.

“Alice?”

“Saved Miss Abbot’s life,” Alice says of her husband, dry-eyed. She knows their war is not yet won. “My brave love.”

Snape nods. “He was exactly that. Always.”

Alice nods and strokes Hannah’s hair again. “My Neville is still alive, but I don’t know where he is at the moment. Thank you for teaching him well.”

“That is gratitude that most certainly belongs to others,” Snape returns quietly, and moves on.

Snape treats Ravenclaw Terry Boot and Hufflepuff Ernie Macmillan, who are suffering from hexed wounds. Boot will need time in an infirmary, but Macmillan’s wounds, at least, are minor in comparison. They fought well, and he tells them so, which makes Macmillan stare at Snape as if he’s a foreign entity.

He finds Daphne Greengrass lying alone, pale and still. Snape takes her arms in a gentle grip and lies them across her chest, then locates her splintered wand and places it beneath her hands. He closes her pale eyes and stands up, looking around the Hall. There are two more of his Slytherin seventh-years in his immediate line of sight. Two of his sixth-years slipped away from their Prefects, as did Gryffindor Colin Creevy. It is the last act of disobedience the three will ever perform.

Snape feels like this is his fault, but he has no idea how it could ever truly be avoided. One way or another, Voldemort was going to raise his wand against these people. In this act, at least, they all stood together.

“It isn’t. It isn’t your fault,” Minerva tells him as they meet each other in the center of the Great Hall.

“What good is it to be Headmaster of this school if not to protect them?” Snape asks her.

Minerva clasps his arm. The touch makes him tense up as much as it is also unexpected comfort. “You and I—all of us—we taught them everything we could. They made the choice to stand against Voldemort. I grieve, but I am so very proud of them. You should be, also.”
Snape nods. Sound reasoning. He still hates it.

“Miss Lovegood.” Snape kneels down next to her cot. “Aren’t you underage?”

Luna Lovegood smiles at him. “My seventeenth birthday was in February, Headmaster.” She is lying on her side, a bloody gash torn through a white student’s blouse that looks to have seen one Cleaning Charm too many. She is also surrounded by what appear to be differing colored roses in full blossom before he realizes that the blossoms are moving.

“Nargles, this is Headmaster Snape,” Lovegood whispers. “Headmaster, these are my friends.”

Snape holds out a single finger. The creatures have the beaks of a finch and tiny black compound eyes; the exposed bare skin on their arms, legs, and faces is the same color as the flowers they imitate. Otherwise, they look to be entirely composed of rose petals.

A tiny female tilts her head up at Snape and then touches her hand to the end of his finger in imitation of a handshake. “Nice to meet you. Why are you not still among the roses?”

“A Death Eater went in, and he was…hurting them. The roses.” Love frowns, a startlingly ferocious look. “I was not about to let them hurt anyone in this school, no matter how tiny and overlooked they often are. I didn’t realize I’d been hurt at all until all of the nargles came out and attacked the Death Eater. There is probably not much left of him,” she continues thoughtfully.

“What was the spell?” Snape asks, studying the wound, a deep cut that mars her side just below her ribcage. “The one that injured you?”

“Mm. Something called sectumsempra, I believe,” Lovegood says after a moment. “I think it would have been much worse than this, but some of the nargles shoved me out of the way when I didn’t get a proper shield up in time.”

“If they hadn’t, you would be dead,” Snape tells her, and then inclines his head at the nargles. “Thank you. Miss Lovegood, you are very, very fortunate, but I’m afraid this wound will not heal without leaving a scar.”

“I earned it properly, Headmaster,” Lovegood replies in utter seriousness. “Why would I mind a scar?”

“Why, indeed.” Snape performs the healing spell that is sectumsempra’s only counter, and is relieved when it’s enough to close the wound. “If battle resumes, do not get back up,” he warns her. “You’ve lost too much blood to stay on your feet without falling, and we’re running low on certain potions. If fighting comes to the Great Hall, you are just as capable of pointing a wand from this cot.”

Lovegood smiles. “If anyone not of Hogwarts comes into this Hall, they will probably not like their welcome.”

Snape glances around at those who are injured too badly to be mobile, but not badly enough to be unconscious. Most of them are exceptionally competent witches and wizards. “No, they will not.”

Septima Vector is lying on a cot, pale with death; Fleur Delacour-Weasley is stroking her forehead. “I try to help ’er, but she iz gone before I can,” Fleur says, her accent more pronounced than ever. “I did so enjoy ’er classes during ze Tournament year. She…she love ze numbers so.”

“Yes. She did,” Snape manages to say. “Her loss is not your fault.” Fleur nods sadly. “Come; more need our help, and your talent with a wand has not been forgotten by this school.”
Snape finds the Weasleys gathered in a ginger cluster around one of their own fallen. “Arthur,” he
breathes, stunned. Molly is holding onto her husband’s hand, much the same way Augusta held her
son’s, though she is only clinging to him, not patting his skin. “I’m so sorry. What—”

“Killing Curse,” Percival says in a low voice. “Supposed to have been me.”

Charles reaches over and slaps Percival on the back of the head. “No, it wasn’t. Don’t you dare tell
Dad he shouldn’t have done what he did, or I’ll hex you somewhere into next week.”

Percival sniffs and leans against his older brother. “Just feed me to a dragon. It’ll be simpler.”

“Ginevra?” Snape asks quietly, when he doesn’t see her with the rest of the family.

“She’s all right,” George says. He’s sitting with Angelina Johnson, who has his hand captured in a
grip so firm that his fingers are turning white. “She was—Ginny was waiting here with Dad when
that bastard gave us his little gift of time off.”

Two Gryffindors missing. Two Gryffindors to whom Snape gave an annoying talking Hat. He hopes
they’re not up to anything foolish. There are enough bodies already.

_Dammit, Potter_, Snape thinks in near-desperation. _Where are you?_

Then Voldemort’s voice is assaulting his ears, a grating noise in his skull despite the Dark Lord’s
pleasant tenor. Their hour of armistice is over.

“Your hero is gone. This battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters
outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who
continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family.
Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children,
your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we will
build together.”

Those who are capable of standing do so, and all eyes turn to Snape. He tries not to draw back from
their regard, the demand and pleading of others for him to tell them what to do.

He knows what must be done. “Winky.”

The house-elf appears at his side. She has a knife in one hand, which is still dripping with blood.
“Yes, Master Severus?”

Snape eyes the knife. “Do I even want to know?”

Kreacher pops into existence next to her. He’s holding two very large meat cleavers, both of their
blades bright red. “We’s be defendin’ what is ours,” the palsied old house-elf says, baring his teeth in
a wide grin.

“I do hope you enjoyed yourselves,” Snape replies. “Winky, I need that one particular, carefully
wrapped object in my quarters. Fetch it, please.”

Winky disappears without bothering to speak, reappearing a moment later with the leather-wrapped
bundle in question. She holds it out to him with both arms, a faint tremor in her limbs. He accepts it
before turning to the woman coming over to stand at his side. “Narcissa.”

Narcissa offers him a hard-edged smile as she takes the bundle. “My pleasure, Severus.”
Dean Thomas is peering out of one of the broken windows while standing on Seamus Finnigan’s shoulders. “They’re coming,” he announces. “Out of the Forest.” He jumps down and stands next to Finnigan, who immediately grabs Thomas’s hand.

“What are we going to do?” Wood asks. He’s standing next to Andromeda, who arrived at some unknown point; she is clasping her daughter’s hand. Nymphadora has the fierce look of one who is ready to rend someone to pieces with their bare hands.

Snape looks around at them all, seeing the fierce resolution hardening on many faces. Sirius and Remus still have concern for their godson in their eyes; Molly and all of her children are standing, as are Alice and Augusta. Most of them learned during the first war that you do not stop to grieve until the battle is over.

There will be no surrender, not from this lot. Snape smiles and raises his wand. “Let’s go outside and say hello.”

Snape, Minerva, and Shacklebolt lead the way. The Entrance Hall doors are gone, blasted apart during the attack. Rubble from destroyed statues and broken bits of armor is everywhere underfoot.

They step out into the castle’s open courtyard under a sky lit by an overcast dawn. Voldemort and his Death Eaters approach from the opposite side, their numbers far greater than those of the Order who are still capable of fighting.

Snape, Minerva, and Shacklebolt halt when they’ve granted enough room behind them for everyone to have left the castle. Voldemort and the Death Eaters also stop walking.

Both groups gaze at each other amidst the remains of broken walls and blackened stone. Snape is relieved to see that Rubeus Hagrid is alive, if a captured prisoner surrounded by Death Eaters. Pettigrew also still lives; he is busy cringing away from mutual glares of intense hatred being leveled at him by Black and Lupin.

“Severus,” Voldemort says, gazing upon him with an air of surprise. “How is it you survive? My dear Nagini’s venom is potent.”

Snape glances at the snake in question. Her scales are not as shiny as they had been hours before, and she seems listless, but is no less deadly for it. “You should have considered that before you had her place so much of that venom into Arthur Weasley’s veins. An anti-venin is an easy thing to craft, even for something like her.”

“Brilliant, as usual,” Voldemort murmurs. He looks at the ragtag group of wizards and witches who have emerged from the castle to greet him. “Are you wise enough to surrender?”

It’s a very Muggle act, but Snape spits at the ground before eying Voldemort with utter disdain. That is a gesture that does not require an explanation.

Voldemort smiles. “Your savior is dead. Harry Potter is dead.” There are unhappy gasps at that from those who hadn’t yet believed it; several among them begin to weep. “Kneel at my feet, and you will be spared.” His eyes flicker over to Snape. “Most of you shall be spared. One has already made his choice.”

Draco Malfoy steps forward, a mocking smile on his face. “You know, I never realized when I was a child how absolutely bloody stupid your speeches truly are.”

“Right, that,” Oliver Wood says, grinning. “A new world we’ll build together? What a load of complete rubbish.”
“Like you won’t kill us all, anyway,” Katie Bell says in a snide voice before reaching out to grasp Millicent Bulstrode’s hand.

“Y’do seem to have a thing ‘bout killin’ people who cheese y’off,” Finnigan remarks dryly.

“Take your smarmy good looks and shove ‘em up your own arse!” Aberforth Dumbledore shouts.

“HOGWARTS’ ARMY!” Padma Patil cries.

“HOGWARTS’ ARMY!” the others echo in a deafening response.

No matter what happens, Snape is so blasted proud of them all. It might have taken him too long, but he learned the lesson well. He would rather stand here with those who would spit in the face of certain death than die while pledging fealty to one who doesn’t care to understand what loyalty even means.

Voldemort raises his wand. Snape takes a breath and does the same in a single smooth motion, seeing others do the same from the corner of his eyes.

“Proteget Eos Ignis!” someone shouts. Voldemort’s first green volley of Avada Kedavra bounces off a sudden wall of blue-green flame. Above them comes the angry war-cry of a phoenix.

“Potter,” Snape whispers.

“Oh, Merlin, he’s alive!” Ronald Weasley shouts.

“HARRY!” Granger yells.

“And he’s also bleedin’ invisible,” Lee Jordan observes. “Stop cheating, dammit!”

“Stay back,” Potter’s disembodied voice orders when several students and teachers try to advance, seeking him out. ‘This is my task—just mine.’

Voldemort laughs, an act several other Death Eaters repeat. Bellatrix’s giggle is loudest of all. “A pitiful trick. What task is that, Hogwarts? Surrendering to me at last?”

Actually…” The hood of the Invisibility Cloak falls back, revealing that Potter is standing halfway between the castle’s defenders and Voldemort. “I was going to ask if any of you would consider surrendering to us.”

Voldemort’s eyes narrow. “Survived again, Potter?”

“Well, yeah.” Potter tilts his head. His hair is even more of a mess than usual, but he is standing tall, a beacon of defiance. “You and I both know why.”

“It matters not. If I cannot kill you, then you will have to bear the agony of watching everyone else you love die before you, helpless to stop it.” Voldemort smiles. “After all, what reason have I to surrender when my victory is clear?”

“Maybe you’re right,” Potter says, his head tilted in a gesture that is Sirius Black at his slyest. “Expelliarmus!”

Voldemort grasps hold of the Elder Wand with both hands, a shocked look in his eyes, but it doesn’t help. He loses his grip on the wand, which sails through the air to land in Potter’s outstretched hand.

“What treachery is this?” Voldemort roars, his handsome visage twisted by fury.
Potter sounds unconcerned. “You went after the wrong master of the Elder Wand.”

“No,” Voldemort rasps. “I defeated you!”

“Nope. I volunteered. That’s not a defeat; that’s a sacrifice. It renders the contract null and void. Magical contract law is fun, by the way.” Potter is smiling, but it’s no longer an expression either of his parents might have borne. That is purely Harry James Potter, his eyes alight with grim humor.

“Since when did Albus hold the bloody Elder Wand?” Minerva asks Snape in a low voice.

“Since Grindelwald’s defeat.”

“That deceptive old coot. If he weren’t dead, I’d slap him,” Minerva mutters. Shacklebolt sounds like he’s choking on the urge to give in to a wild bleat of laughter.

Voldemort’s anger fades like it had never existed, but his eyes hold no trace of lingering amusement. He pulls both his original wand and Potter’s stolen wand from his robes. “Ultimately, it will not matter. One way or another, those you love will die.”

“One day, yeah. Everyone does.” Potter reaches under the edge of his shirt, just visible beneath the clasp of the cloak, and draws forth a silver pendant hanging from a long chain that shimmers with the magic of a Disillusionment Charm. Mounted to the pendant is the familiar darkness of the Resurrection Stone.

Voldemort’s eyes focus on the stone, then the cloak, and finally settle on the wand. “The Three Hallows, united at last.” His voice is full of mocking charm. “What will you do with them, Harry Potter? Send ineffective shades after me?”

_When the Elder Wand comes to his hand, he will understand exactly what he is capable of doing with it._

Snape clenches his jaw. He is going to hex James Potter if that man ever shows up in his dreams again.

Potter ignores Voldemort’s question. “See, there is more than one way to master death. You’ve always been too bloody stupid to figure that out, though.” Potter holds out the stone on its chain and taps the Elder Wand to it three times. Each tap rings out like a struck gong, a sound that reverberates across the stone courtyard.

When the sound of the third strike fades, the courtyard is full of ghosts.

Snape can’t help his sharply indrawn breath. The ghosts outnumber the living by quite a lot, but their stares are all focused on Voldemort and his followers. James and Lily Potter. Edward Tonks, Frank Longbottom, and Arthur Weasley. Hestia Jones and Dedalus Diggle. Emmaline Vance and Sturgis Podmore. Florean Fortescue and an entire host of goblins. Arabella Figg is also present; Albus’s spy in the Muggle World is standing there with several ghostly half-Kneazles twining around her ankles. Septima Vector and Sasha Willowood. Colin Creevy and Daphne Greengrass—all of Hogwarts’ fallen. Marlene and the entire McKinnon clan. The twins Fabian and Gideon, along with their parents. They’re flanked by the rest of the Prewett lost to the first war, which causes Molly Weasley to let out a choked sob. Susan is crying as she looks at the entirety of her family, the Ancient House of Bones. The Meadowes. Minerva’s deceased husband, Elphinstone Urquart. The Fenwicks. Alastor Moody, Caradoc Dearborn…and Albus Dumbledore, standing next to a young girl with blonde hair. They’re accompanied by a middle-aged wizarding couple who bear a striking resemblance to Albus and Aberforth.
For some reason, Potter’s summoning also included Lucius Malfoy. Draco is staring at his father with grief shining in his eyes. Lucius glances at him and nods, saying nothing. Draco nods back, lifting his head in response to whatever silent communication has just passed between them.

Potter is staring at Voldemort. His eyes are hard, his jaw set. “Tom Marvolo Riddle. There are a vast number of people who wish to have a word with you.”

“Hello, Tom,” Albus says. “I did warn you.”

Voldemort is staring at the shades in what seems to be genuine horror before he buries the expression, hiding it with bluster. “You send ghosts after me, after all?” he sneers at Potter. “I have nothing to fear from the dead!”

“No. You just fear death itself.”

Snape is honestly concerned that Potter really is trying to ward off Voldemort and his minions with an army of shades. Then Augustus Rookwood lifts his wand, a snarl on his face. Alastor Moody is faster; a green blast from his wand goes right through the flaming shield charm and lifts Rookwood off his feet. The Death Eater lands in an ungainly twist of limbs, his eyes wide and startled by his sudden death.

“This is completely mental,” Ron Weasley comments, watching the ghosts advance through the flaming shield.

“No arguments from me,” Charles whispers.

In no time at all, Voldemort and his Death Eaters are surrounded. Those who thought themselves loyal to a madman either panic or fight back, but one cannot kill a ghost.

Bellatrix goes down screaming, disappearing within a thick cluster of the dead. When they part again, there is no sign remaining of her at all. She is not the only one to suffer that fate.

“You know, I actually wanted to kill several of those bastards myself,” Snape says to Potter.

“You got to kill Yaxley,” Potter replies without turning. “You can cope, Snape.”

“Nagini!” Voldemort yells, his eyes darting around as he watches Death Eater after Death Eater fall to wand blasts from ghosts—or to other methods of dispersal. He hisses a command; Nagini lifts her great head, sluggish to respond.

Snape bares his teeth in a pleased grin. A pit viper cannot inject its venom without taking on some of the blood from its prey. Snape is immune to the toxin flowing in his own veins, as it was designed solely for an overly large, living reptilian Horcrux. It won’t kill her, but it is definitely slowing her down.

Nagini’s target is clear at once. She advances on Potter, who calmly waits for Nagini to approach. He doesn’t move or attempt to lift his wand, even once she is in striking distance.

“Harry,” Minerva gasps in horrified warning. “What are you doing?”

When Nagini rears back to strike, Potter whips aside the left half of his Invisibility Cloak…revealing Neville Longbottom, who is drawing the Sword of Gryffindor from the Sorting Hat held by Ginevra Weasley. In a single, broad stroke, Longbottom cleaves Nagini’s head from her body.

The great snake hits the ground and thrashes a few times. Then both ends of her severed body begin
to smoke as the basilisk venom destroys the Horcrux. “That was for my Dad!” Neville declares in an angry shout.

“I told you it would be fun,” Potter says to Miss Weasley. Ginevra’s answering grin is as bright as a sun, even after Neville drops the Sorting Hat down onto her head.

“Here now, to be worn is no longer for me. Put me back in the office, you three!” the Hat complains.

None of this is quite to plan, but Snape isn’t going to complain about effective results. “SIRIUS!” he shouts hoarsely. “REMUS! NARCISSA!”

Black, Lupin, and Narcissa step forward. Each of them bears one of the three remaining Horcruxes in their hands—Cup of Hufflepuff, Locket of Slytherin, Diadem of Ravenclaw.

Voldemort’s eyes widen. “No!”

“Yes,” Potter counters, still watching Voldemort with an air of calm repose.

“That cannot be the locket—it was still in the fountain!”

Snape notices Regulus Black’s shade turn away from the Death Eater he’s just obliterated. “Slytherin’s locket hasn’t been in that fountain since the twelfth of November in 1980. And to think that I once thought I wouldn’t get to witness your defeat.”

Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Draco Malfoy raise the three gathered basilisk fangs into the air. In the next breath, they plunge the tips into each Horcrux the others are holding.

“NO!” Voldemort howls. Then his cry of disbelief becomes a shriek of pain. Snape turns around, watching as Voldemort’s flawless skin begins to smoke. White flames jut out from his fingernails like candle flame. His thick hair starts to curl as if it’s being burnt. “WHAT IS THIS?”

The few Death Eaters who survive are gazing at Voldemort in horror; the castle defenders have been watching the ghosts in awed silence. Snape’s words fall into a sudden hush. “Oh. That would be the second potion you ingested last September.” He realizes there is a wide smile on his face. “White Fire. Potter named it after its inadvertent creation. It seems to have a pronounced effect on the blood of one who has been cursed.”

Voldemort erupts in a column of white-hot fire that burns so hot, with such ferocity, that no one can hear if he is still screaming. Instead, what comes to Snape’s ears is the victorious cry of a circling phoenix.
The Choices We Make

The ghosts do not all disperse at once. Some do, as if deciding that their task is done. Others assist a few members of the Order in apprehending the few terror-addled Death Eaters who remain.

Some ghosts are too busy seeking out loved ones among the living. Snape has to look away from Molly’s reunion with Arthur and long-lost members of the Prewett family. Instead, he ends up watching the little blonde ghost, Ariana Dumbledore, leap into Aberforth’s arms. He clings to the child as if he is never going to release her.

Snape glances at Albus, who is watching the reunion with a fond smile. “Did you do as you once feared?”

Albus looks at him. “Does it really matter, Severus?”

Snape takes note of Potter, bookended by his parents and almost lost from sight to ghostly limbs. Lily’s parents are standing behind her; the Potter family waits behind James. Neville is hugged by his father before Alice is also pulled into the embrace. Andromeda is weeping in her husband’s arms.

“No. I suppose it doesn’t.”

Alastor Moody stumps up to Snape. “You couldn’t bother with reforming a leg?” Snape asks him, amused.

Moody snorts at him. “Nah. What’s the point?” He leans in close. “Constant vigilance, Headmaster!” he says, and vanishes.

Snape rolls his eyes. Some people just cannot let things go, dead or not.

“Minerva,” Albus says. Minerva, as promised, slaps the former Headmaster before hugging him. Then Elphinstone Urquart comes to take her hand, leading Minerva away while tears drip down her face.

“Severus.”

Of course. Snape turns around to find that Albus is still staring at him. “Yes?”

“I would ask you to listen to an old man’s ramblings, one more time. Will you?”

Snape gives Albus a bland look. “Well, your portrait never bloody well shuts up. Why should you?”

Albus smiles. “Once upon a time, I ruined all of my chances for finding true happiness in life—and love, of which you quite rightly berated my portrait about for misunderstanding its nature. I never had a child, Severus. I thought that a gift never to be mine.

“Then you came to me in the pouring rain, terrified for the life of another…and I will readily admit, I was terrible to you. You ignored every single moment of castigation I or others heaped upon you, and worked hard to balance the scales, even when some of that imbalance was caused by others. You did not care; you were intent upon doing the right thing, no matter the manner in which it needed to be done.” Albus pauses. “I was not being false when I said that you were the best of all of us, Severus. If I’d had opportunity to choose a son, it would have been you.”

Something hard and terrible breaks in Snape at Albus’s words. “You,” he says, struggling to speak with his throat gone almost too tight to breathe, “are a manipulative old bastard. You used me and
everyone around you in an attempt to defeat Voldemort, doddering and foolish enough to try and take on that entire burden yourself.”

Albus nods. “Yes. You are exactly right.”

“But.” Snape glances away, mastering himself with the control he used to survive this war. “But, you cared for my well-being as best you knew how to. You saw potential within me that no one else wanted to see. Perhaps I would not choose you as a father, but you did a better job of it than my own ever did.”

When he turns back, Albus has one eyebrow cocked, an expression of absolute mischief on his face. “Thank you for pointing a wand at me.”

“Oh, fuck you!” Severus retorts, and when Albus hugs him, he allows it. He cannot hold the old man’s flaws against him forever, not without doing the same to himself. “Now go away,” he says, stepping back. “You have a sibling to speak to.”

Albus looks wary. “I’m quite sure Aberforth would rather punch me.”

“You’re dead,” Severus points out in irritation. “Who cares? Go and see the goat-lover, Albus.”

The moment Albus makes his careful way over to Aberforth and Ariana, he’s assaulted by ginger twins—the older, deceased pair. “Hello, you twin horrors.”

Gideon and Fabian grin at him. “Hello, favorite play toy! I mean target!”

“That you did,” Snape replies, realizing that he’s being all but escorted over to the ginger cluster. “You still are not allowed to adopt!”

“Hell, Severus. Molly and I made that decision years ago,” Arthur Weasley says, his arm draped over Molly’s shoulders.

“You did?” Snape repeats in surprise.

“We did?” Ron looks horrified.

Gideon points at his nephew, laughing. “That’s the face he made at the time, too! Spittin’ image, except for the lack of ginger.”

Snape shakes his head. “Fred and George: in case you were wondering? You were exceptionally well-named.”

“Getting’ that impression, yeah,” George says, a faint smile on his face.

“Severus.” Arthur holds out his arm.

“No, none of us did.” Arthur glances at Percival. “My boy made a mistake, but mistakes can be fixed. I wanted to see him live long enough to be better.”
“Dad,” Percival whispers. “I—”

“Percy Weasley, if you tell this man that you are anything other than grateful, I will hex you within an inch of your life,” Snape tells him in a flat voice. “And yes, I do mean the pun.”

“I told you he was funny,” Gideon says, nudging Fred with one elbow.

“Molly. Whatever time is left here…that should belong to you,” Snape says, and gets hugged by a tearful Molly before she is once more surrounded by family, living and dead.

Snape draws back from the crowds in the courtyard, watching at a distance as Ronald Weasley and Padma Patil stand together in quiet, peaceful silence. Granger and Viktor Krum are doing much the same, as if relieved that the battle is won and they’re both still alive. It means his attention is not where it should be, and he is stealth-hugged by James Henry Potter.

“Lily!” Snape blurts out, startled. “He is touching me—your husband is touching me. Please remove him!”

James laughs and stands back, his hands resting on Snape’s shoulders. “Severus Prince Snape.”

“Still. Touching!” Snape retorts, trying to lean back. “Are you dead and deaf?”

“Not at all.” James’s grin fades. “Thank you.”

Snape shakes his head. “You could have said that without touching me!”

“That isn’t nearly as much fun.” James laughs again and strides off to go pester Black and Lupin. He passes by Narcissa; Lucius is kneeling before her, his head bowed over her hand. Narcissa has her other hand over her mouth, but she is nodding in response to whatever Lucius is saying.

“The look on your face, Sev.”

Snape turns around to face Lily, who is gazing up at him with a smile. “Can’t you let anyone show you a single ounce of gratitude?”

He lets out a sigh and lifts one eyebrow in dry response. “Gratitude has price tags attached.”

“Not this time,” she says, and wraps her arms around him. Snape holds her, squeezing his eyes shut. He is not going to weep. He is one of the most feared bastards in the British Isles. He has a reputation to maintain.

“Why?” Lily whispers in his ear. “Is that mask so necessary, now?”

Snape steps away, staring down at her. “I wouldn’t have the slightest idea what to do without it.”

“I’ve never seen you cry before.” Lily’s ghostly finger reaches up and wipes moisture from his cheek. “There. That’s ever so much better, Sev.”

Snape sniffs back too much moisture. Dammit. “I also haven’t the slightest idea of what to do next.”

Lily smiles. “Choose,” she says, and then tilts her head in the direction James had gone.

Snape looks over to see Regulus Arcturus Black standing there, smiling at his brother. Sirius Black is staring at Regulus in open-mouthed shock. He doesn’t even move until Lupin rolls his eyes and shoves Black towards Regulus.
Regulus laughs and grabs Sirius before he can stumble, pulling him into a hug. Black hesitates a few seconds longer before doing the same. Lupin appears to savor the moment before turning back to two ghosts who are waiting with utmost patience behind him. Snape recognizes Lyall Lupin with ease, though he never met Hope Lupin while she still lived.

“Yet another Slytherin who proved the old prejudices wrong,” Minerva says, wiping at her eyes. Her husband’s arm is around her waist. “Such choices we make.”

“Choices. Yeah.”

Snape turns in alarm based on the tone of Potter’s voice. He’s standing with his arms crossed, looking up at something that Snape cannot see.

Then, to Snape’s confusion, Potter removes his Invisibility Cloak and holds it out. “I think this belongs to you.”

Snape’s eyes widen in shock as a hand and arm made of pure white bone seem to reach out of the air to take the Cloak. “Are you certain?” The voice is not male or female, or even truly a voice at all. It’s a translation of sound that doesn’t exist, fair and pleasant, terrible and unforgiving.

“It isn’t mine. It was just borrowed for a while,” Potter replies. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome, descendent of Peverell.” The sound of moving cloth is heard; then the air shimmers and dances around a form Snape can’t make out. Given the expressions of wonder or horror on other living faces, he suspects they are having similar difficulties.

Potter hands over the Resurrection Stone, still hanging on its silver chain. It’s taken by the same bony hand before both stone and hand disappear from view.

Then Potter holds out the Elder Wand, grip first.

“That might not be yours to give,” the disembodied voice says.

Snape gets the distinct sensation of being looked upon by some entity greater than himself. It isn’t a pleasant feeling. “I still don’t want the cursed thing.”

“The curse is broken, Descendent of Peverell,” the voice intones.

“I still don’t want it,” Snape repeats, aware that several people are staring at him. His lineage is his concern only. “Didn’t Potter just say the items were merely borrowed?”

The Elder Wand is taken, vanished into the ether, sheltered by Death’s own Cloak of Invisibility. “Then you are wise,” the voice says.

Snape makes a disgruntled face. “No, I’m just not dead yet.”

Lily’s laughter is light and breezy, heady as wintergreen and citrus on cold nights. “It’s time to go.” She squeezes his hand once and steps away. Snape can feel something that sheltered him going with her, and it makes him want to reach out in one last vain attempt to grasp it. He resists, keeping his hands clenched at his sides.

The ghosts fade away. The courtyard is quiet once more, broken only by the sounds of those still mourning their losses.

Snape feels empty and bereft. It is not just Lily’s departure, the last time he knows he will see the
woman who had once been his dearest friend. He is all too aware that Eileen Prince did not respond to the call of the Hallows. It is only then that he realizes he’d hoped differently.

Then he gasps in realization, nearly tearing the fabric of his shirt sleeve when his hand starts to shake. Minerva tuts and helps him to unroll the fabric in precise folds until it meets his elbow.

Snape stares at his arm, unsure if he wants to believe it. It’s been a constant of his life, faded or strong, since January of 1977…but it’s true.

The Dark Mark is gone.

*          *          *          *

Unfortunately, there is still no shortage of things that must be done. Voldemort is dead, and he left an utter disaster in his wake. It’s even more irritating now than it was in 1981. Snape is so wrapped up in the immediate and necessary aftermath that it takes him a long while to realize that the weight of a blood oath and four Unbreakable Vows is gone.

Kingsley Shacklebolt asks Snape to accompany the available Order of the Phoenix members to the Ministry, where they are about to perform a most necessary restructuring of the British Wizarding government. Snape shakes his head and wishes them well; his place is at this school, tending to those who still need assistance.

“I see.” Shacklebolt reaches out. It takes Snape a moment to realize what is expected before he clasps Shacklebolt’s offered hand. “Is there anything you need, then?”

Snape glances towards the Great Hall. “For now? Any medical supplies that can be spared. Anyone who knows how to—how to cast the preservation charm for the dead. It’s one of the only charms I do not know, and I can’t ask Filius to do that. Some of those who are fallen are of his House.”

Shacklebolt nods. “You’ll have what you need before the sun sets. I promise,” he says, and leaves with Nymphadora, William, Oliver, Lee, Angelina, Fred and George, Charles, and Aberforth.

The Diggory family stays to assist, as do Andromeda, the Black cousins, Lupin, the remaining Weasleys, Granger, Krum, and so many others who were brave enough to come to Hogwarts when their assistance was needed most. It bothers Snape a little, how easily everyone defers to him in regards for instructions in what must be done, but he doesn’t have time to dwell on it. The injured must be moved to the infirmary. The bodies of the dead have to be removed and placed in an expanded room, giving them back the Great Hall for other, less dire purposes.

Only when that is done does Snape send word to those who evacuated the younger students, telling them it is safe to return. Pyrrhus goes along with his Patronus to ensure that the message is understood to be true.

Odd. He hasn’t cast a non-corporeal Patronus since his first successful use of the spell, but the shape of the doe refuses to fully manifest.

Miss Lovegood awakens after she’s been moved and tugs on Snape’s sleeve before he can leave the infirmary. “I had a pleasant dream about my mother after everyone went outside. It was very nice to speak with her again.”
He musters a smile for her. “You were not dreaming. Blame Potter.”

Lovegood tilts her head, accepting his words with her usual equanimity. “No, I think ‘blame’ is the wrong word entirely.”

Snape takes a brief moment to repair the poor gargoyle statue in front of the door to the headmaster’s office. “Thanks,” the gargoyle mumbles, still acting as if it is going to fall over dead at any moment.

Potter has collected his silver lime-wrapped wand from wherever it was hidden before his “capture” by Malfoy. His glasses are gone, which earns him plenty of confused glances, but he ignores them, too busy cleaning up the rubble still underfoot while repairing the statues and suits of armor that still have enough parts remaining to be reassembled.

“Where the—” Snape bites off what sounds like anger. He isn’t angry. He’s relieved. He’s just used to expressing it in other ways. “After the Port Key. Where were you?”

Potter takes the opportunity to wipe the dust from ancient mortar from his face with his jumper sleeve. “Pretty sure I must have been unconscious under the Invisibility Cloak—and don’t ask me how that happened, because I really don’t know. I woke up after they collected you and Draco.”

“Fortunate timing,” Snape says in a mild voice.

Potter shrugs. “Better than never waking up at all.”

Snape glares at him. “Thank you for reminding me of that possibility. You stood between me and Nagini?”

Potter stops trying to assemble the next suit of armor and lets all the pieces clatter to the floor. “You. Were. Dying,” he bites out, scowling at Snape. “You’re damned right I did, and I’d do it again! Now go cope with the fact that we’re all still alive. I am busy!”

Snape doesn’t realize what he’s trying to hold back in his throat until it bursts free. Laughter. He is also hugging this idiotic Gryffindor with his impossible luck and his absolute lunacy in giving Death back their belongings!

“Hey, there’s a Slytherin and a Gryffindor hugging out here,” Snape hears Macmillan say.

“That’s nothing,” Finnigan counters. “There’s a Slytherin and a Gryffindor makin’ out back the other way!”

“Neat! I wanna see!” Macmillan declares.

Potter watches Macmillan scamper off in the direction Finnigan indicated. “Millicent will kill him. She will actually kill him.”

“Miss Bell will remind her that certain hexes are far more satisfying.” Snape keeps trying to stop smiling, but for once, he can’t quite manage it. “Ginevra and Neville’s well-timed appearance?”

“Right after you left the castle, Neville and Ginny told me you’d granted them a particular talking gift. I found them right after the armistice began and—planning for that moment was something to focus on. I didn’t know yet if you were going to survive.”

“Then it’s fortunate that we are both too foolish to die,” Snape says dryly, and Potter laughs.

As promised, medical supplies come to Hogwarts at noon, brought by Healers from St. Mungo’s
who’ve come to assist by Apparating directly onto the castle grounds. Snape considers fixing the fallen wards and decides against it, though he does make sure the anti-Apparition wards for the castle itself are repaired.

Minerva tries to volunteer for the task, but Snape insists on being the one who walks through their makeshift morgue once it’s confirmed that all their dead defenders of Hogwarts are accounted for. There is a scroll in Snape’s left hand and a quill in his right; when the task is done, there are forty-three names, students and adults both. He stares at that tally, unsure of what he’s feeling.

It is miraculous it isn’t a higher number. There should have been no tally of the dead at all.

Perhaps it is petty of them, but no one is in any great hurry to go collect the bodies of their fallen enemies. They can lie there until the M.L.E. is in less of a shambles.

Snape makes his way back to the gargoyle statue, which is beginning to look more lively as the sun sets. “Headmaster,” it says. “I need a new password.”

He glances at the statue. “No. No password. Never again.”

“But—but what—what am I supposed to do?” the gargoyle protests. “I’ll be out of a job!”

“You can ask. Ask the purpose of those who come here. If it is something that can be easily dealt with by another teacher, or by a Head of House, send them that way. If they need to see me, open the door.”

“Oh.” The gargoyle looks bewildered. “All right, then, Headmaster. Whatever you like.”

Snape allows the stairs to carry him up, though normally he outpaces them. He pushes open one of the doors and enters the room, feeling like he’s walking into foreign territory.

Pyrrhus is on his perch, his head hidden underneath his wing. He is burning in his sleep with a gentle blue flame.

All of the portraits are awake, gazing at him. “Well…Voldemort is dead.”

“We’re aware, Headmaster,” Elizabeth’s portrait says.

“Headmaster,” the other portraits repeat. The echo of the word rises up towards the ceiling like it’s bouncing off of stone. Snape shakes his head and circles his desk, dropping down into the chair he’d Transfigured months ago to suit his tastes. Simple wood and cushioning made of thick, durable fabric. It is nothing like the previous chair, which often looked more like a throne for royalty.

He is nothing of the sort.

Snape unrolls the list, using half of a geode and one of Albus’s old magical tinkerings to hold it open. It isn’t in alphabetical order. It doesn’t matter.

“Severus,” Dumbledore’s portrait interrupts him before he can put quill to fresh parchment. “You do not have to do this task alone.”

“No, Albus. My job. My responsibility.”

“Quite right,” Phineas says. For once, he does not sound arrogant.
To Mr. Dirk & Mrs. Hepzibah Creevy:

You will see the news in the Daily Prophet tomorrow that a battle took place at this school. I wished for you to hear from me, first. There were casualties.

Your son, Colin, disobeyed the order to evacuate with his fellow underage students.

Snape hesitates over the next line.

He fought valiantly and well to protect others, dying in order to preserve lives. Colin Creevy is a true Gryffindor. I hope, after the grief passes, you will be able to remember that, and honor him…

Forty-one letters are sent out by owl at midnight. Two families in Hogwarts are already aware of their losses.

The morning after the battle, there is no newspaper. It doesn’t arrive until dinner, an Evening Prophet edition that is dedicated solely to those who fell during what they’re calling “The Battle of Hogwarts.” The fallen are spoken of not by order of social standing, but by those who literally sacrificed themselves to save another. Then the rest of the dead are named and discussed, students and adults alike. That casualty list is followed by the identities of all who died during Voldemort’s occupation of Wizarding Britain. It’s the thickest newspaper the Daily Prophet has printed in years. Aside from the battle at the school, it’s obvious they’ve been compiling the other names for a long time.

The Wizengamot is conducting legal trials for known or suspected supporters of Voldemort with those members who still live and hold their seats, which is a third of the Wizengamot’s original number. Otherwise, their government is a disaster. Kingsley Shacklebolt is all but tossed into the role of Minister for Magic, and is holding the Ministry together with spit, wire, and Muggle ducting tap.

As if summoned, Aberforth Dumbledore comes to visit when Snape has a moment to go out and repair the damage to Albus’s violated tomb, not wanting anyone else to see the previous Headmaster’s grave in such a state. He brings Snape a wand, thirteen and a half inches of acacia wood that is clear-varnished, not dyed, which reveals the wood’s organic patterns.

“1892, that was,” Aberforth says, trying for a ferocious scowl and failing. “Albus was so proud of the thing. That should go in with him, Headmaster, what with that other wand gone now. It never would work for anyone else, for all it’s not ash.”

Snape nods. “Then that’s where it will go.”

Aberforth walks out with him, waiting patiently for Snape to use his wand to gesture the broken stone aside. The old man’s mouth twists up, but he gently lifts his brother’s hands and places Albus Dumbledore’s original wand beneath them. Then he nods, watching as the stone is replaced and repaired until there is no hint it was ever damaged in the first place.

Five days after the battle, forty-two funerals are held in one mass ceremony. Before May of last year, Hogwarts had no cemetery at all. Now forty-three graves and tombs are laid out in a peaceful corner of the grounds. As before, a phoenix sings a mournful lament, but unlike Fawkes, Pyrrhus does not depart afterwards.
The Weasleys, the Longbottoms, and the Greengrass family have family plots in other places, but the former two ultimately decide that their dead patriarchs should lie with those who also fell while defending the school. The Greengrass family chooses to bury their eldest daughter on family ground. Astoria leaves for her sister’s funeral, but returns a week afterwards, red-eyed and angry that her parents had tried to keep her from completing her fifth year. It is a decision that most students make at the end of that long first week, though some, Snape suspects, will never return.

The *Daily Prophet* is full of news every day, and for once, none of it suffers from a surfeit of embellishment. Snape is cleared of all charges regarding Albus’s death, and of being a Death Eater, without his needing to do a thing. The revelation of his being a spy for the Order of the Phoenix all along is announced as if everyone always knew Snape’s true intentions.

He shows that copy of the *Prophet* to Dumbledore’s portrait. It irritates him when Dumbledore just chuckles at the expression on Snape’s face.

Snape receives a letter from Narcissa the next day, delivered by the Malfoy family’s great horned owl. Its disposition has not been improved by forced exposure to Voldemort.

> Dearest Severus,
>
> *I keep reading the most charming things about you in the Daily Prophet of late.*
>
> All my love,
>
> Narcissa Black

Snape borrows Hedwig for his reply. The owl looks miffed to be taking anything to Malfoy Manor, where Narcissa has taken up temporary residence with Draco while they enact repairs and restore the Manor’s “stolen” possessions.

> Dearest Narcissa,
>
> *I don’t trust it at all. It’s a fucking trap.*
>
> In Greatest Affection,
>
> Severus Snape

Draco Malfoy looks annoyed to be treated the same way by the *Prophet*, even though it means he is restored to his position as recognized legal Heir to the Malfoy Estate—an inheritance he publicly accepts only days later, when Lucius Malfoy is confirmed deceased by the Aurors who locate his body beyond the boundaries of the school. There was no sign of battle that far from Hogwarts; Snape and Draco both suspect that Lucius must finally have turned against his fellow Death Eaters and paid the price for it, though they discuss it with no one outside of Narcissa. She never speaks of what Lucius’s ghost said to her, but she doesn’t refute their theory.

As Headmaster, Snape gets to deal with the reporters most often. He’s usually too tired or too busy to
do much more than give them basic answers, but Rita Skeeter has always proven herself to be a highly irritable human being.

He finally has enough when Miss Skeeter comes to the school and begins pestering him for more information on what it was really like to “pretend” to be loyal to Voldemort. He considers terrifying her with the truth, but ultimately decides there is a much more swift and effective way to deal with the situation.

“Miss Skeeter: Miss Hermione Granger has informed me that she somehow discovered you to be an Animagus during her fourth year of school. An unregistered blue beetle.”

Skeeter sniffs, her Muggle pen still poised above her notepad. “Easy enough to spin, Headmaster. We all did all we could to hide from You-Know-Who during the last year, didn’t we?”

“Beetles are exceptionally useful in potions.” Snape steps back from the repair work he’s been doing of the Astronomy Tower and glances at her. “Did you know that there is a spell to force someone’s Animagus transfiguration? It’s quite useful. Its counter-spell was used on Pettigrew when he was discovered in hiding as the Weasley family’s pet rat.”

“Spells can be blocked,” Skeeter replies, but she sounds less certain.

“They can,” Snape agrees, as if they’re talking about the interesting vagaries of clouds. “If you dishonor anyone’s memory by treating them as less important than anyone else by nature of their old social status, you will be transfigured into your Animagus form and used for potions ingredients.”

Skeeter tilts her head, the cap of her pen resting near her lips. “Should I quote that?”

“If you like. I find myself far more concerned with you doing exactly as I am asking.”

“That was not asking,” Skeeter responds tartly. “That was telling.”

“No, that was blackmail.” Snape smiles at her. “It’s effective, isn’t it?”

Skeeter’s grin is unpleasant and unrepentant. “I like you.”

“Please never say anything like that to me ever again.”

“Done.” Skeeter gives him an evaluating look. “If you grant me a real interview, I swear on my life and my desire not to become potion parts that none who died from the date of the Fall of the Ministry through the week after You-Know-Who’s death’s will be maligned in the Prophet. Not by me, nor by anyone else.”

“If you can refrain from asking stupid questions, and do not mind if I continue with what needs to be done?” Snape considers it. “Potion parts,” he repeats.

“I meant what I said,” Skeeter reiterates. For once, he believes her.

“Very well.”

Sirius Black causes an even bigger stir by announcing his engagement to one Remus John Lupin in the Prophet. When asked by reporters if he is aware of the fact that he is having relations with a known werewolf, Black acts utterly astonished, exclaiming, “Oh! So that’s why he’s always busy on the full moon!” quickly followed by, “Don’t be so fucking ignorant.” The latter quote is fully legible only if one is a legal adult.
Severus gets a simple invitation by owl for an event scheduled on the second of May. He makes sure certain others know of it, and Saturday, a small group composed of himself, Minerva, Filius, Remus, Poppy, and Rolanda Apparate to a wizarding cemetery north of London, hidden in the Chiltern Hills. While there is a groundskeeper to keep things tidy, many of the crypts in this graveyard will never be used again. He passes by so many family names that have died out over the last two centuries that it feels insurmountable to attempt to count them all. Even Severus’s maternal grandparents are buried here, but they magicked their own tomb by goblin-verified contract so that they would be the last Princes to be placed within its stone walls.

Sirius is waiting for them to one side of the entrance to the Black family crypt. With him are Narcissa, Draco, and Harry, along with Kreacher, who has gigantic tears running down his miserable face. Standing opposite the crypt door are Andromeda, Nymphadora, Oliver, Hermione, and Viktor Krum.

“I couldn’t do this before for a lot of reasons, not least of which I didn’t even know when he’d died,” Sirius says, looking at each of those gathered in turn. “I still don’t—I’ll never have my brother’s body to place into this tomb. Given our family’s sentiment, he might not have wanted to be put here, anyway. I know I sure as hell would like to be buried somewhere else. But for now, this is what I have, and now that I know when…” He swallows. “I can do this properly.”

Sirius blinks a few times before taking out his wand, placing the tip of it against the stone at shoulder height near the heavy crypt door. The gray stone begins to shift and change, becoming a flat rectangle inset with a carved relief.

Regulus Arcturus Black II

Beloved Brother of Sirius Orion Black III

Born 18th October 1961

Died 12th November 1980

Aged 19 Years

Non Victus, Super Omnes Victoris

No Defeat in Death, but Victory

Sirius waits until the carving is embedded deeply into the stone. “All of you here know both Regulus and I in some way, by lessons or by what became of him.

“When I was a child, I was a terrible person. A bloody saint compared to my parents, aunt, and uncle, mind. But…I was a terrible person who wanted to be better. It took me a long time to figure that out, and I was older than Regulus when I finally started to get a handle on what being better really meant.

“I’m so glad that he figured it out sooner. I’d rather he still be alive to show everyone what silver and green is truly capable of—but he was better. He was more than our parents could ever fucking conceive of, and I’m grateful beyond words that he chose to be the bravest man the Black family has ever known.”
“I dunno, I think maybe this year sets a pretty good tone for bravery in the Black family,” Oliver says, gripping his wife’s hand. “Maybe we can start a few new trends.”

Sirius looks to Harry, then Remus, Narcissa, Andromeda, and Nymphadora before he smiles. “Maybe we already have.”

A week after that Saturday, there is a quieter announcement in the paper that Nymphadora Tonks Wood has become Nymphadora Tonks Black, and that Oliver James Wood has become Oliver James Black. Nymphadora Black is listed as a newly recognized Heir to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. When Snape asks Draco about his own position, Draco tells Snape, in utter seriousness, that he turned down his cousin’s offer. He is the last remaining Malfoy, and that is now his primary responsibility.

Snape sees Draco in Astoria Greengrass’s company often, but they do nothing more than sit together, speaking in soft voices. If Draco still plans a courtship, he looks to be in the middle of observing the traditional Pure-blood period of mourning before he initiates anything.

There are two more announcements in the Prophet, listed side by side:

“George Fabian Weasley and Angelina Roxanndra Johnson would like to announce their intent to wed on 1st July 1999. Invitations to the ceremony and reception will be delivered by Christmas. The groom-to-be has already sworn an oath to the bride-to-be that there will be a minimal amount of explosions.”

“Fred Gideon Weasley and Alicia Jacklyn Spinnet would like to announce that we are Thinking of Becoming Engaged, but Do Not Rush Us Or We Shall Elope. The brother of the Weasley groom-to-be would also like to point out that he has taken no such vows about minimal explosions.”

Ronald Weasley and Padma Patil haven’t killed each other yet. That’s the most encouragement Snape knows how to give of any relationship that involves Ron Weasley.

Neville Longbottom and Ginevra Weasley beginning to date is not a surprise at all. Neither are Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan. Both of them act miffed when the entire student body and half the faculty tell them they’ve known about Thomas and Finnigan for five years now, they were fooling no one, and to please stop being so dramatic about it.

Viktor Krum disappoints millions of female fans by announcing, just after a successful game, that he plans to wed Hermione Jean Granger when the latter is done with her studies at university. Snape puts down the Prophet and finds Potter in the library.

“You’re not planning on getting married or engaged, are you?”

Potter looks up from the book he’s been reading, which seems to be written entirely in cuneiform. “Uh—no? But look for Cho and Cedric to put out an announcement soon.”

“Marrying without you, are they?” Snape asks, amused.

“Well, they wanted to get married. I don’t,” Potter replies. “I mean, it was an educational relationship, but it wasn’t…I don’t want to marry them. They’re really nice together, though.”

Snape gives the students through the second week of May to grieve, or to study, given the scowls he sees on some young faces. Then he gathers the surviving faculty together, all of whom elected to remain at Hogwarts.

“Well? Are we sending them home, then?” Slughorn asks. “I’d like to be on my way, myself.”
Snape glares at him. “Be quiet. No matter our preferences in the matter, this school year must be completed. There are fifth- and seventh-year students who cannot afford to miss out on the opportunity to sit their exams for the O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.”

“Are there even enough wizards or witches to oversee the exams?” Sinistra asks.

Marchbanks nods. “There are. There might be some mutterings about conflict of interest, but I’m needed as a teacher as much as I will be needed for the process of the examinations.”

“Griselda, I would be…we would all be most appreciative if you would take on Professor Vector’s Arithmancy classes. I know it is quite a workload to add—” Snape tries to say, but Marchbanks is already nodding.

“I’ll do it. I can keep up with all three classes easily, but do not push for more. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“None of us are,” Minerva observes dryly. She’s left her dark hair untied ever since her husband’s momentary return and departure, and the streaks of silver in it are obvious.

“Hagrid is resuming his post for Care of Magical Creatures. Wilhelmina, there are still a few students with genuine interest in Ghoul Studies, and we have no one to cover the remaining classes in Magical Theory. Can you take them?” Snape asks.

Grubbly-Plank thinks about it before shrugging. “I’d wager I know more about ghouls than that fool Carrow,” she says. “Magical Theory is textbook stuff. Worst of that’s the grading.”

“We still have to put the notices up for Apparition lessons. Someone will have to teach that,” Pomona says.

“I’ll do it,” Filius volunteers. “It isn’t that hard. I just have concerns about the splinching.”

“That, I will be on-hand to help remedy,” Poppy adds. “And Severus, every student who was here the night of the battle reports some form of post-traumatic stress. I’ve handed out a lot of Calming Draughts and Dreamless Sleep potions of late.”

“Do you think it will interfere with their ability to finish school?” Snape asks.

Poppy clasps her hands, pursing her lips, before she answers. “I think if we respect what they’ve been through, and continue to monitor them…yes. I think they can do it.”

“Most of them would be insulted if we asked them to do otherwise,” Hooch says.

“All right.” Snape stands back from the table. “On Monday, the eighteenth of May, classes resume. Go warn your Houses. I’m sure the whinging will be audible in London.”

The whinging that Snape expects is surprisingly minimal. He patrols the halls on Monday morning and hears very few complaints. In the Great Hall, the students are talking over breakfast. Grief still mars many faces, but animation is starting to come back to eyes and movements.

In his Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, Snape doesn’t see many differences among the younger children. A few students were removed from school by their parents, but otherwise, his mixed-house classes seem very much the same. It’s the sixth- and seventh-year classes where the differences are so noticeable it is like pain in his chest.

His seventh-year Potions class is unchanged. Nott had already earned his dismissal last year; Granger
and Potter graduated a year early the previous summer.

William Lakewood and Wendy Rosier of Slytherin and Melody Veriss of Ravenclaw are gone from his sixth-year Potions class. All chose bravery over wisdom and paid the ultimate price for it. Ginevra Weasley, as intelligent about brewing as her twin brothers, glances in the direction of their empty seats often.

The Defence classes for sixth- and seventh-years are harder. Some of these sixteen-year-olds crept back to the battle, and they take to their instruction with the steel-eyed enthusiasm of ones who’ve lived through the worst of things already. There are obvious empty seats, but Snape can’t bring himself to Banish them.

Seventh year is the worst. Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Theodore Nott, and Tracey Davis are dead, killed during the battle when they chose Voldemort’s side. Daphne Greengrass, Edward Hopkins, and Marcus Jones died while defending Hogwarts.

Pansy Parkinson escaped death by nature of being unconscious, but she bore the Dark Mark on her arm. She is now serving time in Azkaban for trying to kill Argus Filch in an attempt to escape the boats.

The other Slytherins of that year do not come back to Hogwarts. Some feel the sting of what they consider Snape’s betrayal. Far too many others are busy witnessing the trials of parents and relatives who sided with Voldemort. That leaves Snape with only Millicent Bulstrode, Draco Malfoy, and Blaise Zabini.

The losses from the other Houses mean that the seventh-year Defence classroom is over half-empty. Just like in the younger group, he can’t bring himself to rid the room of the excess chairs. It feels too much like dismissing those sacrifices, and Snape refuses to do so.

Lavender Brown is proud to show off the scars that shine white against her dark skin, using her own experiences to demonstrate to all students that the mark of a werewolf is not the end of one’s life—it was, after all, not the full moon. Lupin joins her during those lectures to prove that even if it had been, life as a werewolf has certain advantages, even though the Ministry does not agree.

Snape confronts Lupin on the final lecture day before exams are scheduled to begin. “Please tell me you are taking this class back next year.”

Lupin gives him a surprised look. “It was Albus who hired me for the job. I didn’t know if you’d want—”

“Please stop being an idiot,” Snape interrupts. “It’s irritating. Do you want the job back or not?”

“You don’t want it?” Lupin asks.

“I’m a Potions Master,” Snape reminds him, frowning. “No, I do not want the stress of teaching two different subjects at once while also attempting to run this school.”

“Then why is Slughorn complaining about being forced to stay on?” Lupin wants to know.

Snape rolls his eyes. “Because he was stupid enough to sign a contract. Also, I still needed a Head of House, and he’s the only one qualified aside from myself.”

Snape catches Ronald Weasley roaming the halls that evening. At least one Weasley per day turns up, keeping an eye on Ginevra while involving themselves in castle repairs. Miss Weasley is quite aware of their true motives, but since they don’t accost her in the hallways, she ignores them.

“Uh, no thanks, Professor,” Weasley says. “I haven’t been here all year. That’d be a disaster.”

Snape isn’t convinced. “I know you’ve spent a year in Miss Granger’s company. That means, despite your best intentions, you are probably well-prepared to sit your exams.”

Ronald scowls. “I don’t have to. I’m seventeen years old. I can tell you, and school, to bugger off if I want to!”

“Mister Weasley.” Snape leans forward and delivers his most favorite glare of promised death. “I will not be the only Headmaster in the history of Hogwarts to fail to graduate a Weasley from these halls. SIT YOUR N.E.W.T.s OR YOU WILL BECOME ONE!”

Weasley gulps and meeps like a trapped rabbit. “Uh—yessir. I will be sitting my N.E.W.T.s tomorrow!”

“Good.” Snape straightens his robes. “You can overnight in the dormitory with the remaining seventh-year gentlemen. I will see you tomorrow.”

Minerva is leaning against the wall in the next corridor as Snape walks by. “Don’t threaten to turn my students into newts for trying to skip their exams. That is my job, Headmaster.”

“I found him first,” Snape replies, and smiles when she rolls her eyes in disgust.

The trials for the last surviving Death Eaters who were not dismantled by ghosts run concurrent with the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T exams. Jugson, Mulciber, and Rowle are all remanded to Azkaban for lifelong incarceration. Peter Pettigrew, who now permanently lacks a hand, is sent to Azkaban for lifelong solitary confinement. Snape does not think he will survive long, and he does not care.

A few former Ministry employees also join the Death Eaters in Azkaban, but two in particular are sentenced to death by Dementor. Mafalda Hopkirk and Albert Runcorn ran the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, and are responsible for an untold number of executions, unjust imprisonments, and the deaths caused by such imprisonment.

Every seventh-year who stayed for the Battle of Hogwarts does exceptionally well on their N.E.W.T.s—including Weasley, to the surprise of no one except Ronald Weasley. Snape thinks that facing literal death has made the prospect of exams far less intimidating. A few fools among the examiners mutter about potential cheating until Griselda Marchbanks removes her polite veil and tears them all new and unpleasant orifices for daring to make such suggestions.

Snape really appreciates that sort of protective ferocity. He wants to convince her to stay on at the school for next term.

Next term.

Snape finds himself dropping down into his office chair in shock. Next term. He is contemplating next term. He is thinking of the ways in which he will continue to do this job, and he never even bloody noticed.

“I can’t be Headmaster of this school,” he whispers.

“You already are,” Phineas points out.

“Phineas does have a point. You’ve done the job well, for an entire year. Why can’t you?”
Dumbledore asks.

Snape bends over and rests his face on his desk. “Please shut up.”

“You get to oversee their graduation ceremony!” Edessa says in excitement.

Snape groans and puts his hands over his head. “This is not helping!”

On the twelfth of June, Hogwarts sees its smallest graduating class in several hundred years. That does not do much to reassure Snape about his ability to continue in the post of Headmaster, even aside from the politics he’d once discussed with Minerva.

He holds onto the phoenix feather charm resting in his pocket that morning, wondering if he should discard it at last. No one said anything regarding Narcissa Black’s restored youth, or Remus Lupin’s —primarily because Sirius Black would not stop making joke after joke after ribald, ridiculous joke about it. There is still fluttering rumor about the rediscovery of Walburga Black’s secret to eternal youth, but it is no more than that.

In the end, he decides not to. This is the face he wore from Voldemort’s return in 1992 until now, and that is the face he will show to their guests today.

Snape has no idea what he’s supposed to say to the families who have assembled to watch their surviving children graduate from Hogwarts. There is absolute silence as he approaches the podium set up for this ceremony, and he finds he prefers it. Even polite applause would feel false.

“This war,” he begins, finding words at last, “stole far too much from us before it even began. People were taken from their homes. Families were destroyed. The Order of the Phoenix did what it could, but at the time, we understood we were fighting a losing battle. In our zeal to safeguard the Muggle-born children that Voldemort would target, we forgot those among us who are adults—and for that mistake, we lost even more.

“Then the enemy dared to target this school, the one place that should always remain a haven…and a haven it will be again.” Snape takes a breath. He is being watched with curiosity instead of outright hostility, which is an improvement over blatant distrust. “The adult students of this school learned the meaning of unity, and when war came, they acted in defence of themselves and others, regardless of House affiliation or family name.

“The Head of each House of Hogwarts will stand here before you. They will tell you the names of those who sacrificed their lives so that those seated behind me would still have the chance to graduate from this school, and for each generation onward to do the same.” Snape takes a step back. “Horace Slughorn, of Slytherin House.”

Horace Slughorn steps forward. “I name the graduates of my House first, for it breaks my heart that there are only three. Millicent Meagan Bulstrode. Draco Lucius Malfoy. Blaise Robert Zabini. Stand, please.” He waits for them to do so. “We Slytherins are aware of our reputation, but our Headmaster proves, as Regulus Black did before him, that we are also capable of the same sacrifices and heroics that other Houses are known for. Please applaud for these three…and know that there should have been many others.”

Snape applauds with the other teachers, sniffing back suspicious moisture. He might possibly be less inclined to turn Slughorn inside out for a little while.

Horace lists their losses, also, those who died in the school’s defense: Daphne Greengrass, Marcus Jones, Edward Hopkins, William Lakewood, and Wendy Rosier.
Filius gives the lectern an irritated look before tapping it with his wand, shrinking it down to his size before he stands behind it. “My Ravenclaws are wise, ones who know when to stand, and when to run. On the twenty-fifth of April, they knew it was time to stand. Padma Patil, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Sue Li, and Isobel MacDougal—please stand once more. You have served Hogwarts well.”

Ravenclaw’s losses are no less than any other House. Melody Veriss, Anthony Goldstein, Mandy Brocklehurst, Lisa Turpin, Samantha Gold, and Charity Yun.

Pomona shakes her head when Filius leaves a shrunken podium behind. She restores it to its original height. “I know of no great words to say to you, and like Slytherin House, I have only three students who emerged, unscathed, from terrible events. Hannah Abbot, Susan Bones, and Ernest Macmillan: please stand and be recognized.”

The losses for Hufflepuff are just as painful to hear. Megan Jones, Wayne Hopkins, Roger Malone, Heather Bulstrode, Cliff Warden, Quentin Tremble, and Zelda Limebert.

Minerva takes her place at the podium after Pomona sits down. “I feel guilty that myself and Ravenclaw have the most graduates of the four Houses, though that was not due to anyone else’s lack of skill. Quite the opposite. We were outnumbered, but we fought. We did not give up, nor did we give in...and I believe that is the only reason any of us are capable of being here today. Neville Longbottom, Ronald Weasley, Seamus Finnigan, Parvati Patil, and Lavender Brown. Please stand and be recognized. You’ve done well.” In the audience, Dean Thomas claps for them without any hint of resentment that the Gryffindors of his year are graduating without him. Thomas told Minerva the day school resumed that he was going to need to put in a full seventh-year, or she’d kill him for flunking his N.E.W.T.s.

The losses for Gryffindor are hard for Minerva to recite, and she has to stop twice: Fay Dunbar, Celiah Kellah, Colin Creevy, Drake Spore, Amanda Swott, Fletcher Egg, and Jennifer Mole.

By the time Snape has to stand before their guests again, he knows what else he wishes to say. “You’ve heard the names of those students who fell, but they were not the only defenders of this school, and I refuse to leave their names unspoken.” He begins with Arthur Weasley—Molly starts crying again—Frank Longbottom, and Septima Vector, but there were fifteen other wizards and witches who responded to Hogwarts’ cry for aid, and he speaks their names to a silent hall.

“I don’t know who will be standing in my place next year. This summer will be the first one in which the lingering fear of war will not tarnish the holiday. For some of you, this fear began in 1992, but the rest of us have dwelt under this cloud since 1975. That changes much, and we won’t know in what ways until September.

“Some of you will be pleased to know that your hated Potions teacher will, at least, still be retaining his job.” It isn’t a very nice smile that he gives in response to the groans coming from students in the audience, but it is entirely in character. “Thank you.” Snape turns around and looks at their graduating class. “You are now officially freeloaders. Please remove yourselves from this school.”

Millicent hugs him, which sets a terrible, horrific trend repeated by half of the dunderheads on stage. “No, I really meant it. Out!”

No one believes him. Snape is going to set Albus Dumbledore’s portrait on fire.
Snape jolts awake that evening to discover that he has, once again, fallen asleep over his desk. It should be something easy to avoid at this juncture. Exams are over; all he has to do is ensure that the castle is empty of children before the train leaves tomorrow for London. Despite everything that went so very wrong this year, it will depart on schedule—the third Friday in June.

He wipes his face, then his eyes, and tries to remember what he was doing. Oh, yes. O.W.L. letters.

He wants a bloody scribe. This is ludicrous.

It was a sound that awakened him. Snape stands up and rounds the headmaster’s desk as the scratching at the door repeats.

The ratel is staring up at him when Snape opens the door. “All right, then. Come in.” He waits until the ratel trundles inside. “Where have you been, and what brought about this sudden return to Animagus visits?”

Potter is suddenly standing where the ratel had been. “I’m bloody HIDING,” he says, wide-eyed. “This is worse than the last five years combined!”

“Ah, yes. Savior of the wizarding world, defeater of Voldemort…” Snape bites back a smile at the look of open-mouthed dismay on Potter’s face.

“People whinging about how I gave the Deathly Hallows back to their original owner!”

That one is a surprise. “Oh, my. You have demonstrated a responsibility towards another’s personal property. How entirely offensive.”

Potter throws up his hands. “Apparently!” Then he slumps down on one of the chairs in front of the desk. “I’m going to end up spending the entire summer as a bloody ratel.”

“Or you could, perhaps, choose to spend the summer traveling.”

“Travel?” Potter blinks a few times. “Oh. Right. Seventeen. Stole a fucking dragon. Got to watch Voldemort go up like a Roman candle. Travel is an option now, isn’t it?”

“Unless you have other plans? Yes,” Snape replies. “Winky.”

Winky pops in, takes one look at Potter, and nods. “Winky be gettin’ the tea, Master Severus.”

“Tea. Tea is excellent.” Potter thanks Winky profusely when she brings back a full tray. “Plans. Well, Tonks and Oliver are planning the wedding reception that they didn’t get to have this past spring. Invitations haven’t gone out yet, but your name is supposed to be on it. Scheduled for some time in August, but I don’t know the specifics. Not my wedding.”

“I’m terrified.” Snape wonders if the reception will be designed to keep the guests safe from the bride. “Anything else?”

“Uh—no. Remus and Sirius aren’t getting married until next year at the earliest. Sirius is having far too much fun toying with the press. Think he’s made it a goal to cause Rita Skeeter to finally have some sort of nervous breakdown.”

“I actually hope he succeeds.” Snape gives in and joins Potter in having tea. If he’s falling asleep over his desk again, the caffeine certainly won’t keep him from resting later.
“You’re too pale,” Potter observes. Snape glares at him, but Potter is just watching him with a concerned expression. “How’s the bite healing up?”

“It still hurts, some days,” Snape admits.

“Let me see?”

If anyone else on the planet had asked him that question, Snape would not only say no, he would toss them from the room. Potter has never asked anything of Snape to later use as leverage against him.

Snape tucks his fingers beneath the collar of his shirt and pulls it down to reveal the scars on the right side of his neck. Potter leans closer, brow furrowed, before he sits back again.

“Well?” Snape asks. “Have you an opinion, Mister Potter?”

“I’d say it looks like you were assaulted by a vampire, but the scars are too large. It would have to be a vampire giant.”

“That is a most unpleasant thought,” Snape says.

“There was one in the 1400s. Some vampire got it into their head that they wanted to prove that it was impossible, and proved that it was possible instead.” Potter smiles. “Speaking of impossible things, I thought you’d like to see this.”

He holds out his right hand. The deep scarring that had remained from the blood quill, white slashes surrounded by angry red, have faded to illegible, thin white scars.

“That…is a great relief. It also makes me glad I killed the toad,” Snape says.

Potter snorts. “It’s probably not the proper moral path, but I’m glad you did, too.” He glances at the paperwork on Snape’s desk. “What are you doing?”

“Composing O.W.L. letters. It’s one of my last remaining tasks before I’m free for the summer.”

“That’s going to take a while.” Potter sets down his teacup. “Let me see the quill you’ve been using, and one you haven’t used at all.”

Bemused, Snape passes over the requested items. “What are you doing?”

“Helping,” Potter says. “I’m hiding, remember?” He lets the quills rest in his left hand while he touches the tip of his wand to them both. The magic is nonverbal, but Snape can feel a shift in the air that is often the sign of a successfully cast spell. “There.”

Snape is given back only his original quill. “Potter. Explain.”

“Except for parents’ names, subjects, grades, and student names, it’s a form letter, right?” Potter grins at him and demonstrates with a blank sheet of paper. The ink emerges in perfect mimicry of Snape’s handwriting.

Snape points his quill at Potter. He had wanted a scribe, after all. “If you forge my signature on anything except these documents, you’re fired.”

“Please.” Potter shakes his head, smiling, as he starts writing the next O.W.L. letter with a speedy vengeance. “If I’m going to forge your signature on anything, it will be something useful.”
“Potter!”

“Harry,” Potter corrects, not looking up from his work.

Snape is taken aback. “What?”

“My name. It’s Harry.” Potter continues to write, only looking up at brief intervals at the original scroll hanging in the air to copy down O.W.L. grades correctly. “I graduated last year, Snape.”

“That you did.” Snape attempts to finish the letter he’d been working on, but he can’t concentrate.

He told Lily that gratitude has a price tag.

Snape is sitting in a room with one of the only people he knows that understands this truth, and still doesn’t care.


Harry glances over at him in surprise. “I thought you didn’t like your name because of who used it most.”

“Yes, well.” Snape looks back down at his disastrous attempt at a letter. “He’s dead now. They all are.”

Harry nods, but doesn’t reply, not right away. He finishes off his current letter and starts on another. “What are you going to do for summer break, Severus?”

The old flinch that he’s felt for two decades upon hearing his name doesn’t come. “I plan on doing absolutely nothing at all, Harry.”

“Nothing?” Harry keeps writing. “Sounds dull, Severus.”

Severus realizes he’s smiling. He feels at ease in a way that he can’t recall ever experiencing before. “I’ve not had the opportunity to do nothing in over twenty years. I’m actually looking forward to it.”

* * * *

If it weren’t for Harry’s insistence upon helping, a matter that Severus appreciates more than he had words to say, the O.W.L. letters would still be waiting for completion. Instead, all Severus needs do is ensure Minerva reviews the work for potential errors before they’re sent out by the school owls in mid-July.

Once the train and its students have gone, there is one final faculty meeting before the summer holiday officially begins. Minerva lives in the castle, long ago choosing the eschew her marriage home to the east; Severus, Hagrid, Sybill, and Binns live there, as well.

Severus has never discovered where Irma Pince goes on her summer holidays. It just seems wiser not to ask.

He sits down in the chair at the head of the table, which is the first out-of-character thing he does. It’s a deliberate decision, a signal to indicate that the meeting will not be to standard. “Our final meeting of the year is, by necessity, going to be a bit different. Some of you know your jobs, and your
positions need not change. Minerva is once again officially the Deputy Headmistress of this school.”

“Bloody Carrows,” Minerva growls under her breath.

“Remus Lupin is once again taking on all Defence Against the Dark Arts classes when the new term starts, as I never want to do that again,” Severus says dryly. Lupin merely shrugs when the other teaches glance at him.

“Horace is already aware, but this makes it official. He will be teaching Potions for students in first-through third-year. He will also still be handling the Alchemy classes for those students who are third-year and above.”

“Thought you wanted to go home,” Filius teases the man mercilessly.

Horace shifts uneasily in his seat. “It is, perhaps, easier to concentrate on the ideas of teaching when You-Know-Who is dead.” Severus glares at him. “Voldemort! Voldemort is dead. Also, as Severus pointed out, Slytherin still needs the service of a Head of House. I managed to restrain my more ambitious instincts, and I’m not dead, so I take this to mean that I did well enough.”

“Turning you inside-out is still an option if you forget that, too,” Severus reminds him. “Firenze, do you wish to remain, or do you wish to return to the Forest? I have it on good authority that your herd will welcome you back.”

The centaur thinks about it. “Both, I think. It will be an excellent way to test if their resolve is true or fickle.”

Severus nods. “Then the Divination split remains the same for classes. Madam Marchbanks has agreed to remain on as Professor of Arithmancy through the next term, but warns me that we should all keep an eye out for a proper replacement.”

“There’s another batch due to graduate from university this year,” Bathsheda says thoughtfully. “We might be able to snap someone from that lot.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Let me interview them first. If they can survive that without soiling themselves, they can go through the rest of the vetting process.”

“I am far more fond of that idea than I should be,” Rolanda murmurs.

“Wilhelmina has chosen to stay on to teach Ghoul Studies, as she’s found she enjoys the subject.”

Wilhelmina nods, smiling. “I do. I’d forgotten how much fun it was. It doesn’t take up much of my time, though, so if Rubeus ever requests my assistance during lessons involving potentially dangerous creatures, I volunteer my services.”

“Now, they ain’t none that dangerous,” Rubeus says cheerfully.

“Of course not, Rubeus,” Wilhelmina replies. “But we have also both been witness to some very careless children.”

Rubeus thinks about it before nodding. “Aye, true, an’ sometimes me judgement’s not what it should be. I remember I’ve tough skin an’ forget others don’t. I’ll show you my lesson plans, when I’ve cobbled them together. Y’ let me know what ye think, Professor.”

“Two are dead because of the Occupation. The other two have chosen not to return to Hogwarts; one of those families refuses to return to Britain at all,” Severus tells her. “We’ll also need a new teacher for History of Magic.”

Filius perks up at once. “We’re exorcising Binns? That’s long overdue!”

“No, we’re not,” Severus says, annoyed. “Headmaster Dippet tried during his first year. Binns just ignores it. We are convincing Binns that the Wizarding University of London is in need of a new history professor and relocating him. At least there, if the students wisely skip his classes and do their own studying, he won’t bloody notice.”

“That’s cruel,” Pomona says, cackling as she wipes tears from her eyes. “I love it. No one has learned a thing in that class in over a hundred years unless they’ve done the reading themselves. Who shall replace him?”

“That is a task for when we reconvene in August, not now. In the meantime, Madam Narcissa Black wishes to take on the Art classes.”

Severus watches every head turn to stare at him. “Narcissa Malfoy. Teach?” Aurora whispers.

“Well, why not?” Horace speaks up, offended. “She was an excellent student. I don’t know what her credentials are for art—”

“Quite good, actually. She spent her spare time before and after Mister Malfoy’s birth studying the history of the subject, and followed that by teaching herself the methods in which it is done.” Severus pauses. “Narcissa Black is quite good. If you send a polite request to visit Malfoy Manor during the summer, she will be pleased to show you her work.”

“Living with Mister Malfoy again then, is she?” Rubeus asks, curious.

“Narcissa is still trying to decide where she wishes her new residence to be,” Severus answers. “We’re getting another ginger, by the way. William Weasley seems to have quite the understanding of wizarding music, both local and abroad, and has volunteered to teach the Music class—at least for the first year. He states flat-out that this is a trial run to see if he prefers it, or if he’d rather go hide among the goblins again.”

“Isn’t Fleur pregnant?” Poppy asks. “She is due in…December, I believe.”

“She is.” Severus is still trying not to wonder about what a one-sixteenth Veela Weasley will look like. “Headmistress Elizabeth Burke reminds me that it used to be quite the done thing for a teacher’s family to reside in the school with them. Unless anyone is opposed to the idea…?”

“A baby born in this castle.” Minerva shakes her head in wonderment. “When is the last time that happened?”

“1893. Dumbledore claims that it was a delightful inconvenience,” Severus says. “Now then—Madam Longbottom, Mister Longbottom’s grandmother, was once an instructor here before her marriage. She is willing to take on the post again to teach Magical Theory.”

“As long as someone lets me place a refreshing charm on that vulture she wears before it disintegrates in front of the first-years and leaves half of them traumatized, I have zero objections,” Filius says. “She is strict, but quite knowledgeable about the subject.”

“Aside from filling Binn’s position, then, the only thing left is the restoration of Muggle Studies,” Minerva says. “I’ve had no ideas.”
“I have.” Severus is amused by the surprise on many faces. “Charity Burbage was a good person, and a good teacher—” He breaks off; sometimes he still cannot stop seeing her broken body suspended in the air. It is moments like these when he really hates Albus Dumbledore and Voldemort both. “She was a good instructor, but her knowledge of the subject was limited. I’m suggesting a teaching rota composed of a list of people who are Half-bloods who were raised in Muggle homes, or who are entirely Muggle-born.”

“Multiple viewpoints, multiple lessons.” Griselda is smiling. “Oh, I always liked those sorts of classes. Much more realistic worldview. Do we have a list of instructors yet?”

Severus passes a list over to Minerva. “The first half already volunteered; the second half will need to be asked if they would like to participate. There are enough Muggle-born and Half-blood adults that we can have a single instructor teach for a full week only before rotating them out for the next in line.”

Minerva glances down at the list before looking right back up at him, open-mouthed. Severus shakes his head in warning before continuing. “I may only have this job for one more term before the board of governors reforms. There are a number of changes I would dearly like to implement that half of bloody Wizarding Britain will possibly consider heresy. Would you like to hear them?”

“Yes. Please,” Lupin says at once, eyes narrowed. “I am so sick to death of the things Wizarding Britain disapproves of.”

“If we’re going to make changes, it might as well be now, while we’re all still considered heroes. Once that shine fades, it will be back to the usual doldrums and difficulties,” Poppy observes in annoyance.

“I want to move the Sorting of students to their third year, not their arrival.” It’s nice that no one erupts into concerned clucking. “It was originally Albus’s idea, so if anyone disagrees, we can tell them to go complain to a dead man.”

“All right,” Aurora says, frowning. “The living situation?”

“We’re in the middle of a massive reconstruction of Hogwarts thanks to that damned battle,” Sybill speaks up, startling nearly all of them. She usually doesn’t speak at all during a faculty meeting unless it’s to complain of portents of death. “What stops us from creating two new towers? One for first-year students, and one for second-year students? The dormitories can be split by gender, or lack thereof, as we do for all the other houses.”

“They would still need a teacher living in or near each new tower. Part of a Head of House’s role is to look after our students, after all,” Minerva points out.

Rolanda looks excited. “I’d love to take the first-years! I teach them flight as it is. That trust would be quick and easy to establish!”

“Done,” Severus says, before anyone can argue. He’d suspected she might like the idea. “Second-years?”

Aurora finally rolls her eyes when no one said anything. “It should be Remus, not myself.”

Lupin shakes his head. “Werewolf, Aurora. The idea of Hogwarts’ Pet Werewolf might have kept me in the Defence post, but watching over children at night will be far more than most parents could ever tolerate.”

“Aurora, you and Rolanda will both have new quarters when you return from your holiday,”
Severus informs them. He has thoughts about the werewolf issue, as well, but this isn’t the proper
time or place. “I will leave you to arrange moving from one part of the castle to the other it with the
house elves when you return.”

“Oh, what next? This is absolutely exciting!” Bathsheda exclaims.

“Resumption of basic Occlumency lessons for third-years and up. Mandatory,” Severus grates out.
“It is a failure of this school to leave students without one of the most basic mental protections in the
magical world, and as long as I am Headmaster of this school, it will not continue!”

“Mandatory until they’ve properly mastered it, I take it,” Lupin says, resting his chin on his clasped
hands. “Legilimency?”

“The board of governors would slay us all if we tried,” Severus replies wryly. “Even I know what
our limits are. Unless there are special, Potter-like circumstances, that option will remain at wizarding
university level.”

“We don’t necessarily have any teachers for that,” Griselda says, but she’s already looking at
Severus.

Severus rolls his eyes. “On the contrary, we have an accomplished number of Occlumens in the
region. Myself, Horace, Harry Potter, Luna Lovegood—though she would need to graduate first—
Draco Malfoy, Narcissa Black…and Sirius Black.”

Lupin starts laughing. “Oh, shite! He’ll kill you!”

“Sirius Black has been trying to kill me since we were eleven, and he hasn’t managed it yet.”
Severus feels his mouth curl up in an unwilling smile. “I’m sure he’ll figure out proper revenge. If he
hates teaching, he can find someone else to take up the post once the term is done.”

“Miss Lovegood is an Occlumens?” Pomona blinks a few times. “Oh, that explains so much.”

“It really does.” Severus waits until Lupin manages to calm down. “One more thing. Hogwarts needs
to begin accepting Squibs into this school, pending immediately.”

Argus Filch starts in shock from his near-doze and nearly falls off his chair. “You want t’dо what?”

“What he said,” Aurora repeats, staring at Severus in utter dismay. “They’re Squibs!”

Severus stares back at her. “And you are merely a Mudblood,” he says scathingly, his best
resumption of the Bloody Bat he can manage. “And yet, here you sit. What makes you better than
Argus?”

Aurora draws herself up, insulted. “I can do magic!”

Severus points at Argus. “And he understands it!” he shouts back. “Argus Filch is from a pureblood
wizarding family. The only true difference between either of you is based on nothing more than
ridiculous wand-waving!” He takes a breath and resumes an appearance of calm. “I am absolutely
done with accepting any of the prejudices that fill our world, ones that should have been utterly
abandoned centuries ago. They mean a significant portion of Wizarding Britain is undereducated and
unemployed. It’s ridiculous, and serves no purpose other than to make a few puffed-up pureblood
families feel better about themselves.

“Our job,” Severus says, glaring at every single person sitting at the table, “is to educate. To teach. If
we are still culling students based on a matter of circumstances of birth, then we are not nearly so
enlightened as we like to think we are. Why not resume culling the Muggle-borns from the list? The Half-bloods? Your workload will become very light indeed if we restrict Hogwarts admission to pureblooded wizards only. Or is that the problem? Have you all decided to become lazy?"

There is an intense silence that Severus feels like pressure against its skin. It’s as if all of Hogwarts is holding its breath.

“You know…Albus was far less frightening when it came to giving inspiring speeches,” Pomona ventures at last.

Severus lets out a derisive snort. “Then you truly were not paying attention.”

“But, what subjects could they take? We would have to create an entirely new curriculum—” Horace begins to say, right before Madam Pince lets out a loud gale of laughter.

“Change of curriculum!” she repeats, still laughing. “Dunderheaded fools. What subjects could they take? It’s like you all feel that Squibs can’t bloody read!”

“Please enlighten us then, Irma,” Minerva says in irritation.

“Potions brewed in first year require no magic, merely knowledge,” Irma replies, smirking at them all. “First year Defence is theory. Second-year Defence is introduction to creatures and many of the non-wand related means of dealing with them. Care of Magical Creatures requires no wands whatsoever. Astronomy requires no wands. Study of Ancient Runes—no wands! Herbology—no wands! The basics of Divination—no wands! Ghoul Studies, history of wizarding Art, Music Appreciation, Magical History, Magical Theory—no bloody wands! Muggle Studies definitely does not require a wand. There’s only one of you what can see past his own nose, and he was always my favorite!"

“Thank you, Irma.” Severus glances at the others. “Further complaints?”

Aurora glares at him. “You called me a Mudblood!”

“I did, and it got your attention quite nicely, didn’t it?” Severus tries not to sigh. “And thus, a school rule is now implemented that is long overdue: Argus, anyone caught using the word ‘Mudblood’ while attending this school will receive an automatic detention with you, delivered by Howler, an instruction I am weaving into the blasted wards.” Severus glances at him. “Not the torture devices!”

Argus scowls. “Oh, why not?”

“Because I daresay some of the little ingrates would be far too excited by the prospect to consider it a proper punishment,” Severus returns in a dry voice. “They hate cleaning far more than they fear odd contraptions.”


“And I need you in another role.” Severus dredges up a smile that feels somewhat genuine, if exceptionally underpracticed. “You are well-versed in the ways in which a Squib living in our world can use other tools and means that easily replace a wand. I think a first-year class teaching role would be suitable.”

Argus draws away from the table. “Ye can’t mean that!”

Severus taps his fingers along the tabletop for a moment. “Mrs. Norris, would you please stand and give us your opinion on the matter?”
There is a startled mew just before a stout-bodied woman is standing where the cat had previously been roaming the room. “How di’ ye know?” she says in complete indignance.

“James Potter, Peter Pettigrew, and Sirius Black, all of whom had the subtlety of stampeding elephants,” Severus replies. “Please tell your idiot husband that he has an additional and deserved role in this castle.”

Mrs. Norris glares down at Argus. “Well? D’ye need me to switch back t’m me Animagus form an’ claw some sense into ye?”

“No, no, no!” Argus shakes his head. “Fine! I’ll do it! The little buggers will be terrified of me!”

“Then you will be doing the job correctly,” Severus observes, which causes Minerva to roll her eyes. “Thank you, Mrs. Norris.”

“M’name’s Alberta,” she retorts crossly. “Alberta Norris Filch.”

“Leave out the Norris part, and you can assist your husband in his efforts,” Severus says. “I would hate for you to lose your lovely spying abilities in the hallways if that name became associated with your face instead of Argus’s lovely cat.”

Alberta tilts her head. “A’right then. Fair ‘nuff. Not like m’not used t’the idea already.”

Minerva looks like she wants to bury her face in her hands. “Am I the only one following the law? How many blasted unregistered Animagi are there?”

“My godson is a ratel,” Lupin says, giving Minerva a bland, innocent look when she glares at him. “Not my fault. Blame Sirius.” Minerva heaves a sigh and gives up.

“I believe that’s everything. Get out.” Severus waves his hands towards the doors. “I don’t want to see any of you again until mid-August.”

“You won’t be here, Severus?” Minerva asks in surprise.

“Not this summer,” he says. “Lupin, a moment.”

Severus waits until the others have gone, though he notes with amusement that Alberta immediately reverts right back to her favored form so she can ride out on Argus’s shoulder. “I have a…difficulty.”

“They have potions for that,” Lupin says.

“Don’t make me hex you. I am actually asking your opinion of something, werewolf.”

Lupin smiles. “Couldn’t resist. Sirius always was a terrible influence. What is it, Severus?”

It is, at least, getting easier to hear his own name. “My Patronus hasn’t been the same since Voldemort’s death.” He pulls out his wand and casts the spell, murmuring the words under his breath. Once again, the result is a non-corporeal, bright mass of light.

Lupin studies the Patronus with his arms crossed as the ill-formed Patronus bounces its way curiously around the room. “Have you ever had this sort of difficulty before?”

“Not since I first learned to cast the spell at twenty,” Severus replies. “It…should have been earlier, but I did finally manage it.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.” Lupin frowns. “That’s a Patronus in transition. It wants to become
something else, but you’re holding it back.”

“I’m doing no such thing!”

“Oh?” Lupin glances at him, eyebrows raised. “What are you thinking about when you’re casting the spell, Severus?”

“How bloody happy I am that Voldemort is dead.”

Lupin rolls his eyes. “That, Severus, is not an appropriately happy memory.”

“The hell it’s not!” Severus yells.

“It isn’t. That’s about vengeance, not joy.” Snape glares at him until Lupin sighs and pulls out his wand. “Watch.”

The Patronus that Lupin conjures is not a wolf. It’s a dog.

“Are you actually kidding me,” Snape says in amused disbelief.

“Not at all. Sirius now has a wolf. Never heard of anyone actually trading Patronuses before, but we did.” Lupin gestures at the large black dog, which wags its tail before vanishing. “Find a memory that fits. Your Patronus will figure it out…though I suspect part of the issue is that you don’t want it to change.”

It is exceptionally irritating to realize that Lupin is probably correct. “Fuck you.”

“Alas, I am engaged, and remain a one-man wolf,” Lupin says, spreading his arms in innocent reply.

“Fuck you; get out of my castle,” Severus adds crossly. “Wait. What did Potter’s Patronus finalize as?”

“It was a thestral.” Lupin gives him an odd, uninterpretable look. “Was. His is in transition, too.”
Lupin, Black, and Potter make it clear that Severus is welcome at 12 Grimmauld Place for the entire summer. Lupin makes note of the fact that Cokeworth is an actual pit, even from a Muggle standpoint. Black says that it will mean Severus is in easy strangling distance, because Black has no business teaching anyone to do anything; September’s plot is a disaster waiting to happen.

Potter points at his godfather and starts howling with laughter. “Ratel!” he gasps out. “RATEL!” Black scowls; Lupin joins Potter in laughing at the man who taught a fourteen-year-old how to be an Animagus.

Remus. Sirius. Harry. He is trying. It’s just very, very odd.

Severus goes back to Cokeworth first to discover that Winky has been a terrifying force of nature in his absence. He has literally never seen the inside of this house spotless. He didn’t even know there was old and proper wooden flooring beneath the old Muggle carpeting, and it gleams like it’s new. There also seems to be a strange surplus of light; it takes him a while to realize that the windows have been cleaned of all hint of industrial pollution on the outside. The walls have been white-washed, something Winky informs him was last done decades ago.

“I thought they were actually yellow,” Severus observes, turning around in the parlor that also acts as his library. “I don’t remember them ever being any other color.”

Winky looks pleased with herself. “A house-elf always knows, Master Severus.” Then her ears turn down in disapproval. “The pantry bein’ bare, though. Winky has been eatin’ with Dobby and Kreacher.”

Severus frowns. “You didn’t mention anything before.”

“A house-elf does not ask for the shopping money!”

“Winky, I’ve never had a house-elf before you decided I was an acceptable substitute for a proper wizarding family,” Severus replies. “I do not automatically know these things.”

Winky wrings her hands. “Winky’s bein’ sorry, Master Severus. Winky forgets, too.”

“Well, I also need to eat, but if I shop locally, I need an exchange of currency. Yes, we’re surrounded by Muggles,” he says in response to Winky’s expression of open-mouthed shock. “Don’t worry. Most of them don’t bite. They’re too busy drinking themselves to death. Please do not mimic them.”

“Winky can be doin’ the shoppin’ in Wizardin’ London an’ be bringin’ it back here. Is what I’s be doin’ before.”

Severus shakes his head. “That still requires money. I haven’t had the time to concern myself with anything of the sort in…in a while.” Last summer? The summer before that? Someone could have robbed him blind and he wouldn’t have known unless the goblins troubled themselves to inform him.

He tells Winky to eat with the Black house-elves again that evening if he’s not back for dinner before Apparating to London. Diagon Alley is not yet much improved from the dire state it had been in during the Ministry’s occupation, but the atmosphere is far less oppressive. Fred and George’s shop, meanwhile, is still a horrifically cheerful eyesore.
His first mistake is arriving without any sort of Charm on his appearance other than the phoenix feather in his pocket. The second is not in immediately rectifying it.

Everyone wants to talk to him. Everyone. Bloody hell, no wonder Harry hid in Severus’s office!

Wizards at least follow certain forms of etiquette. When Severus ducks into Madam Malkin’s to escape, no one tries to pursue him. He leans against the closed door, trying not to gasp for breath.

He has faced down Voldemort at his worst. Fame is far more terrifying.

Madam Malkin comes out from the back to the sound of the door’s tingling bell and eyes him with amusement. “Headmaster Snape. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No! No, nothing at all,” Severus replies, aware that he hasn’t removed himself from her doorway.

“Mister Potter came in last week with much the same expression.” Malkin grins at him. “If you go hide in one of the changing rooms long enough to cast a Charm to temporarily alter your appearance, I won’t tell a soul where you’ve mysteriously disappeared to.”

Severus thinks about it. “Do you have a use for dragon scales?”

Malkin gives him a wry look. “This isn’t a favor that requires repayment.”

“Think of it as pre-payment for future potential favors, then!”

Gringotts is another unexpected difficulty. “I need to escort you to your vault, Headmaster,” Gisheesh informs him in a cryptic voice.

“Why?” Severus asks. Good God, did someone actually rob him blind?

“There are matters that require your attention,” Gisheesh says. “This way, please.”

Severus gives up and follows the goblin. He’s not going to find out what those matters are unless he does so. “Did you ever replace your stolen dragon?” he asks in a mild voice. Gisheesh’s answering growl of frustration and foul words in Gobbledygook make up for having to ride in the stupid cart.

He lets his fingers touch the ancient Prince family crest. It seems so simple: a braided circle holding four runes within its protective confines. The Elder Wand that divides the runes down the center is obvious only to those who’ve been taught to recognize it.

He’s still glad he turned it down. His life is already too complicated.

Gisheesh pulls open the door to the vault. Severus stares at its revealed contents, trying to make sense of what he’s looking at.

“I see,” Severus manages at last. “The matter of concern is that someone has pulled a runner as a modern Robin Hood, stolen from the rich, and redistributed to the poor.”

Gisheesh glares up at him. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. The count of Galleons inside is accurate.”

Severus looks back at the rather large pile of gold. “The hell it is.”

“Trust me; we are very good at counting,” Gisheesh retorts dryly. “The original amount in your vault as of the beginning of the year 1997 remains untouched. There are three new parts. The first: you taught a full year of classes at Hogwarts for all student years, and thus received your pay, as is
automatically deducted from the Hogwarts accounts for such purposes. The second: you are Headmaster of Hogwarts, which is a significant increase in pay and a separate function from an instructor.”

Severus rubs the bridge of his nose. It had quite honestly slipped his mind that being paid was a thing that would continue to happen. The idea that he was being paid for both jobs had also never occurred to him. “This still seems excessive.”

“Hence the third part,” Gisheesh says, annoyed by the interruption. The goblin pulls out a scroll and unrolls it, beginning to read aloud:

“To Severus Prince Snape, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry:

Delivered to your vault this day of 1st June 1998 is the sum of ten thousand Galleons, decided upon by the Order of the Phoenix, for seventeen years’ back-pay in your role as dedicated and constantly endangered spy for said organization, in the amount of five hundred Galleons per year. The remaining fifteen hundred Galleons is to be considered a bonus for assisting in the successful destruction of the Enemy named Tom Marvolo Riddle, commonly called Voldemort. Financiers include the Ancient and Noble House of Black, the Malfoy Estate, the Ancient House of Peverell, now called Potter, the Muggle Doctors Granger Family, the Noble Lineage of Longbottom, and various other contributors.

Most Sincerely in your Debt,

The Order of the Phoenix

Postscript: Yes, we paid everyone, so not a word of complaint will be tolerated.”

Gisheesh lets the scroll snap-roll closed before handing it over. Then the goblin takes out another letter. “This one, I was told to give directly to you.”

“Thank you.” Severus glances at the scroll and the sealed letter in his hands, the pile of gold, and then abruptly sits down on the vault threshold.

“Are you all right?”

Severus thinks about it. “Am I actively dying or hallucinating?”

Gisheesh lets out a snort. “No.”

“Then I must be fine.” Severus tucks the scroll into an inner pocket of his robe before breaking the wax seal of the Black family crest on the envelope.

Dear Severus,

Shut up.

A little bird—well, cat, actually—informed me of certain impending political difficulties once the Board of Governors figures out how to reform, and then how to tell its arse from a hole in the
There is enough gold in this vault now to solve that difficulty. If you choose not to fix the problem, what’s here is still yours. What the hell am I going to do with it? You can’t bloody well eat gold. It has no nutritional value whatsoever.

I solved my own problem regarding the Black family seat on the Wizengamot. I gave it to Narcissa. She’s thrilled; she’s going to eat them alive, and they’ll bloody well deserve it. Draco will be taking the Malfoy seat. Young or not, he’s the only one left, so they have to put up with him.

Harry overheard our plans, looked most put-out, and submitted the bribes for the House of Potter to regain their Wizengamot seat—which should never have been lost in the first damned place. James was properly legal to inherit, the bastards.

Alice Longbottom is taking over for Augusta, who hasn’t wanted a thing to do with the Wizengamot in ten years. Someone argued Aberforth into taking the Dumbledore seat before the Wizengamot could make it disappear, too. Maybe they gave him a goat. I hope it was a nice one.

Convincing Molly to accept what she would consider charity, since it would fall outside the bounds of what the Order established as fitting “pay” per year of service, would have been a waste of breath. Thus, Percy Weasley is holding the restored Weasley seat in the Wizengamot. They deserve what they’re getting. He actually understands how the Ministry works.

There are many others who want to be involved, but prejudice or a lack of recognition for Wizarding families outside of English borders prevents it from becoming reality.

Help us stack the fucking deck.

Ungraciously Yours,

Sirius Orion Black

P.S. James wouldn’t say it to your face—you would have punched him. He told us, instead: “If I hadn’t had such a stick up my arse, that man would have been a damned fine Marauder.”

Yes, he meant you. I still say death has made him daft.

By the time Severus Apparates back to Spinner’s End, the sun is setting. He goes around back, opens the door, and slumps down in the parlor’s only armchair.

Winky pops into existence in front of him. “Is Winky goin’ shopping, Master Severus?”

“Shopping?” Severus groans and lets his head fall back. “Right. That. No. Take me to my old quarters at Hogwarts. We’ll dine there.”

“Is somethin’ bein’ wrong?” Winky asks in concern.

“Wrong?” Severus contemplates the idea while his house-elf waits patiently for him to answer. “Not necessarily. I’ve just unexpectedly been given quite a lot to think about.”

* * * * *
The initial shock aside, Severus does try to hold onto his original goal. He wants to do absolutely nothing for the entire holiday.

He’s driven witless by the monotony of nothing by the end of the first week. When the Daily Prophet is all he has to look forward to, things have become ridiculously dire—and the only thing useful he gets out of that is the announcement that Cedric Lewis Diggory and Cho Jia Chang intend to marry in August of 2000.

The occasional letters delivered by Owl Post break up the tediousness, but not nearly enough. Most of them are too uninformative, though Harry’s letter is one of the few exceptions.

**Dear Severus,**

_The Ministry wanted to throw a howling fit—pun intended—over the idea of giving out free Wolfsbane potion to werewolves instead of chaining everyone up on the full moon. Minister Shacklebolt still has enough sway, and not enough government left, to overrule them, so free Wolfsbane is exactly what is going to happen._

_Matters were improved by Sirius telling them he was paying for the damned monthly doses. The Ministry could shut it, since it wasn’t costing them a single knut aside from the need for someone to be available to hand it out to werewolves seeking relief._

_Brewing that much of the altered Wolfsbane potion is not a task a single person could ever keep up with. Ever. I’d like to do other things during the day, like breathe, eat, and sleep._

_Remus decided to pull out his conniving side. He should do it more often; it gets results._

_The laboratory behind Phineas’s portrait is now a brewing laboratory for the altered Non-Wolf Wolfsbane (can someone please think of a different name at some point?) that has been expanded to be twice the size it was last autumn. The third floor of the townhouse has been converted into a boarding house for newly employed werewolves with successful N.E.W.T. O-grades in Potions to brew Wolfsbane on everyone else’s behalf. A bunch of formerly homeless people have a place to live, a job, and get to stick it to the Ministry, so they’re slowly getting used to the idea that this is a good arrangement._

_It probably helps that they’re living in the same house where a man of Pure-blood stock is publicly engaged to a known werewolf. They are also, slowly, becoming less terrified of me._

_I am not even eighteen years old yet. I am not terrifying._

_Remus says that it’s about the Deathly Hallows and killing Voldemort. Not sure how that translates to being someone that werewolves are afraid of._

_Sirius is trying to figure out how the Extension Charm in the attic works. If he can find the edges of the created space, he can add a floor to the boarding house for extra rooms and storage of excess Wolfsbane until the day of the full moon. None of us are stupid enough to give it to the Ministry before that. It would be conveniently lost, and then it’s back to the chains, and every single bit of trust Remus cultivated among the wolf packs is gone in a night._

_I hate politics. I can’t believe I agreed to accept this stupid seat on the Wizengamot._
Agreed, paid a bribe, whatever.

I am not wearing that stupid hat. Kingsley is thinking with serious intent of abolishing the hat, since it’s been outdated for literal centuries. I don’t think he wants to wear the damned thing, either.

Yours,

Harry

Severus makes sure Winky has an actual set list of tasks so she doesn’t get too distressed, along with the money to accomplish them, before heading into Muggle London for the rest of July. He doesn’t sleep there; he has a house for that. It’s just nice to be outside without any sort of disguising charm, another unrecognizable face among millions.

“Hey, it’s Ozzy!”

Almost unrecognizable, then.

Severus turns around to spy Jade of the Top Hat approaching, a wide smile on her face as she jogs down the sidewalk to meet him. “S’bout time you crawled out from tha’ rock again! How’s tricks?”

“Tolerable,” he says. “Ozzy?”

“Well, yeah. You didn’ gimme yer name, mate, an’ Harry’s big on respectin’ what privacy folks want.” Jade looks up at him from beneath the brim of her ridiculous black top hat, revealing bright gray eyes surrounded by a generous application of dark eyeliner. “Should I be callin’ you sommat else?”

“It’s Severus.”

“Oh, yeah—Mum says a lot o’ you were big on th’ Latin. I guess I’m lucky m’Mum liked rocks.” She holds out her hand; she’s wearing purple leather gloves with the fingers missing. Severus wonders if Luna Lovegood is prophetic. “Jade Viridian. Got Mum’s family name, too, if tha’s wha’ th’ expression on your face’s for.”

Severus clasps her hand. “Nice to meet you properly. I see that you and the nose ring have parted ways, and from the lack of scent, the cigarettes joined them.”

“Well, yeah. I’ve got a master’s degree now. Got t’look proper when I go in an’ pretend t’be respectable.” Jade grins. “Got th’ day free, though. Bite t’ eat? My treat. I know how you lot are w’money.”

“Money isn’t an issue. The fact that I am completely lost is my only current difficulty,” Severus replies, unable to help smiling back. “Congratulations on your degree.”


“The real thing, or London’s pathetic version?” Severus asks, bemusedly allowing Jade to tow him down the sidewalk by her firm grip on his hand.

“It’s all ‘bout knowin’ where t’look, ain’t it, then?” Jade says. “Some o’ th’ places tha’ look like
outright dives are th’ best places in London.”

If it’s anything like the tiny Indian restaurant that Harry discovered, it should suit. “Maybe it will be comparable.”

“Ain’tcha a bucket o’cheer, then?”

The food is decent, the tea is authentic, and Jade is still sulking over his use of chopsticks. “Never coul’ get that,” she says, pointing at him with the end of one of her own sticks. The other is stabbed through the center of a water chestnut. “You been there then, yeah?”

“A few times.” Severus sips at the black gunpowder tea. “Not as often as I would prefer.”

“Issat where Harry’s off to, then? China?” Jade asks.

He frowns. “I don’t know. He discussed traveling during the summer—or perhaps longer—but I didn’t know he’d left.” Wherever the location, it’s probably safer than remaining to be mugged in Diagon Alley.

“Thought you was friends.” Jade’s normal smile is fading.

“We…are,” Severus admits. “You may be used to thinking too much in terms of Muggle—regular posted mail. He can easily send word whenever he chooses to do so.”

“Ah, right. Owls,” Jade says, resuming her usual cheer.

Severus reaches into his sleeve to touch his wand, casting a silent Muffliato. Once again, the nearest Muggle cell phone loses signal, to its user’s frustration. He really wants to study that phenomenon in depth. “Not over the ocean, they don’t, not unless you want an entire batch of drowned owls. Port Keys,” he explains. “There are postal employees that hop back and forth from continent to continent with the mail too distant for an owl to deliver.”

“That’s neat, that is. Gotcha beat, though. We,” Jade leans forward and offers him a mischievous grin, “have got th’ Internet.”

“What the fuck is the Internet?” Jade laughs aloud. “There is a real person in there! I was startin’ t’doubt it!”

“I will never teach you how to use chopsticks properly at this rate,” Severus retorts.

“Oi, hey, bribery! Now that’s right’n proper.” Jade tips her hat at the waitress when she brings the check, accompanied by two pre-packed fortune cookies. He prefers the wizarding Chinese version, which contain literal magic bursts of momentary good fortune. “When’s the last time you were in t’ the movies, Sev?”

He expects that shortening of his name to hurt, and is almost disappointed when it does not. “1975.”

“Stone th’ bloody crows! That’ll not do t’all,” Jade says, wide-eyed. “That’s shite.”

Severus shrugs. “It’s the truth. Will these things explode if you open them?”

“Why, there a magic version?”

“Several variants,” Severus tells her, relieved that opening the Muggle version only seems to involve a cellophane wrapper. He fishes out the paper revealed inside.
Jade steals his broken cookie while Severus stares down at the words on the tiny strip of paper. “You will make a new friend.” He scowls, lowers the paper, and looks in the direction of their waitress.

She notices his attention, tips him a wink, and saunters off to disappear behind the curtain that hides the kitchen from view. “Bloody hell.” Magical cookie? No. Fully trained witch waitress? Yes.

Jade lifts her hat. “Your eyes will be opened to a new world. I hope they’re not tryin’ t’tell me to off an’ watch Aladdin again. Can’t get the songs outta my head as it is!”

Severus places several pound notes into the plastic tray with the bill before Jade gets to it. “You can buy the bloody cinema tickets, if you going to continue to insist on paying for something.” He’s still getting used to British notes again, which feel unfamiliar to his fingers.

After they leave the restaurant, Jade takes his arm, like they’re a couple out on a date. It’s getting dark, but the city is so bright it doesn’t matter. “Was goin’ t’say earlier, jus’ seemed a bit rude t’ do it w’out there bein’ dinner first.”

“Say what?”

“You look better,” Jade says. “Like you’re less likely t’fall over an’ end up in hospital. Like Sirius an’ his boyfriend, Remus. Tol’ Harry it was ‘bout time th’ three of ya learned t’ bloody well take a proper kip now an’ then.”


“Don’ knock sleep, mate. Keeps th’ years from climbin’ your face.” Jade nods in the direction of the cinema. “There we are. This’un’s still playing a movie in from th’ States called Jackie Brown. I think if you’re gonna go an’ skip twenty-three years o’ film history, best jump right off into th’ deep end o’ th’ pool.”

“There had best not be actual pools involved, Jade.”

Jade turns around, her mouth open to retort, when she notices the expression on his face. “You did! You just made a bloody joke! Hol’ on, I need t’see if th’ world’s endin’!”

They are no more than five minutes into the movie when Severus realizes he is in the company of a trickster. Jackie Brown has the deliberate feel of a film crafted in the 1970s, even if the reels are completely modern.

“Aerodynamics and orbital science,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “Slytherin.”

“Shut it, I like this’un!” Jade shoots back, settling in to watch the screen with a delighted look in her eyes.

He has to admit, Jade has good taste in cinema. The story of staggered blackmail and manipulation is quite appealing, as is the title character’s success. He doesn’t think much of the cinema’s insistence on it being so loud, but he can protect his hearing well enough with a simple charm.

“Well? First picture in twenty-three years—whatcha think o’it?”

“I’m glad to see that Muggle misogyny seems to be fading again. That took long enough,” Severus answers. “The racism, too…and perhaps maybe the rampant homophobia.”

“Nah. Still got plenty o’ all that,” Jade says. “Don’ get me wrong or nothin’, it’s scads better than it were ten year ago. Your mates Sirius an’ Remus can stroll ‘round London holdin’ hands an’ not get
“the life beaten out o’ them, an’ not just ’cause you’ve all got pointy sticks. It’s nice, though, you talkin’ like s’not a problem for your lot.”

“It most often is not, though there are some holdouts. Some people need very little provocation to be horrible to each other.” Severus glances up at the signs they’re walking past. Some of the brands advertised are recognizable, if under entirely new logos. Others are completely foreign. “Equality of the sexes hasn’t been a concern in centuries. Recognition of multiple genders is automatic, as well, given some of the species we share living space with. Being queer is usually only an issue when it’s a question of needing an heir for the line of familial succession.”

“Surrogates, then? That’s an idea that’s pickin’ up speed.” Jade seems amused. “Mum never woul’ tell me why it had’nt be her name instead o’ me Da’s. Not that he stuck ’round, anyway. Magical lineage, right?”

“Probably of concern to her, yes.” Severus looks at her. “No siblings, Jade?”

“Nah. Mum might be all proud o’ me for getting’ my degree like I did, or she’s still sobbin’ her heart out o’er not havin’ a witch kid.” Jade pauses and glances around them, puzzled. “Hey, howzit no one’s payin’ a thing we say any mind?”

“A spell,” Severus replies. “It means those around us just hear muffled babble. I hate unnecessary discretion when there are much simpler solutions at hand.”

Jade starts snickering. “Simpler solutions? You?” She steps a few feet away and points at him. “Look atcher, mate! That’s not th’ clothes of a bloke lookin’ t’be discreet!”

“Uncomfortable?” Severus lifts his arms. “Jade. Tailored silk.”

“Alrigh,’ not so uncomfortable, then.” Jade resettles her hat. “Still look a bit outta place there, Sev. C’mon! You wan’ t’hang in London, you need t’look a bit less obvious!”

“Less obvious than what?” he asks, baffled. Jade is dragging him back towards the stores they just passed by.

“Mate, between th’ togs an’ th’ right long hair, y’look like a bloody rock star wanderin’ about.”

“I do not,” Severus protests, not certain why he’s allowing an insane woman in a top hat to drag him into a store. Foolish curiosity, perhaps?

“Y’do! Tell this nutter bloke he looks like a bleedin’ rock star,” Jade says to a shop girl in her late teens. She has teal hair and a gold ring encircling her lower lip, and could probably stand to be wearing more clothes that are not composed solely of netting.

Teal-Hair gives Severus a quick up-and-down sweep with her eyes. “Bleedin’ rock star w’money,” she says. “Fancy a date, love?”

Severus glares at her. “I’m thirty-eight years old. Are you even legal?”
“Thirty-eight, my fit rear end!” Teal-Hair blurs. “Y’don’t look it!”


Severus is honestly tempted to send a Patronus through the wall in a pathetic request for assistance. “What if I don’t wish to blend in?”

Jade takes off her hat and plops it onto the head of the nearest blank-faced mannequin, revealing that her short-cropped hair is solid black, much like his own. “Y’wanna crawl out from th’ rock you’ve been livin’ under, or not?”

Severus takes a look at what they’re surrounded by. There is a great deal of black clothing on display. “It’s like a Muggle store devoted to the Victorian Gothic.”

“Goth is in.” Jade smiles and pats her hat. “Perfect time for you t’leave tha’ rock. Wardrobe’ll even be familiar!"

Severus looks from side to side. “No, it will not.”

“Aw, c’mon!” Jade grins. “You’re just thirty-eight. Wizards live a good long while, right?”

“Unless death interferes prematurely? Yes,” he says.

“Well, c’mon then! How old d’ye feel?”

Severus stares at her. “Ninety,” he whispers.

Sadness creeps into Jade’s eyes. “Oh.” Then she steps forward and hugs him.

“People keep touching me,” he complains, but he’s hugging her back. He’s also blinking back tears. This is ridiculous.

Jade just hugs him tighter. “Aw, Sev, it’ll be fine, right? C’mon. Think of it as fun. Got’ter be better’n what you’n Harry were up to this last year, yeah?”

“Fun.” Severus glances up at the ceiling before returning his attention to Jade, who is looking up at him with one dark eyebrow cocked in blatant challenge.

He’s never backed down from a challenge in his life. “All right. Do your worst.”

Jade’s cackling should have served as a warning.

A half-hour later, she is shoving him over to stand in front of a mirror in the back of the shop. “See? What’d I tell you? Fit an’ fine!” Jade repeats, grinning.

Severus grimaces at his reflection. “I look ridiculous. Please also leave off the false flattery. I really don’t like it.”

“False flattery.” Jade looks at him as if he’s just insulted her hat. “You’re mental, y’have to be.”

Severus considers the events of his life. “That part is not in question at all.”

Jade sighs in exasperation. “You’re magic. You lot have any spells that makes a mirror reflect what I’m seein’ o’ you, ‘stead of what you think you’re seein’ there?”

Severus frowns. “Yes, but I am highly aware of what I look like—”

“It means that much to you, then?”

“You’re daft, so YES.”

Severus looks around the shop, but Teal-Hair is at the front counter, engrossed in a magazine. They’re otherwise alone in the store. “Very well. My wand, jacket-holder.”

Jade smirks and reaches into his jacket to pull out his wand, then performs a little twirl before handing it over. “Don’t I look good, wearin’ your jacket, Sev?”

“Maybe if it bloody well fit properly.” Severus holds onto his wand for a moment, thinking through possibilities, before he touches the mirror’s glass. “Revelabit in hoc speculum quod reflectitur in eam oculis.”

“Reveal to you, in this mirror, what reflects in her eyes,” Jade translates. “Neat, even if your grammar is terrible.”

“You make up impromptu, difficult spells, and see how well you fare,” Severus retorts.

Jade shoves at him. “Just look in th’ bloody mirror, y’daff git.”

Severus rolls his eyes and looks, noting that Jade is standing right beside him. She looks exactly the same, though her eyes seem more blue, her chin more elfin and sharp, and some of the years are missing from her face—the expectation of one who is still of one in the habit of thinking themselves younger than they actually are. The spell is working, then.

He doesn’t want to look. He knows what he looks like.

“Look,” Jade orders, nudging him hard in the ribs again. Severus gives in and does so.

He can’t make his brain comprehend what he’s seeing.

There is a young man standing before him. His hair is long enough to fall past his shoulders, sleek and shining under the horrible fluorescent lighting in the store—not greasy as he has always, always been told, even by his mother. His skin is extremely pale, someone who spends too much time indoors (in a bloody castle dungeon) to have been touched by the sun, but it is smooth and clear. His eyes are as black as his hair, a trait of the Prince lineage that is otherwise rare in Wizarding Britain. His nose has a familiar hook to it, less pronounced than he remembers, but his brows are not heavy at all. There are lean muscles visible on his bared arms, crafted from the work it takes to grind ingredients, to keep a wand up and in place during duels, to write with a quill for hours on end while pacing back and forth as he thinks.

He is tall, slender but verging on gaunt from the stress of the last year. Jade chose black denims that fit close until they hit the knees, where they flare out in what she calls a boot-cut—nothing like the flapping curtains of old bell-bottomed trousers. The solid black t-shirt is a perfect fit, not too tight in a way that he might find restricting, or potentially indecent.

Severus is staring at a stranger. “I have no idea who that is,” he confesses.

Jade smiles at him and rests her head against Severus’s arm, a warm, comforting weight. “Maybe it’s ‘bout time y’found out, hey?”
“Aw, now, lookit this. You’re back t’the silk already?” Jade complains when he finds her near the cinema that hosted *Jackie Brown* the week previous. He has now also seen *Dark City*, which he is really not sure he’s comfortable with, and also a three-hour long remake of *A Night To Remember* from 1958, now simply called *Titanic*.

He had to walk out of the theatre when the ship started to sink and go have a nice, private, traumatic breakdown in the cinema bathroom. Lesson learned: he is not prepared for historical retellings that involve realistic mass death. Jade has already promised that when *Saving Private Ryan* makes it to the UK, they will not be watching it. He doesn’t know what that particular film is about, and after Jade’s promise, he is in no hurry to find out.

Jade is fully decked out for the day in her traditional top hat, a black lace long-sleeved coat that hangs to her knees, black jeans, and lethal-looking boots. “An’ you’re skippin’ out on th’ kips again!”

“That’s because today I am having my revenge for your horrific shopping habits,” Severus says. “There’s an alley over here. Come on.”

Jade laughs. “Oh, s’yer goin’ t’knife me. That’s gratitude, it is.”

“Stupid International Statute of Secrecy,” he counters, taking a quick look around. “Hold on to my arm, and please do not sick up on me.”

“Hol’ onter FUCK—”

“—IS THAT!” Jade finishes shouting after the Apparition. “Sev!”

He smiles at her. “Congratulations, aerodynamic engineer. You’ve just teleported for the first time.”

“Bloody ’ell,” Jade whispers, and braces herself on the nearest wall. “Could’ve warned a girl, mate!”

“I told you: revenge,” Severus counters, straightening his jacket cuffs from where Jade’s grip wrenched everything out of place. He walks out of the alley, takes his bearings, and heads towards the nearest intersection with a crossing.

“Charring Cross Road? What’re we doin’ here?” Jade asks.

“Did your mother ever take you to Diagon Alley?” Severus asks, escorting her across the street when the signal light changes. She’s still shaking off the nausea from Apparating halfway across London.

“Heard o’ it. Ne’er been,” Jade says.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Hogwarts or no Hogwarts, your mother did you no favors at all. If mine weren’t dead, I would send her along to yours so they could compare notes.”


“It’s fine. It was a long time ago. This is it,” Severus asks, escorting her to the Leaky Cauldron’s entrance.

“S’not an alley. And…” Jade scowls at the building. “Howssit lookin’ like two different buildings at once?”
Severus opens the door, gesturing for her to precede him. “Muggles see a ruined, empty shopfront. Wizards see the true building. You’re untrained, so you see both. A lack of training does not mean that your magic ceases to exist.”

“Neat.” Jade takes a quick look around the pub. “Leaky Cauldron. Not so leaky, this.”

“We’re about to be mobbed,” Severus says in warning, and then is beyond relieved when Fred and George Weasley beat the other patrons to them.

“Headmaster!” George cries.

“Severus!” Fred exclaims. “It’s been forever and a day.”

“Nope, just feels like it since you’ve scowled upon us with all your Batty might,” George says. “And you are, Miss?”

Jade glances back and forth at the boisterous twins. “Jade Viridian.”

“Green Green. Oh, your parents must be loads of fun,” Fred says. “What’d you do to deserve bein’ stuck with our old Headmaster?”

“I kidnapped him an’ subjected him t’Muggle movies,” Jade returns in a dry voice. “Oh, I like both o’ you. You’re bloody well taken, aren’tcha?”

“Engaged to be wed, Green-Green,” George answers.

“Pretending not to be,” Fred adds. “But actually am. My fiancée’s parents are…well…”

“Stupid,” Severus cuts in, noting the babble of rising, excited voices. “Please, do me a favor and keep those people away from me.”

“Favor?” Fred’s expression lights up like one of his fireworks. “Legit favor?”

“Legitimate favor, yes,” Severus insists, still trying to keep a polite expression on his face while more patrons advance on their position as recognition kicks in. “Slytherin levels of favor, my word on it, just run interference!”

George looks like he’s going into paroxysms of joy. “Christmas came early this year!”

Then a cloud of solid black rises into the air between the twins and the rest of the tavern’s patrons. Severus grasps Jade’s hand and rushes towards the back of the Cauldron, exiting out into the tiny patch of back garden and its familiar brick wall.

“Th’hell!” Jade is grinning. “No bloody wonder Harry spent all o’ May hidin’ in Muggle London. That happen every time, Sev?”

“Yes.” Severus glances at her arm, where several stretchy black bands grace her wrists. “Might I borrow one of those?”

Jade slides off one of the bands, which is a stretchy elastic coated in metallic fabric. Excellent. Severus ties his hair back, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out the phoenix feather charm before dropping it into his satchel. “Better?”

“Y’mean d’ya look less like death warmin’ over? Yeah.” Jade gives him a sharp look. “Ain’t about a good kip, is it.”
“No, though this summer has been restful.” Severus glances down at his coat before he finally just takes it off and stuffs it into his bag to join the feather charm.

Jade’s eyebrows go up when the satchel shows no signs of holding anything. “You’ve got a quantum physics bag. I want one’a them for goin’ through w’y your subterfuge.”

“Slytherin,” Severus repeats fondly, taking his wand from his sleeve and holding it out. “Place your hand over mine. Do not get fresh.”

“Oi, that’s on you!” Jade grabs ahold of his wand hand.

“Here,” Severus says, tapping his wand to each specific brick in turn, “here, and here.” The wall obligingly slides apart to reveal Diagon Alley.

“All right, so the distraction’s over and done with and—” George stops short as Severus and Jade turn to face him. “Uh. Well. Never mind, then.”

“You don’t think anyone’s going to notice?” Severus asks, amused by George’s reaction.

“Well, you are currently not walking about being terrifying, so no, I don’t think anyone’s going to notice. Well, unless you get mugged for being a looker,” George adds thoughtfully.

“I’m telling your fiancée you said that,” Severus promises, leading Jade through the entrance of parted brick.

“See, that’s the sort of thing that’d give you away in an instant!” George shouts cheerfully before turning around to go back inside the pub.

“Maybe m’Mum didn’ bring me here ’cause you’re all mental,” Jade observes dryly.

“That is also a distinct possibility,” Severus admits, escorting Jade through the crowds with her hand firmly clamped onto his arm. She is staring at everything and everyone with wide-eyed wonder.

“No one is going to eat you or abscond with you, and I desperately would like to retain blood flow to my fingertips.”

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Jade mumbles, and her grip loosens a bit. “I was right ‘bout the Goth scene, wasn’t I? I fit right in!”

“And there are enough children wandering around in denims that no one will pay a whit of attention to yours,” Severus says. “Come on; this way.”

“What’s an Ollivander’s?” Jade’s eyes narrow. “Wand makers? You lot don’t make your own?”

“Do you remember that International Statute of Secrecy I mentioned earlier?” Jade nods. “Your mother took it far too damned seriously.”

“Oh. This is one’a those things I should’a known ‘bout already.”

“Severus Snape!” Garrick Ollivander greets him as they enter. The man’s health is finally returning after his long stint as Voldemort’s prisoner. “How are you today?”

“I’m well, thank you, Garrick. You seem much improved.”

“Aye. Must’ve been a potion or three slipped to me by some dark-haired little runt holding an eleven inch box elder wand with a core made from braided unicorn hair!”
“What?” Jade repeats blankly.

“He means, ‘Thank you,’” Severus clarifies. “Garrick, this is Jade Viridian. She is a Half-blood whose parents left her desperately undereducated, and is seeking her first wand.”

“She is, hmm?” Ollivander gives Jade a speculative look. “Not often I’m doin’ that. Not in a long time.”

“I am?” Jade elbows Severus hard in the ribs as Ollivander wanders off to search for his favorite measuring tape.

Severus smiles. “We’re trading.”

“Trading what, Sev?”

“Information. You get to learn things that will make your chosen profession, as well as your life, significantly simpler without needing to give up any part of it, and I get to learn of things like this blasted Internet of yours. Or possibly how one goes about getting into a Muggle university without any damned A-levels.”

Jade gives him an odd look. “What, you can’t do that’un on your own?”

“We’re usually doing the opposite. Muggle-borns and Half-bloods attending wizarding universities,” Severus explains as Ollivander comes back. “Yes, he’s measuring your arm for a reason.”

“He’s measurin’ all o’ me up so much, I’m expectin’ him t’bring me a corset!” Jade complains, but she doesn’t seem too startled when Ollivander’s measuring tape starts finishing the job on its own.

Ollivander smiles. “Not hardly. Oh—intelligence, cunning, craftiness, a fine grasp of logic. I’ll be right back.”

Jade looks down at herself. “How’n th’ hell’s he getting’ all that w’ a measurin’ tape?”

“The only way you get to find out is if you become a wand maker. They value their secrecy.”

“If I haven’t gotten it right this first time, I’ll eat my left shoe,” Ollivander promises, bringing over a box. “Ash, ten inches, firm and strong with a dragon heartstring core. Try this, young lady.”

Jade stares into the open box. “How?”

“Pick it up and wave it around. Preferably without pointing it at anyone,” Ollivander replies. “Last time I forgot to give that warning, I got blasted in the face by Harry Potter.”

“That is what you get for not trusting your first instincts,” Severus points out.

Ollivander rolls his eyes. “You can keep your smart mouth to yourself, young Headmaster.”

“I’m. Thirty. Eight.”

“And I’m one hundred and two,” Ollivander retorts. “Babe in arms, Severus!”

Jade finally grabs the wand, yanks it out of the box, and shakes it at the nearest wall. Fortunately for Ollivander’s shop, the only thing that happens is that the wand lights up with the bright glow of the moon. A glittering trail of silver emerges from the wand’s tip to drift down like fine mist to the floor.

“Oh.” Jade stares at the magic until it vanishes. “Issat all right?”
“Oh, yes.” Ollivander looks misty-eyed and proud. “I’ve had that one set aside for eleven years now. You’re what—twenty-two, young miss?”

Jade nods, still staring at her wand. “Yeah. Twenty-two.”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. That’s younger than he’d originally thought. “Twenty-two. With a full master’s degree from a university.”

“Tha’s me,” Jade says absently. “Head for maths and a way w’blowin’ things up.”

Ollivander leans in close to Severus. “Please keep her away from the Weasley twins.”

“An’ I’ve good ears, too,” Jade snaps, glaring over her shoulder at Ollivander. “Now what’m I doin’ w’this?”

“For now, put it back in the box,” Ollivander says, holding open the lid. “It has charms of protection embedded in the wood. If anyone without magic pokes around in the box, they won’t find anything. If they try to steal the box from you—well, they won’t like the results very much. Severus, you’re not paying for this one.”

“Don’t even start.” Severus places double the number of required Galleons onto the tabletop. “You did that to me when I was eleven, but you don’t get to repeat it.”

“The wand chooses the wizard, Headmaster,” Ollivander says, but at least he’s pocketing the money this time. “Sometimes that is far more important than profit.”

“Just my luck,” Severus replies.

“I’ve got no idea what this means, Sev,” Jade says the moment they leave the shop. “Tell me about my, uh, wand. Yeah, tha’s weird. Tell me ‘bout my wand in a way that’ll make sense.”

“A wand carved from ash will only ever belong to one owner, that being you.” Severus halts them in front of the owl emporium so that Jade can stare at the birds with the delight of someone who’s never had to clean up after an owl in a temper. “It’s most often found in the hands of the stubborn.”


“Usually considered the most powerful type of core, but I think it’s a load of rubbish,” Severus says. “The magic, the spellwork—that all depends on the wizard.”

“He wasn’t usin’ dragon an’ unicorn like metaphors, was he?” Jade asks as they move on. She glances at the robes on display in Madam Malkin’s window, one eyebrow quirked, but keeps walking.

“Not at all.” Severus shows her the rest of the alley, including Knockturn in the tour.

“Why’s it so blasted quiet down this way?” Jade asks, her voice low-pitched. Knockturn Alley always has a hush to it, like furtive whispering in hidden corners.

“Knockturn Alley is infamously known for dealings in Dark magic. Not all items of a Dark magical nature are harmful or evil, but in the wrong hands? They can be deadly. There are many in the wizarding world who would not be caught dead in this alley—literally. They fear it would damage their reputations beyond repair, which is also foolish.”

“You’ve used Dark magic, then?”
Severus nods. “Often.”

“How?”

He gives that question due consideration as he guides her back out of Knockturn. “Because it was necessary.”

Jade’s eyes narrow. “Necessary, or right?”

“Those things are often the same. They are also often not the same at all.” He takes them back to Madam Malkin’s, but does not subject Jade to a wardrobe adjustment. As she herself noted—she fits in quite well as is. Instead, he purchases a black leather satchel that’s proportionate to her height and leaves with both it and Jade, who is treating him to another suspicious look.

Severus gets out his wand and gestures for her to do the same once they’re seated at an empty table outside a new restaurant proclaiming to sell Broiled Frog Legs, Fried Newt, and Sautéed Salamander. Jade sounds enthused about the frog legs; Severus is just hoping there is more to the menu than amphibians.

“First lesson: early British wizards were very, very bad at Latin.”

Jade lets out a snort of laughter. “I know our history, Sev. That might be puttin’ it a bit too kindly.”

“Quite. English is a Germanic disaster infected by Norse and then badly mixed with French,” Severus agrees. “The only people who spoke Latin for centuries were the clergy, and to be honest, most of them were just repeating what they’d been taught without true understanding of Latin’s structure. The traditionally accepted Britain incantation for your desired quantum space bag is *Capacious Extremis*, which isn’t even close to correct.”

Jade makes a disgruntled face. “*Capacious* isn’t even the right word to use!”

“Exactly. You won’t hear a magical being in China, Korea, Japan, or Russia using Latin incantations for their magic, either. Why would they?”

She nods. “S’not ‘bout th’ words, then. It’s th’ intent o’ what you’re wantin’ t’do.”

“Which is how wordless magic can exist once the basics are mastered. It is also how *wandless* magic can be performed, though that often only comes with a mastery of one’s skills. There are childhood exceptions called accidental magic caused by strong emotions, but they’re more likely to happen to children who are raised in magical households. You were not.”

Jade thinks about it. “Just th’ once, actually. Made th’ candles on m’birthday cake light up when I thought Mum was takin’ too long ‘bout gettin’ it done. She threw such a bloody fit ‘bout fire hazards that I never did it again.”

“Threatening to hex your mother into the next calendar year is not an acceptable response to that statement, is it?”

“If hexes are bad? No, Sev,” Jade tells him, rolling her eyes. “C’mon, back to th’ tricks!”

“I will hex you if you call what we’re doing a trick ever again,” Severus retorts. “*Capacious Extremis* works because British wizards and witches expect it to work. They’re taught it works that way, so it does. They know the intent of the charm, and the magic responds accordingly. Some of us, on the other hand, went to the trouble of learning real blasted Latin.” He pauses. “I found that doing so made non-verbal magic easier to accomplish. I don’t know if that is true for everyone.
“You are unpracticed and unrecognized in the magical world, and I also do not want this bag to explode, so you will not be attempting this yourself. Instead, you will get your payment for putting up with being brought here.” Severus touches his wand to the bag. “Abscondita est infinita repono.”

Severus can feel the change in the bag, even though nothing else happens but for a faint burst of silvery-gold light from his wand. “There. One quantum bag, as requested. Here, it would be referred to as an Infinite Extension Charm.”

“Infinite hidden storage.” Jade picks up the satchel, looking inside. “Looks normal, then.” She puts her hand in, and then keeps going until she’s into the bag up to her shoulder with a grin on her face. “Oh, tha’s lovely. That’ll come in handy, it will!”

“You’re welcome.”

Jade tips her hat at him. “I’ll be thankin’ ya when I’ve stuffed m’whole pile o’ textbooks inside an’ can still carry it about.”

She is such a Slytherin. The true sort, the kind he would like to see more of, like Millicent Bulstrode, the Greengrass sisters, and Draco—once he’d tossed off Lucius’s nonsense and chosen to grow up, at least. It makes Severus glad she chose London over magic. Jade Viridian would not be the same person if she’d grown up in Hogwarts during his time as Voldemort’s spy.

Then she surprises him. “You’re a good teacher, Sev.”

He shakes his head. “I’m nothing of the sort. I’ve no patience for it.”

Jade gives him a look of polite disbelief. “Nothin’ o’ th’ sort, huh? That, y’daft bloke, was a good bit o’ teachin’, an’ I’ve had some instructors who had no business doin’ it t’all.”

“This is different. You don’t ask stupid questions.”

“Course not. I’m a bloody adult who’s already been through seven years o’ uni,” Jade replies. “Bet you’re just fine wi’ students who ain’t tykes.”

Severus decides that the best way to deal with that comment is to set it aside to contemplate later. “Would you like to meet a mythical creature, Jade?”

“A bloody dragon?” Jade asks in disbelief.

“No. Dragons are dangerous. It takes a lot of specialized training to tend to a dragon reserve.” Severus takes her Gringotts first, with a whispered admonition not to be rude.

Jade just glances at the goblins moving about, performing their work, with her head cocked to one side. “No girls?” she asks. “Or do they just not care?”

“I suspect the latter. I’ve never asked. They might tolerate that question from children, but you’re a grown adult. I wouldn’t chance it.” He does ask for and receive a small withdrawal from his vault, one that won’t necessitate a trip to the vault itself. Jade is starting to get the expression of one who is taking in too much information at once. He’ll terrify her with the cart ride at a later date.

Once outside of the bank, he gestures for her to open her new bag before dropping a handful of galleons, sickles, and knuts worth about fifty galleons. “Yes, and shut up,” he says, when she opens her mouth to protest. “I am well aware of what it’s like to be a student on a budget, and now that you’ve a wand, you can come back whenever you like. It would be a shame not to be able to buy something you felt was a necessity.”
“Why?” Jade asks, staring down into her bag. “An’ how do I get this out ‘gain? I can’t bloody see it!”

“Because once upon a time, I had nothing, and someone was kind enough to do it for me,” Severus replies. “Reach for what you want to retrieve with specific intent, or shove your wand into the bag. Accio, while incorrect on its own, is a decent basic summoning charm if you pair it with what it is you’re asking for. If the charm fails, either nothing will happen, or you will wind up with your head stuck in the bag.”

“Now tha’s a grand thought. Don’ think I’m needin’ m’head stuck in quantum space, thanks.”

Severus leads them to a quiet section of the alley, behind Fortescue’s abandoned emporium. No one has claimed the building yet; he hopes someone does. Seeing it stand empty is a harsh reminder of how many they lost to the war. It also makes him crave a change of scenery. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Jade says after a moment. “Think I’m ’bout overwhelmed.”

“Do you think you could handle one more bout of whelming before it’s too much?”

Jade laughs. “You used whelmin’ proper! Tha’s fancy, it is. Yeah, one more, Sev. That teleport bit again?” She winces when Severus nods. “Right. Get on wi’ it. So glad I skipped out on lunch!”

Severus brings them to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. The sun is shining on full summer grass, but a few steps will take them into the shade cast by massive trees. He takes the broken rocks down, three steps that had once been crude, ancient stairs, and holds out his hand. “Come on.”

“All right then, Sev.”

All right, Sev! I’m coming!

Severus winces in response to the memory and has to look away from Jade. “This is the Forbidden Forest.”

“Forbidden? Should w’be here, then?”

Severus Snape, that is the Forbidden Forest! It’s called Forbidden because that means no!

Severus leads Jade forward, struggling to keep his mind focused on now, not then. Easier said than done. “This is Hogwarts. The Forest and its boundaries can be dangerous, but not if you understand it.”

Trust me! I found something amazing, Lil!

Sev, we’re not supposed to be here!

“Yeah, well—Sev, I don’t understand it!”

“Then stay close,” he says. “You’ll know why we’re here in a moment.”

Just stay close. They’re right up here.

“Oh,” Jade gasps as they step out into the clearing. Several unicorns are grazing on the grass that’s sprouted up, seeking sunlight. One of them is rolling around on the ground like an undignified pony. “Uh—” she breaks off when one of the unicorns breaks away from the others.

“It’s fine.” Severus watches the older mare approach at a trot. “She just wishes to know what’s going
on."

Sev!

*It’s fine, Lily. Look—she likes me!*

“I thought unicorns hated men,” Jade says while Severus is forcefully nuzzled by an overenthusiastic unicorn. He nods before the mare shoves her way forward so that his face is resting in her hair.

He might not be able to do this.

*They’re scary.*

*That’s just cause they’re bigger. They’re not gonna hurt us, Lil.*

*How do you know, Sev?*

He’d forgotten that day. All of it.

*She is nice. Terrified, but nice,* the mare comments.

“That’s because you’re quite a bit larger than she is,” Severus whispers.

“I can’t tell if you’re talking to me or the horse,” Jade says wryly.

The mare snorts and stamps her foot.

“Please do not insult the unicorn with the very long *horn* protruding from her forehead.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry, then,” Jade apologizes. “Uh—you’re m’first unicorn. Er, is it rude t’ask why you’re cryin’ into a unicorn’s mane?”

“It isn’t rude.” Severus steps back and dries his face. “I was recalling something I’d forgotten.”

“Am I gonna cry m’eyes out if I hug a unicorn?” Jade asks.

The mare turns around to face Jade, blinking her silvery-blue eyes. “There is only one way to find out, isn’t there?”

* * *

Severus returns Jade to London not long afterward. There had been no crying, but the soft, awed delight was almost as bad. He does extract a promise from Jade that she will not be using her wand unless it’s to retrieve things from her new favorite bag, or to visit Diagon Alley. In exchange, he promises that yes, she will learn basic magic from him during the rest of the summer. Maybe she’ll never need more than that—maybe she’ll never want it—but Severus does not like the idea of anyone being uneducated to the point of helplessness. Not after two damned magical wars in his lifetime.

Severus goes back to the Forest after leaving London for the evening. It’s already dark in the clearing when he sits down on an old, weather-smoothed rock.
The Forest is quiet. He can hear owls, the sounds of animals walking or crawling around in the brush, and the nightsong of birds who hate daylight.

_That’s a Patronus in transition. It wants to become something else, but you’re holding it back._

Severus pulls out his wand and studies it. The sleek matte black varnish hides the true color of the elder wood, something he always preferred. A wood of unknown qualities is more likely to be underestimated…and it has served him well.

Happy. He’s out of practice at that. What the hell makes him happy that isn’t also based in grief or vengeance?

Jade’s ridiculous top hat. Her smile. Harry surviving Voldemort’s third attempt to kill him. Hugging the atrocious brat in the midst of castle rubble. Being so proud of the last three Slytherins he can truly call his own, surviving and graduating with earned respect.

Harry coming to Spinner’s End when everything felt like crumbling dust: _You’re my friend._

Severus lifts his wand. “_Expecto Patronum._”

The silvery light forms and coalesces into a distinct, corporeal shape. The unicorn raises her nose in the air and stamps her hoof on the ground, as if waiting impatiently for something to do.

He turns and glares at the real unicorn that crept up to the edge of the clearing while he was preoccupied. “You don’t need to look so bloody smug about it, you know.”

Both Patronus and unicorn snort at him in mocking disagreement.
Jade is on his case far too often about how Muggles really are not that formal. When he goes out to the small market in Cokeworth, trying to remember how to shop in a store that doesn’t rely on magic to function, he does attempt to heed her advice. The most he can manage to do is go out without his coat, which means he’s walking around in a banded white button-down shirt and black trousers. She still thinks that is too formal, but he can only handle so many blasted steps at a time without rebelling…or breaking down entirely. Those are two incidents he doesn’t wish to repeat.

Then he looks up after placing a carton of eggs into the basket he’s carrying and stops short. “Dear God, I’m having a nightmare.”

Petunia Dursley looks at him from across the boundaries of her shopping trolley, the muscles under her eyes twitching. “What—are you doing here?” she manages to spit out. Next to her trolley is a tall boy who is built like a massive rugby player, if one who is a bit overweight.


He’s walked past her trolley, on his way to exit this damned store, when he hears a strained, “Wait.”

Severus looks up towards the shop’s fluorescent-lit ceiling. I just wanted eggs, he thinks, and turns around. “Yes?”

“You told my—my nephew that I was in training to be a nurse. I didn’t know you knew anything about me,” Petunia says. It sounds like she’s trying to be accusing, but isn’t sure of her own purpose in detaining him.

“You were Lily’s sister. Nursing is an honorable occupation. She was proud of you for going to school for it,” Severus tells her. Lily had been unhappy when Petunia ditched university for a swift marriage to Vernon Dursley, but as far as Severus knows, she never said an unkind word to Petunia about the decision.

“Proud,” Petunia says in a shaky voice. “Proud. Of course. He—Harry also says that you helped to stop him. That you were…instrumental in dealing with those who took away my family. Who took away my Vernon.” Her son is quiet while his mother speaks, glancing back and forth from Petunia to Severus with wary curiosity.

“I was.” He loses nothing by admitting it. “I didn’t do it for you, or for him.”

“I’m aware,” she says bitterly. “Why would you? We’re only Muggles.”

“Petunia Dursley,” Severus says, “when you and I met for the first time, you were exceptionally rude to me. Everyone I attended at our local school treated me in the exact same fashion. My Muggle father was an abusive alcoholic. I knew nothing else. How did you expect me to react?”

“I didn’t know that. About your father.” Petunia’s brow wrinkles. “No, that’s…not true. There were rumors. I just decided that I…didn’t care.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Have you suffered brain damage recently?” He is also trying to figure out why they are having a conversation at all, let alone one that is taking place in the local market.

Petunia glances away as her son, Dudley, goes pale. “We went out from that terrible…from the
house. We were going to try to have a nice day in London. To—to forget. For a little while. Then the Dementors came.”

“They made me look at everything,” her son finally pipes up in a deep voice that’s too raspy to boom out properly. “Every bad thing I’d ever done to anybody. They made me live it like I was the one it was bein’ done to.”

“They were that close?” Severus lets out a strangled breath. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“We’re aware,” Petunia says in her familiar, haughty way, but then she seems to shake it off. “We live here now, too. Vernon left a life insurance policy behind, but it wasn’t enough to keep making payments on the house in Little Whinging. I—I sold it. We came back to live in my parent’s house.”

Lily’s house. “I didn’t know it still stood. I haven’t been there.” Not since January of 1976.

Severus wanted to kill this woman. He’d been happy to hear of her husband’s death. He wanted Petunia Dursley dead.

Petunia Dursley and her son were nearly kissed by Dementors. There is nothing he could ever do to them that would be a more terrible punishment than that. Life is still not fair.

“Have you been here long?” he asks, for no reason that he can fathom.

“No, not…just a week. I’m trying to put something in the pantry, but I—”

Then, to his intense discomfort, Petunia bursts into harsh sobs in the middle of the store.

“It’s okay, Mum,” Dudley says, putting his arm over her shoulders in an attempt at offering comfort. “It’s gonna be fine.”

“Dudley.” Severus waits until the large young man glances over at him. “Help me to escort your mother out. I have a feeling that neither of you have eaten properly in days, and that is where we should start.”

He still firmly blames Albus Dumbledore for everything.

Severus took down the Fidelius Charm that protected the house at Spinner’s End when he arrived for the summer. There is no one left he fears enough to need it. Wizards who still might wish vengeance upon him will find that his Ministry-listed address is Hogwarts, and attacking the school would be exceptionally foolish. Wizards who know how to use Muggle registries will also fail to find him, as the house is still listed under his father’s name.

Petunia almost balks when she realizes where she’s being taken, but then Dudley encourages her to keep walking. Severus privately hoped she would bolt and leave him free of whatever the hell he’s doing, but no—she follows him docilely to the back garden of the house, and then walks inside with a look of grieving shock still frozen on her face.

Severus gets her settled at the kitchen table, calls for Winky, and gets tea into this woman’s hands. Given that Petunia doesn’t flinch at the house-elf’s appearance, she must have been in Grimmauld Place long enough to grow accustomed to Kreacher and Dobby.

He goes back to the parlor to find Dudley Dursley staring at his library. “Cor, you have a lot of books,” he says. “Not as many as Mister Black, but there are still lots.”

“Not all of them are safe to touch,” Severus says.
“Cause I’m a Muggle, right?” Dudley sounds sad, not bitter. Odd.

“No. It is because some of them literally bite,” Severus replies. “It’s a form of protection to keep untrained magical beings from being harmed by their contents. These here, however,” he points to one particular set of shelves, “are all standard books, fiction and non-fiction alike.”

“Neat. Thank you. I was never a big reader afore those…things.” Dudley shivers. “Reckon I’ll never be much of one, but I’m trying to be…y’know. Better than I was.” He hangs his head. “I was awful to my cousin. I tried to apologize, but he can’t remember it. Says that means it doesn’t matter, but it does.”

Severus regards the young man. He never met Dudley Dursley before the young man’s encounter with Dementors, but what he sees now…has potential. “Have you graduated from school yet?”

“No.” Dudley’s cheeks flush a dull red. “I hadn’t told Mum before those Death Eater blokes came. I was flunkin’ out. My own doing, too.”

“You weren’t happy there.”

Dudley winces. “It was my Dad’s school. I was supposed to graduate from Smeltings, just like him.”

“Smeltings is even more of a pit than this entire village,” Severus returns bluntly.

“Fine; I wasn’t bloody happy!” Dudley finally cracks, glaring at Severus. He looks too miserable for the anger to really blaze forth. “The only thing I was good at was hittin’ people!”

“From what I remember, Smeltings doesn’t really specialize in anything else. You seem capable of much more than that.” When Dudley gapes at him, Severus tilts his head in the direction of the kitchen. “Come along; let’s make certain that your mother hasn’t discovered a new reason to lose her mind whilst sitting in my house.”

“I don’t know how to do anything,” Petunia is sobbing over her second cup of tea. Severus isn’t sure if this counts as a successful preservation of sanity. “I can cook and I can clean and grow stupid flowers, but I don’t know how to do anything!”

“Nursing,” Severus reminds her. “I was informed that your skills are not entirely rusty, and you used them well during your time in London.”

Petunia blows her nose on a handkerchief she retrieves from her purse. “I can’t go back to school. I’ve got to raise my boy—”

Severus glances up at the boy in question, who is leaning against the countertop with a cup of tea, trying to be unobtrusive. He’s too large to manage it. “The boy in question is eighteen years old, Petunia. He’s an adult, one capable of looking after himself.”

“I don’t know how to do anything, either.” Dudley gives his tea an unhappy look. “The house—my grandparents’ house. It needs fixing up something fierce. But I—Dad would have just called and paid someone to do it. I never learned to…I wouldn’t know what to do with a hammer if someone handed me one.”

“That can be remedied, but maybe later.” Bloody hell, even Severus knows how to use a damned hammer. He is not revising his opinion of Vernon Dursley as a waste of humanity. Even Severus’s drunken excuse of a father made sure he could pound a nail into a board without it turning crooked. “How bad is the house, Petunia?”
“Bad.” Petunia draws in a deep, sniffling breath. “I could have it repaired, but then the money…well, it looks like a tidy sum, but I know how easy it is to spend.”

“Would you accept my offer of assistance in repairing it?” Severus finds himself asking. He has definitely lost his mind. “It would take perhaps a week, at most, if I am careful about it.”

“With magic.” Petunia lets out a bitter laugh.

“I wouldn’t change a thing about it. It would still be the same house afterwards.”

Petunia shakes her head, as if puzzled. “You still have electrical outlets.”

“They work, too. I never had the electricity disconnected from the house.” Severus needed the boiler to keep the pipes from freezing during the winter when he had no opportunities to make certain of it himself. “There is no reason why both cannot be acceptable.” He hesitates. “James and Lily’s home in Godric’s Hollow. It relied on both magic and Muggle technology.”

“I didn’t know that.” She wipes her eyes again. “You know…I got a bit used to living in a house full of magic. That odd townhouse with its houseguests and funny little elves. I thought so often that I didn’t belong there, but…but Jean and William Granger were there, too. Just as Muggle as I am. They were scared of those cloaked bastards who killed my Vernon, but they wanted to help who they could. It didn’t matter if they were normal or if they were freaks—magical. Witches. Wizards.”

Petunia sniffs again. “I loved Vernon. I did. But oh, God, my life was so empty. I was filling it with spying on the neighbors and trying to have the prettiest garden. That’s no kind of life,” she whispers. “I focused on my Dudders because he was the only other thing I’d made. I turned up my nose at magic when I couldn’t have it.”

“All Lily ever wanted to do was share it with you,” Severus says quietly.

“I know. I know that. I was such a horrid person to her. I was a horrid person to her baby boy, blaming him for the reason my sister was dead. If she hadn’t married James—” Petunia breaks off, biting her lip. “I didn’t approve. But no; James Potter is not the reason my sister is dead. That was him.”

“It was, yes.” Maybe it was a bit his fault, too, but Severus had done what he could to rectify the mistake, all he knew how to do, before it was too late to stop it. Voldemort’s death, Lily’s forgiveness, James’s insane declaration—those things will have to be enough to carry him forward.

“I’m glad Harry doesn’t remember it, but he should. He should hate me. Instead, to him, I’m just a person who needed help…so he did it. Like Lily would have.” Petunia blows her nose with the handkerchief again and balls it up in her hand. “I treated you like you were—I wasn’t kind. Why are you being kind now?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. I’m still half-convinced that I’m having a vivid and unpleasant dream,” Severus replies dryly. “Maybe it is because I had to be a certain kind of person for so long that I no longer know who I really am.” He ponders the idea, reading Petunia’s emotions through her eyes and her expression without using magic. “There are certain charms that can be added to a household that work on their own. No magical interference is required once they’re built into the home.”

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Petunia says bitterly.

“Yes. You do.” Severus pins her with an intent stare. “Everyone does. The point is to make the right choices for the right reasons.”
“And you, Severus Snape?” Petunia lifts her head, still trying to hold onto her pride. “Did you make the right decisions?”

“I must not have, because now I’m the headmaster of a bloody school.”

Petunia stares at him before letting out a restrained snort of sudden laughter. “All right. Let’s try it. I can always tell you to get the hell out of my house.”

“See? Choices,” he replies. Good God, what has he gotten himself into?

The next morning, Severus meets Petunia at the head of the lane that leads to the Evans’ old home. “Who is this?” Petunia asks, sounding scandalized.

“This is Jade Viridian,” Severus says, introducing her. “Jade, this is Petunia Dursley.”

“Hallo!” Jade says cheerfully, holding out her purple-gloved hand. Petunia shakes it like an automaton. “Sev here was supposed t’hang w’me in London today, but then he tells me he’s busy helpin’ someone he doesn’t like. Now, he says sommat like that, then I’ve got to come see who he’s helpin’ while not likin’ ‘em very much. Oh, an’ I’ll help, too. If you’re not mindin’ m’hat, that is.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Jade is a Half-blood who chose to remain Muggle-educated instead of attending Hogwarts. She holds a master’s degree in aeronautical engineering.”

“You…you turned down magic?” Petunia asks in disbelief.

“Yeah. Asked m’Mum if witches did anythin’ wi’ space science, an’ she says no. That were it f’me.”

“I—I suppose your being here is fine.” Petunia musters a glare for Severus. “You could have warned me!”

“I don’t have a bloody telephone, Petunia.” He’s pondering remedying the lack, if only so Jade will leave him alone about the matter, but he doesn’t like the idea of paying a bill for an item that will most often sit unused.

He can’t experiment with Muffliato if he doesn’t have a telephone. Dammit.

The two-storey home at the end of the lane, shaded by old overhanging English willow trees, is in such deplorable condition that it actually hurts to see it. The wooden clapboard siding is falling off, weathered and gray, the paint all but gone. Most of the windows are broken, the holes covered with what looks like black plastic and ducting tape. The roof is sunken in places from where water has eroded away the shingles and eaten its way through the wood.

“Oi, that’s a right mess, that is,” Jade says. “Thassa shame.”

“I thought I’d never want it. Never need it.” Petunia’s lips are pressed together in a thin, unhappy line. “I was so proud of myself for getting away from here…but it wasn’t here. It was them. I left them, and all I got in return for it were funerals.”

“Petunia.” Severus waits until she looks at him. “I need to walk around the house, and then I need to walk through it, every room, top to bottom. Not to pry, but to know exactly what needs to be repaired. If I start with the wrong thing, I could break something else, and that just makes things more difficult than they need be.”

Petunia’s jaw juts forward in a way that had always made her look a bit like a horse. “Why are you helping me?”
Severus shrugs. “I have no damned idea. Can we do this already or not?”

Petunia gives in and nods. “Yes. I—please.”

Severus nods and turns to Jade. “What’s the charm?”

Jade winces and gets her wand out of her black satchel. “Er—*restore, reparare, renovare*?”

“And you will be using it only on?”

“The clapboards,” Jade answers, saluting him with her wand. “Not t’touch anythin’ else or we might be havin’ broken windows again.”

“I thought—you were raised as a Muggle. University and a degree,” Petunia says cautiously.

“Yeah, but that one’s a pushy bloke ’bout usin’ all y’skills,” Jade quotes.

“Try it with a single window. Better to repair one twice than all of them.”

Jade points her wand at the kitchen window. “*Restore, reparare, renovare!*”

The plastic and ducting tape vanishes from the window as the glass rebuilds itself. When the spell completes its work, the glass is like new, the wooden framing solid and strong, the white paint restored. Petunia has her hands over her mouth in amazed disbelief.

Severus nods at Jade. “Good work,” he tells her. “Keep working on the siding until you start to feel tired, and then stop. You aren’t accustomed to using magic. If you don’t stop when your body tells you to, you and your hat will be lying in the dirt.”

Jade’s mouth twists up into a sour grimace. “Good t’know.”

Dudley escorts him through the house, not in an act of paranoia, but in order to reveal the full extent of the damage. There is exposed sky in the roof over the attic, the dung of invading wildlife, and a horrific mold problem. The second floor has mold growing on the ceiling and running down the walls, accompanied by dark water stains surrounding places where the ceiling has collapsed inward. Most of the pipes have burst; someone either did not turn the water off when Lily’s parents died, or didn’t finish draining them properly.

The foundation feels wrong beneath his feet, which means the cellar walls need shoring up. The subflooring has warped and bent, so no floor in any part of the house is level. The carpeting is horrific. It’s repairable, but Severus had no use for that shade of olive green in the 1970s, and he thinks the Evans would not mind if he were to change it to something less mindful of awful housing fashion trends.

The kitchen sink and the bathroom downstairs are the only places where water will still flow, but cracked pipes in the basement spew water each time. The original drain that would have dealt with any water seeping into the basement is clogged; there is a puddle downstairs that he has to slosh through to investigate the walls, the other pipes, and electrical conduit lines. Those are intact, as is the fuse box. He’s almost certain there are better fuses available than the glass originals still in place; half of those show the cloudy black of being burnt out. The only other problem is the wiring upstairs, chewed through by rodents over the years.

The range in the kitchen is gas, still serviceable and has already been cleaned by Petunia, just like the rest of the kitchen. It doesn’t hide the scent of mold, but it’s safe to eat in the room without worrying about consuming rodent droppings. The refrigerator is running with an unhappy hum and doesn’t
seem to understand how to be cold any longer; the freezer is hopeless.

“That’s going to have to be replaced outright,” he murmurs.

“What, the fridge? It can’t be magicked back to working?” Dudley asks, curious.

“The difficulty is the Freon. The tank is leaking and nearly empty. I can’t quite conjure a set of gases out of thin air to stuff into a sealed tank.” Maybe he could, but it just seems far too complicated when he can just buy a damned refrigerator and make someone deliver it.

Severus taps on the closest walls and looks at Dudley. “These walls,” he says, “are all plaster. Hence the cracks.”

“Right. They are, uh…not doin’ so well.”

“No. But this is one of the reasons why I needed to see it first. If I repaired the walls before I repair the floor, the plaster will crack again. If the problems with the floor are repaired first, I can then repair the walls and only have to do it once.”

Dudley nods. “How d’you know so much about this sort of thing?”

“I was raised in a Muggle house that liked to pretend it was going to dramatically fall apart at any moment.”

Severus emerges hours later, feeling wrung out. “That’s the structural stability done,” he tells Petunia, who is still staring at all of the repaired and restored shining white clapboard siding that recovers most of the house. “Jade!”

“What?” Jade lifts up the brim of her hat. She’s sitting on an old tree stump with her wand on the ground beside her. “No grumpin’ at me, you! I stopped when th’ world started t’spin.”

“I know. Let’s go home. Petunia, we’ll be back tomorrow.”

Petunia offers him a faint nod. “All…all right, then.”

“Oh, and figure out what colors you want this house to be. The 1970s need to finish dying.”

She lets out another restrained burst of shocked laughter, her hand clamped over her mouth.

Severus chooses to walk home rather than Apparate. It isn’t far, the road sees very little traffic…and there are no useful places to dart off to keep the Apparition hidden from Muggle view. He nods at the few people they pass, out for evening strolls and possibly gossip. Jade exchanges more exuberant greetings.

“Hey, I was realizing,” Jade says. “You grew up here, right?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound like y’did,” Jade says. “You sound like you’re straight outta bleedin’ Oxford. Granted, m’Mum thinks I took on way too much bloody Cockney than’s proper, but tha’s my fault how? I didn’ pick our flat; she did! But least I sound like’m local. What’s your excuse, Sev?”

“My mother was very strict when it came to imparting perfect enunciation,” Severus explains. “She was from a family that valued following the evolution of what they considered a ‘proper’ British accent. Thus, you are stuck with a pompous git.”
Jade snickers. “Not s’much, really. Betcher pull it off nicely, though.”

“I have been accused of doing so, yes.”

They halt in front of the grown-over driveway next to the house. The street sign for Spinner’s End is on the verge of falling off again. He pulls out his wand, checks for witnesses, and then repairs it. Bloody lazy village council and their mockery of a budget.

“This one’s yours?” Jade lifts her hat to take in the full view of the house. “Looks a bit done in.”

“It’s deliberate. It’s close to the road, and a shabby appearance discourages thieves.” Severus leads the way around back. “The front door is a trap. Please do not attempt to use it. The rear door is spelled to a key; I will give you a copy. If you try to enter without the key, there would not be enough left of you to scrape into the inside of your hat afterwards.”

“That seems excessive.”

“Hence the continued shabby appearance to discourage thievery. I don’t want to have to clean up after them.” Severus brings them inside; Jade immediately removes her hat and tosses it onto the coat rack by the door. Severus smiles and copies the gesture with his coat. It’s going to need one hell of a cleaning, as will the rest of his clothes, more than a simple refreshing charm. Winky will be thrilled.

“S’lot nicer inside than th’outside,” Jade observes. “Oooh, books.”

“As I told Dudley—don’t touch any except for the ones on this shelf. The others tend to bite. Literally.”

“That’s bloody awesome! Goth books!” Jade squeals.

“Winky,” Severus calls, and the house-elf pops into existence.

“Guests!” the house-elf squeals right back at Jade, who is staring in open-mouthed delight. “Guests, guests, guests, and not terrified Muggle guests! I be getting’ the dinner!” Winky disappears again.

Jade closes her gaping mouth. “Th’fuck was that, Sev?”

“She is a house-elf. They like to bond to family lines in forms of service—it’s cultural, not slavery. She will literally do anything you ask, so please be responsible and do not mistreat her.”

Jade’s attention has already been distracted by Pyrrhus, who is on his perch in the entrance to the kitchen, grooming his tail feathers. “That…tha’s a big fuckin’ bird, Sev.”

Pyrrhus lifts his head, cocks his head at Jade, and then trills. “Yes, a guest. This is Jade Viridian, and she is—yes, she’s aware that her name is Green-Green!” Severus scowls at the phoenix. “Your name used to be Norman! Have some bloody manners. Jade, this is Pyrrhus. He is a phoenix.”

“Now, see, you should’a started wi’ phoenix before unicorns. Er—can I touch it?”

“She isn’t going to steal your feathers, dolt.” Severus nods at Jade. “You can. He is merely being anti-social because he’s going to burst into flame and have to start over again at some point within the next month.”

“An’ lose all those gorgeous feathers? Shame!”

Flattery wins the bird over, every time. Pyrrhus leaves his perch, lands on Jade’s shoulder, and starts investigating her hair with his beak.
“He’s heavier than I expected,” Jade says, reaching up to scratch the phoenix’s neck. Pyrrhus sighs into the touch and half-closes his eyes in bird-bliss.

“He’s the size of a buzzard. Of course he’s heavy.”

“Got it.” Jade glances around the house while keeping her hand embedded in phoenix feathers. “S’nice place. Truth!” she says, when Severus turns to stare at her in surprise. “I grew up in flat the size of this parlor and that kitchen combined, mate. This is th’ biggest house I’ve ever been in, outside o’ that other bit o’ falling down mess.”

“This house was built and used as an entirely Muggle dwelling until I inherited it, so there is still working electricity. It was a decrepit heap until Winky decided it was a personal affront and made it her mission in life to make the house habitable. However, there are other improvements.” Severus starts a fire in the fireplace before tossing in a handful of Floo Powder. “12 Grimmauld Place!”

Kreacher sticks his head out of the flames, giving Severus a narrow-eyed look. “What does the Headmaster Bat want?”

“Kreacher, please ask Sirius and Remus to suspend their evening activities long enough to come here. I need to speak to them. I either need their help, or I need them to confirm that I have not actually lost my damned mind,” he says. Jade stuffs both hands over her mouth to muffle her giggling.

Jade points at the fire while the flames continue to burn green after Kreacher disappears. Pyrrhus takes the opportunity to return to his perch. “What’s all’a that, then?”

“The dust applied is called Floo Powder. The ability to contact other homes is called the Floo Network, but it only works if those houses have also agreed to be hooked up to the Network. It’s the wizard equivalent of a bloody telephone, Jade, but better.”

“Howzzit better?” Jade asks, just as the flames rise and turn bright green as Remus Lupin and Sirius Black arrive.

“You’re using us as a sanity check. Us,” Sirius starts to say, but then he’s pounced by Jade.

“Eeee, tis m’favorite pair o’ cute queer blokes!” Jade exclaims, while Sirius looks entertainingly boggled. “Floo Network teleporting! Oi, is that any better than th’ other method? Less sick afterwards?”

“As long as you don’t hit yourself on the bricks during the process…no, no, it’s the same sort of disastrously ill feeling afterwards until you get used to it,” Lupin says, smiling. “Hello, Jade. I didn’t realize you’d made Severus’s acquaintance.”

“Met’m on Halloween back in ’96,” Jade says, grinning as she hugs the werewolf. “Then th’pushy git makes me get a wand. Bribed him for a quantum bag, so we’re even.”

“Slytherin,” Sirius and Remus say in the same breath.

“She would have been absolutely terrifying, yes,” Severus agrees, and then explains the developing situation with Petunia and Dudley Dursley…his new blasted neighbors.

“You’re helping Petunia Dursley,” Remus repeats.

Severus rolls his eyes. “For the third time: YES.”
“Willingly?” Remus asks, still giving him a look of pure disbelief.

“Yes!” Severus slumps down onto the parlor chair. “Everything is terrible.”

“She didn’ seem tha’ bad,” Jade notes. “Bit stuffy, but way less shrieky than what you lot were complain’ ’bout last year.”

“She got better. Eventually,” Sirius allows, but he looks like he’s chewing on something sour as he says it.

“True. She was not all that bad after she stopped screeching over every little thing,” Remus muses. “Shouting about magic, shouting about men kissing, shouting about girls kissing, shouting about the house-elves, shouting about no one knowing how to put a proper bandage on anyone…Merlin, that woman can complain.”

“I still can’t believe you’re talking to Petunia, let alone helping her. Didn’t you want her dead?” Sirius asks.

Jade snorts. “If he’s wantin’ her dead, he’s bad at his job.”

“I am very good at my job, thank you,” Severus returns, and then lets his head thump back against the chair. “Damned Dementors beat me to it. They take all the fun out of any ideas about revenge, the bastards.”

Remus and Sirius glance at each other. “How bad is the house, Severus?”

“So bad that another month would have seen it collapsing.”

“What the hell?” Sirius looks appalled.


“Oh. Well, fuck.” Sirius leans against the wall, crossing his arms. “Want some help?”

“I’d bloody pay you for that.”

“Oi, you didn’t volunteer t’ pay me!” Jade complains.

“That’s because this is still trading. You’re practicing,” Severus counters with a smile, which makes Jade glare at him. “Learn to bargain better if you don’t like it.”

“I’m gonna figure out which o’ these books bites and drop it o’er your head,” she shoots back.

“And there’s no need to pay us, anyway,” Sirius replies. “Still can’t eat gold; Harry’s off traveling; Narcissa is at Malfoy Manor. It’s just us at the house. Honestly, things have been dull since Voldemort went up like a Roman Candle. At least this is something useful to do, Severus.”

“And the sooner it’s done, the sooner Severus and Petunia can go back to pretending to ignore each other’s existence,” Remus says. “And, well…Dudley Dursley had the life scared out of him. He went from being one of the most horrible little sacks of awfulness I’ve ever encountered to the most helpful lad in the house during the occupation. I’m willing to get this settled for them. Even if Petunia turns out to be truly hopeless, that boy of hers deserves a chance.”

“We’ve all lost our bloody minds,” Severus mutters.

“Yeah. Seems to be the part of growing up that nobody was smart enough to warn us about,” Sirius
agrees.

Winky pops in, her eyes turning into gigantic green bulbs as she spies Sirius and Remus. “More guests!” she whispers. “You! You’s needin’ more chairs, Master Severus!” The elf draws herself up. “You’s needin’ a proper wizard’s dining room.”

“Well, we don’t have one,” Severus says. “You will have to make do with extra chairs.”

Winky scowls. “And a larger table, Master Severus!” she declares before disappearing again.

“We don’t have to stay for dinner—” Remus tries to say until Severus glares at him.

“That house-elf will cry. I will make her cry in front of you. Suffer with the rest of us, werewolf.”

“Werewolf? Seriously?” Jade clasps her hands together over her breast. “That’s bloody excellent!”

Remus gives her a blank look. “Werewolf? Excellent? Young lady, you have read far too many Muggle books on the subject of werewolves.”

Jade shrugs. “Yeah, probably. C’mon, food! He had me repairin’ bloody wood all day!”

Severus can’t remember ever eating in his own kitchen and enjoying the prospect. It’s almost as odd as enjoying anything about Grimmauld Place, the house or its occupants. Afterwards, he’s about to offer to take Jade back to her flat when he realizes she has passed out on his living room sofa, her face buried into an ancient throw pillow. Severus and Remus leave through the Floo, though Sirius gives Severus a lifted eyebrow and gestures at Jade first.

“No,” Severus replies in annoyance. “We’re not dating. She’s more like the insane baby sister I always needed but never wanted.”

Sirius tilts his head and nods. “Yeah, I can see that working. You even look similar enough to pull it off. Good night, Severus.”

Severus looks at his clothes the next morning and finally gives in. He is not destroying tailored silk in order to fix a blasted house full of mold. He may never get rid of the odor from what was worn yesterday, and house-elves are very good at their jobs. Instead, he grabs a pair of the black denims that Jade badgered him into purchasing, adds a long-sleeve black shirt of simple cotton, and goes downstairs.

“Oi, I want different clothes, too. I slept in these!” Jade complains at once when she sees him.

Severus rolls his eyes, shakes his head, and Transfigures her outfit into something more appropriate for dealing with mold, adding a refreshing charm into the mix.

Jade frowns, mouth pursed, as she looks at herself. “All right, I deserved that, I did. Never do that t’me again while I’m still wearin’ the bloody clothes!”

“Then be more specific.” Severus drops a key into her palm. “Don’t lose it. More specifically; please never label it, or tell anyone what it unlocks.”

“You’re actually givin’ me a key.” Jade scrutinizes it. “Feels tingly. Issit like a ‘Doctor Who’ thing, this?”

Severus gives her a bewildered look. “That show is still broadcasting?” Jade laughs while she shakes her head.
Remus just seems baffled when he and Sirius step out of the fireplace. “You own something made of denim?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Yes. The inside of that house is an actual disaster.”

“Oh, that’ll be fun, then,” Sirius is glaring at the lower half of Severus’s trousers. “What happened to bell bottoms?”

“Someone wisely killed them and made certain that they stayed dead.”

Petunia stares at them all in dismay when they arrive. “Not just you, oh, no, not only my sister’s best friend.” She glares at Sirius and Remus. “Now I have to deal with her husband’s best friends, as well?”

“The house gets fixed faster,” Sirius tells her immediately. “I have experience. My place was left abandoned from 1981 through 1993, but I bet you didn’t have to deal with doxies, pixies, boggarts, and rabid house-elves.”


“God, that’s worse,” Remus mutters. “I’ll spend the entire bloody day sneezing. Come on, then. Let’s get this done.”

“I get t’make things unbroken!” Jade sings out, holding onto her top hat as she runs into the house. Dudley gives her a baffled look before following her inside.

Petunia rounds on him. “Severus!”

“One more day, or one week,” he says. Petunia blinks a few times. “Oh, and a refrigerator is being delivered today to replace that dying contraption in the kitchen. Consider it a bribe to pretend to not know me if we stumble across each other in the market again.”

Petunia glares at him. “You’re bribing me with appliances? They’d best be high-end!”

No, Severus considers as he walks into the house with Petunia’s list of wall and carpeting color choices, Jade would not be the most terrifying of Slytherins. That honor belongs to Petunia Dursley, and the world is a better place for that horrific event never occurring.

The last thing he does when the repairs are complete is to escort Dudley Dursley down to Cokeworth’s privately owned, aging hardware supply store. As he suspected, the man behind the counter is the same one he met as a child.

“Well! Severus Snape, as I live and breathe,” Jeffries says, smiling to reveal that most of his teeth have decided to vacate the premises. “That ol’ house of your’n needin’ anything?”

“Not today, thank God. I’m here for another reason.” Severus nudges Dudley into taking a step forward. “This young man is Dudley Dursley. He is Lily Evan’s nephew.”

“Lily’s nephew? God rest her, an’ lemme look at you.” Jeffries leans closer, peering at Dudley through his thick-lensed glasses. “There’s a bit of resemblance, even without that pretty ginger hair o’ hers. What can I do for this young man, Severus?”

“This young man, through no fault of his own, has lost his opportunity to finish schooling beyond his sixth year,” Severus replies. “He knows absolutely no trades, but is a hard worker who is willing to learn. Do you know of anyone taking on apprentices at the moment?”
“Well, lesse.” Jeffries pulls out a notepad and flips through a few pages. “Actually, old Baker just lost his tyke to uni. He could use another strong boy to help with his construction business. You know how to swing a hammer, son?”

“Swing it? Sure,” Dudley replies. “Hittin’ anything in particular with it is another matter entirely, sir.”

Jeffries utters a hoarse, delighted laugh. “That attitude’ll getcha far, young man! I’ll let Baker know he’s got a prospect. Do you have a phone number for me, boy?”

Dudley rattles it off; Severus finds himself memorizing it out of habit. No information is useless, after all. “Excellent! If you don’t hear from that old buzzard in a few days, you come back in and see me. I’ll hand him his own arse, never fear.”

Petunia’s son smiles. It’s the only real happiness Dudley has expressed aside from pleasure in having the house’s repairs completed. “That’d be brilliant. Thank you.”

* * * *

Severus takes Jade as his plus-one to Nymphadora and Oliver’s reception on the second weekend of August. She really doesn’t have to do a damned thing to her wardrobe to fit in like she was born and raised to the wizarding world. Formal “Goth” is composed of a return of the lace coat, a multi-layered skirt of tulle and more black lace, a violet corset atop a sleeveless black muslin shirt…and of course, the hat. “This all right, then?”

“You might start fashion trends,” Severus answers, holding out his arm. “Apparating is easier.”

“Well, one of us has t’make wi’ th’wardrobe, because we all know you can’t be bothered t’be changin’ out th’ silk,” she counters, grinning. “An’ wha’s wi’ the return o’ th’ long face?” She peers closer. “You don’ look near as ill, though.”

“A continued temporary deception,” Severus says, Apparating them between statements. The altered phoenix charm feather is in his pocket, a comforting reminder of upcoming plans. “Sirius and Remus are not doing the same, but I have my reasons for choosing to do so.”

“Plottin’,” Jade correctly deduces as the tent curtain is drawn back to allow them inside. “Whoa. Tha’s fancy, s’what,” she whispers. The reception has not skimped on any tradition at all, but since it was arranged by Andromeda Tonks, it is also exceptionally tasteful instead of a clashing disaster. “Lots o’ things flyin’ about. Oh, an’ they’re all starin’ atcha.”

“People do that. They either want to gossip, or they wish to murder me.”

Jade laughs. “Can’t imagine why, mate.”

“They are also staring at you, possibly trying to deduce how I cursed you into accompanying me,” Severus adds.

“If I embarrass you by fallin’ into that bubblin’ thing o’er there, will tha’ convince ’em I’m a willin’ victim?”

“It will convince them you are as clumsy as the bride,” Severus says, watching as Nymphadora trips
and lands in the bubbling tub Jade just pointed out.

“Oi, th’ poor dear,” Jade says, watching as Oliver pulls his wife out of the bath. They’re both laughing their fool heads off. “Her…her hair just turned blue. I want her hair.”

“Stealing people’s hair is generally frowned upon.”

“How’s she doin’ that, Sev?”

“Metamorphmagus,” Severus tells Jade. “She was born capable of changing her appearance at will. If you wish to change your hair every few minutes to suit your mood, you will have to learn and then rely on charms. Now, before we get separated by conversation, your mad curiosity, and politics, a few ground rules.”


“If anyone asks, you are a university-graduated Half-blood who schooled outside of Hogwarts. Some of the guests might be a bit unsettled by having an untrained adult witch in their midst, and by unsettled I mean panicked. Telling them you live in Muggle London is fine; telling them your current occupation in specific detail is not. You are creative; I’m sure you’ll find a way to explain how you’re attempting to gain your doctorate in magical terms.”

“The wizarding world seems t’ run on a lot o’ complete shite, Sev.”

“It really, really does,” Severus says. “Nymphadora, I see you are as graceful as ever.”

“Wotcher, Professor!” Tonks grins at him, her hair shifting to resemble a dawn-lit sky. “I adore the hat, love! I’m Nymphadora Tonks Black. Please, please call me Tonks; my mother is the only person allowed to call me Nymphadora. Who are you, and where did this mad one kidnap you from?”

Jade laughs. “Muggle London. Love your hair, congrats on th’ nuptials, and where’s th’ food?”

“Priorities definitely in order, this one,” Oliver says, holding out his hand for Jade to shake. Her fingerless gloves match her corset. “Oliver Black. Nice to meet you!”

“I’m Jade Viridian. He bribed me.”

“He would,” Oliver agrees cheerfully. “Come on, I’ll show you around! The Deputy Headmistress of our beloved school is approaching, and she is about to kidnap your date.”

“We’re not dating!” Severus retorts, just before he is waylaid by Minerva.

“The first faculty meeting for the term is next week,” Minerva says, yanking him by the arm over to a quiet corner of the tent. “Please tell me that you’ve found a replacement for Binns, because by Merlin, he actually left!”

“I have found multiple replacements for Binns,” Severus counters, and smiles at her look of disbelief. “And a few ideas to accompany them.”

“Oh, good. More stomping upon tradition. Out with it, then! I need to pretend on Monday that I knew about this all summer long. Filius is starting to panic.”

“Why do we teach nothing but the British history of magic?”

Minerva blinks at him a few times before a wide, pleased smile graces her face. “Why, indeed?”
“We’ll need to expand the faculty table by two seats.” Binns never showed up to sit in his, so it was discarded decades ago.

“A first year devoted to…”

“World-wide magical history. After first year, quarter-terms devoted to the history of magic in specific global regions by borrowing lecturers from those locations. I already have a list of those who would love to take the opportunity to visit post-war Britain and properly educate our undereducated dunderheads.”

Minerva grasps onto his arm and leans against him. “Severus Snape, Albus made a good decision.”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Ah, yes. About that…”

Minerva listens, her eyes growing steadily wider. “Well! That will take some getting used to.”

“Harry!”

Severus turns around to see Jade all but assaulting Harry in her version of hugging. It’s nice to know that she’s been politely restraining herself and not trying to actually cling like a leech.

Harry is laughing. “Jade! Now how’d you turn up here?”

“Gate-crashin,’” she replies cheekily. “An’ you! When’d you get back?”

“Fifteen minutes ago. Why, don’t I look it?” Harry stands back and spreads his arms. He’s wearing black robes over a gray button-down shirt and black trousers, though the collar isn’t banded or cuffed —just missing entirely.

“Y’look like I dressed you, so tha’ must mean it’s dapper,” Jade replies.

“Yep. Just missing one thing,” Harry says. He steals Jade’s hat and drops it onto his head. “Mine, now.”

“Oi! You gi’ tha’ back or I’ll turn y’into a Muppet!”

“What in Merlin’s name is a muppet?” Minerva asks.

“A puppet for educating children, with the intent that the children turn out to be far more intelligent than the puppets are,” Severus answers.

“Now, you can’t go and turn the savior of the wizarding world into a puppet,” William says, approaching with Fleur on his arm.

“It’s just not a done thing,” Charles adds, leaning up against his brother’s opposite side.

Harry scowls. “Jade, if you really can turn people into Muppets, please feel free to start with the gingers.”

Jade grins in a way that makes her eyes light up as she reveals all of her teeth. “I ge’ t’practice more!”

“Strategic retreat,” Charles says, and vanishes into the crowd with William.

Fleur just looks confused. “What is this muppet?”
“Depending on the show you watch, a child’s education or an adult’s open-mouthed horror that yes, a puppet made that sort of joke.” Harry points at Jade. “And it’s entirely her fault that I’m aware of this.”

“Go’ter keep you lot educated somehow,” Jade says.

“You are from London! I love the city!” Fleur says, and kidnaps Jade.

Jade glances over her shoulder at Severus. I warned you, he mouths. Then he turns his attention to Harry. “And where the hell have you been?”

“Uh—distracted,” Harry replies.

“That is not a location.”

“No, but it’s definitely a state of existence. Hello, Professor,” Harry greets Minerva.

“You graduated in the spring of 1997, Harry. My name is Minerva,” she says tartly. “Or shall I continue to refer to you as Mister Potter?”

“Not like it isn’t accurate,” Harry says. “But it does mean you won’t be scandalized if I call him Severus.”

Minerva leans back a little. “A little, actually!”

Severus shakes his head and hugs the atrocious brat. “A single letter in two months? You’ve already forgotten what Owl Post is for?”

“I did say I was distracted,” Harry replies, squeezing hard before releasing him. “Hawai’ians are weird. I like them.”

“Every culture has some aspect of oddity.” Severus realizes that Minerva is staring at him. “What?” he snaps.

“You willingly touched another human being.” Minerva narrows her eyes. “I called Seamus Finnigan a liar when he said you hugged someone of your own free will.”

“Then you owe the man an apology.”

Harry grins. “Just imagine what you can get away with based on everyone else’s preconceived notions as to what you’re actually like. How did your plan of doing nothing over the summer turn out?” he continues, before Minerva can open her mouth and ask prying, suspicious questions.

“I lasted an entire week before I couldn’t take it anymore,” Severus admits. “I have since spent too much time in London for it to be healthy, made plans, bribed officials, repaired a house…”

“Accio m’blasted hat!”

Harry ducks in surprise as the hat he stole from Jade sails through the air to return to its original owner. Jade sticks her tongue out at Harry and pulls her top hat back down onto her own head.

“And I also gave someone a deadly weapon,” Severus finishes before glaring at Jade. “Arcesso!”

“The Wolf Man here said accio!” Jade counters, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at Remus.

“That’s because he’s an idiot!”
“It’s a simple charm!” Remus shouts back, grinning.

“Without bloody context, accio means for example!”

Remus pauses with his finger up in the air. “BOLLOCKS! Give me a moment, I will actually come up with a way to refute that.”

“No, you won’t.” Severus drops his wand into his hand. “Adduc proni Jade!”

“OI! BLOODY HAT THIEVES!” Jade points her wand at the ceiling. “Evoco multis HATS!”

“Oh, that’s done it,” Harry says, just before the entire wedding party is buried in copies of Jade’s top hat.

Jade’s muffled shout emerges from a pile of hats taller than she is. “A’right, so I might’ve o’erdone it a bit!”

It is, quite honestly, the most entertaining wedding reception Severus has ever attended.
“The Feast is starting soon. Don’t you think the Headmaster should be present, Severus?”

Severus finishes adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. “Albus, you know I always had a fondness for dramatic entrances.”

“It’s going to be a late dramatic entrance if you don’t get a move on,” Phineas says crossly, an opinion repeated by several other portraits. Painted dead busybodies.

Everyone has just seated themselves, including the new students, when he strides into the Great Hall. Twenty-one of the faculty table’s twenty-two chairs are occupied; Firenze chooses to stand off to one side or roam the Hall, depending on his mood.

Severus is pleased to note that no adult wears colors of mourning, even the Pure-bloods. He’s glad they managed to put tradition aside—a reminder of death is not the way he prefers to begin the new school year. There was quite enough of that the previous term. Even he made a concession; his robes are an exceptionally deep violet that is mindful of a sky without stars, though his preferred jacket and trousers are still black. He is no longer impoverished, but he is still not made of money. Properly tailored silk is expensive.

The murmuring begins almost at once. Without breaking his customary brisk pace, he lifts his wand up and over his shoulder, sending a blast of glittering stars and magic swirls into the air.

Severus hops up onto the faculty table’s riser and turns around. “Honestly, what were you all expecting?” he asks, allowing his lips to curl up in one of the smiles a vast majority of the student body is familiar with. “Your previous Headmaster wore his gaudy stars and comets instead of merely making them. I, however, am a traditionalist, and see no need to dress like a walking astronomy demonstration.

“Now: welcome to Hogwarts, where the staircases have minds of their own, the portraits gossip and lie, and yes, the suits of armor really are making fun of you behind your back. The only true solution is to make fun of them in return, but were I you, I’d choose to reserve that tactic for the ones who are not carrying weapons. Some of them are old and tetchy. In short, for the lot of you who are first-years and Muggle-born, this castle is far preferable to Disneyland Park outside of Paris.”

The new first-years among the Muggle-born set have just gone from looking baffled and fearful to nearly vibrating with excitement. Good; there will be plenty of time for the new students to be terrified later.

“You’ve been there, Headmaster?” one of the older Slytherin Muggle-born students asks. Severus is glad to see that John Wyn-Jones returned after last year’s necessary scholastic exchange.

Severus nods in irritated regret. “I’ve had nightmares that resemble that place. Someone still owes me such a favor for subjecting me to that horror show.”

“Not the sort of welcome speech I was expectin’ from the Bat,” a seventh-year at the Hufflepuff table whispers.

“You really do need to learn that whispers are not supposed to echo throughout the Great Hall, Catterick,” Severus replies dryly. The young man turns bright red. “Someone spent the summer trying to turn me into a less miserable excuse of a human being, but unfortunately for you all, she failed miserably.”
“Oi, I did not!” Jade counters from the faculty table.

“And that would be her. Students, that is Professor Jade Viridian, who will be hosting one of your two-week rotations in Muggle Studies.” Jade stands up and gives everyone a flirty wave, which attracts the attention of a vast portion of the student body. Bloody corsets. “She’s a Half-blood witch who has lived her entire life in London, has earned an advanced scientific degree in Muggle aeronautical engineering at a respectably young age, and is thus wise to all your tricks. Don’t try them.”

“What’s aeronautical engineering?” Mafalda Prewett asks, scowling.

“It means I know how t’make things fly by usin’ explosive force,” Jade replies, offering the other girl a smug smile. “Wan’ t’see if tha’ includes you?”

Prewett goes pale. “No!” she blurts. “No thank you, Professor Viridian!”

“What’s with that hat?” Quirke from Ravenclaw asks.

“Oi, now—I won’t be mockin’ your green skin if y’can leave m’hat well ‘nuff alone!”

“Green—oh, no,” Miss Quirke gasps, glancing down at her dark green hands.

“Next thing of note: while not banned from the castle, do not eat anything from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes unless you know what it does in advance, or you know that their counter-candy is already available. Miss Quirke, you will be green through the next day unless you can find someone kind enough to feed you the other half. Do enjoy it; the merpeople in the lake find that skin tone to be of particular interest.

“Wheezing fireworks are banned from within the castle. I’m not stupid enough to think that any of you will have the sense not to purchase them in the first place, but they will be used outside—and you must warn the rest of us before you do so.”

“Er, uh…why?” Abercrombie asks hesitantly.

“Because there was a bleedin’ battle here last spring, you idiot,” Ginevra Weasley informs him scathingly. “Some of us don’t take well to unexpected explosions. Try it and see how long your bollocks remain attached to your body!”

“Miss Weasley, please do not neuter students in ways that are irreparable.” Ginevra smiles, recognizing that he didn’t tell her that she was not allowed to make good on her threat. Allowing Minerva to declare Miss Weasley as Gryffindor’s Head Girl was an excellent choice.

“How come you’re still Headmaster?” Mallory yells out.

“Because Albus Dumbledore was many words I am not supposed to say in front of children, and named me his successor. Yes, he was probably out of his mind.”

“But—but you hate us,” Miss Madley says in a lost-sounding voice.

“No, I hate stupidity,” Severus clarifies. “Please also allow me to remind you that the nature of being a spy involves convincing the enemy that you are trustworthy. Otherwise, you’re of no use whatsoever and end up dead in short order.”

“Hah! That’s a fine pun,” Dean Thomas comments.
“Mister Thomas, Head Boy of Gryffindor, you will keep your puns to yourself.” Severus looks around at the full Hall. It’s a favorable improvement over how empty things were last year.

“For those of you who’ve never seen me before, those who have, and those who’ve read ten years of horror about me in the Prophet—oh, don’t even start trying to pretend otherwise.” Severus rolls his eyes when a few students look ready to protest their innocence. “You are all going to have to get used to referring to me as Headmaster Prince.”

There is a beat of silence he rather enjoys. “You changed your name?” Baddock exclaims.

“That is a stupid question with an obvious answer, Mister Baddock.”

“WHY?” Zeller bursts out, her jaw hanging open.

Severus glances over his shoulder at Minerva, who is doing a miserable job of comporting herself with stone-faced dignity. “You’d think I’d just insulted them.” He turns back to a crowd of amusingly shocked students. “I did so because my father was an abusive alcoholic who was utterly useless in every sense of the word, and I was completely done with being associated with him. Any other stupid questions?”

“I heard the Prince family has a seat on the Wizengamot again,” Pritchard says.

“Convenient timing, isn’t it?” Severus bares his teeth in a smile that’s almost purely the old Bat. “On to other matters that are actually important. Your favorite pet werewolf has returned to teach you louts Defence Against the Dark Arts.” He glances upwards in apparent resignation at the cheerful cry of welcome that emerges from most throats. Remus, for his part, restrains himself to waving back.

“Moving on: Professor Slughorn has stayed on to continue teaching Potions to students first- through third-year, as well as instructing anyone third-year and up in the fine art of Alchemy. Professor Grubbly-Plank will handle Ghoul Studies, and unlike both of her predecessors, she is actually knowledgeable about the subject.

“Professor Augusta Longbottom has returned to Hogwarts after a fifty-year hiatus to teach Magical Theory, which is mandatory for first years, or anyone who has not yet taken the class. The vulture on her hat is not the part you should concern yourselves with. Madam Narcissa Black is your new Art instructor, and yes, she is very, very good. William Weasley has decided to take on Music for the year, and if you’ve chosen that elective, Merlin help you. Professor Marchbanks remains with us to teach Arithmancy, a posting that Professor Vector would have approved of.”

He gives them a moment of silence; most of these positions needed to be filled due to the deaths of their former holders. “We have three more new instructors. Professor Sirius Black is here to let us finally resume the teaching of the useful magic of Occlumency. His qualifications are certified; he also proves he is knowledgeable about the subject as he is not currently dead.”

“Dementors don’t understand Occlusion,” Sirius says from his place at the table. He’s smiling, but the look in his eyes is too fierce for it to be taken as carefree. “Quite useful, that.”

“Professor Julius Westenberg is your new teacher of History of Magic for first-years. Professor Zyanya Aileen is in from the United States to begin the first quarter of Magical History for second-years and up, focusing on the magic of her tribe before expanding her focus to discuss other aspects of tribal magic in North America.” He pauses. “Yes, truly, Professor Binns is really gone,” he assures the students, who either breathe a sigh of relief or literally cheer.

Severus hold up one hand, which does gain him silence at a respectable speed. “There are a few
other things to tell you, which is why you have to listen to my unpleasantness first instead of Professor McGonagall. The Sorting will be carried out differently this year. If you don’t like it, there is a portrait of Albus Dumbledore in my office. Ask politely, and you will have my full permission to go yell at him, as this is entirely his fault.

“First-year and second-year students now have their own separate dormitories to dwell in, and will be watched over by Madam Hooch and Professor Sinistra, respectively. Sorting into the four Houses of Hogwarts will not begin until a student’s third year. Headmaster Dumbledore believed that two years of schooling gives you time to learn of yourselves and your talents more thoroughly, which can lead to a…shift of perspective.”

Severus glances around, taking in student reactions. There is low whispering, but no one looks truly horrified. Excellent. “Second years—you are included in this new arrangement, and will be shuffled over to the new second-year dormitory. This is not mandatory, but anyone who is third-year and up: if you wish to have the Sorting Hat once more dropped onto your head to see if, perhaps, your skills will now be better honed in another House, you may line up and do so.”

“But our friends!” Branstone bleats.

Severus frowns. “Friends?” He glances over at the Ravenclaw table. “Miss Lovegood, who are we?”

Luna Lovegood stands up, her Head Girl patch firmly attached to her robes. Her dreamy smile is still her favorite expression, but it’s much easier to take Lovegood seriously when that smile is joined by battle experience which has turned her eyes to pleasant blue steel.

“Hogwarts,” Lovegood says, lifting her chin with pride. “All of us. We’re Hogwarts.”

“Thank you, Miss Lovegood.” Severus returns his attention to the rest of the Hall. “If your Sorting today leads to a change of House, and you lose contact with friends made in your original House, either you or they are doing something foolish to cause that rift. We are not a divided school. Albus Dumbledore made those gaudy blasted flags above your head for a reason.”

There is thoughtful regard on many young faces, while others stare up at the flags in curiosity or wonder. “Now: anyone who wishes to see if they need the traits of a differing House to truly learn the fullest extent of their talents will stand and form a line between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Professor McGonagall will call you forward after the Hat has its say.”

Minerva is biting her lip against amusement as she puts the Hat down on the stool she conjures next to Severus. The Sorting Hat lets out a huge yawn.

“Oh, what’s this? A switch away from division amiss?
No warning do you need heed this year, not when there is nothing to fear.
Step forward, Hogwarts united! To the Sorting you are invited!”

A much larger group than Severus expected stands up and forms a line, volunteering to potentially be re-Sorted. Once the process is complete twenty minutes later, a good two-thirds of that number are wearing new House colors, seated at their new House tables. Many of those students look relieved by the change.

Severus nods as Minerva Banishes the stool and takes the Hat back to her seat at the table, looking out at the reorganized Hall. A new first-year table now sits between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, while the new second-year table is placed between Gryffindor and Slytherin. “One more thing. For formal gatherings required by Hogwarts, such as the Start-of-Term Feast and other events that take
place in this Hall, you will sit at your assigned tables. For regular meals, I don’t care where you lot sit as long as you comport yourselves with as much dignity as you dunderheads know how to muster. Throw food and waste their efforts, and you’ll face the wrath of the kitchen elves, who are not afraid to use knives against those who’ve displeased them.

“Try not to break anything on your first day.”

The applause he gets in response to that closing statement is baffling. He treats the students to a disgruntled glare and walks around the length of the table to go sit down…only to be confronted by the sight of the stupidly large, overly ornate golden chair reserved for the school headmaster.

“Oh, absolutely not,” Severus growls. He slaps the damned chair with his wand, shrinking it down. It shifts in appearance until it’s only slightly taller than all the other faculty chairs, made of the same dark wood and sized to fit. The only other change he makes is to Transfigure the fabric solid black, emblazoned only by Hogwarts’ school crest. “Better,” he pronounces, and sits down.

“Well, won’t that set a tone,” Minerva says from his right side. She’s smiling, wide and proud.

“Thrones are stupid, and I refuse to sit in one now that I no longer have to.”

“It’s tradition, Headmaster,” she teases him.

“Sod tradition.” Severus taps the arm of the chair with his wand. The kitchen elves grew accustomed to that signal last year; food appears on all the tables at once. “They can sing the stupid school song at the end of the year, too.”

Narcissa is seated to his left, and leans in close as students begin to eat while attempting to talk at the same time. “You’re still using the charm.”

“For one last day, yes.”

She smiles. “Oh, you’re plotting. I love it when you plot.”

Severus gives her a bland look of mock-innocence. “Narcissa, when am I not plotting?”

* * * *

After the conclusion of breakfast the next morning, Severus goes back to his office and discovers that someone has been there during his absence. A new wooden table sits next to his desk, a match for the wood of the chair he Transfigured last year.

On the table sits a finely crafted French Press resting atop of a metal stand; a low flame is burning beneath it. The Press is full of fresh coffee that smells like nothing he can get in Britain unless Severus is desperate enough to raid a high-end coffee shop, one that is usually too pretentious to be bearable.

No one else is in the room—one of the portraits would have informed him. Severus walks over, taking note of a tall, covered beaker labeled Distilled Water. A sealed blue bag covered in a picture of coffee beans is leaning against the beaker. Next to that is an odd, cylindrical device with a dial and button. It takes him far too long to realize he’s holding a Muggle coffee bean grinder, magicked to work without electricity or batteries. Waiting with all of these items is a sealed scroll.
Severus picks it up and studies the wax seal. A triangle envelops a simple circle, and within that circle are the familiar Elder Futhark runes Peorð, Eh, Yr, and Lagu—the same runes also found on the Prince family crest. Peverell’s cloak surrounds a wheel—a potter’s wheel. It makes Severus wonder if that is how Ignotus’s family name eventually changed to its modern iteration.

His matrilineal line has a much less noble reason for their name: Peverell became Prince due to a blundering idiot in the sixteenth century. Antioch’s last Peverell descendent, a girl, married into the Mortdecai family, which was at the time a name in excellent standing in the wizarding world. That part of the family line eventually came down to yet another sole female heir, one who married an undereducated fool who fancied himself a scholar. He traced her lineage back to the original seal, ignored the line of the Elder Wand, and misinterpreted the braided circlet as a crown. With only a vague knowledge of ancient runes, the idiot decided Peorð, Eh, Yr, and Lagu somehow meant Prince.

Severus never did ask Antioch if the three brothers had occupations aside from asking Death for things that didn’t belong to them, but Antioch’s ghost is gone from the cemetery in Godric’s Hollow. It’s now too late to find out.

Severus breaks the seal to read the scroll. It is short and to the point, as Harry’s missives often are.

Severus,

I truly am sorry for dropping off the map for a bit. I really was distracted. By…well, everything, actually. I had a few realizations while traveling that I’m still trying to figure out how to cope with.

I’ve also learned that Remus has absolutely terrible taste in coffee. He is a werewolf; what is wrong with my godfather’s sense of taste? He should bloody well know better.

Happy New Term gift. I thought it might be useful.

Don’t kill anyone unless they deserve it.

Yours,

Harry

Severus picks up the mug waiting on his desk, tall and white ceramic with blue lettering. It’s Muggle-based, and to his amusement, is labeled with the entire chemical formula for caffeine.

“Appropriate,” he says, and pours ambrosia from the Press. Someone must have taught Harry something of coffee-making while he was away during the summer. A French Press is the finest method for controlling every aspect of the brewing process.

He sips coffee—oh God, he is never having standard offer British coffee ever again—and contemplates his schedule. Mondays and Fridays are still reserved for his sixth- and seventh-year Potions classes, though now Tuesday and Thursday are devoted to his fourth- and fifth-year students, two double classes per day, morning and afternoon. He has deliberately blended the roster so that
there is equal representation of all Houses in each class, just like his classes for the oldest students. Horace can deal with dual-House classes for the younger children until he shows a bit more sense and defies the old tradition.

Wednesday is devoted to Muggle Studies for all students third-year and up, and is now a mandatory class to take before graduation. He arranged the schedule for five classes: three before breakfast; two after lunch. It will run backwards, seventh-years down to third-years. Any experienced instructor knows it’s best to be fresh and prepared to fight the hardest battles first.

“You are up to something. I know you are,” Dumbledore’s portrait says.

Severus tilts his head. “As I told Narcissa: when am I not?”

“You are going to be fun,” Edessa declares, laughing aloud. “It’s been far too long since we had a trickster seated in that chair. Phineas was terrible at it!”

“I was not,” Phineas whines. “I just didn’t like the little ingrates!”

Severus goes upstairs to change clothes. He has plans, and he is going to enjoy this day to its utmost.

*          *          *          *

The Muggle Studies classroom has a desk and a spinning, high-backed chair that’s exactly like a standard Muggle office chair. He sits in it, turned away from the classroom, and listens to the seventh-years enter.

Jade is sitting cross-legged on the desk itself, grinning. “They’re all gonna flip, y’know.”

“That was the entire point.”

“You’re darling. I can adopt, right? Thas’a done thing.”

He glances at her. “I think the elder of us is the one that is supposed to be doing the adopting.”

Jade shrugs. “Don’ really matter much t’me. Just thinkin’ ’bout it.”

“Liar. How many are we up to?”

Jade lifts her hat and glances in the direction of the desks. “Looks t’be ’bout twenty-three, and th’ last one’s shuttin’ th’ door. Full count, mate.”

“Excellent.” He stands up, walks around the desk, and then sits down on it next to Jade.

“Bloody hell,” Miss Weasley whispers.

“I do like the shirt,” Miss Lovegood observes.

“That is not him,” Kettletoft says loudly. “It can’t be.”

Severus grins at Kettletoft. “Why not, Hufflepuff?”

“Holy shite,” Miss Amano gasps, and then turns red. “Sorry! It’s just—uhm—”
“You’re fit,” Miss Arncliffe blurts out.

“Well. Y’are,” Jade says, when Severus frowns and looks at her.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Welcome to Muggle Studies. Jade Viridian is taking the second rotation. I, however, am taking the first…for what should be fairly obvious reasons.”

“You might have to explain it, Professor,” Miss Lovegood says, her chin propped on her hand as she smiles at him. “I think they’re all terrified.” She pauses. “The denims are also quite flattering.”

“Get out, Jade,” Severus says. Jade smirks, plants a kiss on his cheek, and saunters her way out of the classroom. She is the one who chose his wardrobe for the day when he couldn’t bloody well make a decision. The denims are black, as are the boots, which have a heavy tread and laces that ride so high that he used magic to knot-up the damned things. His hair is also tied back in a long tail that hangs between his shoulder blades; the charm that hid the potion’s effects from last September has been thrown away. He is again that lanky stranger he viewed in the mirror, and it’s about time he got used to that man.

“Miss Lovegood: the shirt represents a band from the States called Live, one I’ve become quite fond of. They’re depressing bastards. It suits.”

“Are we…uh—swearing in class?” Miss Nicola asks, her cheeks glowing almost purple from an intense blush.

“This is a seventh-year class, and you’re all adults. Welcome to real life,” Severus replies. “Fuck yes, we are.”

“Are you Polyjuiced?” Yoshioka ventures. “You seem…uh, different.”

“That’s the entire point.” Severus rests his hands on his knees. “By its very nature, previous versions of Muggle Studies have had a singular flaw.”

“They weren’t taught by anyone who’d lived in the Muggle world,” Miss Weasley says.

“Exactly.”

“What’s with the black cuffs at your wrists?” Newbourne asks, finally starting to lean forward with genuine curiosity.

“I find a lack of full-length sleeves to be odd—it’s been a very long time since I’ve been able to avoid them.” Severus glances down at the soft black leather that shelters his wrists. “The cuffs mimic the same sensation so that I’m not driven to distraction.”

“Neat,” Newbourne pronounces. “One o’ my cousins has a thing like that. Stuff has to feel a certain way, or he can’t concentrate.”

“Interesting.” Severus turns his attention to the class as a whole. “By necessity, this class will be far more informal than any other interaction you’ve ever had with me. Do not expect this same behavior in other places, especially Potions; it’s not bloody safe.

“I’m a Half-blood, something that many of you have never known. I was raised in an entirely Muggle household in a Muggle village. My father hated magic, so my mother and I did what was needed when he was not around. Otherwise, we relied on Muggle appliances, radios, music, art, television—I didn’t see Diagon Alley until I was eleven years old, just like any Muggle-born student.”
“Is that why you changed your name, sir? Your father bein’ a Muggle?” Hanley asks. That particular Slytherin is a Pure-blood; Severus expected the question to be asked sooner rather than later.

“No. I meant what I said about my reasons. My best and only friend as a child was a Muggle-born student named Lily Evans. You all know her as Lily Potter.”

“You were best friends with Harry’s Mum?” Miss Weasley blinks a few times, wide-eyed. “Wow.”

“Didn’t know she was Muggle-born, actually. They don’t mention things like that when people tell the story,” Miss Mina says.

“It’s something they really should not leave out of the story. Lily performed a great sacrifice that created powerful magic, and that it was done by a Muggle-born needs to be recognized.”

“Huh.” Miss Tande is tilting her head. “I guess you’d be in a prime position to be able to tell that story proper then, Professor.”

Severus inclines his head. “I am, but that is reserved for another time, and another person. For this class, I’m going to discuss with you what it was like in a Muggle household during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. There will be many mentions of subjects and events that most of you have never heard of, which is a great shame and a serious detriment to the further development of wizarding society. For next class, I’m going to demonstrate one of the ways in which I was all but dragged back into the Muggle world after a twenty year absence, and then discuss the culture shock that accompanied it. A lot has changed since my childhood, and most of it…” He smiles. “Most of it is quite an improvement.

“We’ll start with a direct comparison of the music I grew up with, followed by a modern sampling.” Severus picks up his wand and removes the Disillusionment Charm that hid the magicked Muggle radio from view. “This is David Bowie, who Lily and I both agreed was utterly insane and thus followed his doings like mad little fiends.”

“The Man Who Sold the World” is a song that still holds a lot of meaning for him. Most of it isn’t nice, but to forget the past is to chance making the same mistakes over again.

“Is he talkin’ about the Devil?” Halkirk asks when the song is over. “It kinda sounds like it.”

“Trust me, Mister Halkirk. One does not need to be the Christian Devil to sell the world.” Severus pops open the lid to switch the disks, explaining about compact disks as he does so. He needs to get a working turntable; the difference between a vinyl disk and a compact disk will help to drive the example home. ‘This is a song called ‘Spiders’ by an Armenian-American band named System of a Down. Their families moved to the United States to escape the Armenian Genocide, another event most of you have likely never even heard of.’”

“Cor, that’s different,” Kettletoft says of the song, wide-eyed.

“That’s poetry,” Miss Weasley observes. “I like it, even if it’s a bit…er. Depressing.”

“Excellent.” Severus stands up, feeling the need to pace the room much as he does while teaching other lessons. “Now, we’re going to discuss some of the Muggle history that led to these very different sounds…”

By the time the first class is over with, he has a group of seventh-years who are actually enthused by the idea of coming back to class for their next lesson. Severus halts them before they leave.

“If you want to give away this little setup, you can,” Severus says, and then the side of his mouth lifts
in a sly smile. “Or you can all keep silent, and allow your fellow classmates to be as startled by my presence as you were.”

Miss Weasley’s grin is wide and predatory. “An all-day prank, Professor?”

“Absolutely.”

“I am down for this,” Mallory declares.

Lovegood nods and eyes her fellow Ravenclaws. “The ultimate riddle: who is Professor Severus Prince?”

The students all look at each other. “We’re not saying a word, are we?” Miss Arncliffe asks, grinning.

“Nope. Let ’em find out the fun way,” Newbourne says, smiling back. “Best first-term class I’ve ever had!”

“Go on, then.” Severus waves them towards the door. “I’ll see you all this evening at dinner.”

“And then everyone finds out.” Miss Sibazaki lets out a positively gleeful cackle. “This is going to be fun!”

The sixth-year class goes just as well, though Astoria Greengrass lets out a startled, happy squeal when she recognized him. The discussion is fascinating; this is the year that holds more Pure-blooded wizards than any other, and while there is some disbelief when it comes to things like orbital satellites and the moon landing in 1969, they’re willing to listen. That’s an important first step to gaining wizards who don’t look down on Muggle-borns as inferior beings.

Severus is going to enjoy introducing them all to the concept of the Internet. Now there is an addicting pastime. He refuses to buy a computer for the house at Spinner’s End because he’s afraid he’ll never stop reading everything he can discover by web-browser.

He takes a secret passage near the classroom to avoid students, going to his office for lunch. Winky brings him a tray and immediately wants to know all about the symbol printed on the back of his shirt. He ends up speaking through lunch, trying to explain Muggle design-work and branding, which differs from wizarding ways of advertising.

The classes with the fifth, fourth, and third-years all have the same entertaining beginnings. The previous classes are true to their word and keep his presence a secret, enjoying the sneakiness of the game…and the minor inherent revenge as the younger students are all startled in the exact same way they themselves were surprised.

Who is Professor Severus Prince? He still isn’t sure, but it is rather soothing to be in a classroom setting that does not require exceptionally strict protocols, warnings, and justified wrath.

He doesn’t bother changing clothes before going to the Great Hall for dinner. He earns a few curious glances, but in the Muggle outfit, with his hair tied back, he doesn’t present the same profile; no robes fly out in response to his swift stride.

Then he sits down next to Minerva, who is staring at him in amazement. “Severus Snape!”

Severus raises an eyebrow.

“Severus Prince,” she corrects herself, scowling at him. “What in Merlin’s name are you up to?”
“I,” Severus says, “am enjoying myself. Immensely.” He tilts his head in the direction of the student tables.

Minerva turns her head to discover that every student who did not take Muggle Studies this year is on their feet, staring at the stranger in their Headmaster’s chair. There is open-mouthed shock, surprised delight, and bafflement everywhere Severus looks.

He is a Slytherin. This is one of the best days he’s ever had.

“Like a brick to the face, Severus,” Minerva says dryly.

Severus smiles. “Alas, I am still out of bricks.”

“You ingested the same potion Remus, Sirius, Andromeda, and Narcissa did.” Minerva shakes her head. “The one that was part of the trap for Voldemort.”

“It had to be tested, and Harry is a conniving young man who steals hair when one’s back is turned,” Severus says. “But to reveal it sooner…well. Last year was most certainly not the time.”

“No, instead you reserved it in order to shock three-quarters of the student body.” Narcissa sits down next to him, a shark-like grin on her face. “Well-plotted, Severus.”

“Thank you, Narcissa.”

Minerva presses her lips together before finally leaning closer. “And if one wanted to acquire this potion…?”

“That’s a project for the next summer holiday,” he replies. “I need to figure out if it can be made without killing a Golden Snidget for every batch.”

Minerva looks appalled. “They still ride too close to the edge of extinction as it is!”

“Exactly. Unless I can figure out a variant that lets them live…” Severus frowns. “Maybe I should just start a bloody bird breeding farm. I might like birds. I already have a phoenix that I can’t get rid of.”

“I’ll financially back the venture for a cut of the profit,” Narcissa says in a mild voice.

Severus glances at her. “You know…that is an excellent idea.” Perhaps Sirius might wish to be involved, as well. There is also the matter of the emerald-shelled Fire Crabs, another endangered species.


“You may need to reintroduce yourself to the student body,” Filius says, snickering under his breath. “I’m fairly certain many of them do not believe you to be you!”

Severus’s smile widens. “Let them wonder. It’s more fun that way.”

They get through most of dinner before Severus feels a crawling sensation along his arms. Odd.

Then Pyrrhus appears in mid-air without warning, warbling in what sounds like distress. Severus stands up. “What do you mean, someone is in danger? How can there be—”

The mental image strikes him like a slap to the face. Severus glances down the faculty table to find
one particular seat empty. “No,” he whispers. He leaps over the table, landing on the floor below the upper ledge in a crouch.

“Did he just jump the table—” Severus hears as he’s Apparating.

Outside, near the Black Lake, is a single ghostly form in the air, hovering over their victim. Severus brings his wand up and shouts the incantation: “EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The Dementor looks up and then quails at the sight of a corporeal, full-sized unicorn Patronus charging towards it. Severus ignores the Dementor’s fear and runs to Jade, who is lying on the ground, her eyes closed.

Severus forces himself to breathe as he pulls her up into his arms. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Jade is whispering, tears running from beneath her closed eyelids.

“You’re all right. You are,” Severus tells her. “Jade. It can’t hurt you. Not now.”

“Where the hell did that come from?” Remus gasps out as he comes tearing up to them at a full run. He slides to a halt, staring at the Dementor. It is trapped at the edge of the lake by Severus’s Patronus, unable to advance towards the victim—the food—that it wants.

“The Aurors must have missed one when they were being sent back to Azkaban.” This is not to be tolerated. Not in his school!

Rage feels hot in his chest as Severus lifts his wand again. “Solvite eum in saecula!” he shouts.

The Dementor shrieks in pain and begins to shrivel. The unicorn Patronus watches the proceedings with narrowed eyes, stamping her hoof in impatience when the Dementor refuses to die quickly enough.

“Did you just—did you just kill a Dementor?” Sirius asks, panting for breath as he arrives. With him are Narcissa, Firenze, and Rolanda. Severus can hear others approaching, but his attention is reserved for the Dementor.

“I wanted it fucking dead,” Severus tells them in a snarl.

“Th’fuck issat fucker?” Jade mumbles, blinking her eyes open.

“That is about to be a former Dementor.” Severus lifts her up into his arms. She is not a student of Hogwarts, but she has somehow become his…and he almost lost her to a stray damned Dementor. “You’re going to be fine. Let Remus shove chocolate in your direction—it is actually useful.”

“I ge’ free chocolate f’almost bein’ eatin’ by tha’ thing. Tha’s cool,” Jade whispers. “Gimme, Wolf Man.”

While Jade is trying to shove an entire bar of wizard-crafted chocolate into her face, Severus glances at his Patronus. The spell he crafted in that moment is an excellent one, but not quite enough. Something is missing—

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” Severus hears Harry declare. The corporeal light that comes forth from the darkness behind them is a bird in flight.

A bloody phoenix.

Severus gives the man a dry look as Harry approaches, his wand still raised. “Really?”
“Not my decision. Apparently if you die three times, it’s a thing that happens,” Harry replies, smiling. “Love the unicorn.”

“Oh, shut up.” Severus watches the phoenix Patronus taunt the Dementor, which has lost more of its substance. “Oh, I see. Remus?”

“I’ve got it.” Remus lifts his wand. Narcissa and Hooch catch on immediately, as do William and Minerva, who’ve joined them at last.

The chorus of *Expecto Patronum* is pleasing to his ears. The unicorn and phoenix are joined by Narcissa’s Black Hebridean Dragon, Minerva’s housecat, William’s sphynx, Sirius’s wolf, Remus’s large black dog, and Rolanda’s falcon. Each corporeal Patronus advances on the Dementor, surrounding it and flooding the entire area with light.

Severus’s initial spell weakened the Dementor. The strength of so many Patronuses erases it from existence.

“I’m so sorry,” Jade says in a stronger voice. With the Dementor gone, the chill is leaving her limbs. “I just wanted t’ look ’round, I didn’ mean t—”

“Believe me, this is *not* your fault,” Minerva interrupts her sternly. “A Dementor is not a creature that belongs here. I’m—I’m so sorry. It’s a terrible thing to experience.”

Jade still looks unhappy. “Least m’not dead. Where’s m’bloody—did that bastard eat m’bloody hat?”

“Glad to see your priorities are in order.” Harry holds up the item in question. “Found it on the ground nearby. No harm done.”

“We can kill Dementors.” William sounds awed. “We keep them at Azkaban because we can’t get rid of them…but we can kill Dementors.”

“I wonder if Kingsley’s awake,” Remus says. “The Ministry is still in enough disarray that we could…we might be able to convince the Wizengamot to let us be rid of the damned things.”

“The spell is *Solvite eum in saecula,*” Severus tells them, and puts Jade down when she starts wriggling and wrinkling her nose in disgruntlement at being held. “Like any Unforgivable, you have to mean it.”

Sirius lets out a snort of amused laughter and shakes his head. “Oh, I know you bloody well meant it. I think the entire school heard that shout. By the way: how the absolute hell did you Apparate out on the castle?”

Severus looks at Sirius like he’s daft. “I am the Headmaster of this school. Of course I can Apparate here! Or did you think Albus just had perfect timing?”

“Sure bloody seemed like it.” William smiles. “Heard so many complaints from Fred and George about Albus Dumbledore’s timing, and how it ruined so many potential pranks.”

“Only when there would have been dangerous fallout. Albus enjoyed their antics far too much.” Severus is biting back a smile. Os on their Potions N.E.W.T.s. The sneaky little ingrates.

“*Expecto Patronum.*” Jade is scowling as she adjusts her hat. The other conjured Patronuses are still milling about, touching each other like they’re greeting old friends. “I await a guardian. How’s it work, Sev?”
Severus is not surprised that Jade is rallying in such a fashion. He doesn’t like to be defenceless, either. “Hold out your wand, concentrate on a memory that makes you truly happy—feel the strength of that memory—and speak the words.”

“Happy memory.” Jade purses her lips. “Seems hard after bein’ nearly soul-bugged by one’a those things.”

“Soul-bugging!” William starts howling with laughter, his hand on Remus’s shoulder to keep from falling down. “I won’t be forgetting that one anytime soon!” Even Minerva’s lips are twitching in an attempt to hide a smile.

Jade suddenly grins and pulls out her wand, the pale white ash wood gleaming in the moonlight. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

The silvery light emerges from the end of her wand, swirling into a small ball of mist. Jade quirks her lips and gives her wand a simple twirl that he’s never seen anyone use for the spell before.

“What’s that?” Sirius asks when the corporeal Patronus forms. It is very, very small, but no less powerful for its size.

“It’s a hummingbird,” Severus says, amused.

“That is the least surprising thing, ever,” Harry declares.

“Oi, don’ y’be talkin’ shite ’bout my bird, Harry!” Jade’s tiny hummingbird Patronus zips around the others, greeting each one in turn.

“They’re not fading,” Minerva observes. “I’ve never seen Patronuses linger like this.”

“I’ve never seen so many in one place before,” Sirius says. “Maybe that’s the problem?”

“If it’s even a problem at all,” Remus adds. He frowns and holds up his wand. “*Nutricios discedat.*”

His black dog Patronus wags its tail a few times and then fades away. As if it’s a signal, the other Patronuses finally do the same.

Severus closes his eyes and feels his way along the castle wards. He senses no other sign of Dementors, or dangers of any sort. Having an awareness of an entire castle and the land attached to it is still not something he’s used to. Albus was an absolute bastard for not warning him that this particular ability came with the Headmaster’s title. He had to learn of it from the bloody portraits.

“Let’s go back inside. The students are probably crowding around the Entrance Hall doors, trying to figure out what we’re up to,” Minerva says at last.

Remus falls into step beside Severus as they walk back. Harry has his arm slung over Jade’s shoulders; Jade has somehow acquired another chocolate bar and is eating it with delighted determination. Severus despairs of introducing her to Honeyduke’s in Hogsmeade. They might never get Jade out of the store.

“I see you stopped fighting the Patronus’s change,” Remus says in a low voice.

“I see that you are capable of basic observation.”

Remus smiles. “She’s one hell of a Patronus, Severus.”

Severus finally grants the other man a brief nod. “Yes. She is.”
As expected, there is a crowd of students in the courtyard, blocking the door into the Entrance Hall. They have, Severus is pleased to note, trapped the younger children inside the castle. “What happened?” Astoria Greengrass is the first to ask, looking half-terrified.

Severus gives her a reassuring look—or at least attempts to. He’s out of practice at those, too. “It was an overlooked Dementor. It is now a very dead Dementor, and no one was hurt.”

“Bloody horrible things, though. Why th’ hell d’you lot even have th’ things?” Jade asks, adjusting her hat again.

“Stupidity, most likely,” Severus replies wryly, watching as the students begin to relax. He doesn’t blame them for being concerned. “Go back inside. You ingrates are all blocking the doors!”

“What’s with the clothes?” Romilda Vane finally asks, giving Severus’s t-shirt in particular a look of offended displeasure.

“Do not malign the t-shirt. I’m fond of it.” Severus glances around at them and rolls his eyes, offering them his driest long drawl of mockery. “I’m a Half-blood Prince. It’s high time you all got used to it.”

* * * *

Severus has a second compact record player that he keeps in his office. Most of the portraits are enjoying their introduction to new music, though some of them look entirely offended and leave their frames to seek quieter locations when he’s in the mood for sound.

He’s listening to a song titled “Mother Earth is a Vicious Crowd” from an early Live album when there is a knock on the door to his office. “Come!”

Potter swings the door open. “Hi there. Is company welcome?”

“Certainly.” Severus rolls up a scroll, presses Hogwarts’ wax seal into place, and sets it aside. “Thank you for the gift of the Press. I didn’t realize you were still here after delivering it.”

“You’re welcome. I was wandering around today. Looking at the changes to the school…still thinking on things,” Harry says, sitting down on one of the chairs in front of Severus’s desk. “I’ve never heard that song before.”

“No?” Severus rewinds it to the beginning. “I find it fascinating.”

“Pollution, Cain, and misery
Oceans of golden mystery
Armies boisterous and armies loud
Portraits of a vicious crowd
Talk to me, talk to me now!
Hey man, you’re all that I have

Hey man, you’re all that I have!
Me myself, myself and I
We’re born to work and born to die
I have chosen my anthems
Of these I am proud
Portraits of a divided crowd
Talk to me, talk to me now!

Hey man, you’re all that I have
Hey man, you’re all that I have
Hey man we’re all that we have!”

“Yeah. That’s…that’s really nice.” Harry smiles. “Jade conjured a corporeal Patronus on her first try.”

“She is a fiery, determined, and terrifying force of nature.” Severus eyes Potter’s slightly downcast air, the slump to his shoulders. “What’s wrong, Harry?”

“In blunt terms? I’ve no idea what to do with my life,” Harry says, surprising him. “I can’t go anywhere in Wizarding Britain without being mobbed and congratulated for defeating Voldemort. Sure, it’s great that he’s dead. It’s an accomplishment to graduate Hogwarts a year earlier than most students…but Severus, I’m eighteen years old. I only have five years’ worth of memories inside my head—just five. Everyone I know from my year seems to know what direction they’re going, even if they don’t know what’s at the end of the path, but at least they know where to start. I don’t.”

“Prepare the potions that you’ve created or altered for publication, idiot.” Severus shakes his head at Harry’s baffled look. “You’re of age, you have proven formulas, and you have the ability to discuss the ideas behind them to support their use. I know you’ve done enough experimentation to publish an entire book, if you chose to do so.” He thinks about it. “In fact, write me a new seventh-year textbook. The current one is outdated rubbish.”

“What about Borage’s Advanced Potion Making?” Harry asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I claimed the right to re-write that monstrosity years ago,” Severus replies, smirking. “Or did you miss the fact that I wrote all over your copy?”

Harry smiles. “Good point.”

“It will be nice to have textbooks written in this bloody century for the older students. That’s something that’s long overdue,” Severus says. “At least the textbooks for the younger children are fine as they are.”

“Hermione would disagree with you on that one.”

Severus is not impressed by that argument. “Tell her to re-write them, then.”

“Nah. She went Time-Turner levels of classes with uni. Viktor says she emerges from her textbooks just long enough to sleep and eat enough not to fall over before going right back to it again. Wizarding law,” Harry adds, when Severus gives him a curious look. “She’s insane.”

“Harry, I knew that Miss Granger was insane in your first year, when she bloody well set me on fire.”
Harry starts laughing. “She did what?”

“Set me on fire. Seems you magnificent trio of idiots were convinced I was trying to harm you instead of performing a counter-jinx to the hex Quirrell was applying to your broom. Her solution was fire.” Severus smiles. “Quirrell was sitting next to me, and he was always terrified of fire, even before he chose to side with Voldemort. Hermione’s target was incorrect, but it was still an effective solution.”

“Fire.” Harry is still grinning. “I’m surprised you didn’t put her in detention for the next five years.”

“I didn’t know, not at first. Once I discovered who performed that spell, I’d also realized that it had done a better job of stopping Quirrell than my attempt, and decided to let it be.”

“Of course. Can’t have done anything that might damage your monstrous reputation.” Harry looks thoughtful. “An entire book designed for seventh-years, but also available in wizarding bookstores. I wonder if it’s legal to include *Oculus Maxima* in it.”

“Harry, if anyone owned the right to that particular potion, the claim expired centuries ago.”

“Speaking of claims…” Harry props his elbow up on the arm of his chair and rests his head against his hand. “There was an actual Potter Estate, descended from the Peverell line.”

“Was?”

“Was or is,” Harry corrects himself absently. “It seems that one Ioanes Potter, my great-great-grandfather, lost the Potter family estate. I didn’t even know it existed until I started digging through Ministry paperwork, looking for any other potential Peverell relatives.”

“How does one lose an entire estate?” Severus asks, amused. “The man had heirs, else you wouldn’t be sitting there.”

“The story is that his wife, Lucretia, died unexpectedly. In a fit of grief, Ioanes placed the estate under a Fidelius Charm and moved to a smaller home in Godric’s Hollow. Then he had the ungraciousness to die before remembering that he should tell someone else the word tied to the Charm.”

“Yes, that would most certainly make it difficult to find,” Severus agrees, ignoring a few chortling portraits. “Any ideas?”

“I know that it’s somewhere in Britain. The old description says that it is, ‘west of a flowing body of water, east of a great lake, centered in a copse of trees, and before it lies a great plain.’”

“Congratulations. You have just described most of England.”

Harry smiles. “Well, I didn’t say it would be easy to find it. It would probably be useful to have it back.”

Severus frowns. “Useful how?”

“Well, it’s one of the oldest estates in England. Thirty hectares of land would be grand if, oh, someone wanted to breed Golden Snidgets in order to not murder an entire species for profit.”

“Harry—”

“Did you miss the part where I said it was descended from the Peverell line?” Harry asks crossly. “If
I can find the damned place, it isn’t just mine!”

“It was descended from Ignotus,” Severus points out. “Not Antioch.”

“But all three brothers originally inherited it. You’re not winning this argument; stop trying.”

“I will stop trying to win arguments when I am dead, Harry,” Severus retorts. “Shut up!” he adds, glaring up at several portraits who are doing their best not to giggle too loudly.

Harry grins at him. “What the fuck would I do with an estate sitting on thirty hectares, Severus? That’s aside from the fact that I’ve no idea how big this house is supposed to be. No one wrote that part down. Think of it as a way to not have to live within walking distance of Petunia Dursley.”

Severus scowls. “You would still have to find it, and I still say that it’s yours, you idiot. I have no Heirs; it would then revert to the Potter line again on my death.”

“You don’t have Heirs now. Jade mentioned that you told her surrogates are a possibility.”

“One still has to be willing to perform certain activities with said surrogates,” Severus returns dryly.

Harry puts his face in his hands, muffling his laughter. “Oh, Merlin. You make it sound like—you do know that things like syringe bulbs exist, right?”

“THAT IS WORSE. THAT IS ACTUALLY WORSE.”

“You’re the one who pointed out ‘certain activities’ like you were describing the most distasteful act in existence,” Harry points out, still laughing.

Severus groans and puts his head down on his desk. “When the person you are trying to…to accomplish said activities with isn’t trying to kill you, it is not unpleasant. But I was particular in my youth, and even more so now…and I am never going to forget the idea of a syringe bulb, so thank you so very much for that.”

“You’re welcome!” Harry replies cheerfully. “Oh, and speaking of breeding and things not related to syringe bulbs—”

“Please. Actually. Stop. Saying. That.” Severus lifts his head and pulls out his next scroll to begin writing. “As long as it does not involve that particular subject, you may continue. Otherwise, I am throwing you out of this office.”

“Okay.” Harry lets out one last snort of laughter. “Hermione told me, after I pestered her about some of the things I heard before the war started, that there was an idea prevalent in the school during my second year—something about how only the Heir of Slytherin could open the Chamber of Secrets and control the basilisk.”

Severus nods while double-checking the line he’s written for errors. “Yes. There were many in the student body foolish enough to believe that it was you.”

“That’s what I thought, too, given the bloodlines,” Harry says. “But then we found out that the Gaunt family was descended from Cadmus Peverell.”

Severus pauses, recalling that Cadmus had indeed apologized for the last of his line becoming the bane of the wizarding world. “Indeed. Go on.”

“Well…according to Ministry records, no descendants of the Peverell brothers remain aside from you
and me—and while he was alive, Voldemort. All three of us are the Heirs of Slytherin, Severus.”

“That is complete rubbish.” Severus begins his next line, trying to figure out how to request chimera blood in quantities that will not send the reforming Department of Protected Imported Goods into a panic.

“It is, huh?” Harry sounds like he’s smiling. “Salazar Slytherin lived during the eleventh century. The Peverell brothers lived during the thirteenth…and oh, yes, they were brothers. One of those brothers can’t be of a different bloodline unless there was a parental split, and there wasn’t one. They were all three born to the same mother and father, confirmed by the paranoid spellwork they did during that time period to ensure marital fidelity.”

Severus nods. “Fair enough, Harry.”

“There is also the fact that I’ve been speaking to you in Parseltongue ever since you stopped looking at me, and you’ve been perfectly capable of understanding it,” Harry says, which is followed by the sound of a loud thud behind Severus’s chair.

Severus drops his quill and looks up, startled. “What was that?”

“That was the sound of Albus Dumbledore’s portrait falling out of his painted chair,” Harry says innocently.

“Not that part!” Severus glares at him. “You weren’t speaking in bloody Parseltongue! I don’t understand it!”

“When you’re actively paying attention? No, you don’t.” Harry agrees readily enough. “But if you stop paying direct attention by, say, splitting your attention between me and composing a letter? You do. You weren’t speaking it, but you understood everything I said.”

“What the hell is that even supposed to mean?”

Harry gives him an odd look and then spreads his arms wide. “Congratulations, you’re a Slytherin? What else is it supposed to mean? Besides, we’re all out of basilisks.”

Severus stares at the idiot Gryffindor before he gives up and starts laughing. “‘You weren’t—I heard you shout at Nagini when I wasn’t looking at you. You told her, ‘No.’ That was Parseltongue, wasn’t it?’ he gasps out.

“Yeah, it was.” Harry is giving him a fond, sad smile.

“What was wrong?”

“That’s only the second time I’ve ever heard you laugh,” Harry says softly.

“You should maybe try it more often,” Albus suggests.

“He should not! A Headmaster must comport himself with dignity!” Phineas retorts.

The argument only makes him laugh harder. It’s making his chest hurt. “Both times,” Severus accuses Harry, “have been your fault!”

Harry shrugs, grinning. “Guess I’ll have to keep bringing up ridiculous things to get a rise out of you. Like syringe bulbs.”

Severus wants to throw the brat out of his office, but he’s too busy trying to breathe through what is
probably near-hysterical laughter. He did not need that horrific pun to accompany the blasted syringe bulb.

* * * *

The next morning at breakfast, he is dressed in the manner that students are accustomed to. They are, to his amusement, still giving him odd looks, particularly the Slytherins who remember him best as their Head of House.

Harry is sitting with the Ravenclaws to speak with Luna. The other Ravens are doing a very good job of not fawning all over him in adoration…mostly because too many of them are far more interested in the workings of the three Hallows to give a damn about heroism.

In the middle of discussing Narcissa’s plans for the day, involving a castle tour to discuss some of the portraits’ history and the techniques that preserve them, Jade hops up onto the rise for the faculty table with a cheerful, “Good morning!” He’s glad to see she isn’t suffering any ill effects from that damned random Dementor.

Then she shoves her top hat onto his head. “Jade!” he barks.

Jade seats herself in the chair reserved for the Muggle Studies rotation and gives him a cheeky grin. “Well, you’re back t’ th’silk,” she says innocently. “Mayhap th’ tykes need a reminder tha’ they didn’ hallucinate anythin’ yesterday.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “You mean you wish to leave them even more confused than they already are.”

“Tha’ also does th’ trick!”

He shakes his head, drawing out his wand long enough to tap the hat so it sizes itself to fit his head. “Very well.”

“Hey!” Jade glares at him, open-mouthed. “Now it’s too bloody big f’mel!”

“Then you’ll just have to learn to fix it, now, won’t you?” he replies blandly, returning to his meal. Minerva has her napkin pressed against her lips; her eyes are watery with desperate, repressed laughter.

“It is a very flattering device when paired with your robes,” Narcissa points out. “Draco and myself also each have one, thanks to young Professor Viridian’s spell at the reception in August.”

“I warned her that she might start terrible fashion trends.”

“Indeed.” Narcissa glances at Jade, who is still scowling. “I do like the corset. I wonder if it should return in a manner that does not involve suffocation? She says her own is not designed for that at all; it’s merely fashionable.”

“If the idea does not offend, Jade knows how to find very well-made Muggle versions—”

“Vocare impetum hummingbirds!”

“Oh, fuck me,” Remus says loudly enough for the nearest students to hear, just before they’re all
surrounded by attack hummingbirds.

“Protego!” Severus shouts before the first rabid hummingbird can get to him. “JADE! For Merlin’s sake, stop giving the little blighters ideas!” Jade is too busy falling off of her chair laughing to care. “REMUS! Language; same reason!”

Remus, crouched beneath a Protego shield, scowls at him. An entire charm of birds is busy trying to figure out how to get through the spell. “A bit busy at the moment!”

Sirius lets the hummingbirds peck him several times before he shifts into his Animagus form and starts barking at them. As most of the students were not even aware he was capable of it, that revelation has many of them on their feet to start gaping at the spectacle. Narcissa has disappeared, possibly to wisely hide beneath the table.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Minerva mutters. She throws down her napkin, shifts to her cat form, and starts chasing hummingbirds…which is also what the ratel is doing, trying to jump up after the flitting birds and failing miserably at it. Their antics have attracted three student Kneazles, and for some reason, a toad. Severus can’t even blame Longbottom for that one.

Then a Manx comes darting over from the direction of the Slytherin table. Miss Greengrass is the only student unaccounted for. She is also the first Animagus to successfully catch a hummingbird.

“Why don’t we just Banish them?” Filius asks from beneath his own shield.

Severus would love to, he really would, but in less than a minute the faculty table has gone from composed dignity to absolute chaos. For the second time in two damned days, he can’t stop laughing.
Who is Headmaster Prince?

Next week brings the first Monday of the new term. Severus spends breakfast tapping his fingers on the table, feeling like he’s sitting under a cloud of impending doom. He chances a glance upward; no, Peeves is not lingering overhead. In fact, the poltergeist has been rather tame since the Battle of Hogwarts, even without certain restrictive influences around.

The Owl Post arrives in a timely manner, at least. Severus reaches out and catches his delivery of the Prophet, along with two letters, before they can fall into someone’s food.

He unfolds the newspaper just to fold it right back up again and drop it into his empty plate. “Absolutely not.”

Narcissa steals it from him before he can decide to set it on fire. “Oh, that’s a lovely picture of you. Much better than last year’s photo.”

“That’s without the charm,” Severus growls out, thinking, Skeeter. “Hogwarts grounds, Thursday or Friday. I’ll kill her.”

“Is this a legitimate interview?” Minerva asks, peering down her nose at the Prophet. “It isn’t…is it?”

“It was an exchange. She would not malign the reputation of anyone killed during the Occupation, and I wouldn’t revert her to her Animagus form and use her in a potion.”

“Teach me that spell. I want to do that, anyway,” Sirius mutters under his breath. “All of that shite she wrote about my godson in 1995 and 1996 until the Ministry admitted Voldemort was a fucking threat…”

“Who is Headmaster Severus Prince: An Exclusive Interview by Rita Skeeter.” Filius glances at him. “Oh, and that’s not an exchange, that is blackmail.”

“Point of view,” Severus grumbles. He should have expected Skeeter to wait for the school year to begin before publishing—that woman has always prided herself on having vicious timing. Instead, he spent the summer trying to avoid Wizarding Britain as much as possible. In the chaos that came after the battle, in rebuilding the school, and trying to graduate those who were still alive to do so, he had actually forgotten all about his arrangement with Skeeter.

Baddock of Slytherin stands up to gape at him. “Did you really poison Voldemort?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Yes.”

“No way.” Hanley frowns. “When?”

“Sixth of September, 1997.”

Several students lower their newspapers to stare at him. “You what when?” Whitby sputters.

“You lot are missing the point,” Miss Weasley snaps. “Not only did our Headmaster poison Voldemort, he convinced Voldemort to let him do it.”

“That isn’t helping!” Agarkar blurts out. “He poisoned the scariest bastard in Britain!”

“I am never, ever drinking anything you make. Ever,” Miss Nicola declares.
“Oh, please. I’ve been feeding him Wolfsbane since 1993, and he’s not dead yet,” Severus retorts, jerking his thumb at Remus.

Remus starts laughing. “Severus, that yet you tacked on at the end there? Probably not the most reassuring choice of phrasing.”

Severus gives up and leans over towards Minerva when she opens the paper. “Let me see the damned thing.”

After the funerals of our forty-three fallen heroes from the Battle of Hogwarts, it was this reporter’s good fortune to be granted an interview with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, then still known to us all as Severus Snape. He seemed far more concerned as to the welfare of the school, its residents, and the reputations of our honored dead, than he was about me—for which I am very grateful, as it was Mister Harry Potter who informed me that the Headmaster was the one to administer the coup de grâce to the Dark Lord Voldemort, He Who Is Very Dead, Thankfully.

“Dammit, Harry,” Severus murmurs.

It was revealed to me, after asking no less than four times, how Severus Snape came to be Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: a direct appointment by Albus Dumbledore, whom we’ve since learned was already dying of a terrible curse. Headmaster Dumbledore was preparing for the war to come, and doing his best to provide for the students under his care. It causes me to regret one of the exposés I did regarding Dumbledore when last year’s biography of the man was published, revealing intriguing facts of the Dumbledore family.

“Regret, my entire arse,” Minerva says under her breath.

It took another eight attempts—yes, I kept count—before the new Headmaster would answer my next question: What was it like to repeatedly stand before Voldemort?

Severus Snape asked this reporter if I had ever stood before a venomous reptile that had reared up, prepared to strike. I gladly confessed that I have never had the opportunity to experience such a thing.

“A normal viper will do so because it is afraid,” Headmaster Snape told me. “If you move, it will react in fear and strike. If you hold still, it may strike anyway for the same reason. That was what it was like to deal with Voldemort in any fashion, but if he lashed out, it was not in fear. It was for the pleasure of watching someone else die.”

I accused the Headmaster of trying to frighten me away.

Severus Snape assured me that he was reverting to metaphor so as to not do so.
“Lies,” Severus says. “I was more concerned with the welfare of anyone else who might read this paper, like our entire student body.” He and Minerva glance out at the tables, where a lot of white faces are currently staring down at their copies of the *Daily Prophet*.

Then, like any overly curious witch, I asked our Headmaster if he had ever killed anyone.

*I think the manner in which he told me I’d asked him a stupid question was rather polite, considering the circumstances. I retracted the question, as Aurors were still actively retrieving dead Death Eaters from the gorge near Hogwarts, where the covered bridge was still being rebuilt.*

*This reporter then asked our Headmaster why he’d accepted the proposal of Albus Dumbledore* (pun not intended) *and taken on the job that Dumbledore would soon have no choice but to vacate.*

*“Why not?” he replied.*

*“Why not what?”*

*“Why not?” Headmaster Snape repeated, as if I was being exceptionally dim-witted. “Miss Skeeter, how long have I been a teacher at this school?”*

*For those who do not know, his tenure as a Potions teacher began 1st September, 1982. “Sixteen years, if this school year is included.”*

*“It should be, as I was still teaching.” One gets the feeling he was mocking me. “Why did I spend sixteen years here, Miss Skeeter?”*

*This reporter responded that it left him in a position to act as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix should Voldemort return, a fact verified by Minister for Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt—along with many other surviving members of the Order.*

*“I could have done that anywhere. No. I stayed here because I am a teacher, you idiot. I did not have to remain at Hogwarts to do the exact same job on behalf of the Order. It would have been more difficult, but not impossible.”*

*I did point out that he was not the most beloved instructor that Hogwarts has ever known.*

*“My job,” he emphasized to me, “was not to be liked. It was to keep students alive in an exceptionally dangerous classroom environment. You do not sugarcoat a lesson when a mistake could literally mean a terrible accident would occur. In N.E.W.T.-level classes, there are legitimate risks of death if a student brewing at that level commits a blunder that a third-year student might make. You do not ‘be nice’ to ensure that your students graduate Hogwarts. You teach them so that they are capable of surviving.*

*“Oh, and it should not be necessary for any Hogwarts-graduated witch or wizard to need to visit an apothecary to treat basic injuries because they never bothered how to learn to brew a first-year potion with ingredients available for harvest in most British fields. That it was once common was a failure of our education system.”*

*That part, I did have to look up. No offence meant towards current teacher of Potions to younger students, Horace Slughorn, but classroom incidents and injuries dropped down to and remained at an all-time low during Severus Snape’s entire tenure as Hogwarts’ sole Potions teacher.*
“You. Don’t. Say.”
“Severus, be nice.” Minerva lets out an irritated huff of air. “And do not give me that look, either.”

_The purchasing of basic home remedies also dropped to an all-time low—not that any of our shopkeepers in the British Isles will likely thank the Headmaster for this._

_Our Headmaster then asked me—politely, even! if I would mind departing so he could resume work on the restoration of Hogwarts, as all other competent magical workers on site were doing. I was adult enough to ignore the insult, as I now had other things to research…_

**Who is Severus Prince, formerly Snape?**

_It took quite a bit of this reporter’s hard work to discover anything useful that has not already been said before. Our Headmaster was born to Pure-blood witch Eileen Ruth Prince and one Muggle Tobias Joseph Snape of Cokeworth, England. Dear Eileen was not legally disinherited by her family for the marriage, but she was publicly ostracized, leaving her to raise a magical child in a distant Muggle village far from London._

_It is in Cokeworth that Severus Prince Snape would meet one Lily Evans, a woman who would eventually become famous as Lily Potter, mother to the Boy Who Lived—_

Severus shoves his chair back and stands up. “I have class,” he says, and leaves the table.

He receives company fifteen minutes before the start of the hour. “It wasn’t going to stay a secret forever, you know.”

Severus glares at Harry. “What are you doing here?”

“Read the _Prophet_, thought it might be a good idea to make certain you weren’t off to kill Rita Skeeter.” Harry hands him a Muggle coffee with a stupid plastic lid. “Not as good as anything from the Press upstairs, but I was short on time.”

“I am really, really considering it,” Severus growls, prying off the lid and incinerating it so there is no plastic waste lingering around Hogwarts.

“To be fair, it’s probably the classiest article that woman has ever written in her entire life,” Harry points out. “At least she didn’t try to imply romance between you and Mum, like she did between myself and Hermione in fourth-year. That was funny.”

Severus drinks semi-decent coffee and tries not to sulk. “All right; I am _less_ inclined to immediately murder her.”

Jade comes sliding to a stop at the entryway to the classroom. “Oh, you went an’ stopped him!” she complains. “I wanted t’see reporter potion!”

Harry glances at her. “Are we absolutely _certain_ she’s not related to the Prince family somehow?”

“Some days I honestly wonder.”

“Not a chance,” Jade declares. “Neither o’you know style even if it bites y’on the arse.”
Severus rolls his eyes. “Don’t you have anything better to do?” he asks them.

Jade shrugs. “Don’t go’ t’spy on Transfiguration for another hour, at least.”

Harry is glancing around the room. “Is Monday still for sixth-year N.E.W.T.s?”

“Yes.”

When Harry turns around to face Severus, there is a wide smile on his face. “You could always teach them how to brew Literal Wit-Sharpening Potion.”

“That, Harry Potter, is exceptionally Slytherin of you.”

Harry grins back. “Well, apparently we were both Sorted wrong, so someone’s got to keep up with tradition.”

“What’s Literal Wit-Sharpening Potion?” Jade wants to know.

“Literal flying barbs when you make an intellectual comment,” Harry explains. “Oh, and it requires a significant number of ground-up scarab beetles…and nobody has to mention what type of beetle was used today, do they?”

“Fine. But you have to stay and assist,” Severus tells Harry.

“What? Why?”

“Because that one is yours,” Severus retorts. “I could figure out how to brew it, but I refuse to make educated guesses in front of sixth-year dunderheads.”

“Wait. He made a literal wit-barb potion an’ you didn’t?” Jade asks in disbelief.

Severus glances at her. “I always thought words were cruel enough on their own. He’s the one creative enough to add in flying hooked thorns.”

“Came in handy during skirmishes. Witty comment, screaming Death Eaters,” Harry says cheerfully. “What?” he continues, when he realizes Jade is staring at him.

“You’re scarier n’he is,” Jade says. “I really don’t ge’ how th’ tykes here think he’s scariest. That’s all you, mate.”

“It is not! It was bloody useful!”

“Just…just go write it down on the chalkboard,” Severus instructs, and then puts his head down on his desk.

Jade gives him a nudge. “You all right there, Sev?”

“I am desperately trying to gain enough self-control so that I am not laughing when my students arrive. Desperately. Please leave.”

“All right,” Jade says, patting his shoulder. “I’m off. You’ll still terrify th’ buggers if you’re laughing into your desktop when they come in.”

“That really didn’t help.”

“Syringe bulbs!” Harry sings out.
“DAMMIT, HARRY!”

It’s a minor miracle that he manages to get his expression back to something appropriately impassive by the time his sixth-years start drifting in. It helps that most of their attention is now riveted on Harry Potter, who is sitting on a table, holding a large jar of scarab beetles in his lap, and grinning like a madman.

* * * * *

On Wednesday, Severus leaves instructions in the Muggle Studies classroom for his seventh-year class to meet him outside Hogwarts’ front gates. By the time the last of them rush forward, he is staring at his pocket watch in complete disapproval.

“Sorry, sir,” Austin Greely gasps out, his hands on his knees as he leans over to catch his breath. “Reiko and I got out of breakfast late and had to rush off to change clothes.”

“And then I couldn’t find my purse,” Miss Sibazaki says, glaring at Greely.

“Don’t exactly have much that’s Muggle wear,” Hanley says, looking doubtful.

Every student has either pulled on Muggle clothing they already own, or stripped off their robes and ties to leave themselves in their collared shirts and trousers. “That will pass just fine. You might get odd looks for the formality, though.”

“Is that why you’re not wearing the t-shirt again?” Miss Lovegood asks, smiling.

Severus holds out his arms, revealing the white of his silk button-down shirt. He left waistcoat, jacket, and robes in his office. “I am supposed to be the responsible adult escorting your class.” The only other concession he made was to tie back his hair, which is becoming an acceptable Muggle trend again even among the professional set.

“Field trip?” Miss Yoshioka perks up at once. “I’ve not been on a field trip since primary school!”

“What the bloody hell is a field trip?” Halkirk asks.

“It means we leave the school by means of Port Key to visit a Muggle establishment. I told you all that I was going to introduce you to real Muggle technology being actively used, and I meant it. We’ll be gone for several hours, but I will have you back in time for your next class.”

The expression on Mallory’s face is comical. “Uh—how?”

Severus lifts the Time-Turner out from beneath his shirt. “If I have to explain what this is, you are all failing this class on general principle.”

“Time-Turner!” Miss Weasley looks excited. “How did you get one, Professor?”

“I might have told the Ministry that it would be used for academic purposes and thus needed to borrow one.” Severus tucks it back under his shirt, out of sight. “I might also have neglected to mention that a Time-Turner is supposed to be part of the school’s standard inventory of magically necessary supplies for occurrences such as these, and for some reason, we were lacking one.” He smiles. “I hope they’re not expecting to receive it back.”
Severus holds out his chosen Port Key, a chipped mug he borrowed from the faculty lounge. “You’ll arrive in Diagon Alley. Do try to land gracefully…and barring that, try not to land on anyone.”

Everyone manages to do so except Kettletoft, who bungles the landing and nearly crushes a goblin. “Sorry!” Kettletoft gasps, bright red with embarrassment. “I’m really sorry!”

“Port Keys,” the goblin replies, rolling his eyes. “Well! Come along, then!” Shessilli says, directing for them to follow the goblin to a table. The goblin clambers up onto the bench before sitting down on the table itself. “Currency exchange, Wizarding to Muggle.” The goblin scowls. “Don’t you fools all just stare at me. First up! Now!”

“Uh—” Newbourne says in bewilderment.

“Muggle environment,” Severus reminds them, trying not to roll his eyes. “You might find it useful.”

With that task over with—including a few Pure-bloods touching Muggle money like it’s the most terrifying bit of paper ever encountered—Severus nods at Shessilli. “I’ll have them back in an hour to exchange it back, if they’ve any money left at all. Four more groups after that.”

“Very good, Headmaster,” Shessilli replies, and hops down from the table to return to Gringotts.

“Where are we going?” Miss Amano asks, once they’ve left the safety of the alley and the Leaky Cauldron behind.

“A library,” Severus tells them, grabbing Hanley by the back of his shirt to keep him from crossing the road too soon and being run down by a car. “Thus, you will all be on your absolute best behavior. If you do otherwise, I will turn you in to Madam Pince. This is a N.E.W.T. year. You do not want to lose access to Hogwarts’ library. It would be quite difficult to study.”

Vickers gulps audibly after they cross the street. “Best behavior, absolutely, Professor. Er—should we call you anything different?”

“Why?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know how Muggles handle schooling for kids our age,” Vickers admits.

“First off—leave off using the term Muggle for the duration. I don’t want to have to explain to some offended foreigner that no, you were not using some new derogatory term. Second—all you have to say is that you attend a private school in Scotland, and are in London for a day trip. Otherwise, you’ll be left alone. No wands unless it’s to save your lives, or the life of another. I mean that absolutely. If I have to Obliviate someone because one of you ingrates got lazy, the lazy ingrate is the one who is going to spend a week in detention for violating the International Statute of Secrecy.” He pauses. “Oh, and don’t mention Merlin. He’s still a popular figure in the this world, though he’s considered mythical, and you might find yourself drawn into a conversation that you have no idea how to cope with.

“Now,” Severus continues, once they’ve crossed the street and stepped into the second of three alleys he plans to use for the day. “Everyone gather close, without stepping on me,” he instructs, and pulls out the Time-Turner. Its chain always expands just long enough to encircle whatever it’s being asked to take along. He turns it once, taking them back a half-hour so that it’s nine o’clock. “And now a bus ride.”

“This is a lot more sedate than the Knight Bus,” Miss Weasley comments of their thirty-minute ride down to the British Library at Kings Cross.
“Thank God for that,” Miss Tande says. “That thing always makes me feel like I’m going to leave behind every meal I’ve ever eaten.”

“This is Euston Road,” Severus explains after get off the bus. “If you get separated from the group, find this sign again,” he says, pointing to the bus stop sign and its plastic-enclosed seating area. “The driver will tell you how to get back to Charing Cross Road if you ask nicely, and from there you know how to find the Cauldron again. I will be here multiple times today, so at worst, you might miss a few classes. Or your entire day. In fact, please do not get lost in the first place. It’s annoying.”

He leads them to the British Library, which is a massive building. Madam Pince would be having paroxysms of joy over the collection, but he isn’t sure it’s even remotely safe to unleash her upon the building’s unsuspecting staff.

“Professor Prince!” the bespectacled man comes jogging up to greet him when they enter through the door for the courtyard. “Good to see you again.”

“Hello, Jacob. Ingrates, this is Jacob Olliver, Jacob, these are my eldest students. We come from a school that has a terrible habit of still believing it’s the seventeenth century. You get the dubious pleasure of introducing most of them to computers and the Internet.”

Jacob’s eyes light up as he clasps his hands together. “Fresh meat!”

“Jacob!”

“What?” Jacob adjusts his glasses and looks innocent. “How much detail do I need to go into?”

“I’m good with computers,” Miss Yoshioka says. “We have one at home that I use over breaks and during the summer. I’ll need the least supervision of all of us.”

“The others will probably require a half-hour demonstration for using any of it, but they are fast learners,” Severus says, and grins. “All yours, Jacob.”

“Oh, this is going to be so much fun,” Jacob declares, which makes half of the students go pale.

“And what will you be doing, sir?” Miss Lovegood asks him as the others begin to follow Jacob towards the library’s fairly new computer area.

“I, Miss Lovegood, will be searching for a book. You and Miss Weasley, as the only Heads of House present for this class, will be looking after the others.”

Miss Lovegood tilts her head. “I don’t think that will be very difficult. Enjoy hunting for your book, Professor—oh, and watch out for the isuzhi! They do like older books very much. Father has such a terrible time keeping him out of his papers.”

“I shall indeed be wary, Miss Lovegood,” Severus replies in amusement, and watches as she follows the others. The nargles turned out to be quite interesting, but he’s not in a hurry to discover what an isuzhi is unless it is useful in a potion.

Severus is glad the card catalogue isn’t digital yet, though that option now also exists. He is a traditionalist, even if it is not a magical set of drawers that will spit out the exact card for the book he’s looking for.

There are four different copies of the complete Lord of the Rings on the shelf, as well as multiple copies of the individual books. Severus picks up the collected version of Tolkien’s works and pages through it, frowning. “ Eleven hundred seventy-eight pages, Lily? What kind of story takes a single
group that many pages to complete?” She’d claimed it was about magic, if fictional magic, but the
ideals were quite nice. That had made him suspicious at once, but things had gotten out of hand so
quickly after that spring he’d never taken the time to read the book.

Then he discovers that there is another book matched to the series, called The Hobbit, and then a
third, The Silmarillion, neither of which she’d mentioned. Severus decides to wisely start with the
one Lily had once pestered him about reading, and takes only the collected Lord of the Rings. Then
he’ll worry about a Hobbit and whatever the hell a Silmarillion is supposed to be.

Severus checks on his students. Miss Yoshioka is already happily clicking away with the hand-held
mouse, browsing the Internet with the comfort of someone who long ago made herself at home.
Hanley keeps picking up his mouse and giving it suspicious looks, but when Miss Weasley lets out
an excited squeak and points out that she has found an online Muggle bookstore, he’s too busy trying
to find the same place to worry much about how a mouse works.

“You’re right. They do catch on fast,” Jacob says, approaching Severus. “I will admit, I usually only
see that many suspicious faces when I’m trying to show the old folks how to use e-mail.” He glances
down at the book Severus is holding. “Time for a re-read?”

“No. I’ve never read it before.”

“Really? What about The Hobbit?” Jacob asks.

Severus shakes his head. “Not any of them. A friend suggested it once, but I never got around to it.”

“You are in for a treat, then. It’s one of my favorites.”

Severus glances at Jacob. “You like almost everything.”

“Well, yeah,” the younger man says, shrugging. “That’s what’s so valuable about a good bit of story.
They all have something different to tell us.”

Severus makes certain that none of his students are getting up to mischief, though so far the only
mischief is Miss Weasley’s complaint that she has to have a credit card to buy books, and it is
entirely unfair. Then he settles down into an available chair nearby, flips open the book, and pages to
the first chapter.

‘When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-
first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.

Bilbo was very rich and very peculiar, and had been the wonder of the Shire for sixty years, ever
since his remarkable disappearance and unexpected return. The riches he had brought back from
his travels had now become a local legend, and it was popularly believed, whatever the old folk
might say, that the Hill at Bag End was full of tunnels stuffed with treasure. And if that was not
enough for fame, there was also his prolonged vigour to marvel at. Time wore on, but it seemed to
have little effect on Mr. Baggins. At ninety he was much the same as at fifty. At ninety-nine they
began to call him well-preserved; but unchanged would have been nearer the mark. There were
some that shook their heads and thought this was too much of a good thing; it seemed unfair that
anyone should possess (apparently) perpetual youth as well as (reputedly) inexhaustible wealth.

‘It will have to be paid for,’ they said. ‘It isn’t natural, and trouble will come of it!’
“Oh, that’s auspicious,” Severus murmurs, and keeps reading.

He later closes the book and puts it on a re-shelving cart. He gives up; he’s going to have to buy his own copy. He’d prefer to read the story at his own pace, or re-read it, or possibly start scribbling penciled notes in the margin to keep up with the entire bloody cast. No wonder the book has appendices.

Then he requires Jacob’s help in dragging his seventh-years the hell away from the computers. Most of them now want one, which is both accomplishment and impending disaster. Those will be interesting Howlers to receive.

To satiate Ginevra’s crossness at a lack of credit card, he takes them to a bookstore on Charing Cross and lets them loose, warning them that the price tags for books are inside the cover of hardbacks, on the back of paperbacks, and to budget accordingly. They roam about for the next half-hour, though it doesn’t surprise him when Miss Weasley comes back with an entire collection of paperbacks clutched in her arms. “Can so afford it!” she retorts at Halkirk. “Besides, it’s none of your bloody business what I’m reading!”

“You could at least have gotten something historical! I want to know what the—what other people think about the Norman invasion!” Halkirk says, clutching a massive tome labeled 1066.

If Severus also had ulterior motives, using the opportunity to purchase Lord of the Rings, that is his business. It is pleasing to note that every student bought something Muggle, either due to a misguided notion that it is a requirement, or out of genuine interest.

The second alley sees him using the Time-Turner to take them back to nine-thirty; he has them back at Hogwarts by ten o’clock, where they meet the sixth-year class at the gates. Unlike his first class, no one is late. Miss Greengrass, his illegal student Animagus, is all but dancing with excitement, as are Rose Zeller, Alexander William, and Jatin Agarkar.

It is, by the end of each outing, a very, very long day. He kept the timer running on his stopwatch from nine o’clock onwards, and by the time he’s introduced every Muggle Studies student for his rotation to a Muggle library with computers and the Internet (and the bookstore; the timing worked too well), his teaching day has run for seventeen-and-a-half hours.

By the time he gets to the dinner table, he’s at hour eighteen. “Are you all right?” Minerva asks him, both eyebrows raised.

“If I fall face-first onto this plate, please rescue me. I might actually be too unconscious to do it myself.” Voldemort’s death has spoiled him. He’s no longer used to this sort of schedule.

How the hell did he do this for nearly eighteen years? Merlin, how?

Severus gets through the meal and then makes his way down to his old dungeon quarters. Sirius catches up at a run and then starts pacing with him. “How did the outings go?”

“Surprisingly? Very, very well. Jade is going to have her hands full.”

“Pre-vengeance. Well-plotted,” Sirius observes, grinning. “By the way—we’re all wondering why the hell you still live down here, instead of up in the Headmaster’s tower.”

“It seems foolish to relocate when this might be my last term,” Severus replies.

Sirius gives him an odd look. “Last term? Are you quitting the post?”
“The Board of Governors is reforming, Sirius. They have no reason to see me continue in this position. I suspect it will go to Minerva. She’s suited to it, and already knows what to expect from assisting me during Voldemort’s occupation of Wizarding Britain.”

“Huh.” Sirius looks thoughtful. “I suppose that makes sense. Do you actually want the job?”

Severus pauses with his hand on the door to his quarters. The first week of this new term has gone exceptionally well, better than he had any right to expect. He enjoyed the Muggle Studies rota, even if he’s glad it is only two classes instead of the entire year. He prefers his lighter Potions course load, which grants him the older students instead of the more patient, repetitive instruction the younger students really do require. The duties of Headmaster are not a burden, even if some of them are odd.

“Strangely enough? I do. I wouldn’t have believed it two years ago, but…” Severus trails off.

“You’re suited to it,” Sirius says, which causes him to look at the other man in surprise. “You are. You’ve seen the absolute worst, and the absolute best, of what the students of Hogwarts are capable of. You know what it’s like to be the bullied outcast, and to have to act the part of the bully yourself.”

Severus frowns. “I wasn’t acting.”

“Pigs are flying right now. I’ll bet I can find them if I look out the window.”

“Please go fuck the werewolf. I am going to bed,” Severus announces, turning his back on Sirius. He takes a certain amount of pleasure in shutting the door in Sirius Black’s laughing face.
Severus gradually begins to get used to the idea of teaching without needing to hold onto the persona of most-hated individual in the school. It was a title he was proud of while it lasted, but it’s a tiring façade to maintain…and he doesn’t have to.

It doesn’t mean he’s nice. There is no place for nice in a Potions classroom. His exacting standards in that regard do not slip at all, though he no longer has to be the Bloody Bat at the same time.

Speaking of.

“Mister Peakes,” he says, not turning away from his inspection of Miss Branstone’s cauldron. “What is it you are about to add to your potion?”


“Interesting. Continue, Miss Branstone,” Severus says, turning around to face Peakes. The Gryffindor team Beater looks like he’s expecting an explosion. The problem is that he expects it from the wrong direction.

“Why?” Severus asks.

“Well…the instructions call for unfertilized goose eggs, swift-boiled and crushed before adding them whole. But gooseberries actually interact really well with the crushed Tentacula seeds.”

“They do,” Severus allows, “but Mister Peakes: what else is in your current brew?”

“Uhm—dragonfly wings, crushed beetle horns, doxy eggs, bursting mushrooms, and salamander blood?”

Severus takes a breath. Fifth-year class. Not N.E.W.T. class. “Mister Peakes, how do gooseberries interact with a mixture of doxy eggs and salamander blood?”

“They…uh.” Mister Peakes’s eyes widen. “They explode?”

“Quite. What do you think would happen if this particular potion were to explode, coating yourself and your fellow students in an Advanced Fire Protection Potion that has been altered by gooseberries?”

“Nothing good?” Peakes ventures.

“I suppose that depends on where flaming ice and hypothermia rate on your scale of inconvenience,” Severus replies dryly. Peakes flinches and quickly scrapes the gooseberries off to the side of his workspace instead of into the cauldron. “Class, pay attention: Mister Peakes has just demonstrated why it is so very, very important to listen to everything—everything—I ever say to you while inside this classroom. Except for last year, all of you have been my students for three different terms, and this is now the fourth. I am fond of experimentation, but do not perform those experimentations unless you are doing two things. The first—know exactly how every single ingredient blends with another, and that you also understand how what you’ve already combined may interact with what you add. The second—where are your shields, Mister Peakes?”

“Shields?” Peakes squeaks.
“Protego is a Charm that you all learn early in your education, and should most certainly be masters of it by your fifth year.” Severus glares at Peakes. “If you are going to potentially make dangerous blunders, it is a simple matter for a fifth-year student to set up shielding around their cauldron!”

“Can he blow it up anyway?” Ackerley of Ravenclaw asks. “I mean—for the sake of learning the subject. I’d really like to see the effect.”

Severus crosses his arms and regards Peakes. “Well? You were in such a hurry to experiment with this potion. Shields, you dunderhead.”

Peakes blinks a few times in bewilderment. “Uh—okay, Professor.” The shields he erects are not the finest work ever performed, but will direct the potion towards the ceiling. Then Peakes scoops up the gooseberries, wisely places them into a ladle, and drops them into his cauldron.

The resulting burning ice gout upwards is quite satisfying. The fact that it snows onto his students for the rest of the class period is merely a bonus.

“That is actually really neat. Not the burning icy death part,” Cauldwell says. “But the aftereffects. Is there a way to alter it so we get the snow without the impending doom?”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Congratulations, Mister Cauldwell. You have just created the homework for today’s class. I want at least two feet from each of you on ways in which to either eliminate the hypothermic, deadly aspect of the potion that Mister Peakes has crafted, so that the result is mere snow, or I want you to tell me how you would create an entirely new potion that makes only harmless snowfall after the final ingredients are added.”

“That sounds like fun,” Wolpert says. “What’s the catch?”

“You get to demonstrate the working version during our next class. Your final grade on the project will depend on how successful you are, so research your options carefully.” Severus removes his pocket watch and checks the time. “Class is over in five minutes. Please clean up after yourselves and vacate this room. I will see you all here again on Tuesday.”

He’s leaning back in his chair, feet propped up on his desk, when he realizes one student has not yet departed. “Yes, Mister Peakes?”

“Well, Professor, I—I’m wondering why you didn’t…you know. Yell at me.”

Severus looks over at Peakes, who is nearly white in the face. “Make no mistake, and feel free to inform the others: had you added that ingredient and caused the incident I described, I would be angry, and I would have made certain that you knew it. This is an O.W.L. year class, and you were careless both in your research, and in not protecting yourself or your classmates with simple shielding charms. If those blunders are avoided in the future, then no, I will not yell, scream, shout, or howl. I am here to teach you dunderheads how to brew effective potions. That’s all. Most of your classmates will not make it to N.E.W.T.-level because they lack the patience to research a potion properly, to truly discover all the traits of every ingredient. You are ready and willing to experiment, Mister Peakes, which shows you have the potential to be one of those few who make it to my sixth-year Potions class. Be more cautious—be studious—and you might surprise yourself.”

“But I’m a Gryffindor,” Peakes whispers.

“And I am Headmaster of this school, not Head of Slytherin House. That job belongs to Professor Slughorn. I no longer play those games, Mister Peakes.” Severus waves his hand towards the door when Peakes just stares at him. “Go. I’m not writing you a late pass for your next class because you
stood there gawping too long.”

“Uh—yessir,” Peakes says, and scrambles out of the room.

* * * *

Jade takes her round of Muggle studies on the sixteenth, twenty-third, and thirtieth, blames Severus for everything, and then says it’s the best fun she’s ever had teaching anyone. She leaves the castle to go back to London afterwards, a necessary return to the research she’s conducting to eventually earn her doctorate.

Aurora Sinistra takes the next rota, which is how the entire student body finally learns that their Astronomy instructor is a Muggle-born witch. No one is fool enough to try and use her birth status against her, not after the respectable body count she left in her wake during the Battle of Hogwarts.

Harry has the next set, the twenty-first and the twenty-eighth of October. Granger hasn’t arrived yet for her set beginning on the fourth of November, so Harry remains in Hogwarts for the weekend Feast.

Hallowe’en that year falls on a Saturday. Severus tells the Heads of Houses that anyone third-year and up with a signed permission slip for other Hogsmeade visits can head into the village for the day. By evening meal, the castle is full of sugar-crazed fiends. Severus wisely hid in his office for all the daytime shenanigans and pranks, but he cannot skip the Hallowe’en Feast.

The students are used to him eating and departing, which is what he did last year—for multiple reasons. When Severus instead chooses to stand up at the end of the meal and step forward, it gains him immediate, undivided attention.

“I used to like Hallowe’en,” he says. “It always felt like the one time of year when I could be absolutely, purely myself, and it was accepted—maybe even welcomed. Then I got older, and realized that it wasn’t true.”

Severus glances up at the carved pumpkin lanterns floating in the air, holding that evening’s candles. “Then my best friend died on this day in 1981, and minor irritation bloomed into full-fledged loathing. But,” he continues, before too many faces can fall into dismay, “that was a very long time ago, and the person who killed her is exceptionally dead. That is true for many of us now, if on different days, and our losses are for different people.

“Tomorrow is the old Gaelic New Year. Tonight is the time the Gaels always reserved for remembering what came before. Hence, our traditions for telling ghost tales on this day. We remember the dead, for good or ill, for laughter or sorrow.”

Sir Nicholas falls through the ceiling above the Gryffindor table. “Are we telling stories yet? I didn’t want to miss out!”

Severus inclines his head. “Nearly there.”

“Don’t you even start.”

“Sir Nicholas has always had a great fondness for ghost stories, given that he is one.”
“Quite right,” Nicholas says proudly.

“Indeed. One would have no inkling as to where that particular attachment came from.”

Nicholas’s smile falters before he dramatically draws himself up and points at Severus. “That,” he declares, “was not the slightest bit amusing!” Then his head flops over to one side.

“I think most of these children disagree with you,” Severus observes, glancing at tables filled with laughing students. The Friar of Hufflepuff joins them before they’ve quieted, though Nicholas still looks to be in the middle of a snit—false or genuine, Severus can’t tell. He does notice Peeves peer through the wall, look sadly at the lack of ghost above the Slytherin table, and disappear again.

“Where are our ghosts, then?” Agarkar asks, glancing up as the Friar floats over to join Nicholas. “We’ve been asking, but Sir Nick and the Fat Friar just told us to wait for Hallowe’en.”

“It’s a bit of a tradition, though it hasn’t been observed since I replaced the previous Gryffindor Ghost,” Nicholas says. “It’s been long enough that I’d forgotten all about it.”

Severus nods. “And since Mister Agarkar brought it up: the ghost most commonly known to you ingratiates as the Fat Friar would like for me to remind you that he has a given name and a family name, and that his given name is not Fat. It is Johnathan.”

“Well, Ioannes, actually, but Latin has since fallen out of favor. Johnathan works very well, and was also a good alternative to anything French. They weren’t much in favor at the time, either,” the Friar says pleasantly. “Ioannes of Nottingham, commonly known as The Tuck, thank you.”

“You were not!” one of their third-year Slytherin Muggle-borns gasps in disbelief.

“Wasn’t I?” Johnathan beams at the girl. “I suppose that is for me to know, and for you to wonder about, isn’t it?”

“Don’t tease,” Severus reminds the man.

“Someone please just tell us where the Bloody Baron went, and yes, I meant the pun!” Wolpert yells.

“Then this is your first ghost story, and after that it becomes someone else’s job,” Severus replies. “In the eleventh century, a great witch bore two daughters. The elder happily married a local man, and had a great passel of children. The younger was well-known for her beauty, but rejected all suitors, for she would have much preferred to be known for her wisdom.

“Instead, everyone first looked to her mother as the wisest witch in the land. In a fit of jealousy, the younger daughter stole a great gift of her mother’s and fled the island. She did not stop running until she was lost somewhere in the Mediterranean, wild country to the north of Greece. Only then did she put that stolen treasure upon her head—her mother’s Diadem of Wisdom.”

“Rowena Ravenclaw,” Ackerley whispers. “Ravenclaw’s Diadem.”

“The moment she put on the stolen Diadem, Helena Ravenclaw realized at once that she had done something exceptionally foolish. In a fit of despair, she took off the Diadem and hid it. She was too ashamed to even consider returning home…something the Diadem would have convinced her was the wiser path to choose, had she continued to wear it.”

“Aw, man. I never knew any of this about the Grey Lady,” Miss Quirke murmurs.

“I did,” Miss Lovegood returns. “She was quite lovely to talk to.”
“The Grey Lady didn’t speak to anyone,” Miss Amano retorts.

“The Grey Lady spoke to whom she chose,” Severus interrupts. “In this castle, Rowena Ravenclaw was concerned when her daughter disappeared—even more so when she realized that the Diadem had disappeared along with her. Fearing for Helena’s safety, Rowena dispatched Edgar, the Baron of Wizarding York, to retrieve her.”

“Oh. Oh, no,” Miss Sibazaki gasps, and then places both hands over her mouth.

“Edgar was successful in locating Helena, but she was still ashamed, and did not want to face her mother and the potential consequences of her actions. Edgar, who had courted her and been rejected by her once before, fell into a rage at her refusal to join him. When he realized that he’d killed her, he turned his blade upon himself.

“Then, two ghosts awoke alone in a foreign land. Helena was consumed by the need to apologize to her mother; the Baron was consumed by remorse. Together they went back to Hogwarts, but for Helena, it was too late—Rowena had died a month before.”

“Absolutely tragic,” Johnathan says sadly. “I was still alive at the time. Most heartbroken sound I’d ever heard—and young ones, by then, I’d heard quite a number of them.”

“Helena became the ghost of Ravenclaw’s Tower, unwilling to leave it. She hoped to make up for her actions by watching over her mother’s favorite students. The Baron, a student of Salazar Slytherin, took up the same post for his old teacher’s favorites. They both would have continued on this way, unchanging, except for one thing.”

“Tom Riddle talked the Lady into telling him where she’d hidden the Diadem,” Miss Lovegood interjects in a soft voice.

“And by the time Helena realized what Voldemort had done to the Diadem, it was far too late.” Severus glances around, privately discouraged. He’d been trying for ghost story, not crying story. “The Baron found Helena weeping over this misfortune, and it was over this treachery that they finally mended the rift that had separated them in life and in death. It became their sworn task to see to it that the Diadem, corrupted by Voldemort and never again capable of being what it once was, be found and destroyed.”

“The Diadem is no more. Voldemort is dead. The Grey Lady and Edgar of York have not been seen because they no longer had reason to linger.”

“Why are you lingering, then?” Miss Branstone asks the Friar.

Johnathan shrugs. “I like it here.”

“What ’bout you, mate?” Dennis Creevy asks, the first bit of active participation Severus has witnessed from the boy since his older brother’s death.

“I am not leaving until I finally get invited to join the Headless Hunt,” Nicholas says crossly.

“I guess you’ve got quite an attachment,” Miss Weasley says, grinning up at her House Ghost.

“Oh, now that is—look what you’ve started!” Nicholas accuses Severus.

Severus lifts his hands. “It isn’t my fault that someone else was incapable of finishing the job.” While Nicholas sputters incoherently, he turns his attention back to the students. “The same applies to Miss Myrtle Elizabeth Warren, better known to most of you as Moaning Myrtle. With her murderer dead,
she had no reason to remain. The lavatory she haunted is now free of prying eyes unless you choose to bring them with you.”

“It’s like the school’s emptying out of ghosts,” Toazer comments.

“Not quite.” Severus glances behind him. “Filius?”

Filius Flitwick stands up and then hops into his chair to be more visible. “During the war, in which we fought and defeated Voldemort at last, we suffered many losses prior to the Battle of Hogwarts. One of those was a man who was once of my own House. Unlike some that fell here at Hogwarts to safeguard this castle, my student was able to live a full life, and had a decorated career. He died in defence of the whole of Wizarding Britain, though if he’d lived to see the battle here, he would have been right out on the front lines.

“And then…” Filius smiles proudly. “When the Hallows called, he came here, and helped to destroy those who still threatened us. Instead of departing afterwards, he chose to remain. Students, you have a new ghost of Ravenclaw Tower.”

“Sorry’m late. This floatin’ thing takes a lot t’get used to,” Alastor Moody says as he emerges from the wall behind the Hufflepuff table.

“Our House Ghost is a badass,” Woodbridge whispers in surprise.

“And wise to your tricks. Pun intended. Seems to be a theme tonight or something.” Moody says, glancing at Severus. “Thought I’d hang about a bit. That doorknocker is going soft on you lot.”

“Alastor, you used to torment the doorknocker into letting you in because it couldn’t answer your riddles,” Filius says, frowning.

“Like I said! Soft!” Moody declares.

“Horace.”

Horace makes a displeased noise. “Now Severus, that one was your student far longer than they were mine!”

Severus lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t turn around to reply. “Horace Slughorn, do your duty and act as your Head of House, or I will throw you out of the nearest window.”

“Can we do that anyway?” Greely asks, smiling.

“Don’t tempt me.”

Horace finally lets out a sigh and pushes his chair back to stand once Filius has reseated himself. “I’d dearly like it to be otherwise. Unlike Auror Moody, this young one had an entire life ahead…but I refuse to speak ill of her sacrifice. She chose to act in defence of her House and of this school. It is the students of my House she still wishes to protect.” Horace raises his hand in the direction of the far wall. “Slytherins, your new House Ghost.”

Daphne Greengrass refuses to enter through a wall or the ceiling, choosing instead to simply incorporate directly above and to the side of her House table—right next to her sister. “Hallo,” Astoria says, smiling up at her. Severus is very glad that Astoria learnt of Daphne’s continued presence at the beginning of the year, rather than having the idea sprung upon her tonight.

“Hello, baby sister,” Daphne replies. Her blonde hair has been unbound and allowed to fly free in
what Helena would have considered properly spectral form, and she abandoned her school uniform for a silver dress. Her eyes are no longer blue, but lamplight green in honor of her House.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, you daft buggers,” Daphne snaps, noticing that half of the Slytherins look to be on the verge of blubbering. “I made my choice, and it was a damned good one.”

“Does that fulfill your qualifications for rounding out Hogwarts’ necessary ghosts, Mister Toazer?” Severus asks.

Toazer of Gryffindor nods rapidly. “Yes, sir! Excellent ghosts, sir!”

Severus glances back and forth. “Are you more afraid of Madam Greengrass, or of Auror Moody?”

“Can’t it bloody well be both of them?” Halkirk asks, wide-eyed.

“Hah!” Moody grins. “Still got it.”

“You’re also still missing a leg,” Remus notes. “Couldn’t be bothered to go back and get it?”

Moody gives the werewolf a baffled look. “Why would I wanna go and do something like that? I earned that loss of limb!”

Remus rolls his eyes. “Never mind, then. Severus, sit down. It’s my turn.”

“According to whom?” Severus asks, refusing to smile.

“Minerva’s hat.” Minerva looks put upon as the werewolf explains. “We all drew lots on who went next. Now they get to be exposed to something properly, terrifyingly Welsh for the holiday.”

Severus turns his head and stares at him.

“All right, fine. Minerva declared I’m not allowed to tell them any of the old Irish tales. Too many students refused to sleep for the rest of the night afterwards,” Remus admits. “Though, I did have to do some research to find anything fun. Apparently the biggest haunts in Wales are now currently in the habit of hitching rides in random Muggle automobiles.”

Severus frowns at him. “Why does a ghost need a car?”

“Oh, they’re quite jolly!” Nicholas shouts. “Great fun to ride in.”

“Nicholas, if I find out that you’re behind the increase in unexplained automobile accidents in Garbat, I will have your head.”

Severus seats himself to Nicholas’s undignified shout of, “HEADMASTER, PLEASE!”

“Stop breaking my House Ghost.” Minerva is smiling. “That is also my job.”

“What are you going to tell them?” Severus asks Sirius in a low voice while Remus starts to actually terrifying the life out of the little blighters by informing them of a Welsh ghost who is still in the habit of hanging people to death. Some people just refuse to give up on their careers—Alastor Moody being a new case in point.

“I thought about telling them anything about my uncle,” Sirius says. “Then I realized I wouldn’t sleep at all tonight if I tried that. Maybe I’ll just make something up.”

“You could always re-convince them as to the Shrieking Shack’s haunted validity.”
Sirius thinks about it. “Why?”

“I almost died in that pit. Why not?” Severus counters.

Aurora tells them all about the two armies, Britons and Romans, who occasionally like to invade one of the plains and rehash a few dozen battles. It used to be the anniversary of the sacking of Londinium, but the Ministry finally had to ask them to stop for the sake of London traffic and Muggle safety.

Minerva delights everyone by telling them about an ancient Saxon crypt to the east that is well-known for eating people. “I am not going near any crypts,” Remus says. “I mean, as a general rule it’s just good sense.”

Narcissa tilts her head, smiles, and then replaces Minerva once her tale is complete. She then begins to tell the students about a well located in the cellar of Malfoy Manor: a low and ancient brick circle, water black as pitch that will reflect no light no matter how close a candle or torch is brought to the surface. The cellar doors are locked at night, and no one dares enter the room. If an ear is put to the floor above the cellar, one can hear something moving around down there, like rotten flesh sliding along the floor.

“Never mind. I’m not sleeping, anyway,” Sirius confirms, staring at Narcissa in shock.

“Is she exaggerating?” Marchbanks asks, head tilted in curiosity.

Severus shakes his head. “No. It used to be one of Voldemort’s initiation ceremonies.”

Narcissa then begins to describe exactly that. The lucky victim, tossed downstairs at dusk before the cellar doors are chained shut and the door magically sealed. If one is still alive in the morning, they are fortunate. If one is not...

There are still so many bodies unaccounted for from the first war.

William has turned white. “You, Severus?”

“Mm.” Severus nods. He is going to figure out how to get revenge on Narcissa for this; he wanted to sleep tonight, too. “I was seventeen.”

“What did you do?” Pomona asks in horror.

“Warded a circle on the floor, erected a shield, and hid under my fucking cloak. Refused to look at it and hoped it would eventually lose interest and go away. Took all bloody night for it to finally decide to go back into the well.”

“I am skipping this Feast next year,” Bathsheda declares, wide-eyed.

“The hell you are. If I have to be here, so do you,” Severus retorts.

“The most terrifying part of all of this is that you listened to her talk about that well and the creature residing in it, and remained completely impassive,” Horace says.

“It is called practice, Horace.”

Severus is very, very grateful that everyone else manages to come up with less completely traumatizing ghost stories. He’s had enough for the night of being reminded that his entire life would make an excellent horror film. Jade would approve; he does not.
Harry closes out the night by reciting *The Tale of the Three Brothers*—the original version. Antioch, Cadmus, and Ignotus Peverell, and their chance encounter with Death when a bridge unexpectedly collapsed beneath them. Being wizards, they prevailed: Ignotus cast the charm that saved them from plunging into the icy river; Cadmus gathered the wood that rebuilt the bridge beneath their feet; Antioch used magic to shield them from Death’s touch, keeping the brothers from being taken in that moment as they were meant to be. In respect at being so thusly and finely defeated, Death offered each of the brothers a token of his esteem, along with the warning that one day, each token would need to be returned.

“I wonder where he heard this version,” Minerva says under her breath.

“That man stared Death in the face. I imagine they had a lot to discuss,” Rolanda whispers back.

Antioch, fool that he was, asked for a wand that would make him undefeatable in combat. Death granted him the Elder Wand, crafted by Death’s own hand. Antioch lived for another six hours before his habitual bragging saw him murdered in his sleep, the Elder Wand stolen and its curse begun.

Cadmus, still grieving the loss of his betrothed several years ago, asked for a means to speak to her again. Instead of using the gifted tool to console himself and learn that she was well, he could never get over her loss, and longed only to join her. He finally grasped hold of a knife in desperation and slid it over his own throat a few scant weeks before the birth of his only child, borne by his second wife. The stone passed down to his son when the boy came of age. This young man was wiser than his father; he had the stone set in a ring so that it would be more difficult to turn three times in one’s hand.

Ignotus, understanding the nature of how short their lives could be—understanding that they were already meant to be dead—was the boldest one, asking for Death’s own Cloak of Invisibility. Death granted it without saying a word, and left them behind on the reconstructed bridge. Ignotus was the only brother to live a long life, able to see grandchildren and great-grandchildren born. Only when Ignotus was ready to greet Death as a friend did he pass on the Cloak to his last living grandson.

Astoria Greengrass is the one brave enough to ask. “My sister says you stared Death right in the face. What’s he like?”

“They,” Harry corrects, and then stuffs his hands into his robe pockets as he contemplates her question. “And…they’re like the most familiar person you’ve ever known. They’re a complete stranger. They’re an end and a beginning, but it isn’t their task to worry about the beginning part. That’s up to you.”

“You can’t have a beginning after an ending,” Abercrombie says crossly.

“Why not?” Harry replies, and glances at Miss Lovegood. “A circle has no beginning, but that doesn’t keep it from being a circle.” Lovegood beams at him.

“Maybe existence is nothing more than a circle that keeps repeating,” Harry says. “Maybe it’s got a beginning and an end, but it’s such a long path you can’t see the ends while you’re in the middle.

“Either way…why can’t you choose a new beginning? Why not be something new?”
Severus lifted his head from his pillow. Knocking. No.

He starts awake again less than a minute later when the knocking gets more insistent. “Go. Away.”

Pyrrhus looks up from his perch and gives Severus an expression of baleful disappointment. “You have no right to complain. You slept last night.” Granted, he had, too, but he’d cheated and used a Sleeping Draught at half-dose. Otherwise, he couldn’t see anything when he closed his eyes except for Malfoy Manor’s stupid well.

More knocking. Severus contemplates killing his visitor while he grudgingly pulls on a robe and goes to the door.

When he opens it, Harry is standing there. “I still have a reason for not killing you, right?”

Harry holds up the mug from his office. “Free coffee.”

Dammit. “Good enough. That bit about choosing something new was not subtle last night, by the way. Why are you beating my door down on Sunday morning, Harry?”

“I wasn’t trying for subtle.” Harry grins at him. “And I’m here because I found it.”

“Found what? Insanity?” At least insanity does not prevent the brewing of good coffee.

“The house, that’s what! Keep up,” Harry retorts, still grinning.

“House.” Severus thinks about it. “Oh, yes. The no-doubt decrepit pile your great-great-grandfather lost through stupidity.”

“Actually, I have no idea if it’s decrepit or not. I heard what Narcissa said about the well—”

Severus can’t help shivering. Harry is polite enough not to comment. “And?”

“Well, old property documents said that there are two wells on the property to supply water for the house. The structure might be hidden, but the water wouldn’t be. I went dowsing with my wand last night—”

“Puerile jokes aside, you went out. Last night.”

Harry spreads out a map out on Severus’s table. “I couldn’t sleep. Bored out of my mind.”

“You went out wand-dowsing in the English countryside on Hallowe’en,” Severus repeats.


It’s irritating that he can’t come up with a counterargument for that. Why not, indeed? Every Death Eater is accounted for, Voldemort is dead, and even if stray dogs turned up, the man can turn into a ratel.

“All right. Fine.” Severus gives up and resolves to at least enjoy being bribed decently enough. “If you’ve found it, what’s the problem?”

“You’re the only man I know who’d realize right from the start that yes, there is a problem.” Harry is
smiling down at the map. “Right here,” he says, pointing with his finger. “Grove of trees. Flat plain
to the southeast, then onto the Naddle Beck. To the west used to be Haweswater Lake, but that’s
now Haweswater Reservoir. Right here—the water for the estate is at the described northern and
southern points. Nothing visible above ground, but the water is definitely there. The northern one is
an underground spring, but the southern one is supposed to be a well fed by the old lake.”

Severus lowers the mug and wipes sleep-bleariness from his eyes before he looks at where Harry is
pointing. “Southwest of Bampton and Burnbanks. If you really have found the estate, it’s a minor
miracle that it’s not resting beneath one hundred feet of water.”

“I know I’ve found something,” Harry says, and then drops his wand onto the map before briskly
rubbing at his face. He’s still wearing yesterday’s clothes, minus his robes. “The problem is that I
think we both have to be there to get it to recognize ownership.”

“The last living Heirs, however distant, of the Peverell lines.” Severus drinks the rest of his coffee in
recognition of the fact that he no longer has the day off. “Please let me shower and put on real
clothing before we depart.”

Harry waits for him outside of Hogwarts’ front gates, speaking with Rubeus Hagrid. “It’s too bad
you had to introduce the Thestrals so much earlier,” Harry is saying.

“Yeah. Hate it when they’ve learnt it so young,” Rubeus agrees sadly. “But better to understand
what they are than not. Most of the tykes what can see them now…they like them. Find them
comforting beasts, they do.”

“Good morning, Rubeus,” Severus greets him.

“And this ’un!” Rubeus grins. “Unicorns flock to our Headmaster like bees chasin’ a flower!”

Severus glares at him. “And…uh, I wasn’t s’posed to mention that part.”

Harry doesn’t say anything mocking, which is either exceptionally odd or of vast relief. “See you
later, Hagrid,” he says, and then grasps Severus’s arm for the Side-Along Apparition. They arrive
close to a roadside, hidden by a copse of trees, but Severus can see buildings in the distance.

“Where are we?”

“Just outside of Bampton, in Penrith,” Harry replies, taking a quick look around before heading
towards the narrow lane and turning south.

Severus takes off his robes before shoving them into his carry satchel. He’s not sure why he even
bothered wearing them in the first place. “And we’re walking right down the main road…why?”

“I’ve known for about a month that the estate has to be somewhere nearby. They’ve gotten used to
seeing me. Always good to have neighbors, right? Or at least maybe it is. I still have no idea who
lives on either side of 12 Grimmauld Place.”

Severus isn’t entirely opposed to neighbors. Living in Cokeworth is the entire reason he met Lily and
her parents. “What have you told the locals about your reasons for being here?”

“Told them I’m looking for an old family property that’s probably up in the woods, overgrown, and
that the original survey maps are shite,” Harry says. “They’re worried I might lose it to the local
National Park if I find it, but my claim is older.”

The village of Bampton lists a proud population of less than three hundred souls. An ancient factory
sits in the north end, dating to the 1800s, while a long barn is the dominant southern feature. The
The village has a combined bed and breakfast plus a necessities shop, a Muggle post office, a meeting hall, and a tiny repair garage that looks to see everything from cars to tractors. A single telephone booth with fading red paint rests on a corner next to the roadside.

The few people wandering about this early greet Harry like he’s a familiar face. Harry introduces Severus as his good friend. He even sounds like he means it.

“I do mean it, idiot,” Harry says, smiling. “Clear as day on your face,” he explains. “I didn’t need Legilimency for that.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Let’s just go find this dilapidated wreck, all right?”

Once they’re south of the main village, Harry takes the right-hand fork in the road, heading southwest. He waits until the buildings are out of sight, the narrow lane sheltered by overhanging branches, before he cuts west directly through the trees. “It would be easier to fly,” Severus points out.

“Trust me. You’re going to want to be on the ground when we approach. It’s noticeable.”

Severus resigns himself to a long walk and just keeps following a mad Gryffindor through the woods. They break through the trees and bramble a few minutes later, stepping out onto the beginnings of a broad, bumpy field.

Fifteen steps later and he can feel it—magic bubbling up from the ground and tickling the soles of his feet through his boots. Severus halts in place, turning around once in a full circle. “Thirty hectares. It has to be massive, Harry.”

“It is. I think part of it must have been drowned beneath the reservoir, but I don’t think the house went under.” Harry walks out to the center of the plain and points. “If you keep walking due west through the woods over there, you’ll fall right into the reservoir.”

Harry then turns and leads them north. The feel of old magic gets stronger until they’re standing before a short hill. It’s surrounded by old, overhanging trees on all sides except the southern face.

“Oh, there is definitely something there.” Severus glances back and forth, but he can’t see any hint of magic that would hide a structure from their eyes. “This isn’t my specialty, Harry.”

“I don’t…maybe it doesn’t have to be.” Harry pulls out his wand, putting it in his left hand, before holding out his right hand.

Severus reverses the gesture, holding his wand in his right hand while grasping Potter’s hand with his left. Nothing happens, but he didn’t quite expect it to. “I’ve no idea how to break a Fidelius Charm when the Secret-Keeper is dead. We could just shout Latin at it.”

“Why not?” Harry agrees. “Ostende nobis quae perierit!”


“Show us the House Peverell. Also not doing the trick,” Harry says.

Severus glares at him. “I can see that.”

“No, we can’t see it.” Harry smiles when Severus gives him an irritated glower. “You like my terrible jokes.”
“Harry, I’ve had two hours of sleep. All jokes are terrible, no matter who is delivering them.”

“Deliver.” Harry frowns. “Fideliter nobis traditurus est abscondita magnae domus Peverell!”

The air before them ripples. Severus catches sight of the glass panes from many windows before it’s gone again. “That was close. That was very close” He gives his words some thought, winces at the Latin structure, and tries anyway. “Haeredes sumus, fideliter in domo Peverell!”

“Three tries to break a Fidelius Charm, then,” Harry notes as the shimmering building reveals more of itself before vanishing again. “Any ideas?”


“Quid nos quaeritis, ut reveletur!” Harry shouts out, and then the ancient Fidelius Charm drops entirely.

Severus stares at the manor house. It isn’t as obscenely large as Malfoy Manor, and is built more in keeping with the surrounding environment. It’s a two-storey rectangle dwelling of old, rough-hewn brown stone; the roof is mindful of Spanish tile, and holds a gentle slope in case of heavier snows. The front hosts a double-doored entryway of heavy, foreign wood braced by wide bands of old cast iron; a large area of buried rock makes up a small courtyard before the doorway.

“That’s not dilapidated,” Harry says. Severus shakes his head, realizing they haven’t released each other’s hands, but he doesn’t let go. He’s too busy staring.

“The Peverell clan must have been quite large at one time. A building that size was meant to hold several families—that structure dates to the 1200s.” It’s almost, but not quite, a blasted castle. Whoever lived within its walls relied on magic for defense, not turrets or towers. The front of the building reflects the shine of glass from many windows, far more than would have been traditional from the time period. At each window corner is a small wrought iron design that resembles the Anglo-Saxon variation of the Tree of Life, but the metal does not cover the glass in order to act as protection.

“And it took Parseltongue to finally break the old Charm.” Harry gives him another innocent look when Severus glances at him. “You weren’t looking. No trouble understanding it, right?”

Severus sighs and glances heavenward, releasing the brat’s hand. “No. Do you have any idea how difficult it was to convince myself that I’d imagined the words you spoke in second year during Gilderoy Lockhart’s ridiculous Dueling Club?”

“Uh, no, because I don’t remember that,” Harry points out. “Let’s go inside.”

“Oh, yes, let’s just march right into a building that has been left hidden and unoccupied for one hundred thirty-eight years!”

“Probably an even one hundred forty,” Harry says. “Bogarts, doxies…”

“Rabid house-elves…”

Harry and Severus look at each other. “I’ll call one set if you get the other,” Harry says, and Severus nods. A phoenix Patronus flies off in one direction before disappearing; a unicorn runs down towards the field and vanishes.

Kreacher, Dobby, and Winky appear first. Kreacher’s brows turn down in a fierce scowl as he
notices the house. “I,” he announces, “will not be cleaning that!”

“No, not unless you want to,” Harry says absently. “We’re more concerned that there may be a house-elf population that’s been trapped in there for about a century and a half. Alone.”

Winky and Dobby are horrified. “Alone? No wizards and witches, no Masters or Mistresses?” Winky asks in a fright.

“They’s be so sad,” Dobby says, adjusting one of his socks. “Or…” He glances at Kreacher. “Upset.”

Jade appears a few minutes later, spins in place one too many times, and falls down on her rear. “Oi, tha’ is not gettin’ any better!” she exclaims, letting Severus help her to stand. “What’s th’ pile o’ brick, there?”

“The Peverell Estate. Harry has been looking for it for a while now,” Severus explains. “He insists it’s a co-ownership. I think he’s insane.”

“Knew he was that,” Jade replies, smiling as she adjusts her hat. “But Harry tol’ me it’s th’ house o’ th’ Brothers, not jus’ that Ignotus fellow. Stuck w’another house, Sev.”

Sirius and Remus arrive next by Side-Along Apparition. Sirius looks like he wants to kill someone. “Please tell me this is worth waking up for—fuck me,” he blurts, noticing the two-storey stone manor. “You found it!”

“Yeah,” Harry confirms, just as Hermione arrives and stumbles a few feet before catching herself. “Bloody Apparition!” she mutters, and then glances up at the manor. “Oh, that’s lovely!”

“And probably infested,” Sirius notes, taking out his wand. “Remember how much fun it was to clean out Grimmauld Place so it was even remotely habitable?”

Hermione purses her lips. “We need Weasleys if we’re going to tackle something like that.”

“And food,” Remus says. “Tea. Coffee. I’m not even awake enough for this yet.”

Severus presses his hand to his forehead. “Is there anyone else that you would like to flood this structure with?”

Hermione thinks about it. “Tonks, Oliver, Andromeda, Neville, and Alice. There are vines growing along the side of that house that look like wizarding plant life, and that’s Neville’s specialty. If anything particularly nasty is lurking about, Tonks, Andromeda, and Alice will be useful.”

Severus rolls his eyes and sends his Patronus off again while the house-elves Disapparate to fetch breakfast and caffeine for everyone. “I’m telling Oliver and Nymphadora. I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”

“Weasleys,” Hermione says, a Kneazle Patronus emerging from her wand before sauntering off.

“Alice and Neville,” Remus tells them, his black dog Patronus bounding off into the trees.

The wolf howls once before disappearing. “Andromeda,” Sirius adds.

The house-elves return first, which sees Remus lunging for the coffee in desperation. Severus glares at Jade when she shoves a terrible-smelling sandwich of eggs on toast into his hands.
“You tol’ m’yeself!” Jade says, scowling right back. “No magic on an empty stomach, you!”

The others arrive approximately fifteen minutes, notably without Tonks. “She’s pregnant!” Oliver announces, beaming so hard he might spontaneously combust. “No potential rat-traps like this for her, just basic M.L.E. work until the baby’s born.” Andromeda looks viciously pleased, which eases some of the sadness in her eyes from Ted’s loss.

“Congratulations,” Severus says. His words are echoed by the others while Severus wonders if the world is ready for another Tonks Metamorphmagus.

Molly has Percival, Charles, and Ron with her. The Weasley matriarch still has the pinch of grief around her eyes, as well, but she regards the building with the air of a seasoned professional when it comes to ridding old wizarding buildings of unwanted guests. “Lovely Preservation Charms on the windows,” she says. “Someone added a bit of ward-work onto the spell to keep them from breaking—maybe even something that’s keeping them clean on the outside. I think this would be a right mess, otherwise.”

Neville cracks his knuckles before getting out his wand. “I’ll handle the outside. This will be a nice break from uni—I’ve not gotten to touch a plant in weeks!”

“I’ll go with him,” Alice says. “Plants were my mother’s favorites, too, enough that I remember it’s best to have someone watching your back lest a vine decide to try and take advantage.”

“Kreacher, Dobby, Winky—you three are on house-elf search. Please do not let them eat us,” Harry says.

Dobby looks affronted. “If they’s house-elves in there, they’s be hurtin’ nobody.”

Kreacher sniffs and spits on the ground. “Nobody’s be hurtin’ the Headmaster Bat.”

Severus nods at the elves before looking to the guilty party. “Harry, this was your brilliant insanity. You can open the door.”

Harry grins at Severus and leads the way forward. He is, at least, intelligent enough to check the entry courtyard and the doors for traps of all kinds before daring to put his hand to an ancient, cast-iron handle to pull the door open. Musty air rushes out to greet them, the scent of a house closed up for far too long.

“No mold,” Molly notes at once. “That’s a good sign. It means the charms for structure and preservation held. It’s the potential living creatures that may give us trouble.”

The foyer is large, meant to allow easy passage inside and out when both doors are standing open, and possibly also served as some sort of public area. The floor beneath them is stone, but after a few yards the stone becomes unpainted wooden flooring decorated with ancient carpets that look to be original works from the Middle East.

Severus glances at the color and patterning of the wooden floor. Elder wood. He wonders if it was a decision made before or after the brothers’ encounter with Death.

In front of them is a long hallway that goes straight towards the back of the manor. Bracketing it at the front are mirrored staircases that climb up to the second floor, protected by wrought-iron bannisters that twist like creeping vines. Both first and second floor have hallways that stretch off to the right and left; the walls are simple whitewash covered in complicated diagrams.

“I can’t tell if those are aesthetics, or if that’s old magic,” Ron says.
“Neither can I.” Severus gives the designs a suspicious look. “Remus?”

Remus shakes his head. “I’m not getting anything from them. Given the rugs, though…perhaps they’re Moroccan, or Moorish Spanish wizardry? That roof outside is very specific to the south, even if the walls are meant for English weather.”

“Lookit th’ windows,” Jade says, capturing their attention. “They weren’ like tha’ on th’outside.”

Severus looks over to find thick-leaded stained glass windows that repeat more of the same sorts of unrecognizable patterns. The glass throws spots of color along the hallway floors, much like Albus’s flags in the Great Hall—though here an attempt at true color coordination was made.

“This place was built to be solid, but this isn’t a castle,” Andromeda says. “This was a home.”

“Harry, what are you doing?” Sirius shouts.

Severus turns his head to discover that Harry has climbed several steps and is exploring the edges of the closest odd design with his hand. At his touch, the entire image lights up in shades of blue, green, and gold.

“Harry!”

“I’m fine, Severus. This is beautiful work! I think it’s old wizarding art. Narcissa would love it!”

“Oh, it isn’t just art,” Oliver says in a warning tone.

There are now eight house-elves present, standing in a tight cluster on the wooden floor between the stairs. They are young and old, female and male, all wearing pristine tea cloths of red fabric edged with silver.

“Rabid house-elves,” Ron whispers, grimacing.

Harry comes running down the stairs, sliding to a stop on the floor in front of them. “Hi!”

“You is a Potter,” one of the oldest elves says in a leathery whisper. “You is a Potter, yes?”

“The magic recognizes you,” a younger one says, her eyes wide and awed. “You has to be a Potter!”

“Has you come back?” another ancient female asks, sounding desperate.

Harry looks gobsmacked. “I—yeah. Yes. We’ve come back.”

“We?” the ancient leathery house-elf repeats.

Harry points at Severus. “Descendant of Antioch. He’s got just as much a right to be here as I do.”

The old female pats the older male’s shoulder in amazement. “We were never knowing that any of the other families be surviving.”

“Well, we didn’t do a very good job of it,” Severus replies, trying not to feel unnerved. House-elves will protect this house with every fiber of their being if they feel it’s being threatened. “Cadmus’s line is gone. I’m the last of Antioch’s line—Severus Prince.”

“Prince family!” the old house-elf smiles. “We is knowing of you. Been a long, long time for that, too.”
“Didn’t know the Princes were Antioch’s,” the oldest female says, but her ears are twitching with pleasure.

“I’m Harry James Potter.” Harry holds out his hand to the oldest set of house-elves. “Nice to meet you.” The house-elves give Harry’s hand a curious look before reaching out to take it. “I’m so sorry you were here so long without anyone. My great-great-grandfather died before he could name a Secret Keeper for the house’s Fidelius Charm.”

“Severus,” Remus says in a low voice. “Go touch the other bloody sigil, right now, or we may still have a problem.”

“I do not want to be cursed or disintegrated or…whatever might happen,” Severus retorts.

Remus gives him a dry look. “You’re of the blood, idiot. Touch the damned sigil on the other staircase.”

Severus gives up on anyone having good sense today, himself included, and mounts the stairs. He swallows down nerves and touches the wall just to one side of the image. He senses no magic, no feel of danger. It’s only when his fingers brush over the design itself that it lights up, green and blue with silver lurking beneath.

“Two Masters!” one of the young house-elves cries. “We is having Masters again!”

Severus looks back down at the group. Jade is smirking at him. “Told’ja you’ve got another house, Sev.”

“Shut it, you.”

Harry glances up at the sigil Severus touched, which is still glowing, the paint flowing through the design as if it’s alive. The one on the opposite stairwell is doing the same. “That’s—that’s amazing. What sort of magic is that?”

“Old ways of the Moor wizards,” the oldest leathery house-elf says.

“Ignotus married a Moor witch. We can show you a painting of her!” the eldest female says. “She brings great magic to the house.”

“Ignotus wasn’t Christian. The Peverell brothers were still observing the older religions, even if the local Muggles weren’t.” Harry draws in a breath. “They took the existing house and redesigned it with both types of their magic. That’s why the designs, the glasswork—it’s blended magic.”

The house-elves all start nodding. “You can talk to the house,” the eldest female confides. “Everywhere here, there are signs of the Peverell and the Karâni’s seal. You be touching them, and they be doing what you say!”

“This is so cool,” Hermione squeals. “Historical magic that’s been lost, and this house! This house is amazing!”

“That is Hermione Granger,” Harry says when the collection of house-elves stare at her. “She’s a Muggle-born witch and scholar attending university, and she is my friend. Everyone standing with us is a friend to the family.”

“Friend to the family,” the house-elves all repeat.

Severus’s skin absolutely crawls when he feels magic drop down from the ceiling, marking everyone
inside the house. He hears a startled yelp from Neville Longbottom outside, followed by Alice’s vicious swearing; they must have been included in that odd…claiming.

“Uh—okay. That was different,” Ron says, scrubbing at his bare forearm with his free hand.

“Friend of the family being important,” one of the young house-elves says. “If we knows the friends, we can be helping them.”

The elves escort them to two paintings that face the first floor’s western wing. One is of Ignotus, recognizable to Severus due to the man’s presence in his dream, and by Ignotus’s resemblance to his older brother Antioch. He is a stout, sensible-looking man, possibly of Saxon descent. The painting next to him holds the woman the elves call Karâni.

“She looks an awful lot like Edessa Sakndenberg, doesn’t she?” Remus notes. “Edessa had paler skin, but otherwise…”

The house-elves all look intensely proud. “Edessa is being one of the Peverell descendants. She married in with the Sakndenbergs after they come here from Cologne.”

Ignotus adjusts a cape that none of them can see. “Well, hello there. It took long enough for someone to come back here.”

“Sorry about that. My great-great-grandfather…well, it’s sort of a long story,” Harry offers, but Ignotus just nods.

“I knew he would not live long beyond dear Lucretia’s death. It broke the lad’s heart,” Ignotus says, and Karâni nods. She is a graceful witch in a blue silken hajib, dark-skinned and dark-eyed, with the slim, narrow features and profile of Nefertiti.

“He did not pass on the Fidelius Charm in time. Tell me, how did you get through?” she asks. Her voice is a gentle murmur with power lurking behind it, despite the fact that she is merely a portrait. If her painting still holds that kind of impression, then Karâni herself must have been an exceptionally powerful witch.

“It took three declarations and then a bit of Parseltongue,” Harry explains. “I guess that’s part of the family line, after all.”

Ignotus smiles. “Salazar was a great-great-grandfather of mine. A good man, he was.”

“He left a fucking basilisk in Hogwarts,” Severus says flatly.

“A basilisk? A basilisk is meant to be a great protector,” Ignotus says, and then studies the expression on Severus’s face. “Ah. I see. It was not put to such use, then.”

Harry shakes his head. “No. The last of Cadmus’s line was a complete prick. He made the basilisk do….well, things I don’t remember. I kind of missed that part.”

“The basilisk murdered at least one student, and quite possibly others,” Hermione says. “We always knew about Myrtle, since she didn’t leave until that Heir died, but the records for the era are half-scrubbed out. I think someone was covering his tracks.”

“Such a horrible thing,” Ignotus murmurs. “Salazar would have been so disappointed.”

Severus is not convinced. He’s seen no evidence to counter the idea that in his dotage, Salazar Slytherin was anything other than what Jade would declare to be completely mental.
Karânî, meanwhile, has been glancing back and forth between Harry and Severus. There is something to her gaze that Severus isn’t sure he trusts.

Then she smiles. “The Houses will once again be joined together. The Peverell line will be whole.”

“Uh…sure,” Harry says, while Severus glares at the witch in the painting. That felt far too much like prophecy. “I mean, this house is gigantic, and he’s Peverell-descended. I already told Severus that half of this place is his.”

“Did you.” Karânî looks pleased. “You are both welcome. You and all the friends of this family that your home has now marked.”

They slowly investigate the rest of the house. There are four separate wings, meant for four different families. The wing opposite what must have once been Karânî and Ignotus’s home hosts a portrait of a man and woman, middle-aged, in an older style of dress.

“Ignotus’s parents,” Molly says in recognition. Both portraits nod and smile, though neither of them speak. They watch the processional, but otherwise seem far too concerned with each other than to bother with visitors.

The kitchen is a public space, and two doors lead beyond its walls. One door takes them into an indoor space large enough to act as a damned ballroom. Harry glances around the bright room with its thick glass walls and paneled wood and glass ceiling, which lets in a tremendous amount of light. “Laboratory. A big one.”

Severus smiles. “That is a sensible Potions Master speaking.”

“Well, I’m writing a bloody book on the subject. I might as well act the part.”

The second door leads outside, revealing a larger stone courtyard. Beyond the courtyard are ancient willow trees bending over a grassy trail leading off into the woods. The rest of the hilltop features every sort of magical tree recognized by wizards at the time: oak, ash, beech, yew, box elder, ebony, cherry, apple, pear, alder, hazel, larch, laurel, maple, hawthorn, elm, walnut, and blackthorn. Many of the trees are supporting ivy vines, holly berry vines, and morning glories of varying colors. In precise rows planted in beds skirting opposite sides of the courtyard are flowering plants, herbs, and an entire section devoted solely to magical plants.

“This is one hell of a garden,” Neville says in appreciation. “No walls to keep the wildlife out, either.”

“We be needing no walls,” one of the house-elves says, patting Neville’s arm. “We tell them to stay away, and they do.”

“Neat. Is that a teachable trick, or just house-elf magic?”

When they can pry Neville away from the garden long enough to go back inside, it’s to continue investigating the house. House-elves or not, Severus is still alert for unwanted guests. The upstairs east wing is guarded by another set of portraits. “That’s Antioch,” Severus says. “I saw him often enough at Godric’s Hollow, haunting his own bloody tombstone.”

“My own tombstone?” Antioch shakes his head. “I do hope I had a good reason for that.”

His wife, a woman with a stern visage and Severus’s own black eyes, smiles at her husband. “Since when did you ever need a good reason for doing anything, my love?”
“That is an excellent point, Idonea.”

The upper western wing has a facing portrait of Cadmus Peverell. He has the jewel-blue eyes that Tom Marvolo Riddle eventually inherited, but his demeanor is sad, and he refuses to speak. To one side of him is a portrait of a dark-haired, pale-eyed woman who fades into mist if she is looked upon too long; to his other side is the portrait of a woman with red hair and a resigned frown on her face.

“You must have borne Cadmus’s Heir,” Andromeda says to the portrait.

The woman nods. “I did, aye. M’name’s Eufemie of Stirling.” She sighs. “M’damned fool of a husband didn’t even wait around for the birth of our babe.” Cadmus’s expression grows even more morose, and he looks away from his Scottish wife.

Everywhere in the building’s public hallways, there are portraits. Those downstairs reflect the whole of Ignotus’s line, all the way down to Harry’s great-great-grandfather Ioanes and his wife, Lucretia. They’re sharing a portrait, embracing each other as they gaze down at Harry.

“Family,” Harry whispers, staring up at them. “I’ve got—there was a painting you rescued from the house, Severus. Of my Mum and Dad.”

“Was there?” He doesn’t recall removing any painting of Lily and James from the home, though there was a framed portrait that held Fleamont and Euphemia Potter, James’s parents.

“It was a rolled-up canvas in a protective tube, like a map case. I think they were setting it aside to… you know. Add another person.” Harry shoves his hands in his trouser pockets. “It’ll be nice to put those paintings up somewhere. It’s just too bad that there isn’t one of Henry and Elizabetha. Then the entire lineage would be here.”

“Is it that important?” Severus asks, not sure he wants to hear the answer.

“Historically? Sure,” Harry replies, but then he frowns. “I don’t—Severus, my family is everyone who is here with us, and a few who aren’t. I might be a Potter, but I’ve never…I’ve never really experienced what that’s like.”

“That’s all right, lad,” Ioanes says. “Family has always been about what you make of it.”

“A Prince,” Lucretia muses, smiling down at Severus. “You and Harry would be…oh, what year is it?”


“Hmm. Five hundred seventy years since Antioch got his foolish self killed, then.” Lucretia seems to be thinking. “Severus and Harry would most likely be first cousins twenty-three times removed.”

“At that point, I don’t think it counts as a familial relation so much as an exceptionally distant coincidence,” Severus replies, amused.

“That is true,” Ioanes admits. “If we tracked those things to such a vast extent with the intent of keeping all the bloodlines separate, no one in the whole of Britain would ever be able to marry.”

“Some of them are ridiculous about keeping the bloodlines close. My parents were first cousins once removed,” Sirius says wryly.

Lucretia rolls her eyes. “That is going the wrong way in an entirely inappropriate direction!”
They go back to the entrance hall to find Dobby, Kreacher, and Winky updating the Potter-Peverell house-elves on the last one hundred forty years in their much faster, high-pitched language. Severus can’t understand it at all; Sirius claims to understand one word in ten, which means that dog-mocking becomes obligatory.

“Let’s just…house. Exploring. Thing,” Jade says, forcefully dragging Severus away from the main group.

“Spoilsport,” Severus accuses.

“Nah, I jus’ legit wanna lookit th’house!”

The wings are large enough that it’s easy to get separated from everyone, but Severus doesn’t mind. He walks along the hallways at his leisure, tracked by portraits who are literally chasing him by jumping from frame-to-frame to keep track of the first living person they’ve seen in a century and a half.

He has to admit, he really likes the house. He didn’t expect to. The windows which let in a vast amount of light, the rounded archways and doorways, the play of color from the stained glass—it’s all very much the antithesis of the standard English experience regarding sunlight and its lack thereof. The doors are thick wood bound in more examples of curving, flattened iron creeping vine. They are heavy creations that still open on silent hinges with little effort required.

One of the doors on the second floor opens to reveal a bathing room. It follows the décor Karânî would have grown up with in a much stricter sense. The room has a domed, tiled white ceiling that meets in a point; each separate panel creating the dome has a skylight to let in light. Even at night, the glow from the stars and phases of the moon would do an excellent job of lighting the room. The white tile extends halfway down the walls until it becomes a blend of dark blue and dark green, tiled in much more standard stylistic motifs than the sigils on the stairwells.

The bathtub, unlike some of Hogwarts’ monstrosities, is a respectable size. Two people could share it easily, but it isn’t a bloody swimming pool. The tub, taps, and drain are all copper, proving that someone understood the metal’s antimicrobial properties quite well. The toilet itself, modern in 1860, desperately needs replacing, though he suspects the house-elves have ensured that it still works as originally intended. He would just prefer a wall around the exposed toilet, instead of having it be such a prominent part of a bathing room that was meant to be used by more than one person at a time.

Showers, he thinks, glancing at the wall. There is a wooden bench running along it, which means part of the room is also a steaming chamber, like an older Roman bathhouse. If the pipes for steam are there, a shower is not an impossible addition.

“You look happy.”

Severus glances over to see Harry leaning against the doorway. “It’s a lot less dreary than I expected,” he says.

“Dreary.” Harry smiles. “Pretty sure it’s the exact opposite. I was talking to Karânî’s portrait again. She says that the only restriction she put on her agreement to marry Ignatus Peverell was that, if she really were required to live in England, then the house better be as mindful of her home in southern Spain as possible. Ignatus claims there are even weather charms outside to balance out this particular area. Just enough rain to keep droughts at bay and the gardens healthy, but not enough so that his wife would have wanted to fling someone through a window just to let in more light.”
“I’ve lived in a dungeon for sixteen years. This could take some getting used to,” Severus admits.

“Just think of it as a way to not have to move into the Headmaster’s tower,” Harry suggests. “We can hook this place back up to the Floo Network, and then Hogwarts is just a fireplace jump away. Make Minerva live in the Tower, instead.”

“Then there is no one overseeing your House of mischief,” Severus replies.

“Minerva has been Head of Gryffindor House for as long as Augusta was on teaching sabbatical,” Harry says after moment. “Maybe she could use a break. It might be nice to focus on just being a Deputy-Headmistress living in the equivalent of a palatial retirement suite.”

“Then who am I supposed to replace her with?”

Harry lifts an eyebrow. “I suppose that depends on who you want to have the most fun offending, Severus. Remus is all but a permanent addition at this point. Sirius isn’t leaving anytime soon. William is starting to act like he enjoys teaching. Oh, and Ginny told me that she’s overheard Slughorn muttering about how he was happy as a retired man.”

Severus tries not to roll his eyes, but probably does not succeed. “I would need a new Alchemy instructor, a new Potions instructor, and a new Head of House.”

“Narcissa would love to.”

Severus glances up at Harry in surprise. “You’re right. She actually would.” It is one of the few secrets Narcissa ever gave him; she had been heartbroken over the fact that she’d been unable to bear more children. This would give her a great deal of Slytherin children to watch over while teaching them of the proper qualities of her House.

“One problem down, then,” Harry says, and then rubs at his temples with the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand.

“Is something wrong?”

“Oh, just a headache.” Harry drops his hand and smiles. “I didn’t go to bed last night, remember? This much sunlight is like being stabbed in the face.” He looks at Severus. “Why—you don’t think so?”

“No, you’re probably correct. It’s just that I’m still used to being overly concerned,” Severus says. “It’s a hard habit to break.”

“Just asking if I’m all right isn’t being overly concerned,” Harry points out. “Now, if you followed me around for the next half-hour chasing me with potions? That might be a bit much.”

“You know how to brew your own headache cures, idiot.”


Severus chooses to ignore the pun. “It’s gone that late?” He pulls out his pocket watch, flicking it open to discover that it’s approaching noon. He puts it away and then catches Harry rubbing at his temples again. “If you brought a headache cure, drink it.”

“I did,” Harry says absently. “Probably just hasn’t had time to catch up yet. Let’s go see if the house-elves can learn to get along, or if I’ll need to ask Dobby to stay with Kreacher. Kreacher shouldn’t be alone, anyway.”
Severus nods. “All right.” He lets Harry lead the way, thinking that if things had not been so dire at the time, Harry really did embody the best of what Slytherin House is supposed to be. He can find revenge in actions that cause no true harm; he causes true harm where and when it is warranted; he cares about those who he claims as his own, acting as their fiercest of protectors. Gryffindor is about learning how to be brave, to know when to stand true, to understand the distinction between cowardice and valor…and how to know the difference between cowardice and practicality. Ravenclaw turns wit and intellect into wisdom and a fine understanding of others. Hufflepuff takes those who don’t understand or know how to care about others and helps them to realize that it’s a lot easier than they’ve always been led to believe…and then Hufflepuff adds a healthy, heaping dose of fiery stubbornness.

*We should both have been Hufflepuffs, Lily told him once. It would have made things so much easier.*

Maybe it would have…or maybe the difficulty always lay at the feat of House Points, House Cup, and forced competition that alienated everyone from each other. It had been *work* to remain Lily’s friend during their first four years of school, work that had seen him ostracized by his own House until someone observed that Severus had more uses than being a familiar target. Severus never begrudged Lily the friends she made at Hogwarts, but it had always hurt that she’d never understood his desire to have the same thing. Or maybe she had understood, but looked to people she thought shared her view of the world instead of those that might have sense enough see beyond Severus’s outdated robes and his silver-and-green tie.

*A long time ago,* he reminds himself, following Harry down to the main entrance hall again. In that room are people he pretends to mock—except Jade, who mocks him first—and whom he all considers…friends.

He’s gone soft. It’s terrible, and of great relief.

“And none of you have a problem with Dobby being a free elf?” Andromeda is asking, her eyebrows raised in disbelief.

The Potter-Peverell house-elves all seem baffled by the question. “We is *all* free,” they say in a chorus. “We be choosing to be bound to a family line.”

“Let me try again,” Sirius attempts. “Dobby is paid for his work that he does for my godson, Harry.”

The eldest, decrepit old house-elf looks at Dobby. “But you is loyal to Harry Potter?”

Dobby nods his head up and down so fast his ears flap. “Dobby bein’ loyal to Harry Potter! Harry Potter doesn’t mind that Dobby be wantin’ to be paid for his service.”

The group of abandoned house-elves glance at each other in confusion. “But…we is all being paid,” the oldest female says. “Always, we is being paid. We be wearing the colors of our family we serve, but…we be buying our food and buying our nice things.”

“Oh, God,” Remus breathes. “Money not just to buy supplies for the house. Money that is also your own.” Hermione looks disturbed by the revelation, but she’s been struggling to wade her way through the tangle that is the House-Elf Enforcement Department within the Ministry for years now.

“Yes,” the youngest house-elf squeaks. “You is strange, thinking that unusual.”

“How did we lose that in one hundred and forty years?” Andromeda whispers. “How?”

“Time-capsule house-elves.” Hermione is digging out a Muggle notepad and a pen. “I need to take
notes, right now. We’ve lost so much—think of how much reform we can get put into place based on their testimony alone! Not to mention this house might be full of lost magical knowledge, things far more exact than we—"

“Powdered root of asphodel, infusion of wormwood,” Harry suddenly murmurs.

“What?” Hermione stops writing to stare at him. “What was that, Harry?”

“I don’t—I have no idea.” Harry gives his head a brief shake. “That was weird.”

Charles glances at Harry before he turns to Severus. “You don’t look so good.”

“I had two bloody hours of sleep last night,” Severus replies. “I’m tired, not dying.”

“Asphodel, lily of the Elysium fields. Wormwood for potions dealing with necessity of memory, currently under Muggle studies for Alzheimer’s and other memory problems.”

“Mate?” Ron is staring at Harry. “Are you all right?”

“No idea,” Harry says. “My head really fucking hurts, though.”

Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?

“Oh, God.” Severus grasps Harry by the arm and drags them towards the paintings that front the western wing of the house. “Karânî! Ignotus! What do those sigils on the stairwells do?”

“They bond one of the blood to the house, of course,” Ignotus says, though he’s peering at Harry in concern.

“Yes, that part, we understand—but what does it mean?” Severus insists, aware that the others are hurrying over to join them.

“Bezoar, stomach of a goat, cures most poisons, not great to swallow—” Harry clasps his head with both hands. “Whatever is going on can bloody stop now!”

“Well, control of the house, of course,” Ignotus says. “Which includes structural manipulation if need be—”

“What does it mean for the PEOPLE!” Severus yells. Spots are dancing before his eyes. No, no, no!

“You’re both suffering from old spell damage,” Karânî says, beginning to look upset. “The house… the house is designed to heal magical wounds as well as to restore physical health for those of the blood who live here.”

Sirius understands at once. He snags Harry by the scruff and hauls him towards the open doorway. Severus tries to follow and staggers, kept upright only when Charles is suddenly there, supporting him so that he can get the hell out of the house.

He sits on the outer steps until the spots in front of his eyes go away. When he looks up, Potter is standing bent over a few feet away, his hands on his knees and his eyes tightly closed.

“Harry?” Hermione ventures.

“I DON’T WANT IT BACK!” Harry shouts as he stands up. Tears are running down his face. “I NEVER DID!”
“Want what back?” Oliver asks, just before he turns pale. “No way.”

Harry takes in a gasping breath. “Asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat, and will save you from most poisons. Monkshood and wolfsbane are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite.”

Neville looks horrified. “He’s quoting.”

“Quoting what?” Sirius demands to know.

Hermione appears to be heartbroken. “Our first Potions class. First year.”

“He’s quoting me.” Severus looks up at the others. “Greeting the new—”

“Celebrity,” Harry finishes, wiping his face. “I don’t want it back. I don’t.”

“Well, things are a lot different now, mate,” Ron says. “I mean, what’s the difference—”

Harry turns around to stare at Ron. “Six years of being…of being happy, stacked against over ten years of misery. Which would you prefer, Ron?”

Merlin, this is a disaster. “Harry. Twenty-seven years versus eleven.”

Harry whirls on him. “So you’re telling me that it’s whinging, then, since your numbers top mine?”

“No,” Severus says gently. “I am saying that I understand.”

Harry swipes his face dry again with one hand. “How?” he whispers.

Severus is glad their audience is so limited. This is yet more exposure that he never wanted. “The first nine years of my life were misery. My mother had no business being a parent. My father was physically and verbally abusive. The only thing that kept us in the house, the power on, the telephone working, and food on the table was Muggle government assistance.

“Then I met my best friend, and for six years…for six years I was happy, especially after I could get the hell away from Cokeworth for the school terms at Hogwarts. Then…” Severus falters. “Then there were eighteen years without that one bright spot in my life. Eighteen dark years, ones that I never wish to repeat. I’d prefer to forget them altogether, but I can’t.”

“That’s only thirty-three years. You’re thirty-eight.” Jade’s eyes are over-bright, and she’s clasping her hat to her chest instead of wearing it.

“That’s because, in 1993, this short little spell-damaged Gryffindor decided that my office was a safe place.” Severus swallows. “Oh, did I want to keep disliking you. I really did. You made it fucking impossible, you completely atrocious brat. The last five years of my life have been bright again because you shoved your way in and refused to fucking leave.”

Severus doesn’t acknowledge it when Molly puts her arm over his shoulders, but he doesn’t shake her off, either. “Twenty-seven years of horror, Harry. Make no mistake—the past is so hard to face that some days I don’t know how I do it. But then… I have you. I have an insane Londoner in a top hat. These two idiots,” he tilts his head in Remus and Sirius’s direction. Both men are crying, but then, so is he, dammit. “Brilliant Miss Granger. Andromeda’s entire family. Draco and Narcissa. A hell of a lot of clingy gingers.” Charles lets out a watery chuckle. “Even Neville and his explosions.”
“Which were definitely m’own fault,” Neville says, smiling. Alice has her arm wrapped around his waist.

“Just because the years that are bright are fewer…” Severus shakes his head. “It doesn’t make them less powerful. I can’t erase the past, and I won’t forget any of it. But all of you idiots make it easier to bear.”

“Shite, now’m crying. Your fault,” Jade accuses him, getting out a tiny little black silk handkerchief to scrub her eyes. “Why’s everythin’ gotta be so doom n’gloom w’you lot, anyway?”

“Not everything was. I mean, I set Severus on fire,” Hermione says, smiling.

“That was bleedin’ funny, it was—okay, she set the wrong person on fire,” Ron corrects himself, grinning. “But still!”

“I remember that.” Harry is staring off at the field, his eyes still dripping tears. “Before we got out of the house, I got parts of our first year, and some of—some of when I lived at the Dursleys. Living in that fucking cupboard.” He sniffs in a deep breath. “I still don’t want it back. I don’t want to hate them for what they did, and I really think I would.”

“Harry Potter.” Harry glances at Molly. “The boy that Ron brought home to the Burrow, that very first time, was one of the kindest children I’d ever met outside of my own family.”

“Even remembering everything the Dursleys had done, you came to Hogwarts and kept trying to help people. To defend them from things that would hurt them.” Hermione’s lip quivers. “You came to save me from that stupid troll.”

“When Malfoy was still being a right prat, you protected me from him,” Neville says. “You took back what he tried to steal because you knew it was wrong, and you put one of my Gran’s gifts back into my hands yourself.”

“We stopped Quirrell from stealing an immortality rock because we didn’t know if he would succeed or fail…so we made sure he failed. Right mess, that was, but…but we did it,” Ron says stoutly. “You and your fierce bloody insistence that if something was wrong, you were gonna make it right. Which is how we got Obliviated, by the way,” Ron adds wryly. “Trying to help someone who needed it.”

“Dobby tries to stop Harry Potter from going to Hogwarts in his second year.” Dobby looks both sad and proud at once. “Harry Potter be tellin’ me no, he be going to school, even though Dobby warns him it will be deadly dangerous. Dobby tries to stop Harry Potter, and Harry Potter finds a way.”

“Dad was so mad about the car,” Ron says, and then bites his lip.

“Harry.” Severus waits until Harry gives in and looks at him again. “I let my childhood break me. You went through so much worse, and absolutely refused to let it define who you were. If you walk back into that house and those ten years of life with the Dursleys come back…you are not going to be a different person. You’re not going to hate them, if only because the worst offender of that lot is dead. Petunia’s gone back to school for nursing, trying to learn how to be better. Your cousin is becoming known for being a good man who is willing to help anyone that asks. That is all because of you. They changed because you showed them how it was possible.

“And so did I.”

Harry stares at him, his green eyes luminous against his pale bronze skin. He shoves his hand into the perpetually disastrous mess of his hair and then gestures at Severus. “Stand up. Just—stand the fuck
Severus does so, but it requires Molly’s assistance. The house’s interrupted attempt at healing is making it very hard not to wobble in place. “Yes?”

“You are a bastard,” Harry pronounces, and then hugs him. Severus swallows hard again and holds on.

“Harry: it is high time you figured that out.”

“Just out of curiosity, what is the house trying to heal for you, Professor?” Oliver asks.

“Years and years of Cruciatu damage, I imagine,” Severus replies. “Among other things—I don’t even remember it all.”

Winky pops into place next to Dobby. “You’s both be needin’ rest,” she says. “The other elves be sayin’ that there are clean beds in the house. They’s always be keepin’ the house ready, waitin’ for yous to come back.”

Harry steps back and looks at Severus. “You’ve never run from your past.”

“No,” Severus tries to smile. “Not much choice in the matter.”

Harry reaches out and grasps his hand. “Then I’m not running, either. Come on.”

Severus remembers entering the house again, the black spots starting to dance across his vision…and not much else.

He wakes up in a bedroom that is quiet. There is thick wool Persian carpet covering every square inch of the wooden floor to muffle sound. The bed he is lying on is old, but it is astonishingly comfortable; the mattress, sheets, and pillow all smell like clean sunlight. The walls are whitewashed plaster, as is the ceiling, but it is covered by blue and green scrollwork that curls outwards from another skylight. It’s daylight above him, though the day is overcast.

He has no idea how long he’s lying there until he’s mentally listening to a song, something from—last year? Two years ago? At the time, he hadn’t been able to get the damned thing out of his head.

There’s a tall mulatto boy I know

And he comes to every party, and he stands alone
Viewing them the rest, from the corner of his glance
It gets so clear, he’s not judging anyone

The way his arms float around his cage, he’s caged
Canary sings, silently brings, his voice to rage
The way they stop and stare, the way they turn their heads
It’s enough to make him want to run away
But he stays; he stands his ground.

“Seven Mary Three,” he murmurs. Of all the things to wake up to, why that? He doesn’t even have the excuse of forgetting to turn off the compact record player the night before. The room is silent.
He loses track of the other verses but for the last one, which he repeats aloud for no reason other than a lack of recognizing anything else to do.

“So rage, please rage against me
Beat me down, beat me down, forgive me
For what I’ve done.”

Right; now he’s somewhat more awake. He is also very confused.

Why the hell is he in a bedroom?

Severus sits up, and is shocked by how easy it is. He glances over to see that his boots are on the floor near the foot of the bed. His coat is hanging on the bedpost of a bed that is at least three centuries old.

When he gets up, he is moving around in a way that is entirely unfamiliar. He feels too light, as if gravity shifted while he was unconscious.

Severus pauses in the middle of putting his boots back on. It had not been overcast on Sunday. The day had been bright and clear.

He finds his pocket watch in his coat and checks the time. It’s eight o’clock in the morning. On Monday.

He grabs his jacket and puts his hand to the latch on the bedroom door, pushing it open. The hallway is as quiet as the bedroom, but he can feel…something. Magic. Attachment. It’s similar to his awareness of Hogwarts and the school grounds.

He is so very, very late for work.

Severus finds the stairwell and uses the iron vine railing to ease his way down, not sure he trusts his steps. He relaxes when his boots come down on the elder wood flooring of the vast entrance hall. The front doors are closed; no one is nearby. He turns and walks down the long passageway to the kitchen.

Harry is seated at the heavy, rectangular wooden table, still wearing yesterday’s clothes. He’s surrounded by house-elves as he sips at a cup of tea. They seem thrilled to have someone to serve, even if it’s just one person.

“Good morning. I think,” Severus ventures.

Harry looks up. His eyes are red-rimmed from crying, but his face is dry and clean. “Good is still debatable, yeah. Are you all right?”

Severus sits down in the chair that Winky pulls out for him, and he nods his thanks. “I feel like gravity has adjusted itself so that it pulls less. It’s odd. And you?”

“I remember all of it.” Harry takes another sip of tea. His eyes turn glassy; he blinks several times until it goes away. “And—and you were right. The bright things…they make it better.”

Severus can’t stand it. “Harry. I’m so sorry.”
Harry lifts an eyebrow. “For what—for the first two years of school? Sev, I have not forgotten the meaning of *politic.*”

“It was not solely about being politic,” Severus replies, trying to figure out how he feels about Harry using the short form of his name. “I had not…I still hated your father. You resembled him very much, and I always interpreted your actions as brash, despite what Albus was trying to tell me. I couldn’t see what the others did.”

Harry shrugs. “I know. But then that changed. People change. I don’t hate you, or even remotely dislike you. You’re still my best friend, you idiot.”

“It is very nice to see that recalling your childhood living arrangements has not changed your blunt nature,” Severus says dryly.

“Pretty sure I was born with that.” Harry glances down at his tea. “It’s not like what came back—it’s not shoving anything else out of the way. It’s more like background noise. I think I was most worried that it would erase—that it would make me forget what I remember of my Mum and Dad. Really glad it didn’t.”

“So am I.” Then he asks, “Best friend?”

“Yeah.” Harry nods. “Absolutely.”

“Some would say that I would be using you to replace Lily,” Severus says. He is not very successful at ignoring the warm feeling in his chest. Dammit.

“Then they’re stupid,” Harry returns. “I’m not my Mum. I’m *me.*”

“I know.” Severus waits until a thrilled Potter-Peverell house-elf has put a cup of tea into his hands. The china is delicate and ornate, and feels too light in his hands. “You’re—you are, too. My best friend.”

“What about Jade?” Harry asks, curious.

“Jade is the annoying baby sister I needed, thought I never wanted, and…and now I don’t want to ever lose her.” Severus tilts his head at Harry. “Ron and Hermione?”

“The way you feel about Jade is the way I feel about them, though it’s wanted and needed siblings, in my case.” Harry’s smile is wry. “Who am I kidding? Everyone ginger adopted me the first time I set foot in the Burrow.”

“I’m glad—glad that someone did,” Severus says.

“And then Arthur asked me what a rubber duck in the bath was for.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what you told him.”

“I panicked and said that my aunt Petunia told Dursley that it was to test for piranhas,” Harry says, resting his head on one hand as he grins at Severus. “I never had one of the damned things. I’m still not sure what they’re for.”

“Not a clue, myself, other than that they’re plastic and duck-like.”

Harry nods. “I hope Arthur has a great deal of fun finding out.”

Severus winces. “Harry—”
“Time doesn’t really work the same way for Death,” Harry interrupts, pouring a fresh cup of tea without looking at him. “That was a very, very long conversation.”

“Oh? Asked Death about the afterlife, then?” Severus asks, trying for snide and failing miserably.

“What else are you going to ask an Aspect if they’re willing to speak to you?” Harry sips at his tea, makes a face, and adds another lump of sugar to stir in.

“Am I allowed to ask what was said?”

“About the afterlife?” Harry’s gaze goes distant. “They said…the universe isn’t static enough for it to be a set number of steps. It depends more on what you want—not what you *think* you want, either. Oh, hey, croissants!”

“That was not a subtle change of subject,” Severus replies, but the elves are, indeed, bringing over a steaming plate of croissants.

“They’re trying to spoil us. After yesterday, I’m really not in the mood to discourage them.”

“I feel the same way.” Severus reaches for a croissant and puts it on the china plate that has magically joined his teacup and saucer. “Where are the others?”

“Dealing with Hogwarts, since its Headmaster decided to take a header towards the floor. Remus caught you before you could brain yourself on the stones.” Harry grins when Severus rolls his eyes. “Remus and Sirius had classes today, and let Minerva know that someone would need to sit in with the sixth-years for Potions. Andromeda and Oliver went home once they helped everyone else confirm that the main floors of the house are free of any potential problems aside from us. Hermione got the Floo connected back to the Network, so she and Neville returned to uni that way. Ron went back to his Auror classes, Charlie has dragon things to do, Percy is scaring the hell out of the Ministry, and Alice needed to go home to check on things. Oh, and Jade is probably still asleep in a bedroom somewhere nearby. Molly let me know she didn’t leave.”

“Molly is still here?”

Harry nods. “Double-checking the cellar, and of course, she didn’t want to leave us alone in the house, despite our cadre of house-elves.”

“We’re going to live here.” Severus says the words, and they sound unbelievable…but he can feel the house. He can feel the land. Oh, that’s going to be an interesting conflict with what he senses of Hogwarts.

“Looks like it.” Harry obliterates a croissant. “I think Jade should, too. I’ve seen her flat, and it’s like trying to live in a Muggle refrigerator. And…” He hesitates. “I know you probably don’t have objections to Jade—”

“I don’t, no.” Severus is starting to think much more seriously about formal adoption.

“Then…I wanted to see if Hermione and Viktor would like to have at least part of one of the wings. Viktor’s family is poor, and he doesn’t have an inheritance to speak of. It’s why he went into professional Quidditch. Hermione doesn’t have a Wizarding home, and if she’s going to keep pushing for law to go help Percy terrify the Ministry, then she’ll need one.”

Severus considers it. “This house is so large that ourselves and everyone you named could live in one wing and still possibly have room left over. I don’t mind. It isn’t as if we do not all have jobs to occupy our time.”
“No, the rest of you have jobs. I’m unemployed,” Harry points out.

“You are not unemployed, brat. You are writing my new seventh-year textbook. Perhaps writing down the original tale of the three brothers might also be something to consider,” Severus suggests.

Harry lifts his eyebrows and thinks about it. “If there isn’t a copy of the original in this house, then yeah. Maybe that’s a good idea. The original is a bit more…impressionable, I guess.”

“Does this house have a library?” Severus asks the nearest house-elf. It comes to him that her name is Delinka.

More inadvertent telepathy. Merlin, why is his life like this?

Delinka looks delighted. “There is being a vast library, Master Severus! Its door be hidden in the hallway separating the kitchen from the entrance hall. We can show you after breakfast!”

Harry smiles. “Now that is going to be fun.”

Jade tromps her way into the kitchen about a half-hour later. Most of the croissants and an offering of eggs and sausage, purchased locally on the sly by the house-elves, have been demolished. There has also been an intriguing explanation about the elves’ pay and the money for the house’s upkeep, which is auto-delivered by ancient agreement with Gringotts. The eldest elves, Gilly and Furril, were born in the early 1500s, and insist they remember that among the Pure-blood families the Potters associated with, paying the house-elves was not rare, but common. The idea makes Kreacher frown, but Winky goes into quiet hysterics over the notion and has to be group-comforted by the other elves.

“Did ya know, they stuffed us into th’ tykes’ bedrooms?” Jade asks, once she’s inhaled an obscene amount of tea and eaten the rest of their food. “Well, not just th’ tykes,” she amends, wiping her hands clean on the cloth napkin that Cicilly desperately shoves in her direction. “But they’re not th’ suites for th’ adults. They were more like th’ rooms for th’ bachelor types, th’ ones who went an’ had th’ audacity t’not get married right away.”

“That is because the Masters of the house be choosing their rooms,” Furril explains. “They not be choosing yet, so—”

“They was also guesting rooms,” Gilly says. “There is being several suites in each wing of the house, and several guesting rooms.”

“Which could be used for other things. I mean, four wings. We could set aside an entire wing just for visitors.”

Severus glances at Harry. “I don’t even like that many people.”

“No, but you’re Headmaster of Hogwarts. Politics,” Harry notes, right before they’re all swarmed again by excited house-elves who hadn’t yet learned of Severus’s poor career choices.

Molly comes to join them, still dusting her hands. “The cellar is clear. It is also full of wines that are probably worth literal fortunes per bottle.”

“I could invite Narcissa here and not insult her. That’s a nice thought,” Severus muses aloud.

The house-elves show them to the library, which is a massive space hidden behind the first floor bedrooms underneath the second floor. Some of the books are so old that they’re not bound tomes at all, but scrolls still wrapped in leather lacing. “Oh, Merlin,” Harry whispers. “Someone please tell me that there is some sort of referencing system for this. There are a lot of books here.”
Gilly disappears and returns with a giant, hand-bound tome in her hands. “This is being it.”

Severus accepts it before Harry can snatch at the book. He flips it open and frowns; every entry is hand-written, though the book locations are accurate enough once he realizes each wooden shelf is carved with a Roman numeral.

“Amazing.” Molly smiles. “Arthur would have loved this. He might’ve had such a soft spot for Muggle gizmos, but a good ancient tome…”

Severus nods. “He would have, yes.”

“You’d have to know what you’re looking for already to try and search for a book this way. It looks like they’ve all been added to the register by date of purchase or addition of the book, not in alphabetical order;” Harry says, peering over Severus’s left shoulder.

“I can’t read tha’ at all,” Jade complains, standing on her toes to do the same on Severus’s right side.

“It’s transitional language. Some of it is Old English, some of it’s French, some of it’s Middle English, some of it is Latin…”

“And no one could bloody spell or conjugate properly after Old English was abandoned.” Severus lowers the book, frowning. “That’s yet another project, then.”

“And that’s aside from the Golden Snidget breeding and experimentation next summer that’s already planned.” Harry takes the book and flips towards the back, where the last entries have become modernized English—even though spelling is still lacking. “Oh, and Sirius says that he’s game for getting in on the breeding of locally raised emerald-shelled Fire Crabs.”

“It isn’t as if we don’t have the land for it.” Severus glances at Jade. “How attached are you to your family name?”

“Uh—why, Sev?” Jade asks, giving him a cautious look.

“If I said that I was serious about adopting you into my family, would you object? It would require a name change, but if you’re to live here, it would protect your reputation from horrible gossip-mongers.”

Jade stares up at him. Then she startles him by bursting into tears.

“That—that is not actually the reaction I expected,” Severus says, wrapping Jade in a hug and giving Molly a look of complete helplessness. He has no idea what he just did wrong!

“I lied!” Jade bursts out. “About m’Mum! She wasn’ just upset tha’ she didn’ have a witch kid. She was s’mad. Said she was goin’ t’make me go off t’Hogwarts like a proper witch, or else! I didn’ want th’ else!”

Harry is staring at her in quiet realization. “You left home.”

“I ran,” Jade sniffs, while Severus tightens his grip. “An’ she chased me. Th’ traffic ’round there was s’bad in those days. I—I made it safely ’cross th’ road, an’ she…she…”

Severus breathes out a long sigh. “And she did not.” This actually explains quite a bit.

“No!” Jade wails. “T’were m’fault!”

“She was an adult. If she didn’t know how to look both ways before crossing a bloody street, that is
not your fault,” Severus retorts.

“What happened? I mean—was there anyone else?” Harry asks.

“No. It were jus’ me,” Jade mumbles, her face shoved against Severus’s shirt. ‘Lied an’ made it seem like there was sommat at home so I wouldn’ get shoved off at some orphanage. Lived there on m’lonesome. Mum got a pension that never stopped coming in, so I just kept deponst’in’ th’ checks. Had m’own bank card already for ’mergencies, and the bank kept it up t’date. Finished school early, went to uni for free, an’ just…tha’s me.”

“That’s amazing,” Harry says.

Jade jolts her head up, revealing that she’s destroyed what was left of yesterday’s eyeliner. “What?”

“Amazing,” Harry repeats patiently. “You raised yourself from age eleven onward, went to school, kept yourself fed and clothed, went to uni, graduated with a bachelor’s degree, and then added a master’s degree—and now you’re after a doctorate. And you did all of that by yourself. That,” he emphasizes, “is bloody amazing.”

“No friends?” Molly asks in sympathy.

“Oh—yeah, I had friends,” Jade says, trying to wipe her eyes. “Jus’ always tol’ ’em that m’Mum was too sick t’ go out, or have visitors or anythin.’ They all made it bearable, y’know?”

“After yesterday?” Harry lets out a brief, humorless laugh. “Yeah, I really get that.”

Molly comes over and wraps her arm around Harry’s shoulders, pulling him in tight. “Ron suspected, but since you never said a word…”

“That I didn’t have any friends until I met Hagrid and came to Hogwarts?” Harry smiles. “No. I didn’t.”

Jade looks baffled. “But—I know y’relatives were horrible back then, but primary school—”

“Dudley had orders from his parents.” Harry shoves his hands in his pockets and refuses to meet anyone’s eyes. “Anyone he caught talking to me was to be given a fistful of encouragement on why that was a very bad thing to be doing. Didn’t take long for the idea to spread throughout school that I wasn’t safe to be around, especially with Dudley blubbering to every teacher he could find that he’d seen his ‘dangerous cousin’ hitting other kids.”

There are so many things Severus could say to that, but he’s already mentioned most of them already. He settles for dry humor, instead. “There, you see?” he says to Jade. “You bloody well fit right in.”

Jade lets out a hiccupping giggle. “Right, yeah. Y’got a point, there. Three broken nutters.”


Delinka seems to wince as she speaks up. “You is…maybe wanting to see the parlor, now?” she asks.

“Parlor. Distractions.” Jade sniff’s and wipes her face with both hands. “Distractions are good, yeah.”

The parlor is behind a hidden door opposite the library, meant to be a private room for the family. It holds furniture that dates to the early 1800s, but all of it is in good condition. The parlor also has
plenty of available space for certain modern improvements.

“I wonder how much it would cost to have electricity run out here from Bampton,” Severus wonders.

“Couple miles through the woods. It would definitely take bribing whoever’s supplying electricity locally,” Harry says.

“You’d never be able to hide the house from Muggles,” Molly points out. “Not if you had electrical lines running straight here.”

Harry shrugs. “Who cares? It’s any new outbuildings I’d be more worried about hiding from the neighbors, and that’s easy enough.”

“Television. VHS player.” Severus has at least twenty years in film to catch up on, and Jade will not leave off on him watching the *Star Trek* films now that she knows he viewed the original television show as a child.

“Phone!” Jade insists. “Computer! Bloody internet, y’backwards wizarding blokes!”

Severus eyes her. “Jade, this is Shap Rural. Getting a phone line out here might actually be a minor miracle.”

“Muggle things?” Dobby looks horrified. “In a wizardin’ house?”

“We’re all three of us Half-blooms, Dobby.” Harry is glancing around the room with a smile on his face. “Why can’t it be both?”
An Exceptional Bribe

It takes Severus a ridiculous amount of time to realize that gravity didn’t change. He did. He was in pain that he wasn’t even aware of. With it gone, his movements are easier, more fluid. He awakens in the morning without stiff joints. He was so used to all of it that he had no awareness of how much effort he was putting into wand work, potion brewing, or even the simple movements associated with living.

He doesn’t just look younger than he used to anymore. He also feels like it—or as Narcissa points out, he has the actual health of a man his age, instead of one that has been figuratively and literally been beaten to hell and back again.

Amir Blum arrives on Tuesday, the third of November, to begin his quarter of teaching Hebrew-based History of Magic to Hogwarts students. Severus checks his schedule and then lurks in the back of the classroom under a Disillusionment Charm, listening in, attempting to find out something of his matrilineal heritage. God knows the Prince family records in the Ministry are useless.

“I know you linger. Why? Are you worried I am not doing my job?” Professor Blum asks him after his second class.

“Not at all,” Severus answers, dropping the charm after he’s made certain the other students are gone. “I’m merely curious. I only learned my mother’s family was Jewish a few years ago, and that is the only thing I know of them. My mother never told me, and she and all the others of my line are dead.”

“Why not simply join us? You are Headmaster of this school,” Amir points out.

“I’m a very private individual,” Severus says. “If you would prefer I not be here while you teach, that is—”

“No, no. That is not the difficulty. I was, as you also were, curious.” Amir smiles. “Feel free to lurk in the background all you like. I do not mind.”

It is all very interesting, Severus readily admits. He is also intelligent enough to know that he will not be trying to learn to cast magic in Hebrew any time soon, or possibly ever. Cuneiform is easier to interpret.

The weekend sees him back at what Severus can’t stop thinking of as the Peverell House, trying to help oversee a house-elf negotiation. Given that most of Severus’s negotiations took place at wand-point, and involved the other person doing exactly as he said, it would be more honest to say that he is there to watch Harry perform house-elf negotiations.

“I really do understand that all of you want to stay here,” Harry is saying. He’s sitting on the floor amongst the house-elves, refusing to loom over them. These elves wouldn’t mind if Harry stood for the occasion, but too many modern elves—Dobby and Winky included—would see it as further sign of a wizard trying to keep them in their “proper” place.

“But we’ve got a little bit of a problem. See, Dobby is…uh, rather firmly attached.” Harry tilts his head in the socked elf’s direction. “He went against a bad master to come to me, and I can’t reward that kind of loyalty by telling him to stay away. Winky attached herself to Severus after her blood-bonded family sacked her for no good reason—and it took her a long time to get to a point where she even could decide that Severus would be a suitable replacement.”
Half of the house-elves crowd around Winky, chattering their sympathies. Winky seems flustered by the attention, biting her lip and wringing her hands.

“The actual difficulty is Kreacher,” Harry says. “You see, if Dobby and Winky come here, then Kreacher becomes the last house-elf for the whole of the Ancient House of Black.”

“Only one house-elf?” Rosily squeaks in complete dismay. “That is not to be done!”

“Sirius’s older relatives, they had some…uh, really bad ideas about how to treat house-elves. Either way, Kreacher is an older elf, and I really think he shouldn’t be alone. I was wondering if a pair of you would be willing to trade houses over to the Black bloodline.”

“Furril is not sure,” the eldest male says. “The Blacks and the Potters were being related, but that was long ago…”

“Sirius is my first cousin, twice removed, even though it’s just by marriage,” Harry says. “My great-uncle Charlus married his maternal aunt Dorea. But he is engaged to marry Remus, and Remus is my second cousin because his aunt Euphemia Grace married my grandfather Fleamont—and I’m still not over the idea that Henry and Elizabetha willingly gave that name to their child. Anyway, you guys would be living with people who are directly related to the Potter family.”

The house-elves start conferring with each other. “It can’t be Gilly and Furril, they is too old,” Rosily says.

The old elf rolls his eyes. “And it can’t be Rosily, because she is being too young!”

“I can go,” Cicilly says. “I and Bally.” Then the house-elf blushes. “Cicilly be pregnant. We can be repopulating the Black family house-elves in no time.”

“Why can they not be just getting more house-elves?” Gilly asks.

“A lot of the families who still have house-elves never learned to share,” Severus answers her in a dry voice. “Those families are in the minority. There are many wizarding lineages in Britain who haven’t had house-elves bonded to their lines in centuries.”

Every single house-elf, once again, looks utterly horrified. “We be having more babies!” Delinka tells Quig, who eyes her like she’s out of her mind. Severus is just thankful that house-elves can interbreed without ever needing to be concern themselves with birth defects and other abnormalities from such close relations.

“Not being ready for babies yet!” Rosily and Essil squeak at the same time.

“They is still needing to be family,” Furril points out crossly. “How many wizarding lineages are the Masters being related to?”

“Jasper’s wife, Lenora, was a Bulstrode,” Harry says, resting his arms across his knees while thinking. “There’s a really nice Bulstrode who’s engaged to marry a Bell, and Katie already told me the Bulstrodes have just been pretending at their status for about three decades now, but they still have a quartet of house-elves. Sakndenberg—no, never mind, their line died out before the Fleamont line did. The Gaunts would be like Severus—insanely distant cousins, but they’re all gone. The Crabbe family, through Sirius, but I think they’re either all dead or in Azkaban.”

“Azkaban,” Severus supplies. “Just the one left. The others died during the battle in April. The one remaining in Azkaban will never be released.”
Harry nods in acknowledgement. “Rosier, which is also through Sirius, but I think that family shows up about eight generations back.”

“Yes!” Ignotus’s portrait yells in cheerful confirmation. Busybody portraits; at this rate Severus will never be rid of them.

“The Crouches are gone—sorry, Winky.” Harry looks guilty when the house-elf begins weeping at the mention of her prior family. “Oh, Longbottom and Weasley are definitely on the list, Black and Potter sides both. The Yaxleys have enough house-elves, as do the Malfoys—and I don’t think we’re related to either of them, anyway.”

“Minor bloody miracle,” Severus mutters. “The Yaxleys are a genetic cesspool.”

“We will be thinking on how to help the Weasleys, the Longbottoms, the Rosiers, and the Blacks to be gaining proper elves again,” Gilly declares for them all.

Hermione Granger takes the next three Wednesdays of Muggle Studies, terrifying all of her wizarding-raised students with tales of Muggle medical procedures before she bothers to explain that one is either pain-numbed or unconscious before such procedures are performed.

After she has them convinced that she is properly terrifying, Hermione explains many more, far less fear-inducing aspects of the Muggle world. She is also the first to figure out how to magic a television for it not to explode when used inside the castle. Severus blames her for the fact that he is subjected to students singing musical numbers from a few popular films that he absolutely cannot stand.

“At least show them bloody Les Misérables!” he yells.

Hermione gives him an innocent look. “But you said I’m supposed to not terrify them any more than I already did with medical history.”


Hermione counters with an animated version of The Hunchback of Notre Dame. “I have a castle of students singing about hellfire. I hate you,” he says.

She grins back at him. “Yes, but now they’re interested, Severus. Isn’t that fantastic?”

“If you want back on the rota for Muggle Studies next year, it can’t be the same three films.”

“Okay!” Hermione agrees in a way he doesn’t trust. “See you over winter break!” she announces, and departs through the Floo in his office.

That weekend, Severus goes back to Cokeworth alone. He walks through the house he grew up in, one that had been his paternal grandfather’s before his father inherited it. He empties it of the few belongings he kept there aside from the books, packs up the laboratory in the basement, and sends those items on through the Floo to the Peverell House. Next go most of the books on magic; on a whim, he leaves those behind that are theory or history of magic, but have no means to harm anyone. He also leaves all of the Muggle fiction and non-fiction behind, as he can replace it easily.

It’s much more difficult to take down all of the house’s internal wards. Severus meant them to be permanent, not ever imagining he would see a day when he would be able to walk away from Spinner’s End. Actually, he expected to be too damned dead to care, but the result is still the same—hard work. The front door becomes a real door again, without all of its fatal traps. The doors remain
warded against intrusion, though, tied to three metal, old-fashioned keys that look nothing like the shiny modern, flat creations he sees more and more often.

Severus finds Dudley Dursley at work for old Thomas Baker, who runs a construction or deconstruction company, depending on what is needed. Severus remembers several times in his youth when it was Baker’s generosity that saved the roof of his family’s house.

He studies Dudley in silence for a little while. The extra weight the man carried is gone, revealing a muscled tall frame and a thinner face that makes him seem far less brutish. He is cheerfully using a pry bar to remove boards from a wall that is coming down inside a house that Baker looks to be in the midst of remodeling from the ground up.

“Young Severus!” Baker claps his hand down on Severus’s shoulder in greeting. “How long’s it been, hey?”

“Ages,” Severus replies. He’s still startled by unexpected touching; he hopes his smile looks more genuine than it feels. “You look well.”

“Aye, well. A diet of clean air and hard work always did my family good. I like the young man y’sent my way, too. Hard worker, that one,” Baker says, smiling. “ Didn’t once try to pretend to know what he was doing, which meant myself and John could train him up proper. I’ll have him doing real wood-crafting soon on the machines.”

“That’s good to hear.” It is; it means he was not wrong as to Dudley’s potential. “Can I borrow Mister Dursley for a few minutes, Thomas? I promise to return him exactly the way I found him.”

Baker laughs. “Yeah, that’s fine. Still a smooth-talker, Severus! DUDLEY!” he roars, making Severus flinch at the sudden increase in volume. “COME ON OVER HERE! Y’GOT A VISITOR!”

“Oh, hello, Professor!” Dudley says, grinning as he holds out his hand. Severus clasps it, ignoring the plaster dust that immediately coats his skin. “Good to see you again!”

“And you. Thomas says that you’re doing quite well here.”

“He’s being kind,” Dudley says, glancing at his employer. “But I do like it here.”

“Professor huh?” Baker sounds proud. “Good for you. Always knew you’d do well for y’self.”

Severus glances at the older man. “I thought the entire village was certain I would remain here, be chronically unemployed, and do my best to imitate my father?”

“Mayhap some did, but I always said you were too damned smart to go old Tobias’s route. He was an idiot,” Baker says, and then glances at Severus. “No offence.”

“None taken in the slightest.” Severus tilts his head in the direction of the trees near Baker’s house project. “I need to speak with you privately, please.”

“Is something wrong with Harry? He’s okay, right?” Dudley asks in immediate concern.

Severus glances at him in surprise. “Harry is fine—you may even be seeing him sometime this winter, but if so, that will be between the two of you. I have another reason for being here.”

“All right.” Dudley waits until they’re standing underneath the trees, out of earshot for any of Baker’s other workers. “What’s going on, then?”
“I am…” Severus hesitates, feeling strangely bereft. “I am giving you a gift.” He pulls out the envelope with its town council seal, and then he retrieves three keys from his denim trouser pocket. He couldn’t give up on his shirt and jacket for the day, but the black denims help tone his wardrobe down to something more appropriate to a village visit.

Dudley looks at the envelope like it might bite him before he breaks the seal and pulls out what’s inside. “Bugger-fuck!” he blurts. “This is the deed to a house, and it’s in my name!”

“It used to be mine,” Severus says. “It’s the house in which you admired my books.”

Dudley stares at him. “But—that’s your place! You can’t just give it up—I didn’t pay you for it!”

“Payment isn’t the point.” Severus glances up at the trees for a moment. “I no longer need the house, but also—for me it was not a pleasant home. I wish to see it go to someone who will be happy there.”

“I have no idea how to thank you for this,” Dudley whispers. “This is one hell of a gift, Professor.”

“Thank me by—if you ever have a family, make sure that you all are more joyful in that house than my own exceptionally useless parents ever managed to be.” Severus smiles. “Oh, and magic runs in your family. If you have children, you may be in for a few surprises.”

Dudley finally smiles. “I wouldn’t mind that at all. Really, I wouldn’t.” He holds out his hand again. “You’re a good man, Professor.”

Severus makes a disgruntled face as he grips Dudley’s hand again. “I’m really not.”

“People who are berks don’t go ’round giving people houses,” Dudley replies in a dry voice. “And you’ve kept me in the neighborhood with Mum. I…thank you.”

“You are most welcome.” Severus hands over the three keys, explains about the still-existing wards in place for the safety of anyone or anything inside the home, and takes his leave.

He does hope that the young man likes his new library.

* * * *

Minerva is less than pleased about losing her status as Gryffindor’s Head of House. Severus is not surprised by that. “But why? I enjoy my job, Severus Prince!”

“That you do, and so did I. Viciously so.” Minerva nods in wry acknowledgement. “In autumn of 1993, Albus told me that you and I were the definitive results of our own Houses, which he thought was appropriate. He just wanted us both to stop viewing the other Houses as the enemy. I, of course, told him that the other Houses were exactly that.”

Severus pauses while Minerva digests that information. “I know better now. Pomona has never cared. Filius just finds it entertaining. Slughorn is going to break his contract and leave over the winter break, so I must already replace Slytherin’s Head of House. Fortunately, Narcissa says that she will enjoy the challenge…and she has never been focused on House rivalry, either. She has always been more concerned with making certain that a Slytherin understands the important aspects of our House.”
“What you’re saying is that you and I were and are the last hold-outs on any hope of Hogwarts attaining true school unity.” Minerva nods regretfully. “You are probably correct—Albus was most certainly correct.”

“I need you as this school’s Transfiguration instructor, and as an active Deputy Headmistress,” Severus says. “I would also very much like you to take the Headmaster’s residence in this Tower, since I don’t bloody want it.”

Minerva blinks a few times, startled. “That is—”

“Palatial,” Severus tells her in a dry voice. “Think of it as an exceptional bribe.”

“As long as I can remove some of Albus’s adoration of spangled cloth, then yes, that is certainly a fine bribe.” Minerva smiles at him. “All right. Should I ditch them all in the middle of the year, as Horace is planning to?”

“Only if you like,” Severus replies. “You can finish out the year, or…” He sighs. “I have to replace two teaching positions and a Head of House, regardless. I will leave that decision up to you.”

“You still don’t want Potions for the younger students back?”

Severus glares at her.

Minerva laughs. “Oh, the look on your face! No, I thought not. Who do you have in mind to replace me as Head of House?”

“If it weren’t for the fact that I believe this castle would be assaulted by parents carrying torches and pitchforks? Remus would be my preference,” Severus says, and enjoys the fact that Minerva’s mouth falls open. “I’m serious.”

“I know you are. That’s why it’s unbelievable.” Minerva sniffs and closes her mouth, retaining her dignity. “Who, then?”

“Not Sirius. He exemplifies the same problem we did. William.”

Minerva tilts her head. “Oh, that’s a good choice. Young but very responsible, knows from growing up with Fred and George when to allow the trickery and when to put a firm stop to it. If I recall correctly, he also never cared about what House his friends were in.”

“No, he didn’t,” Severus agrees. William Weasley had been friends with a few of his Muggle-born Slytherins, which had shocked the hell out of Severus at the time.

“Alchemy?”

“An import from Finland has been looking for a teaching position in the field for the last two years. A man with the very unimaginative name of Viking Vieno Korkohen. He’s a Muggle-born, and thus not welcome at Durmstrang, which I would dearly like to see drag itself out of the fucking Stone Age and at least approach the eighteenth century.”

“Proud gentle raider,” Minerva interprets Viking’s name, smiling. “Oh, he sounds like fun. What about Potions, Severus?”

Severus grins at her, showing off most of his teeth.

Minerva starts laughing again. “Oh, Merlin!” she gasps out. “Does he know this?”
“I’ve been dropping hints. He is very suspicious, but if he’s figured it out, he hasn’t made a decision yet,” Severus replies. “If he decides not to, then I will put up with the dunderheads for a half-term until I can find a suitable replacement for Horace.”

On the fourteenth of December, Severus jolts awake to the sound of something heavy being dropped onto his desk. He lurches upright, startled, and then realizes who his unexpected guest is. “What are you doing here?”

Harry is staring down at him. “Normal people sleep in beds.”

“Normal people aren’t facing down the last week of school before the winter holiday,” Severus replies. “What is it?”

“Happy Hanukkah,” Harry says, and taps the book that must have been the source of Severus’s rude awakening.

“It’s Hanukkah?”

Harry grins. “You are very, very bad at being Jewish.”

“I am very, very bad at most things that are not related to Potions, yelling at idiots, and for some reason, running a blasted school. What is this?” he asks, picking up the book that Harry dropped in front of him. It’s green-bound cloth with gold lettering on the front for the title: *Challenge and Mystery for the Progressive Potions Brewer*. Harry’s name is at the bottom as H. J. Potter, with his family’s crest placed beneath it.

“You asked for a bloody seventh-year textbook. Congratulations! You now have one.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, thank you,” Severus mutters, gently turning page after page after quick glances at subject matter, formula, and theory. All are at the standards he considers exacting enough for a seventh-year N.E.W.T.-level class, with several challenges towards the end that are appropriate for those who wish to test their skills to the utmost before graduation. Harry even included his newly altered version of White Fire, fearing the original could be used by the fearful to kill werewolves. The revision does not have the same lethal, magnesium-like burning results, but presents more as a terrible internalized allergy attack if ingested. Remus volunteered to test it and then promptly declared he was never testing anything Harry created ever again.

Severus closes the book, holding it in both hands. Harry also included his experimental potions from the last three years, some of which are completely insane…but they produce amazing results when brewed properly.

“Well?” Harry crosses his arms. “Please give me some level of feedback, here. Most people do not look entirely depressed when they’ve been given something they’ve asked for.”

“It’s not depression. It’s—” Severus hates it when he stumbles over words. “Harry. I could not have done a finer job myself. No, amend that. I’m not certain I could have done the job this well. It’s exceptional.”

Severus looks up to find that Harry is visibly startled. “You are very, very bad at accepting a compliment.”

“Bad at most things that aren’t flying, killing Dark wizards, potions, and reading,” Harry retorts. Severus lifts one eyebrow.
“Oh, all right. I know better!” Harry exclaims, scowling. “And that is a prime example of why I didn’t want those damned memories back. I liked my self-esteem where it was, thank you very much!”

“It will return.” Severus taps his fingers on the book to regain Harry’s attention. “I meant what I said. This is exceptional. Have you a publisher yet?”

“Uh—yeah. They’re just waiting on word as to whether it’s approved or not,” Harry says. “I have another copy ready. That one is—that one’s yours.”

“I am holding Harry James Potter’s first book.” Severus smiles at him. “I didn’t publish until I was twenty-two, Harry. You’re eighteen. Never let anyone tell you that you’re unaccomplished at anything, myself included.”

“Well, at the times when you were telling me I wasn’t doing something right, you were correct,” Harry returns dryly. “Off to the printers with it?”

“Tell them to put it on a rush order. I want to fling this at my seventh-years in January,” Severus replies. “Thank you, Harry.”

Harry grins, bites his lip, and to Severus’s amusement, blushes a dull red. “You’re welcome.”

The man he’s sharing a house with isn’t the only one to have odd ideas about Hanukkah. Jade brings Severus a vintage top hat with very stern instructions to stop stealing hers. It does pair well with dress robes, and he was right; she’s started a new bloody fashion trend. He’s seen more top hats and corsets in the last two months than he has in twenty-seven years of life immersed in the wizarding world.

Hermione stops by his office with a bound copy of her first thesis paper on wizarding law. To anyone else, it would be a strange gift, but he has always appreciated her intelligence, even when he was in no position to say so in public. It’s very well-done, and he tells her so, which makes her bounce in place a few times before hugging him.

He doesn’t flinch. He is getting used to certain people touching him, but a little more warning would be nice.

The Weasleys send an owl with a package containing a gaudy card and black knit gloves. Sensible; he approves of sensible, especially when such gifts are crafted from wool-blended silk with permanent warming charms.

Narcissa and Draco send him one of the finest quills it has ever been his pleasure to hold. The feather is a black and pristine primary from a raven. The metal nib is solid gold with engraved swirls; he suspects it to be a restored antique. When put to paper, the quill glides across the page like he’s writing upon water.

The house-elves had already finished preparing him an office space in the Peverell House, at Severus’s request. That week, they order him to stay out of his selected suite and refinish the other rooms in record time.

The wallpaper the elves put up in his bedroom is the steel grey of dawn, bordered by a slightly darker gray separated by white lines. In a dungeon or a dark room, it would be dull and miserable, but beneath the skylights that are over every room of the second floor, it’s tranquil.

He’s not had enough tranquility in his life. Waking up to a room that is quiet and peaceful helps a great deal with his lingering PTSD. The sitting room that separates the bedroom from the bathing
room is done in pale spring green bordered by darker green with silver and dark blue edging—
definitely a theme the elves refuse to give up on. After a day’s contemplation, he decides he likes it,
and it’s a nice transition into the white and blue-tiled bathing room with its modern toilet, properly
sectioned off at last. Even if he has the entire room to himself due to its attachment to the suite, the
aspect of further privacy is still preferable.

The Longbottoms send him a letter and a wide-lipped glass jar holding a well-preserved toad.
Severus raises an eyebrow at the dead toad before he opens the letter.

Dear Professor,

Trevor finally kicked the bucket. Literally—I mean he kicked a bucket over while he was dying,
probably just to prove a point. He was a very good friend to me for many years, even if the blighter
spent most of those years trying to escape and causing trouble. He was most assuredly meant to be a
Gryffindor.

However, I feel odd burying him, since he lived to irritate others. It seemed like a much better idea to
present him to you for use in some future potion that will also serve to irritate someone else.

Best wishes,

Neville Longbottom

P.S. This was entirely my son’s idea. Love, Alice.

Severus lowers the letter and looks at the toad again. He has had some exceptionally odd students.

Case in point: Oliver and Nymphadora Black send him a blasted broom. Tonks being pregnant has
gone to both their brains. At least William and Fleur have the excuse of already birthing their child
the previous week, a terrifying, squalling bundle of a girl they’ve named Victoire.

Dear Severus,

I still dearly remember the game in Harry’s first year when you had Madam Hooch’s position as
referee for one particular Quidditch match. Given that you live with the bloke now, you’re going to
need to be able to keep up somehow.

Sincerely and sarcastically meant, no matter what my wife thinks,

Oliver Black

P.S: Severus, please tell Harry to give me that Memory Projection Potion formula. I really, really
need to witness this and Oliver is not sharing properly! Love, Tonks

Harry reads the letter after prodding at the broom on Severus’s desk, which he declares is last year’s
top model. Not enough to break someone’s budget, but fine enough to denote a great deal of respect
towards the one it’s been given to. “Huh. I think I remember that. Short game, right?”
“Shortest game in Hogwarts’ entire Quidditch history,” Severus replies, trying to find the Hogwarts’ seal underneath the paperwork that is trying to eat his desk alive. He does, at least, find the tea.

“I imagine you were up there to keep Quirrell from being such a complete twat,” Harry says, and Severus snorts tea up his nose.

“Please do not do that while I’m trying to drink enough caffeine to deal with the last day of term!” Severus complains, drying his face with a napkin. Then he takes out his wand and removes tea stains from his shirt. “But yes, that is exactly it.”

“I’m just trying to figure out what kind of face you were making after we landed,” Harry says, refolding Oliver’s letter.

“You raced by me flying at a speed of at least fifty miles per hour. Harry, you scared the bloody life out of me!”

“Oh.” Harry glances at the broom. “Maybe that’s a good idea, then.”

“I would quite honestly prefer the motorbike.”

The best gift he receives comes Friday evening, after he returns from Hogwarts by Floo. He has no plans to go back during winter break except to attend the Christmas Feast held for faculty and students who remain over the holidays.

Jade greets him before he can get out of the fireplace, shoving a wax-sealed scroll at him. “READ!”

“Yes, I can actually read, thank you,” Severus retorts, trying to dust off soot while attempting to escape the fireplace.

“No, NOW!”

Severus rolls his eyes and snatches the scroll from her hands, using it as a means to get off the fireplace’s paving stones. “Please let me actually exit the flames next time, Jade. Floo Powder only lasts for so long.”

“Oh. Right. READ IT ANYWAY.”

Severus gives her a suspicious look. “Is it cursed, toxic, or otherwise something that is going to cause me to expire in this parlor?”

Jade pauses and thinks about it. “Probably not.”

“I’m so thrilled.” He breaks the Ministry of Magic’s wax seal and unrolls the scroll.

This is to officiate that on this 18th December 1998, one Jade Isolde Viridian, born to Martha Rosier Viridian on 30th October 1978 in London, England, the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain, has been formally declared an adopted sister and Heir of the Prince family by one Severus Prince, formerly Snape, born to Eileen Prince Snape on 6th January 1960 in Cokeworth, England, the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain.

Per the requested change of name, Jade Viridian is henceforth to be referred to in all legal and magical matters as Jade Isolde Prince. All biological children of Jade Isolde Prince are eligible to be named Heirs to the Prince family vault and any Prince estates that are legally registered.
Well?” Jade asks, starting to look hesitant as he slowly lowers the scroll. “Whatcha thinkin’ ’bout there, Sev?”

“I am thinking that on Hallowe’en of 1996, I met a girl in a top hat with an appalling nose ring and a thick accent, one who was not only polite and kind, but looked at me like I mattered, even though I was a complete stranger. I’m recalling that in July of 1998, that same woman, sans nose ring, started dragging me all about London without a moment of concern…because to her, even though it had been almost two years since that Hallowe’en…I mattered.

“And I am very pleased to be holding this, because you mean a lot to me, sister.”

Jade squeals and jumps up into his arms, losing her hat in the process. Severus flicks his finger at her hat to get it away from fireplace soot and then holds onto Jade. This is the closest he’s come to feeling like a whole person since the spring of 1976.

* * * * *

“Someone please, please tell me why we are hosting a Christmas Party in this house,” Severus begs for the seventh time.

“Because we can,” Jade says, marching around with three house-elves riding on her shoulders. Every time she pauses, the young elves reach up to hang decorations.

“That isn’t a reason!”

“Well, we have one of the few places big enough to hold all of those it will be politic to invite.” Harry grins at Severus when Severus just growls at the reminder. “This many people might make the werewolf boarders at 12 Grimmauld Place nervous, and everyone else is pretty much terrified of going anywhere near Malfoy Manor since Narcissa told the story about the well in her cellar.”

That sounds like a fine method of keeping out unwanted pests. “Let’s tell people we have a well in our cellar.”

“Uh huh. How many doses of Dreamless Sleep have you gone through since Hallowe’en, Severus?” Severus glares at Harry. “You learned some lessons far too well.”

“You’re the one who keeps whinging that the Hat Sorted me wrong.”

“That’s because it bloody well did!”

Politc. It is a word Severus keeps in mind all throughout the evening of the twenty-fourth. He is
very, very glad that Jade found a band out of London willing to play music at a random manor in the countryside. It’s all strings, so it sounds lovely—and very few among the guests are going to recognize that the quartet is performing slower versions of Muggle rock music. If anything could keep this entire affair from grating on his nerves, it’s that. He loves his sister.

“Miss Lovegood,” Severus says in surprise when the young woman crosses his path. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“Happy Christmas, Professor,” she says, standing on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. He tolerates it; he likes Luna Lovegood better than most beings in existence. “And I’m here because my girlfriend invited me.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware you were dating anyone at school.”

“Oh, not from school,” Luna says in her breathy voice. “Oh, and I brought my father as my plus-one. I hope you don’t mind.”

He glances over to where Xenophilius Lovegood is entertaining a section of the reformed Board of Governors with the existence of something the rest of Wizarding Britain probably refuses to recognize. “I’d almost rather you brought the nargles.”

“Oh, they’re here, too,” she replies, grinning. One of the dark red roses encircling her hair lifts its tiny red arm and waves at him. “They wanted to see you again. They appreciate what you’ve done to safeguard them.”

“Hello again, nargles.” Severus waits until the tiny arm retracts, and Miss Lovegood’s hairpiece resembles nothing more than roses once more. “Who invited you, then?”

“Oi, there you are!” Jade says, dashing up to them. She’s in full black lace gothic wear, but she wrapped Muggle silver tinsel around her hat for the occasion. Severus is expecting to get mugged and is surprised when Jade leans over and kisses Luna’s cheek, instead.

“I told you,” Luna repeats. “My girlfriend invited me.”

Severus does a very good of not slapping his hand over his face. “Jade!”

“What?” Jade gives him a look of beaming innocence, which he knows from years of experience in teaching always signifies the complete opposite. “She’s darling, and legal, thank you.”

“You’re a teacher!”

Jade snorts out a laugh. “Three classes only, an’ I didn’ ask her out that whole time. That was this’un, Sev, th’ moment I was done wi’ th’ job.”

“Fine. Please, for the love of God, do nothing together within this house until after she’s graduated from Hogwarts.” If they’re still a couple at that point, anyway.

“Why?” Jade asks.

“She might not be your student, you great bleeding twerp, but she is mine!” Severus slaps his hand onto the top of Jade’s hat, shoving it down until it’s almost covering her eyes. “You will not sully her reputation until she’s free and clear to do the sullying herself!”

Luna is grinning at him again. “You are adjusting to sibling life very well, at least if you are using the Weasleys for an example.”
“I’m really not.”

“No, not enough explosions,” Luna agrees thoughtfully. “Would you mind watching after the nargles for me for a bit, Professor? I want to go out to the back garden and explore the new bird housing, but nargles are terrified of Golden Snidgets.”

Severus gives up. “It will be my pleasure,” he says, and within the next thirty seconds his hat has developed a brim of red roses. What the hell. If Albus could get away with so many eccentricities it would have been seen as a sign of the impending apocalypse for him to stop wearing glittering spangles and stars, Severus can glare people into tolerating his hat’s new piecemeal of décor.

He wanders around Jade’s masterminded party, being as diplomatic as he knows how to be without being accused of being a Polyjuiced stand-in, or of causing someone to soil themselves in terror. Harry is standing with Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang, both of whom look as if they’re contemplating absconding with the former member of their triad the moment everyone else turns their backs. Ginevra Weasley and Neville Longbottom are dancing with a few other couples in that area of the massive entryway. They’re grinning in a way that reveals they are fully aware that they’re not dancing to wizarding tunes. Oliver convinced a visibly pregnant Tonks to sit instead of roam about, which keeps her habit of tripping over dust motes to a minimum. She has also set her hair to change colors in time with the pixies Filius rounded up and convinced to go on display for the event. Hermione and Viktor emerge from their west-wing first floor section of the house, perfectly coiffed in a way that suggests that had not been the case five minutes prior.

Narcissa and Andromeda are speaking together, bent over a table with their foreheads nearly touching. They’re both smiling, a further sign of rebuilding the sisterhood that Black foibles and Malfoy pretentiousness had all but demolished. Draco is in the midst of guiding Astoria Greengrass out to the small area reserved for dancing. He and Neville greet each other with perfect civility that doesn’t seem forced at all, as do Ginevra and Astoria. Pyrrhus is slowly making the trek up and down both sides of the wrought-iron bannister, bursting into differing colors of flame for the amusement of the few children underfoot.

Severus is going to give that bird a stern talking-to after this is over with. The potential of different colors of flame would have been useful to know. Stubborn damned phoenix.

Ron Weasley has—still—somehow convinced Padma Patil not to break up with him. “Well, it’s Christmas. It’s a time for miracles.”

“Stop quotin’ tha’ bloody movie,” Jade mutters as she passes by with her Lovegood girlfriend, properly outfitted in shoes fitting for a birdcage. “I’m regrettin’ ever showin’ it t’you.”

“Then you have only yourself to blame.” Severus watches Ron and Padma for a few moments longer as Parvati joins them. She leans in and kisses her sister’s cheek, then Ron’s, who promptly turns the color of a London double-decker bus.

Severus reaches out and snags Hermione’s hand as she is trying to escape past him to drag her fiancé to the dancing area. “I am not seeing what I think I’m seeing.”

Hermione seems startled by Severus’s sudden grip on her hand before she turns around to watch Ron, Parvati, and Padma. “Huh.” She taps her finger against her bottom lip, a gesture she definitely picked up from Narcissa during the war. “I wonder if that’s what Ron was trying to stutter his way into telling me about earlier.”

Viktor stands up on his toes so he can peer around the stair bannister for a clearer look. “Is Madam Malfoy not the one who says it has been too long since there has been a wizarding triad marriage in
Britain?"

“I’m almost certain that isn’t what Narcissa had in mind.” Severus tries not to grimace. “I don’t know if I should wager on the twins knocking out all of Ronald Weasley’s teeth, or wager on theirs being the most ridiculous, fluffy, blissfully happy arrangement of your entire generation.”

“I’ll go fifty-fifty on it being an even mix of both,” Hermione says.

“I will not be wagering on either.” Viktor is regarding them both as if they’re being exceptionally crass. “I do hope that Ron likes India. The twins have stated quite clearly that they will be attending the Wizarding University of Mumbai in the spring.”

Severus glances down at Hermione. “That is not the expression of a man who is leery of new experiences, which tells me he doesn’t know…and you haven’t warned him.”

Hermione glances up at him, smirking. “And miss out on the sheer numbers of letters I’m going to receive once Ron realizes what he’s gotten himself into? I wouldn’t miss that for the world. Besides, he could use some expanding of his cultural horizons.”

“How does one check an ancient Sorting Hat for senility, anyway?”

Severus checks on the kitchen after Hermione and Viktor elude him, notes the open glass doors, and steps out onto the old stone courtyard in the back. Jade is inside the Snidget enclosure with Luna, and is, to his intense relief, behaving herself.

Luna is covered in so many Golden Snidgets that it’s hard to make out the young lady beneath them. Of course.

Severus walks back through from the kitchen passage and glances towards the east hallway. He, Harry, and Jade agreed it would be the best place to stuff any overnighting guests so that they were not underfoot, as all three of them chose to live upstairs under the skylights.

Sirius is leaning against the wall in a comfortable slouch, his hands stuffed into the pockets of dress trousers that veer towards Muggle but don’t quite make it. Remus is standing over him, his hand braced on the wall, smiling down at Sirius. Then he laughs in response to whatever quip Sirius just made and bends down to kiss the other man’s forehead.

“Awwwwww,” drifts down in a faint, musical chorus from his hat.

“Shh. Quiet, you lot,” Severus tells the nargles, turning away. “Let them be.”

The next morning, Severus is up early enough that he still has the kitchen to himself. The guests who did not have to rush home to see their families on Christmas Day are wisely sleeping in, but he hasn’t been able to shake the habit of early waking unless he’s been pummeled by exhaustion. He would actually like to do so, but he still greets each morning as if it will bring Death Eaters and explosions.

Harry comes stumbling out by the time the tea is ready, wearing a t-shirt and denims. “Morning. Why is it early?”

“Because the earth completed its rotation, and thus it is a new day.”

Harry opens his eyes just enough to glare at him. “It is too early for sarcasm.”

“Nonsense. Gilly, please give this man tea before he falls on his face.”
Gilly does so, laughing in amusement as Harry grasps the cup and downs most of it in less than a minute. “Please, take two is needed!” Harry gasps.

While Gilly fetches another cup of tea, Severus raises an eyebrow at Harry. “I’m surprised to see you awake this early. I was certain that Cedric and Cho would have kidnapped you last night.”

“Kidnapping?” Harry blinks a few times before recognition kicks in. “Oh! Oh, that’s what they bloody well wanted! Why can’t people just come out and say these things?”

“Because dancing around the subject salvages everyone’s feelings if the dancing is unappreciated,” Severus says dryly. “Trust me on that one.”

“That’s complete rubbish. If they knew how to be direct, I would have enjoyed the latter half of the evening instead of trying to butter up Gilead Scrimgeour!”

“Why, why are you trying to do anything involving butter with that man?” Severus asks, appalled.

“Because he’s on the Board of Governors,” Harry replies, scowling. “I’m still trying to figure out if there is a way to bribe or blackmail that man into _not_ being a complete prick.”

“Harry, you are honestly the most Slytheriniest Gryffindor to ever attempt to flap and slough at the same time.”

Harry stares at him. “I’m buying another French Press for this house,” he says at last. “You say weird shite when you’re under-caffeinated.”

Jade comes bouncing into the kitchen in her usual manner, though she hasn’t brushed her hair, bothered with eyeliner, and she’s still wearing yesterday’s tinsel-edged socks. “Good morning, you shiny, shiny idiot blokes whom I dearly love!”

Severus gives her a suspicious look. “Jade. What did you do last night?”

“I did nothin’!” Jade declares. “I put m’lovely Luna to bed like th’ chaste virginal flower she is!”

“Jade.”

“All RIGHT! All right, we made out like bloody bandits on a bleedin’ treasure hunt!” Jade sits down in the next chair and glares at him. “An’ if you didn’ wanna know, don’ be askin’!”

Severus rests his face on his hand in resignation. “Please, please just announce your engagement _now_, before someone comes along and accuses me of impropriety towards a student.”

“Thought there were propriety magics in place to prevent that sort of thing,” Harry says.

“Yes, but they only work if both parties are inside Hogwarts or on school grounds!”

“Engagement? We’ve only been datin’ for two months,” Jade returns, bewildered.

“Jade…Luna asked you. Luna. Asked you. For a date,” Harry says, like he’s talking to someone being exceptionally dim. “Luna does not ask to date people. Ever.”

When Severus looks up, Jade’s eyebrows have drawn together. “S’what you’re sayin’…is tha’ it’s a good thing I like her, ’cause I’m probably stuck wi’ her?”

“Yes.” Severus looks at Harry. “Please do me a favor and do not date, get engaged, or become married for at least the next three months. I think I have truly reached the limit of sudden and
Harry just sighs. “Well, if last night was any indication, that’s really not going to be a problem.”

“If they don’t know how to be direct, how in the hell did you end up in a relationship with those two in the first place?” Severus asks.

“Oh.” Harry puts down an empty second cup of tea. “Maybe they’re just out of practice, but it started with Cedric shoving his hand down my trousers while Cho tried to shove her tongue down my throat. Really doesn’t get much more direct than that.”

Severus closes his eyes and sighs. “I opened my mouth, I asked that question, and I knew immediately that I was going to regret doing so.” He lets his head thunk down onto the tabletop while Jade howls with laughter.

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New Year’s Eve is a quiet gathering, nothing like the madhouse of the politically necessary Christmas Eve party. It’s only the five of them—Sirius, Remus, Jade, Harry, and Severus himself. Luna Lovegood is with her father, spending time with Xenophilius before school resumes; Hermione and Viktor are waiting for the new year’s arrival with the Doctors Granger in London; the Weasleys are keeping to their traditions in The Burrow.

Severus watches the seconds count down on his pocket watch before snapping it closed. “That’s it, then. Midnight.”

“I don’t hear any cheering,” Jade observes crossly. “Happy Bloody New Year, y’great daft idiots!”

Remus lets out a long sigh. “Happy New Year to all.”

“S’not what I had in mind,” Jade grumbles.

“So…it’s 1999.” Sirius is staring down at his glass full of Firewhiskey. “One year closer to a new millennium.”

“You tossers are depressive,” Jade complains.

Harry glances at her. “Jade, at this time last year, I didn’t know if any of us were still going to be alive to see this day. None of us knew if we were going to survive the war.” He is far too downcast for what should be a pleasant occasion—a victory.

“Some of us almost were not. But instead, we are. We are here, right now.” Severus smiles at Harry.

“To me, that is worthwhile.”

“In a year’s time, it’s going to be the twenty-first century,” Remus muses. “I wonder what Wizarding Britain is going to look like in the twenty-first century?”

Severus glances around at Remus, Sirius, Harry, and Jade. “Different,” he declares in a quiet voice.

Sirius nods. “I’ll drink to that,” he says, and holds up his tumbler. Five glasses meet together with the gentle chime of old crystal, a note that lingers in the air longer than it should. Severus decides to take it as a good omen.
Crystalized Water

All students return to the school on the ninth of January, a weekend, which gives them time to burn off excess excitement from the train ride (and the treats) and to settle in before classes begin on Monday. After the school’s Christmas Feast, Severus found himself checking in once a day, both for preparations that needed to happen, and to be somewhat available for the students who had no place to go during the holiday. He continues that trend through the weekend, holding semi-regular office hours, and is pleasantly surprised to receive numerous visitors who actually seem glad to see him.

Severus waits until the door shuts behind his last Ravenclaw visitor on Sunday evening. “It’s still odd.”

“I keep telling you, Severus: you are good for this school,” Dumbledore’s portrait says.

“Please do shut up, Albus.” It’s the only response he has left; the blasted portraits have logically destroyed all of his counterarguments as to why he shouldn’t be sitting here.

Fine. He claimed the post out of necessity during the Occupation, and for the first half of this term. For the second half of the term, he is grasping hold and not letting go unless they pry this post out of his cold, dead hands—or he survives long enough to consider retirement.

At breakfast on Monday morning, he waits until the elves start making the leftovers Vanish before standing up. “Welcome back. None of the rules announced in September have changed, so if any of you light off a Wheezes firework in this castle, I will allow Argus Filch to hang you upside down by your toes.”

Argus grins from his favorite nook off to one side of the riser. Severus invited him to join them at the table but Argus refused, preferring to remain unnoticed until he can scare the hell out of some misbehaving dunderhead. There is a reason they always got along, after all. It’s possibly for the best; they’re starting to push the table’s capacity with a count of twenty-three chairs…and he still wants to add another one.

“I need to inform you of a few things before classes begin, as someone’s premature departure has left us needing to shuffle a few things around. Horace Slughorn chose to retire in the middle of the school year,” Severus announces derisively, leaving no doubt as to what he really thinks of Horace’s decision. “Someone of much more sterling quality will be taking on the role as Head of Slytherin House, as she herself was the most gracious and venomous of Slytherins during her school years. Professor Narcissa Black will be looking after you for the rest of the year, and potentially for many years to come. Do not disappoint her.”

Severus glances at the Slytherin table, noticing a disappointing amount of glee on too many Pure-blood faces. They probably think Narcissa will return Slytherin House to its old, bloated ways. Severus looks forward to the day when Narcissa causes the little ingrates to realize that being Slytherin has nothing to do with being a Pure-blooded witch or wizard at all.

“With Professor Slughorn’s sad departure, we have a new Alchemy teacher who specialized in the subject for a full university education. Students, meet our new Viking—literally. This is Professor Viking Korkohen of Finland. He already has an excellent reputation in his chosen field, so he will probably be terrifying.”

“Hallo!” Viking introduces himself, standing up and giving the assembled students a brief wave. The speed in which the overgrown blond man returns to his seat speaks of first-day jitters.
“Oh, don’t look so nervous,” Severus says to the student body in a false display of irritation. “I’m not taking the first- through third-year Potions classes back. Why do you think he is sitting there?” he asks, pointing down the left side of the table at the man seated next to Wilhelmina.

Harry Potter stands up and waves, just as Viking did a moment ago. “Hi there. This is getting to be a habit, you know.”

“Ho, shite,” a tiny little voice whispers towards the back of the room.

“Oh, Merlin, someone please drag me back in time by a year,” a fourth-year Hufflepuff says without speaking aloud; Severus has always been good at lip-reading.

“Hi, Professor!” Miss Lovegood calls out cheerfully.

“Hello, Luna—okay, now it’s officially weird.” Harry tilts his head in recognition of too many children all but biting through their own tongues to stay quiet. “Okay, you get two questions, and then I’m sitting back down, because your Headmaster isn’t done yet.”

“What happened to your glasses?” Dennis Creevy yells out, appalled.

“Surprised I didn’t get asked that earlier. They were either stolen by a Death Eater, like the last pair were, the thieving twits, or I haven’t actually needed glasses since 1995.” Harry smiles at them. “One or the other.”

“Are you going to be nice?” Miss Ewhurst of Gryffindor asks nervously.

“Nice?” Harry leans forward and pins Miss Ewhurst with a pleasant smile. “Do you have any idea how many cauldrons I personally witnessed Neville Longbottom melt while brewing potions when that literally should not have been possible? No, I’m not going to be nice. I used to be known as The Boy Who Lived, and I would very much like to keep living.”

“Are you going to be nicer than him?” Tate of Hufflepuff asks.

“That’s three questions now,” Harry points out dryly.

“You keep giving us the wrong answers, so we have to keep asking clearer questions!” Dhillon from Ravenclaw shouts.

“Good. That means you’re thinking.” Harry glances back at Tate. “Ask your fellow seventh-years in N.E.W.T. Potions what they think of their new textbook,” he says, and sits down.

Tate glances over at Yoshioka, who is rapidly shaking her head, wide-eyed. Kettletoft just looks like he wants the floor to eat him.

“Nalini Upreti is here for your next quarter of History of Magic. She will be teaching you about the historical traditions of the Hindu magical communities.” The dark-skinned woman seated next to Julius stands up, the gold thread woven into her sari glimmering beneath the light of so many candles. She waves in greeting, smiles at them with a flash of white teeth and laughing dark eyes, and then sits back down.

“I also have some news that one particular table is going to find upsetting, but before I say it, I want you to know that she is still going to be teaching in this school,” Severus emphasizes. “Professor McGonagall is giving up her post as Head of Gryffindor House after fifty years.”

Severus tries not to wince; yes, that is the sound of a lot of upset Gryffindor students. “She will still
be teaching all classes for Transfiguration, as well as retaining her post as Deputy Headmistress of this school. She will also,” Severus glances at Minerva, who pretends to be scowling at him, “be taking up residence in the Headmaster’s Tower quarters, since I do not want to live there. I prefer to remain downstairs.

“Your new Head of House would have been the werewolf, but some of you have truly stupid parents who would march on Hogwarts and attempt to burn the castle down with all of us still in it.”

Severus smiles when he hears Remus drop his teacup. That was very much worth it. “Your new Head of House will thus be William Weasley. Please recall that he is the elder brother of Fred and George Weasley, who are famous for terrible reasons, and probably knows every single trick you could ever attempt.”

“How does one be a Head of House, anyway?” William asks, glancing up at Severus with an expression that fails utterly at being innocent.

“You live in Gryffindor Tower, and you do not let any of them die.”

“Oh, like extended babysitting. I can do that,” William says, and grins directly at his sister. Ginevra huffs out a breath and rolls her eyes.

“Class begins in fifteen minutes.” Severus lifts an eyebrow when nobody moves. “That means ‘Out!’ ingrates!”

* * * *

Severus is still seated behind the desk in the Potions classroom when Harry arrives for the third-year’s Monday class, which takes place an hour after Monday’s Double-Potions ends. Harry is red-cheeked and out of breath as he drops a bag on the floor next to the desk.

“Bloody hell, I thought I was going to get mugged,” Harry says, bending over to rest his forehead on the desk’s edge. “How long until the invasion begins?”

Severus pulls out his pocket watch. “Twenty minutes. They will likely begin flocking in before that, since it’s you.”

“Figured on that. It’s why I showed up early.” Harry lifts his head. “Probably not early enough. Why are you still in here?”

Severus glances around. “I was actually contemplating exactly how much time I’ve spent in this room. I’ve never changed any aspect of it; it looked like this when I was a student. I was wondering if it should remain this way.”

“Absolutely. Sets the atmosphere perfectly. I loved this room the first time I saw it,” Harry says.

Severus looks at him in surprise. “Did you?”

“Dungeon full of dangerous, bubbling liquids? Yeah. I even liked your speech. Wrote it down as you were giving it, even though my handwriting with a quill was atrocious.” Harry’s smile falters. “I have no idea what happened to my notes from that day, though. The Dursleys, maybe.”
“You liked it that much?” Severus asks, amused. The Weasley twins like to claim it’s the same speech every year, but it’s not. There are subtle variations, and they only ever heard the one. Without hearing the speech in full, a summary would seem to be the same information repeated.

“I did. I knew after that first day that I probably wasn’t going to enjoy your teaching the subject very much, but I really did try. I’m still not sure if half the red marks I got on my work were because you were being politic, or if I was doing that badly.”

Severus smiles. “It was a first-year Potions class. Everyone got bad marks, Professor, no matter their House. The Slytherins would just never admit to it.”

The face Harry makes in response to being called by his new title is just as satisfying as Remus Lupin’s broken teacup at breakfast. “I’m off, then. Enjoy your first day of teaching.”

“I’m the youngest teacher Potions has ever had, aren’t I?”

Severus glances over his shoulder to discover that Harry is in the middle of tying his hair back as best he can, which is almost an exercise in futility. “No. You’re the youngest teacher this entire school has ever had.”

Harry glares at him. “Thank you very, very much for that. Now I’m actually nervous.”

Severus lifts one shoulder in a vague shrug. “If I didn’t know that you could do the job, I wouldn’t have hired you.”

“Yes, but you also hired Slughorn!” Harry calls out.

“Desperate times, desperate measures. I was going to fire him at the end of the year. I’m still most put out that he sabotaged that plan by quitting before I could do so.”

“Huh. Who were you going to hire to replace him, then?” Harry asks.

Severus pauses, turns around, and gives Harry a level stare.

“Oh.” Harry frowns. “How do you know I would have said yes?”

“You’re the one who’s been complaining about being unemployed.”

Severus gives it a week before he decides to look in on how Harry is doing. He never does that to anyone during their first week of teaching—either an instructor is too nervous, still adjusting to the odd way Hogwarts chooses to do things, or both. It’s the second week that he quietly invades an instructor’s classroom, hiding in the back under a Disillusionment Charm to observe and listen.

Viking Korkohen’s review was his first that morning, but he only needed to linger for a few minutes to realize that Korkohen would be fine. The big man doesn’t seem to do well when on the school’s equivalent of a stage, but in the classroom, he is completely at ease. He has his Alchemy students eating out of his hands already. Nalini Upreti seems a bit less comfortable, but has the determination of one who’s already chosen to see their job through. He isn’t worried about her; she only has two months of lessons before the fourth and final rota of the year in that subject.

Severus’s new Potions instructor has his Slytherin-Gryffindor students brewing the Oculus Potion during their second week of class that Monday. It’s a standard potion for third-years, but one that should have been covered by mid-November during Slughorn’s tenure.

Given the look on Harry’s face, he is also aware that something is not quite right. “This is a single
class, so—lucky you, you get to cheat,” he says, and reveals the potion’s name and listed ingredients on the blackboard by slapping it with his hand. It wakes up Mister Stacey in the back, a Slytherin in the verge of nodding off over his workbench. “Standard Oculus is good for what?”

It takes far too long for Miss Ewhurst to raise her hand. “Injuries to the eye, or to repair failing vision due to old age?”

“Or if you’re lucky enough to be born with shoddy vision. However, Oculus doesn’t work for everyone,” Harry says. “Good job, Miss Ewhurst. Oculus is far more important to learn and keep on hand for the first reason—injury. Your cheat today is that it takes too long to make up a proper infusion of wormwood stewed in rosemary oil unless you have Double Potions; you need at least an hour. That’s a fourth-year concern. What you need today comes pre-bottled.” Harry drops his wand into his hand long enough to conjure forth a single bottle for each student before tucking it away again.

“You also don’t have to collect your own mandrake—”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Whiddon breathes out in relief.

“—but you do need to slice it, and please be careful. It stings and your finger will turn interesting colors if you cut yourself with a knife already saturated with mandrake juice. You are also grinding your own horn of unicorn, but you only need a section approximately two inches long to have enough. I want to see the results in your mortars before you add them, because far too many of you look nervous over what should be a simple task at this point. Please also note your need for bilberry berries, garlic, turmeric, and eyebright, all of which you’ll be hunting down on your own in the cupboard. And no, the potion itself is not pleasant to the tongue, but it is a lot better than Skele-Grow.”

“What’s that one taste like? Not had that sort of opportunity, Professor,” Frazer asks. His tone is far too familiar for Severus’s preferences regarding student-teacher relationships in a classroom setting, but Harry doesn’t mind. Brat.

“It burns and it tastes like you’re slugging down—hold on, all of the first comparisons I thought of would get me fired immediately,” Harry says, which makes several third-years laugh. Severus thinks they have no business being that knowledgeable of those things in third-year. “Unsweetened chocolate covered in mold.”

“EW!” Gerard yelps.

“Professor, what is, uh…” Miss Shetty looks afraid to ask. “What’s crystalized water?”

Harry doesn’t wince, though Severus does. Oh, dear Merlin, what has Slughorn been doing for a year and a half?

“That would be ice, Miss Shetty,” Harry replies. “When water freezes, it crystalizes.”

“Right. Why not just call it ice?” Berrow asks.

That breaks Harry’s cheerful mask. “Because this textbook is two hundred years out of date.”

“What, they didn’t have ice back then?” Anthony asks, though at least he’s trying to make light of the situation.

“Oh, certainly, but saying ‘add snow’ in a potion recipe is somehow not pretentious enough,” Harry returns in a dust-dry voice. “Please tell me you all know how to conjure ice.” There is a reassuring
chorus of “Yes, Professor!” in response. “All right, then. Have at it. Remember—show me the powdered unicorn first!”

It takes twelve minutes before Miss Shimizu becomes tearful and frustrated. “I just—Professor, I don’t—this isn’t helpful!”

Harry squeezes Whiddon’s shoulder in approval at the boy’s ground unicorn horn before wandering over. “What is it?”

“Alphabetical order,” Shimizu says mournfully, holding up 1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi. “I mean, it’s so useful in Herbology! But in here—I need to look at rosemary, wormwood, unicorn horn, mandrake, turmeric, garlic, water, eyebright, and bilberry berries. Those are all in different parts of the book—except water, unicorn horn, and turmeric aren’t even in here!”

“Wait—turmeric isn’t bloody in here?” Harry swipes the book from Miss Shimizu, unaware of how many students jerked upright in response to their teacher’s language.

“No! And—I don’t know what it even looks like unless it’s already powdered in my parents’ spice cabinet,” Miss Shimizu adds. “It’s orange! The only orange powders in the potions cupboard are not turmeric.”

“No, they’re not, and they would really not make good replacements.” Harry pages through the T-section of the book a few more times and then looks up, baffled. “Well, turmeric is here, but in peeled and sliced form. That doesn’t tell you what it would look like in root form, and that’s what’s in the classroom.” He glances at a few more pages. “Right, I remember now how much I liked this book when I first got it. By the time we were three weeks into the school term, I hated it for the very same reason. It identifies items well enough, and their uses by themselves. Not much else, though. Even a cross-index would be an improvement, but no, nobody thinks of these things in terms of being actually useful…”

Severus never thought of it that way; but then, he did as Obliviated Harry did—he memorized the damned book from cover to cover. Either no one dared to complain about turmeric’s lack of proper depiction, or his students did a very good job of assisting others within their own Houses for identifying the root.

“Muggle-born, right?” Harry asks, and Miss Shimizu nods. “Right. Everyone who grew up in a wizarding household knows what turmeric looks like before it’s ground up, since it’s a common thing we keep around. An entire root has different effects from part of a root, which is different from sliced turmeric, different from sliced turmeric without its root covering, and dried turmeric slices or powder and everything I’m saying is basically meaningless to you, isn’t it?”

The girl bows her head in shame. “Yes, sir.”

“Okay.” Harry gives Miss Shimizu her book before stepping back so he can see everyone in the room. “I suspect I know what’s going on now. Mister Berrow, why is turmeric included in a standard Oculus Potion?”

“I have absolutely no idea, sir,” Berrow admits.

“It’s an anti-inflammatory with properties that also help to prevent or heal cataracts.” Harry crosses his arms. “Mister Rosier: what is rosemary?”

“Uh—a plant?” Rosier blurts, looking half-panicked.

Harry smiles. “Sorry, I walked right into that one. What properties exist in rosemary that would make
it useful in an Oculus potion? It’s not just there to give the wormwood something to sit in.”

Boyle raises his hand when the Gryffindor can’t come up with anything. “Preservative. I think.”

“Well, preserving eyesight is sort of the point, so yes,” Harry says. “It’s also an anti-inflammatory, but not the first of that sort you want to grab. Rosemary is an antibacterial that stimulates blood flow; both of these traits would be important for treating an injury. Wormwood—yet another anti-inflammatory, tastes like anise crawled up your sinuses and died there. Historically it was used in Egypt as an antiseptic. No, scratch that. Last I read, they were still using it the same way, but only in wizarding communities.”

Harry looks around the room. “Raise your hand if most or all of that was new information. This isn’t about grades, so don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something. If you don’t tell me, I can’t fix it now, can I?”

Severus is disheartened when most of the room raises their hands. This can’t be an entire batch of dunderheads. Absolutely not.

“Mandrake is used in Oculus because of its magical properties, which can differ from the properties of the version of mandrake that Muggles most often encounter. It’s a mandrake-based draught that cures petrification, which can happen if you meet the eyes of a Gorgon, or meet the gaze of a Basilisk through a reflective surface. Thus it is a restorer from damage caused by the eyes of another. The unicorn horn is a purifier, really good for healing potions, adds a good kick of magic to a brew. The ice—your infamous crystalized water—is needed because after the third stage, you must immediately take the potion from hot to cold, add the turmeric, and resume heating again.”

“But I’m not worried about that at the moment. Someone tell me what the properties of powdered moonstone are. Anyone at all,” Harry says.

Silence. No hands are raised; most of Harry’s students look to be on the verge of bafflement or genuine upset.

“Okay. How do you harvest Wiggenweld leaves?”

Still no answers. Severus is contemplating having it out with Professor Sprout. Even if the Potions students missed that lesson, it is one she covers, as well.

A muscle under Harry’s eye tics. “Still fine. I’m figuring this out. How do you know if you’ve brewed a common Boil Cure Potion correctly?”

It’s quiet until Pershore raises his quaking hand. “Uh, it will release blue smoke, Professor?”

The tic is getting worse. “Very close. The potion itself should be blue in color when complete, but it emits pink smoke when it’s done, not blue.” Harry abruptly sits down on top of the desk. “Oh, dear.”

“Is—is something wrong, Professor?” Miss Ewhurst asks after a few minutes in which Harry doesn’t say anything.

“Yes.” Harry puts both of his hands over his face and then drops them again. “I’m trying to figure out how to get all of you to the point where you’re capable of taking fourth-year Potions without losing your minds, or creating some truly epic classroom accidents.”

“Are we—are we not ready for fourth-year?” Stacey asks.

“None of you are even ready for this class!” Harry retorts. “No, no—please, no one go on and think
it’s because you’re stupid. That isn’t the problem, or else we wouldn’t have made it through last week. It’s just—you’ve had a full year and a half-term with Slughorn. Before that, you had a full year with Professor Prince.”

*Titles again, their application and the lack thereof. Brat, Severus thinks fondly.*

The Slytherins and Gryffindors all glance at each other in bewilderment. “Yes, sir?” Whiddon finally ventures.

Harry gives all the third-years in the classroom a somber look. “I understand how you lot might have struggled in first-year—that was not a great school term for anyone, your teachers included. Even aside from the Occupation, Professor Prince is extremely particular for a multitude of reasons, most of which center around the fact that he would also prefer not to be blown up by someone’s ill-brewed potion.”

“He didn’t teach us anything!” Frazer looks too distressed for it to be whinging.

Harry raises an eyebrow. “During my very first day in his class, Professor Prince actually told us quite a bit about the nature of potions ingredients. His teaching was often buried under the yelling and the irritation, but he practically flung information at us from the start of the class period until class was over for the day—and it was that way in every class. He expected us to write it down, and then to remember it…which, well, a lot of eleven-year-olds are not great at. Even he recognizes this fact, which is why you’re looking at me right now instead of him.”

“But you talk about being taught.” Harry gives them a dry look. “I’ve heard from a lot of students that Slughorn was a nice instructor. Nice. Except what has ‘nice’ gotten you? There are fundamental basics missing from your entire education!”

Every student in the room seems to wince or otherwise look guilty. “Oh,” Rosier offers.

“January through June. We have less than six months to get all of you up to speed on what you should already know, and then still get you ready for your fourth year.” Harry picks up his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* and tosses it over his shoulder. It crashes to the floor behind him, where it is promptly ignored.

Severus lifts an eyebrow. If Harry is resorting to book-throwing, then he is well and truly disappointed with its content. He’s seen the man throw exactly one other book, and that was one of Gilderoy Lockhart’s horrific publications.

“The hell with this,” Harry announces. “We’re starting over.”

His students exchange nervous glances again. “Can we throw our books, too?” Gerard asks.

“Oh, I’d love for you to turn the lot of them into rubbish, but no. Right now, you still need them. We’re just not going to approach its contents in the expected fashion. Your homework is about to become a wretched pile, but not because I dislike or wish to punish you; I want to help you.” Harry pauses. “Speaking of, does anyone know where Horace Slughorn lives?”

Miss Shetty tilts her head. “Uh—why?”

“Because I’m going to kill him for doing this to all of you,” Harry replies, scowling. “Right, then!” He hops off the desk and lands on his feet, which makes several students jump. “I’m so glad we meet three times a week, or this would be a disaster we’d have no hope of correcting in time. We’re going back to the absolute basics. We will be discussing all the varying properties of birds, arachnids, amphibians, insects, reptiles, mammals, the platypus—yes, it really is in a category by itself—hair
and fur from every known species roaming this planet, magical or otherwise, rocks, gemstones, minerals, metals, mushrooms, tree parts, leaves, roots, flowers, pollen, nectar, flowers, venom, blood, differences in types of water by pH level, mineral content, and why proper distillation is so very, very important, sprites and pixies, types of bezoars and their differing qualities, water kelpie hair, unicorn horn and hair, parts of the dragon and bleedin’ fish, as well as what’s actually inside a sack of Standard Ingredient, and I really wish they’d stop selling that load of rubbish. During this time, you’ll also learn that a lot of these items are known by multiple names or have sub-species that bear different qualities, which is a complete pain in the backside.”

That bloody well tears it. The moment Harry has completed this half-term of teaching, Severus is going to threaten, goad, or beg the man into getting his certifications in order so he can apply for and earn the title of Potions Master. He’s already published a book; the rest is just irritating paperwork.

Harry’s recitation has most of the class wide-eyed and potentially horrified. “Sir? How long will that take?” Miss Shetty asks.

“That, my delightful Slytherin, is all of January. Oh, and this also includes making notes on the items that need to be harvested at different times, or in different ways, to create different effects depending on your potion.” Harry gives them a wolf’s toothless smile. “Be glad you aren’t also meant to be considering cauldron metal interactions, phases of the moon, or the position of the sun and other stars yet. That’s all reserved for fifth year…though, I really think a few of those ideas should be introduced in fourth-year, but that is currently not my job.”

Which ideas? Severus thinks in irritation. He wants Harry’s opinion on that; he might very well be correct.

“Oh, uh—” Miss Shmizu tentatively holds up her 1000 Herbs and Fungi book again. “This just uh—this only covers magical herbs and fungi. You mentioned a lot more than that.”

“I did, yeah, and all of you have been brewing potions that use ingredients not found in that book since first year! Everything I’ve just mentioned? Most of you should know this already. The only new aspects we should have faced together would have been about harvesting methods—no, I’m really serious,” Harry adds in irritation when there is a smattering of protest. “Don’t bother bringing your cauldrons to class again until I say so. Until the end of this month, you’re all going to be taking a lot of notes. If I cover material that you already know? Excellent! Then make sure the student next to you understands it, too, and then the next student, and the next. You’re all going to need this information for three different subjects if you want to place decently on your O.W.L.s in fifth-year. You’ll need it all just to not sob your way through your fourth-year classes, and yes, that does include this one.”

“Professor, you have to be blowing this all out of proportion. We’re not that ignorant!” Cameron Goyle protests.

Harry looks over at Goyle. “What’s another term for aconite, Mister Goyle?”

Goyle’s eyes screw up as he thinks. “Uh—dead werewolf?”

Harry’s gaze goes flat and angry, the ratel’s temper making his green eyes shine in the torchlight. “Congratulations. I now really do not like you. You had best turn in academic gold, or you are not going to enjoy the rest of the year in this classroom.” Goyle cringes, aware that he’s made a terrible blunder but unaware of how to correct it. Someone should have taught the young man that basic apologies are a good start.

Harry blinks a few times, and the ratel’s eye-shine goes away. “Can someone with a bit more
awareness of the words coming out of their mouth please tell me of another term for aconite that isn’t a joke about my godparent being dead?”

Whiddon is glaring at Goyle. “Monkshood, sir.”

“Excellent. Another one?”

Frazer looks half-terrified to say the word. “Wolfsbane.”

Harry nods. “Thank you. That is something you should all have been aware of by the end of your very first class as first-years.”

“How?” Pershore bleats out.

“Because you had first-year Potions with Professor Prince. He uses that plant for every first class as a means of pointing out exactly why you should know your plants, dried or fresh, blooming or not, season to season. Or did you skip that bit with this batch, and that’s why I’m staring down the barrel of a completely hopeless mess?” Harry asks, looking directly at Severus.

Severus drops what seems to have been a useless Disillusionment Charm. “No, I did not. As you said, Professor Potter—every first class, every time.” He resists the urge to sigh. “I really need to work on my Disillusionment Charms.”

Harry seems baffled. “You were using a charm?”

“We didn’t know he was there!” Stacey blurts out, wide-eyed.

“And I am entirely terrified now, Professors!” Anthony squeaks.

“Please. Your Headmaster does not bite. Much.” Harry grins. “Now, are you done lurking, Professor Prince?”

“Actually, I am really curious as to how you plan to approach this level of intense remedial studies,” Severus admits, sitting down at an unoccupied worktable.

“Really?”

Severus nods. “If it’s anything more useful than what I learned from Slughorn through six-and-a-half years of Potions, I will help you kill that man, and no one will ever find his body.”

“Y’know, sirs, I think that Professor Dumbledore threatened to kill people a bit less,” Rosier says.

Harry and Severus both glance at Rosier. “European Wizarding World War,” Harry says.

“First Wizarding War of Britain,” Severus adds. “Second Wizarding War of Britain.”

Harry looks around the room again. “Two Houses per class. No, this isn’t useful at all right now. I don’t want to have to repeat all of these lectures twice. Roster!”

The Hogwarts roster that tracks scheduling for each year and class, every term, appears in the air in front of Harry. It also refuses to unroll itself.

“Open up, you.” Harry looks unimpressed when the roster refuses to comply. “All right, then; fine: when I was thirteen years old, I threatened to burn down an entire house just to get rid of a portrait inside that wouldn’t stop spewing bigotry and rubbish at ear-splitting volume. I will happily burn you to a cinder and replace you with a roster that will behave. Which would you prefer?”
The roster immediately straightens out, revealing its full seven-day length and seven level depth of students listed by year. “Much better. Thank you.”

Severus would remind Harry that threatening to set irritants on fire is sometimes an overreaction, but the results are always so entertaining that he can’t bring himself to do so.

“Uh, Professor? What are you doing?” Miss Shetty asks.

“Shh. I’m in the middle of ruining your social lives for the rest of the term.” Harry is prodding at the roster with his wand, narrow-eyed. “This class is now for all four Houses, with a double Potions on Wednesdays, until we return to brewing—which I hope will be February, but not until I’m certain you lot can remember the basics.”

“An extra hour of Potions?” Berrow whinges.

“Oh, that’s a problem?” Harry gestures for the roster to depart. “Then we’ll vote on it. You can all continue merrily along on this set curriculum that you’ve already demonstrated that you don’t understand, fail the year-end exams miserably, and really hate the entirety of your fourth year…or you can cope with an adjusted schedule and an extra hour of Potions, secure in the idea that as long as you pay attention, you won’t fail out of Hogwarts. Raise your hands if you want the first option!”

“It’s a trap,” Miss Shmizu whispers. It sounds like a quote.

“Star Wars! I know that one.” Harry smiles. “I don’t see any hands in the air, so I’m assuming you all want to be educated instead of ignorant. Excellent decision. Vanish what’s left in your cauldrons, put all ingredients and tools away, and then be ready to draw and write. You’ll want to take really good notes.”

While the students comply, Harry strolls over and leans down next to Severus. “What, worried I was going to be poisoning the lot of them the moment your back was turned?”

“No. I spy on everyone during their second week to make certain they’re adjusting, or to find out if I need to keep hunting for new faculty,” Severus replies. “I’m still genuinely curious as to how you’re going to approach this.”

“Scheduling shift. Monday’s eleven o’clock is the same for all Houses in third-year. I didn’t have to shuffle anyone to double-up on Wednesday, since the classes run back-to-back. Friday sees this lot moved into the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw timeslot. That part is easier than I thought it was going to be. It’s second- and first-year classes that I’m going to need to sit down with everyone who teaches classes at that level and hammer out a corrected schedule.”

“You think this needs to be done for all three years?” Severus asks in surprise.

Harry grimaces. “Given this mess? Second-years most assuredly do. First-years will be easier; they’re still malleable enough that I can get rid whatever the hell it is that Slughorn thought he was teaching. Shorter process; they’ll be brewing again by mid-January.”

Severus is very glad that only Minerva, Filius, Remus, Rubeus, Pomona, Augusta, Argus, and Julius will be affected. This might require a massive scheduling shift, but it would be far worse if fourth-years and up were also affected. “How did you notice the Disillusionment Charm?”

“I didn’t see a charm,” Harry says. “I just saw you. I thought you were merely lurking about in your usual manner.”

“I do not lurk,” Severus says in amusement. “It isn’t lurking if no one notices you.”
“Lurk, verb: to stay concealed, to remain secretive, to exist without being perceived,” Harry quotes in a dry voice.

“Please do not tell me that you memorized a dictionary.”

“Oh, so you want me to lie to you, then?” Harry glances around to see that most of his students are ready for note-taking. “Boredom, noun: the state of things being exceptionally dull.”

Severus bites back a laugh. “You’re certain you saw no charm?”

“No.” Harry hesitates, an odd look on his face. “I’ve been able to see through illusions and Disillusionment Charms since last spring.”

“Ah. Related to your conversation with a certain cloaked being?” Severus asks.

“No idea. Most likely, yes, but it could just be long-term Invisibility Cloak use. No one else who owned it is alive to ask, though—well Ignotus had it longest, but he claims ignorance on the subject, despite the fact that he’s wearing the damned Cloak in his painting.”

Severus decides to put that subject aside for now. “All right, then, Professor: are you certain a month is going to be enough time for your students to catch up? I would appreciate a batch of fourth-years who know what they’re doing next year.”

Harry glares at Severus, one eyebrow lifted in annoyance. “If I can catch up on all of primary school and two years of a wizarding education over a single summer holiday, this lot can catch up on two-and-a-half years of Potions in a month!”

Severus has to grant Harry that point. Two months of dedicated study had produced astonishing results…which also seems to have included memorizing a bloody dictionary.

“Now, then!” Harry pulls out his wand and slaps the chalkboard so hard that it completes a full rotation. The earlier potion is gone, replaced by a blank slate. Then Harry touches the black board with his wand tip, his face screwed up in concentration. A chalked-in diagram of an intact bird appears in vivid detail, one wing outstretched, and is labeled by each individual part. Harry frowns at the drawing before he adds a second diagram, which reveals the cross-section of the same type of bird in the middle of dissection, also properly labeled.

“This, students, is a pigeon, better known in larger cities as rats with wings, since the daft buggers will eat literally anything that holds still long enough. Seagulls, too, actually. Anyway, I’m using a pigeon as an example because, in terms of the physical exterior and its internal biology, most of a non-magical bird’s parts are fairly similar. It’s the species of bird that is usually far more important. Pigeons can be used in some potions, but the quality will never be as good unless you go out and find a squab. That’s a pigeon that has not thrived on a diet of city garbage. You don’t have to catch one of those until seventh-year. Have fun; they hate you just as much as you’ll learn to hate them.”

Harry checks to make certain he has every third-year’s attention. “The most important aspect in Potions in regards to birds is their feathers, though sometimes other parts are necessary, depending on a potion’s complexity. Feathers are useful, but a bird has varying types of feathers depending on the part of its body you’re plucking them from. Each type will create a unique result in a potion. Down is different from pin feathers, which are different from primaries, crest feathers, and so on. There are up to eight types of flight feathers on most birds capable of flight, dependent on age or species—and yes, even the individual flight feathers will change your potions. No, this is not going to become any less depressing as we move along,” Harry says to Ewhurst, who is starting to turn stark white.
“Now, the most important part of this lecture: do not ever use primary feathers in your potions. Never.”

Pershore swallows before asking, “Why not?”

“Everyone, hold up your quills,” Harry instructs. “You’re all holding a quill made from a bird’s primary feather—no…no, only most of you are. What the—what is that?” he asks, pointing at Shimizu’s fluffy pink quill. That feather did not come from any bird Severus has ever seen.

“It’s…a quill—all right, it’s a plastic feather with a metal ink nib attached!” Shmizu admits, blushing. “I was terrible with a feather quill!”

“Is that pink thing new to this term, this year, or have you been using it since you started school here?” Harry asks, still giving the feather an appalled look.

“Uh—just last week. I got it over the holiday break,” Shimizu says.

“Just checking. It means I can blame everyone except your Headmaster, then.” Harry shakes his head. “Listen. A bird’s primary feather is ostensibly the most important feather to a species that flies. It is thrust, power, and control—a bird’s hand, basically. Everyone else in this room is holding quills made from primary feathers from differing birds. We’re magic-users, all of us, so the control that the primary feather lends to the bird is also lent to us when we use the quill. In more basic terms, it makes it easier to adapt to using a quill in the first place, and we can write for longer periods without our hands cramping up. I am not actually against your ink nib, just that fluffy pink thing you have attached to it.”

Harry smiles at Shimizu. “Don’t be ashamed of your handwriting. I can show you some of mine from my second year, and it is absolutely atrocious. I couldn’t seem to get the handle of quills at the time. Take that metal nib of yours and go search the grounds for an abandoned primary feather. Any of your teachers can show you how to attach it properly.”

Shimizu is still blushing, but she nods. “Yes, sir. I’ll…I’ll do that.”

Miss Skyler Prewett, a cousin of Mafalda, finally decides to participate in class. “Why can’t we use primary feathers in a potion, then?”

“Power.” Harry’s expression turns grave. “A primary feather gives a bird the power to defy gravity. There are certain ingredients in this world that, due to their very nature, are power amplifiers. Dragon heartstring is one, which is why they’re so often found in wand cores. Phoenix feathers. Unicorn blood. In a non-magical species, it’s a bird’s primary feather, a snake’s tongue, a cat’s eye—the most important physical element that the animal relies on.

“If you drop a primary feather into most potions, you will amplify the strength of that brew to such an extent that you’ll either blow yourself up, make something that is primed and ready to explode if it’s jostled…or poison someone in a way that would see you handed directly over for execution, since we’re doing away with Dementors. If our current Minister for Magic is the kind of man I believe him to be, you might even get a trial first.”

Most of Harry’s students are now as white as Miss Ewhurst. “It’s that bad?” Stacey asks.

“A comparison,” Harry says, tucking his hands into his robe pockets as he regards his students. “Voldemort murdered people in order to store part of his soul in physical objects, so that he would not have to die—which didn’t work out very well for him, but that was still a pain in the backside to fix. However: Voldemort never put a primary feather into a potion, nor did he ask any of his
followers to do so. Does that give you proper perspective?”

“Yep. Terrified now, sir,” Frazer says.

“I don’t want you terrified—well, maybe a little bit,” Harry admits. “I want you to understand why knowing all of your potion substances is so blasted important. Pun not intended, by the way.”

“That’s why we’re always told to put our scrolls and quills away before brewing,” Miss Prewett says, frowning. “I always thought it was about a tidy workspace.”

“That, too. Dear Merlin, this is becoming a first-year lesson pending immediately. We’re lucky no one’s died, Severus.”

“I did keep careful watch on them, but you are correct. Basic Protego shielding charms and the dangers of certain ingredients should be incorporated into first-year Potions studies,” Severus says, and then glances at the students. “Now do you dunderheads understand why I am so very particular about the classroom environment?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we get it, sir,” Pershore whispers.

“But—what if I wanted to take notes while brewing?” Shimizu asks in frustration. “If we have ideas, or want to write down what something did if we did it wrong?”

Severus glances down at the worktables, trying not to wince. “A nail hammered into each corner with a string attached that’s too short to reach cauldron height, with a lead pencil on the other end with a Permanent Sticking Charm.”

“Pencils aren’t lead anymore, they’re graphite. That’s aside from a pencil’s questionable wood sources, the paint, the metal, the eraser, and the need to sharpen it,” Harry says. “Too many variables. Absolutely not.” Harry frowns. “Graphite sticks, though. That might work.”

“Graphite dust,” Severus counters.

“But one variable instead of five, and there are charms to prevent dust from rising into the air.”

“Point to you, then.” Severus gives Harry an impassive stare. “Over sixteen years I have taught Potions in this classroom, and I’ve managed to keep holes from being pounded into these worktables during that entire time.”

“Neville melted at least one of these worktables. What’s a nail compared to melted table?” Harry turns back to his students, who have been watching the exchange with avid curiosity. “Now, let’s go on to bird parts and subjects that are less pants-wetting terrifying, shall we?”

Severus waits until that lecture is complete, with homework given—diagramming the bird again to prove that the dunderheads were paying attention—before he approaches Harry. He is sitting on the desk once more, still frowning.

“Another problem?”

Harry glances at him. “I was just thinking that if I’m going to get the rest of the year’s lesson plans complete for all three years, I’m going to need the school’s Time-Turner. I’ll never be done in time, otherwise. That’s aside from the fact that I need to permanently restructure all three classes for next term.”

“Consider the Time-Turner yours for the duration, but please give it back. I’m hiding it from
busybodies at the Ministry.” Severus sits down on the desk next to Harry. “In the meantime, I have to apologize to my fourth- and fifth-year students during tomorrow’s classes, as I was berating them for someone else’s stupidity.” He doesn’t have as much damage to correct as Harry, but his students are still not going to be fond of their increased homework.

Harry smiles. “Remember when it was just remedial Defence Against the Dark Arts we needed to worry about?”

“Indeed. If Horace has an ounce of self-preservation, he’ll have left Britain entirely.”

“Please,” Harry says, snorting out a laugh. “Like a little water would keep me from tracking that man down.”

“Very vicious, Professor Potter.”

“I’m a bloody ratel, Professor Prince. What the hell did you expect?”
The Wizengamot formally reconvenes for the first time on the thirty-first of January. Severus is looking forward to it as much as he would be looking forward to a root canal provided by the Doctors Granger. The only thing that is making him curious enough to attend is the fact that Kingsley Shacklebolt abolished the old robes and hats entirely. The only dress code expected is that those seated on the Wizengamot show up clothed, period. He selects his traditional white shirt and black silk, but foregoes his robes. He wants to test how far this lack of dress code idea really extends.

“First day on the Wizengamot, eh?” Antioch’s portrait asks as Severus walks by.

“Yes.”

“Good. Since I know you’ve got no family left to say it aside from me…I’m proud of you. I’m glad to see my line sitting in a position of respect.”

“So am I,” Idonea adds. Antioch’s wife is smiling at Severus in gentle affection.

Severus has to swallow against a sudden, stupid lump in his throat. “Thank you.”

When he comes downstairs, Harry is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt with the collar left open, along with a pair of solid black denims and black trainers. He’s scratching Pyrrhus’s neck while the blue phoenix trills in bird-bliss. Then Pyrrhus reaches out and starts trying to groom Harry’s hair with his beak.

“Hey, no!” Harry steps back, laughing. “Trust me, no amount of grooming in the world is going to keep my hair from doing whatever it wants, Pyrrhus!”

“None at all, hmm?” Severus asks, amused by Pyrrhus’s indignant glare.

“Aunt Petunia cut it all off once. It grew back overnight. All of it.” Harry shrugs. “I asked Ignotus if there were any odd family traits I needed to know about. He thinks it must have come from Henry’s wife, Elizabetha, the one part of the lineage we don’t have a portrait for. I don’t even know anything about her other than the fact that she was the last of the Pure-bloods from the Fleamont line.”

“Considering Henry Potter’s politics during his time in the Wizengamot, I would imagine she was a very interesting woman.” Severus glances at Harry’s denims. “Muggle for the Wizengamot, Harry?”

“I’m a Half-blood. They can go chew on a dead rat if they don’t like it. Besides, I have no idea how long this meeting is going to last, and I want to be comfortable for it.”

“Harry, you have no idea how tempted I am to run back and change into a t-shirt right now.”

The Wizengamot is not a full seating, not like it had been during Pettigrew’s trial. Severus sees more welcome faces than unwelcome ones; too many Pure-bloods with foolish notions allied with Voldemort. Their seats will remain empty until their Heirs come of age, or the seats are simply removed from the Wizengamot.

Severus sits down next to Narcissa, who is dressed in a flowing silver robe with his gifted broach clasping it together at her breast. “Should we expect anything interesting?”

“First formal reconvening?” Narcissa shakes her head. “I would be tempted to sleep through it, but I wish to see how Minister Shacklebolt will direct the proceedings.”
“How does one get a Chief Warlock or Head Witch to lead the Wizengamot again?” Harry asks from Severus’s opposite side.

“Vote,” Draco murmurs from the seat below them. He is wearing all black in his favored shirt, coat, and trousers instead of robes. “It has to be a vast majority decision—at least seventy-five percent for the person in question. Anything less and the candidate won’t take the seat.”

“It will probably take at least a year for someone to emerge from this group with the ability to take the title,” Narcissa says.

“Good morning,” Kingsley Shacklebolt greets the Wizengamot. He doesn’t join them in the stands, but instead addresses them from the floor, peering up at them with a pleasantly neutral expression on his dark face. “There are several needs we must address, or our government will continue to falter. It is my hope that we can work together on this most vital of projects. I want to not only salvage Wizarding Britain from Voldemort’s damage—I want to see it thrive again. To do so requires a vote on several suggestions given to me, ones I feel that merit the Wizengamot’s attention.”

“Oh, he’s good,” Draco says in a low voice. “Bait and set.”

“The first is a suggestion that defies long-standing tradition, but it is a tradition that is foolish,’ Kingsley says in a strong voice that carries throughout the courtroom. “We call ourselves the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain, and yet only English-born witches or wizards have ever been granted Wizengamot seats. We, my friends, are hypocrites.”

“That’s the way it’s always been done!” a Pure-blood from an older family shouts from several rows away.

“That doesn’t make it intelligent,” Kingsley replies smoothly. “This Wizengamot stands over half-empty. If we do our duty and acknowledge the ancient wizarding bloodlines from all countries in our United Kingdom, we will have a full governing body. Wizarding Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Cornwall, and the Isle of Man must be recognized. All of those wizarding communities have long-established families of upstanding values, bravery, and grand ideals in the matters of justice. I will not pester you with petty details, as we simply do not have time. I wish you to vote on this matter right now, my friends. Recognize the rest of our United Wizarding Kingdom of Great Britain. We need to finally be a united nation in truth, or we will soon be nothing at all.”

“How many for a successful majority?” Harry asks Draco.

“For regular votes? The majority just has to be larger, even if the number is only by one.”

Kingsley lifts his arms. “Please stand if you believe with me that our United Kingdom must become so in truth.”

Severus gets up, aware that Harry, Draco, and Narcissa are doing the same. So is the Greengrass matriarch, to his surprise, along with Alice Longbottom, Percival Weasley, Arachnea Figg, Muriel Prewett, Griselda Marchbanks, ancient Edwin Filch, Marcus Westenberg, Susan Bones, Augustus Abbott, Garrick Ollivander, Malika Shafiq, Sullivan Fawley Senior, Angelica Smith, Gueneviere Warren, Joshua Montague, Harriet Macmillan, and Millicent Bulstrode, who earned her seat when her parents were both sentenced to Azkaban for being active supporters of Voldemort. A few others rise as well, but Severus is unaware of their names.

Kingsley nods. “A vote of twenty-five for. Now: all those opposed to the recognition of the other wizarding lineages of Great Britain, please stand.”
Severus watches in scathing disapproval as numerous members of the Wizengamot stand up. Some of them look hesitant, as if they really aren’t sure if it was a good idea. Severus thinks if they were that damned uncertain, they should have remained seated for both votes. Idiots.

Kingsley’s eyes roam across the stands before he nods. “A vote of twenty. The majority rules—the wizarding lineages of Wizarding Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Northern Ireland, and the Isle of Man will be recognized. Each family who can trace their magical lineage back for at least ten generations, per the ancient Wizengamot standards, will be invited to join this august body, whether they be Pure-blood or Half-blood. And when,” he continues unexpectedly, “certain numbers among us gain sense, the Muggle-borns in our community are going to have the opportunity to participate in the government of which they are a part!”

“Oh, I like him,” Narcissa says in undertone to Severus. “He’s efficient. I do so like efficiency as compared to useless bluster.”

“Next!” Kingsley yells over the disappointed muttering. “This, you are going to hear! Werewolves have been feared by this Ministry for too long. When Voldemort went among them to recruit, he gained a few packs, yes, and we fought against them. But: he did not get the majority! Werewolves from all social standings fought against Voldemort, be it by tooth and claw or by wand!

“FOR EXAMPLE!” Kingsley roars, drowning out the angry shouts. “Remus Lupin is a known werewolf, an acknowledged brilliant teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and a WAR HERO that saved countless lives during both wizarding wars! Were it not for his status as a werewolf, he would be eligible for a seat, as both his lost parents, Welsh and Irish, have over ten generations of magical blood behind them! With Wolfsbane Potion given out for free to all werewolves, soon to be replaced with Lycanthropy’s Bane Potion, there is NO REASON for this prejudice to continue! We have not only calmed lycanthropy, ladies and gentlemen, but we have a potion that halts the transformation entirely! WE WILL INCLUDE THESE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN AMONG THE NUMBERS OF THE WIZENGAMOT. As Minister for Magic of the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain, I am choosing to use one of my few true executive powers, and on this, MY WORD IS LAW!”

Severus rolls his eyes as the Wizengamot continues to cluck like hens who know a fox is in the henhouse. “SHUT UP, YOU IDIOTS!”

Most of them turn to stare at Severus in surprise. Next to him, Harry is making desperate-sounding noises as he does his best not to start laughing. Severus sighs and stands up. “In case you bleeding idiots missed the memo, the Minister for Magic just made a legal decree. Stop complaining about what you cannot change. We have other things to do today!”

Kingsley nods at Severus, the hint of a bitten-back smile on his face. “Thank you, Headmaster Prince. Now then! On to other matters…”

Narcissa is eying Kingsley with respect. “All right. I admit it freely: I was wrong. This is going to be an interesting day, after all.”

* * * *

Severus goes back to Hogwarts with Harry, Narcissa, and Griselda that evening, feeling as if he’s gone half-deaf from angry yells or approving shouting. “Fucking politics,” he mutters.
“Interesting politics, at least. No, let me rephrase—politics that will actually *mean* something,” Harry says. “I remember life under Minister Fudge. Kingsley is going to shake down the entirety of Wizarding Britain, and he’s going to make them like it.”

“He was a Ravenclaw at Hogwarts. They do have a way of understanding the twists and turns of law to make it dance for them,” Severus admits.

“I’m still glad this idiocy only occurs once every two months unless there is a trial that needs attending,” Griselda says. “I very much would like a drink.”

“Not yet. We need to tell the others first, so that it’s not a shock when the *Prophet* arrives in the morning.” Severus sends his Patronus off to tell the others that a staff meeting is required. They’ve missed dinner, so he plans on making it as short as possible.

He waits until everyone has arrived, though Westenberg looks like he had to crawl back out of bed to make it to the meeting. Their new History of Magic teacher is working out well, but he still has the bad habit of trying to take on too much in regards to his students. Severus knows he’ll find a balance in his work by the end of the year. Otherwise, he would already be hunting for a replacement.

“The Wizengamot gathered today,” Severus announces. “Officially, the full count…all forty-five of us.”

“That’s about a third of what it should be,” Rolanda says. “That must have been fun.”

“Severus yelled at everyone to shut up when they tried to drown out one of Kingsley’s decrees,” Harry confides, grinning. “It’s a fun one, too.”

“All right. What are we expecting, then?” Minerva asks, and looks to be bracing herself.

“As of today, anyone who resides in any recognized wizarding country in Great Britain—Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall, and Wales—who can trace their magical lineage back ten generations is now eligible to take a seat on the Wizengamot,” Severus announces.

Minerva looks as if she’s mistakenly swallowed a shoe. “Are you—are you serious?”

“Very,” Severus replies, and smiles. “And one of Minister Shacklebolt’s decrees is that in this matter, the bribes to gain a seat do not apply. If the family lines claim a seat within the year, it will cost nothing.”

“Oh, and werewolves are legally recognized as being eligible to sit on the Wizengamot,” Harry adds casually.

Remus gives them a blank, shocked stare. “They did what?”

“Kingsley all but told them that they were allowing known werewolves of proper magical lineage to sit on the Wizengamot, or he was going to set them all on fire,” Severus says in a mild voice. “Aren’t you fifteen generations descended on the Welsh side, Remus?”

Remus’s mouth opens and closes a few times. “I—oh, shit. I’m the last of my line. I can’t let that family seat be lost—fuck! Sirius, I hope you like kids.”

Sirius’s eyes go entertainingly wide. “WHAT.”

“Kids, dammit! Surrogate parent. I have to have a bloody Heir now!” Remus retorts, and then turns so white that Severus is concerned the man is about to pass out.
Minerva blows out a long, unsteady breath. “Oh, my. Oh—I am so glad I have a niece who is of age, bearing the family name, who can take a seat in the Wizengamot. I do not want to deal with that disaster. Fiona was a Ravenclaw; she’ll be quite suited to the role.”

“I’ll be damned,” Pomona whispers. “I’ll have a family member on the Wizengamot.”

“Most of us will,” Filius says, looking pleased. “And it is about time!”

“I won’t,” Aurora replies crossly. “Muggle-borns do not apply.”

“Kingsley has announced his intentions to provide Muggle-borns with government representation,” Severus tells her. “No, I’ve no idea how he plans on pulling that off, but he’s ready to fight tooth-and-nail for it. He fought in both wars, as did quite a few of us. I think we’ve all had enough of dragging, useless political posturing.”

There is a long moment of silence until Sirius looks at Remus again. “Kids?”

“Well, we didn’t kill Harry,” Remus says, still looking frazzled. “How hard could it be?”

“Please get married first,” Harry advises them, grinning. “Bit more legitimate that way.”

“You realize this means you’ve got to produce an Heir at some point, too,” Narcissa points out to Harry.

Harry blanches. “Please not immediately. I am eighteen. Absolutely not.”

“Then try not to die in the meantime. You’re the last of your line,” Narcissa says wryly. “Severus, you have the same problem.”

“No, I do not. I have a legally adopted sister, and according to the magic involved, she’s now just as much of a Prince as I am. Jade can figure out children. Between herself and Miss Lovegood, I’m certain they’ll be insane.” Severus finally sits down and puts his face in his hands. “Oh, dear God.”

“Werewolf recognition on the Wizengamot?” Remus says again in bewilderment.

“Yes,” Severus repeats without moving his hands. “Absolutely, legitimately, yes.”

“Well, then. Twenty werewolves on the Wizengamot. That will make things interesting,” Remus says.

“Twenty?” Severus lifts his head. “Are you—twenty?”

Remus nods. “Two are on the Wizengamot right now. They’re just not telling anyone. Speaking of, I really need to go to bed. The Lycanthropy’s Bane Potion knocks me on my arse, and I’m done in.”

“Right. Full moon. G’nite, Remus,” Harry says, and watches thoughtfully as Sirius escorts his fiancé out of the meeting room. “This will be a fun week. He’s going to keep shorting out over the idea.”

“Money’s on it, ten galleons,” Filius announces. “Fifteen has my count.”

“Ten,” Severus counters. “He’s not that easy to rattle.”

“Four,” Harry says.

Minerva rolls her eyes. “Eight!”
It’s actually entertaining that they all lose the bet. The werewolf rallies overnight and refuses to be fazed at all.

They should have bet on Sirius routinely stalling out over the idea of children, instead.

* * * * *

Over Easter week break, the *Daily Prophet* announces the engagement of Draco Lucius Malfoy to Astoria May Greengrass. Severus is invited to attend the celebration of their betrothal, as is practically everyone in the Order, along with any surviving Pure-bloods who have proven themselves not to be complete wastes of wizarding humanity.

“Congratulations,” Severus tells the couple in utmost sincerity. “You are both lovely together.”

Astoria smiles at him. “Thank you, Professor.”

“Severus at the moment, please. I’ve been a friend of Narcissa Black far too long for her future daughter-in-law to keep to formalities when we’re not at school, Astoria.” Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Please tell me you’re sitting your N.E.W.T.s before the wedding.”

Astoria’s smile widens into a genuinely bright grin. “I’m already of legal age. There is not a thing in Hogwarts guidelines that says I cannot attend my seventh year as a married woman, and I’m taking advantage of the political lull to get this done before my parents can turn it into an even more horrid affair than they’re attempting. I’m even thinking of trying out for professional Quidditch after graduation.”

“She is one hell of a Seeker.” Draco smiles at his fiancée. “And she is much smarter than I am. Whether it’s Quidditch or university, I’m supporting her decision, no matter if it’s a done Pure-blood thing or not.”

“My parents are off somewhere having dramatic hysterics over my choice of husband,” Astoria confides in a wry voice. “It no longer matters that I’m a Pure-blood marrying another Pure-blood. They tend to think of Draco as a terrible blood-traitor.”

“Then they’re idiots. How you and your delightful sister came to be in the face of that, I’ve no idea,” Severus says.

Draco grins. “Daphne’s already promised to come to the wedding. That will set an excellent tone, I think.”

“The rumors! The madness!” Astoria laughs aloud. “I miss her dearly, but I’ve not lost her, and we plan to basically terrorize the entire lot of unenlightened idiots my parents are insisting be guests at my wedding.”

Severus smiles at her. “Slytherin to the core. I’m delighted.”

“You are, of course, invited to witness the chaos. Sometime in August, I think,” Draco muses. “We haven’t quite decided yet, and some might consider that too fast between engagement and marriage.”

“I really don’t care,” Astoria replies. “I’m so irritated with the lot of them that I’m honestly considering wearing my Quidditch uniform instead of a bridal gown.”
Draco looks at Severus, noting the expression on his face. “You desperately, desperately want us both to wear our Quidditch uniforms, don’t you?”

“Only if you have photographers staged everywhere to capture the expressions on the faces of so many dunderheads.” Severus shakes his head. “Wear whatever you like. The most important thing is that you’re both alive, happy together, and not trapped in some terrible forced marriage.”

“No, not forced at all. Draco has always treated me with utmost kindness, even when he was still being a complete prat,” Astoria says.

“Well, I was, but she was a younger girl who—well, it wasn’t a done thing,” Draco blurts out, his cheeks reddening. “I’m just glad she forgave my earlier terrible behavior.”

Astoria stands on her toes to kiss Draco’s cheek. “People change, and you, lovely man, were instrumental in saving Britain. I’ll remember I’m marrying a hero, thank you very much.”

“Speaking of that sort of thing…I once told you I owed you a grand favor,” Draco says to Severus, his gaze serious. “That favor is now a work in progress.”

“Please let it not be you trying to marry me off.”

Draco laughs. “No—I wouldn’t dare. Let’s just say it is quite useful, and you’ll find out next month.”

“In May.” Severus frowns at Draco. “You did not.”

“Even if I did, you can’t stop me.”

Severus grips Draco’s shoulder. “Now you’re a true Slytherin, Draco Malfoy.”

Draco smiles back at him. “I learned it from the best, sir.”

Severus wanders through the Manor, nodding at some guests and speaking to others. He is not playing host, so the level of politics at play is not nearly as intense as it was at Christmas. It’s a pleasant bonus that he actually finds a great deal of these people agreeable in some form or another.

Nymphadora has gone from visibly pregnant to exceptionally pregnant. Severus asks her flat-out if she’s carrying twins.

She tilts her head. “The midwives at St. Mungo’s can’t actually tell,” she admits. “I was barely ready for one baby, and now there might be two. Two potential Metamorphmagi babies. I just hope that if there are twins, they’re fraternal. Identical Metamorphmagi babies would quickly become guesswork as to who was who.”

“You are an excellent Auror, Tonks. You would know,” Severus compliments her. “And Oliver declared he will give up anything Quidditch just to stay home and be a father. You get children, and you get to keep your career.”

“Oliver will have them on brooms the moment they’re capable of walking around without falling,” Nymphadora says dryly. “Thank Merlin that Mum will be around to keep an eye on him.”

“There you are,” Severus says when he finally finds Harry sitting on a balcony railing. “Where the hell is Jade?”

“She’s with Luna. They sort of kidnapped most of the female witches and quite a few wizards who wanted to discuss corsets. The last I heard before I escaped, Jade was reintroducing everyone to the
idea of brocade silks and satins. If brocade top hats start to show up, you know how they originated.”

“I did say the twenty-first century would be different.” Severus sips at the champagne, which has sweet notes underneath the bitter tannins. “It’s been three full months. How do you like teaching, Professor Potter?”

Harry’s face twists up in discomfort. “That’s still weird to hear, Professor Prince.”

“Doesn’t work in reverse. I’ve gotten used to it,” Severus returns, smiling at Harry’s vexed look. “Well?”

“Teaching. Yeah.” Harry rubs at his chin, where bristle is already trying to grow after a morning’s shave. “I like it. I don’t know if it’s a career or anything yet, mind…but I think I’m good at it.”

“You are good at it,” Severus counters. “You are very, very good at teaching. You’ve more patience at cramming knowledge into the young ones’ skulls than I ever had.”

“I had to have learned something from my first two years of class with you, or I would have failed all of my exams instead of just getting scrolls of sarcastic comments returned to me.” Harry smiles. “I never found the first day’s notes, but I did go back through my old school trunk and found where I’d crammed old paperwork from the first two years. It was meaningless to me in 1993, so I ignored it. Now it’s just entertaining.”

“I was not a good teacher of young dunderheads, Harry.”

“You were…hmm. Viciously effective,” Harry says. “You might be right about me and teaching. I mean—they’re listening. That’s the most important part of the process, I think. But I’m asking your formal permission to please let me write a new textbook for the first- through third-years.”

“Granted. That book, like the previous seventh-year textbook, is an outdated disaster.”

Harry nods. “1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi has got to go, too. I’m going to replace it with something actually useful for a Potions student. That book is great for Herbology, but in a Potions setting, it’s just not effective enough. I’m going to list the ingredients by nature of what they are, and then list the ingredients by categories of what they can do.”

“That would make for quite a thick book.” Severus thinks about it. “My revision of the sixth-year textbook is due, and the fourth- and fifth-year textbook may as well be redone at the same time.”

“Two books for each of us over the summer, then. We can race to see who is faster at writing a decent set of Potions books. Loser has to let Jade pick their films for a solid week.”

“That, Harry, is cruel.” Severus finishes the champagne in his glass. “Winner gets to observe the loser’s misery.”

“I’m pretty sure that was a given, Sev.”

* * * *

“Are all our ducks in a row?” Minerva asks Severus in the final week of April. Aside from the Pureblood gossip that arose from Draco and Astoria’s announced engagement, it’s been a quiet month—
for Hogwarts, at any rate. The students had a week’s access to Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, but at least that has been somewhat entertaining. Even those injured by unexpected results have taken it in good spirits, though Severus is going to have Fred and George’s heads for selling anything relating to gravity to his students.

“No. It’s why I’m glad the Board of Governors doesn’t want to see us until the end of May, when we’re that much closer to a completed school year.”

“True.” Minerva is leaning back in her chair as she sits in front of his desk, idly resting one finger at the corner of her lips. “I would be even more enthusiastic with exams to show for it, but our other results—well, they’re not going to be able to deny that part of it.”

“No, which is why I’m certain the venture is going to succeed.” Severus waves his signature dry on his current scroll before rolling it up to place off to one side. He still wants a scribe, but his previous one is now gainfully employed by teaching.

Minerva smiles. “Sticking around, are we? No thoughts of doing a bunk?”

“No at this juncture, no.” Severus gets out a fresh sheet of parchment. “Maybe in ten years, when I’m certain that the school governors wouldn’t immediately attempt to undo everything we’re trying to establish, but not now.”

“Miracles will never cease,” she says dryly, and gets to her feet. “It’s time for dinner. Are you coming, Headmaster?”

Severus glances at the correspondence he still has remaining. “Given that I want to spend the weekend doing things that are not this? No, not this evening. Pass on my regrets. I should be done in this office when you retire for the evening, so I will see you at breakfast.”

“I’ll make sure Winky knows to send up a tray,” Minerva says. “Good night, Severus.”

“She usually does not need to be told. Good night, Minerva.”

True to form, a tray appears on the empty corner of his desk a few minutes later. Severus pauses long enough to pour tea into a cup before resuming his work. It’s strong enough to get him through an entire evening, as is his preference, with just enough sugar lurking beneath to bring out the flavor of a good Assam.

He’s lived long enough to develop preferences to specific tea plants. Yet another miracle.

Two letters later, he hears the pop of displaced air as a house-elf arrives. “Master Severus?”

“What is it, Winky?” he asks without looking up.

“I’s be bringing the tea. Is Hogwarts house-elves trying to be takin’ my place?”

Severus glances up to see that Winky is holding a tea tray and bearing a look of house-elf scolding. “Why would you—”

He bites off what he was about to say. “I’ve grown careless, haven’t I?” he murmurs, picking up the cup that has been mostly drained of its contents.

“Master Severus?” Winky is starting to sound concerned. “What’s bein’ wrong?”

Severus runs his finger along the inside of the cup, where the ceramic has had time to dry. When he
holds his fingertip out to the candlelight, he can see the faintest shimmer of something that is not cane sugar residue on his skin.

He knows that residue. There is only one tasteless and odorless potion in the world that creates the effect once it has dried.

*If I used honey as a sweetener, I would have noticed*, he thinks. *Honey would have altered the formula, given it a taste it otherwise does not have.*

“Severus?” Dumbledore’s portrait asks from behind him.

“I always did say I wouldn’t survive the war,” Severus responds. “I wasn’t quite wrong, just a year late.”

“Severus!” Dumbledore shouts, but gravity is pulling him down, spilling him from the chair to lie on the floor. “Winky! Portraits! Find assistance at once!”

Severus rolls his eyes at the useless instruction, opening the bottom drawer of his desk and fishing around inside by feel. Not cork, not cork, not glass—lead. He pulls out the phial, doing his best to prop himself up on one elbow so that he can drink its mist-colored contents. Then he collapses back down on the floor, staring up at the vast array of empty-framed portraits that climb the Tower walls.

“Will it help?” Dumbledore asks. “My boy, will it help?”

Severus blinks a few times, trying to stave off unconsciousness. “No—no. Delay the effects only.” He tunes out Dumbledore’s voice, idly wondering who he angered enough, with power enough, to slip an undetectable poison into Hogwarts.

It is, Severus muses, a very, very long list.

“SEVERUS!”

He can’t even make out the identity of the person shouting his name until Harry is all but yanking Severus into his lap, staring down at him. He isn’t panicked, but Severus thinks this may be the closest he’s ever seen Harry come to that emotion.

“What was it, you idiot?” Harry yells, peeling Severus’s hair back from his face. “Tell me!”

He has to smile. It’s funny, it really is. “Done in…by one of my own creations. Years ago. Too much imagination,” he whispers. “Cursed Draught of Living Memory.”

“Oh, that’s auspicious,” Harry replies. “What does it do?”

“Oh…well.” Severus swallows when his mouth turns too dry. “Take the Drink of Despair, Draught of Living Death, Veritaserum, a Memory Potion, and probably things that should never go into a potion, mix them together…”

Harry slaps him, which jolts him back to consciousness. “Antidote?”

“Wasn’t really the point.”

“Details, then, dammit! What are the effects?” Harry demands to know. “I’m *not* going to be the one telling Jade her brother is dead, you selfish prick!”

“You dream…in memory. Worst memories,” Severus manages. He can feel that he is borderline lost to the potion’s effects, but if anyone is going to be able to save his miserable life, it’s this atrocious
brat. “Truthful worst memories. You live—and re-live—the worst you’ve done, living hell, until the pain from the potion…there are worse ways to die, Harry.”

“Death by constant attack from potion-created *Dementor* has definitely got to be in the top five slot!” Harry retorts. “Oh, Merlin—fuck!” He rummages around in his robes until he pulls out a phial filled with sunshine yellow liquid.

“What…are you…doing?” Severus asks.

“Mitigating it, dunderhead,” Harry says, pulling the cork. “Elixir to Induce Euphoria.”

He smiles. “Probably will not mix that well.”

Harry stares at him in disbelief. “Severus, you’re already dying. I can’t exactly make things any worse by trying, can I?”

No; if anything, Severus will probably be fortunate enough to die faster. The last thing he hears is Harry shouting at him to drink the stupid fluffy rainbow potion—
In January of 1977, Severus doesn’t bother returning to school. Eileen Prince is disappointed in him, but she has never approved of his existence, let alone his choices. Tobias Snape is dead, finally done in by his own consumption of Muggle whiskey. Severus hadn’t bothered to come home for the funeral last September.

What reason does he have to return to Hogwarts, anyway? He hasn’t been welcome there, not ever.

*Not true,* his mind tries to remind him. Madam Pomfrey and Madam Pince both seemed oddly fond of him—Merlin knows why. He’s nothing and no one, and Lily…

Severus shies away from the memory of his last sight of her face. She had no use for him. Why would the others?

Lucius is his patron for Severus’s inclusion in Voldemort’s Death Eater ranks. When they both bow before the Dark Lord, Severus is careful to keep his movements as exact, if not as refined, as Lucius’s own.

Baring his arm for the Dark Mark is supposed to make him feel like he’s finally being considered worthwhile—*worth something.* Instead, it’s a Mark that causes him pain, is not actually pleasing to the eye, and makes him…leery. He’s surprised by that emotion, and hides it, because he has no idea what to make of it at all.

Severus is too intelligent to meet Lord Voldemort’s eyes, though he notes many who seem to be fool enough to so. That is a powerful wizard, one Lucius has confided does indeed have a temper for those less gracious than others. Instead, he studies Voldemort from across the room. For a wizard who has celebrated his fiftieth year on this Earth, he is hale and young, his hair not marked by silver, his skin unblemished and pristine. Voldemort is surrounded by a constant cluster of admirers that seem like silly hens rather than skilled witches or wizards.

If Severus is going to earn a place here, he resolves at once, it will *not* be by hen-method.

“No, perhaps not yet,” Narcissa agrees. “But you are what many of our House were not, for all they bore our favored silver and green.”
“And what is that?”

“A good Slytherin.” Narcissa smiles in her gracious way that makes her pale blue eyes seem more welcoming than Lucius’s gaze ever does. “We who truly understand the nature of resourcefulness, determination, and self-preservation—we who value cleverness and cunning with a dash of ambition, but not so ambitious that we meet our ends in foolish ways.”

“Foolish ways.” Severus realizes he’s grasping the place on his forearm where the Mark lies beneath his robe and forces himself to stop. “It may be too late in some respects, but in others…I thank you for the reminder. I believe I needed it.”

Narcissa tilts her head in acknowledgement. “It is only too late when one is dead, Severus Prince Snape. Never forget that.”

“No. I won’t.” It is better advice than Lucius had to offer, for all he is the eldest of the three of them. “Friend, you say?”

“It really shames me to know my House never once reached out to you the way it should have,” Narcissa says, sounding angry. “No, it has not escaped my awareness that Lucius does not call you thus.”

“Not much does, I expect.” Severus takes a sip from a champagne glass—atrocious tasting, far too bitter, too much tartaric acid allowed to develop—to wet his dry throat. “It would be…nice…to have a companion who understood what it means to be of Slytherin’s House.” Then he eyes her. “Unless you are trying to use me in some ploy against Lucius, in which case I am going to flee this Manor while I’m still capable of drawing breath.”

Narcissa laughs, low and musical. “Not at all. No, Severus, my intent…” She looks grieved for a moment. “I was the youngest of my sisters. While I am glad that Bellatrix is among us, as is cousin Regulus, there are other family members whom I miss very much. I remember very much what it is like to feel alone.”

“I have known little else.” He wants it to sound cold again, but instead it just sounds pathetic. Just because he is seventeen and of legal age does not mean he has grown in any useful fashion.

“Come and see me, any time that you like,” Narcissa offers unexpectedly. “You may do so without fear of besmirching my virtue, or being accused of thus, Severus. For the preservation of the Malfoy family’s social standing, I cannot bear the Lord Voldemort’s Mark. As this means Lucius will be gone with the others more often than not…when I am not required to present myself to the public, I fear this Manor will be lonely.”

His immediate response is to say Yes without reservation, but he has just been reminded of his House’s best attributes. “Your offer is most kind, but I fear I must counter it.”

“Oh?” Narcissa lifts an eyebrow at him as she sips from her glass, using the crystal to hide a smile. “In what way, Severus?”

“I lack a place to set up a proper laboratory, which would best able me to put my skills to use for the Dark Lord…or for anyone else who might require such things. I’m sure you are aware of the fact that my skills in that area, at least, have never been disputed.”

“No, they have not.” Narcissa seems to be biting back another smile. “You shall have your place, and I will supply all that is needed from my own vault. You, of course, will not mind if you are sometimes in another’s company?”
“As long as what I brewed did not present a direct threat to my Lady Malfoy’s well-being, then no. Company…” Severus presses his lips together. He is not as accustomed to the habit of hiding his true thoughts from others. He will need to work on that. “Company would be most welcome.”

He spends 1977 killing people with the utter abandon of someone who finally feels free. He then spends all of 1978 doing the same while recognizing that he isn’t free at all. When he realizes that, he spends more time at Malfoy Manor, in Narcissa’s supplied laboratory. She is often not at home, but he just wants the silence. He invents things that are amazing just as often as he crafts things that are terrible.

Severus considers most of 1979 to be the same caliber year as the previous two—something he’d now much prefer to forget. That is also when he starts staying out of Muggle villages, towns, cities—he can’t. No more. He has done much that the God of his childhood will probably never forgive; he would like to add as little to that dark stain as possible.

In July of that year, the bloody Prewett twins do their utmost to kill him. When they miss, Sirius Black tries to do a better job.

Absolutely not. Severus might not like his job overly much anymore, but he refuses to die by Black’s wand. He leaves Black dangling upside down from a tree and departs to the amusing sound of Black still shouting obscenities to the air.

It’s only later that it occurs to Severus that he had perfect time, place, and opportunity to kill Black, and did not do so. He doesn’t even know why he chose not to take the chance. It’s a thought that trips him up so much that he spends the rest of the summer hiding behind a cauldron, churning out useful poisons and curses. Maybe he’ll be fortunate enough for Black to swallow one.

In November, Severus is literally the only Death Eater to escape a fight alive. The Carrow twins lose their parents, Crabbe’s mother dies, Karkaroff’s wife falls during the retreat, and Walden Macnair’s brother Walter dies an ignoble death by stepping directly into the path of a curse. The only thing that saves Severus is a damned good Disillusionment Charm, and the fact that he has absolutely no compunctions against sharing an aboveground crypt with its current, desiccated occupant.

He’s still exhausted when he returns to the current base of Voldemort’s operations, the Nott home. “Severus.” Voldemort does not seem surprised to see that Severus returns alone. “What felled the others, my friend?”

“Stupidity, My Lord,” Severus replies in blunt exhaustion. “If Macnair had listened to me from the start when I told him it was a trap, the others would still be alive.”

Walden Macnair gets to bear the brunt of pain for that one. Severus is just relieved it isn’t him.

January in 1980 starts out on the right foot. Two of them. “YOU’RE BOTH INSANE!”

“That we are!” Fabian Prewett shouts from somewhere behind a broken-down wall.

“High time you figured that out!” Gideon chimes in.

“I KNEW YOU WERE INSANE IN 1977!” Severus yells back, incensed. “THIS IS NOT NEW INFORMATION!”

“Then why does he keep telling us this?” Gideon asks.

“Beats me—oh, no—MERLIN, I TAKE IT BACK, I TAKE IT BACK!” Fabian yelps.
Severus grins from his hiding place behind a scorch-marked boulder. “IT SERVES YOU RIGHT FOR GIVING ME THE IDEA!”

“Ne corpus percutereti! Ne corpus percutereti!” Fabian is busy shouting.

Severus can hear that Gideon, somewhere nearby, has hit the ground laughing. “Please come and join our side!” he calls out between guffaws. “That was the funniest thing I’ve seen since last year!”

“YOU TRIED TO KILL ME LAST YEAR, YOU INGRATE!” Severus yells back, offended. Treating burn wounds had not been the best way to spend the day after Hallowe’en.

“And it was funny,” Gideon gasps out. “The look on your face, I swear!”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Incenderet Gideon Prewett!”

“FUCKING FUCK!” A burning robe comes flying out from behind a brick building. “That wasn’t funny!”

“You thought it was hilarious when it was my cloak you set ablaze!” Severus retorts.

Is he…is he enjoying himself?

Oh, God, he is. When the hell did that happen?

It’s such a confusing thought that he Apparates away from the fight. He just—he was outnumbered. A strategic retreat is a sensible one.

February is terrible. This has been such a standard of life that Severus barely notices that the fighting seems more intense than usual.

What he does notice is Voldemort’s temper becoming increasingly more volatile. He spends the last week of the month in so much pain that it hurts to breathe.

To think he once enjoyed the idea of an Unforgivable. He knows better now. They earned their names for a reason.

In mid-March, Severus is the only man standing in the ruined village that had once held a small population of one hundred fifty-eight thriving Muggles. The others who did this are all gone, moving on to the next target. Severus wasn’t with them, and for that, he is grateful.

Then he becomes aware that he is not alone, but does not draw his wand. The late arrival might be a single individual, but they are behind him. Severus has become one of best duelists in the Death Eater ranks, a title bestowed by the Dark Lord himself…but he is not that fast.

“Gloating over your spoils, traitor?”

“No. Witnessing the results of others’ spoils, and thinking them terribly short-sighted and wasteful,” Severus says.

“Wasteful?” James Potter sounds incredulous. “Is that all you can say?”

“Given that I do not know what has been done with the bodies? Yes, that is the only safe thing I can say about it.” Severus lifts his left arm—not his wand arm—slowly, revealing that he holds only a sheaf of papers.

“What the hell is that?” Potter asks.
“The last known census of this village, conducted after the first of this year. It’s the only way you’re ever going to know who lived here.” Severus glances off in the direction of a tall building that is still burning. “I rescued the documents before they were burnt to ash.”

“How do I know those aren’t coated in poison?”

Severus turns his head and subjects Potter to the best withering glare he’s learned to muster. He has several very good examples to draw from. “Because, you idiot,” he pronounces, “if I were in the mood to kill you, I would skip potions and wands and strangle the life out of you with my bare hands.”

“Oh, no love lost there, huh?”

Severus rolls his eyes and bends over long enough to put the papers on the ground, kicking a rock over the stack to keep the wind from taking them. “Fine. Do what you like. Destroy the records as well as the buildings, Obliviate everyone who knew this place existed, and move on with your life. I don’t care.”

Potter is staring at him like he’s a foreign object. “Yes, you do. Nobody finds the names of the dead if they don’t care.”

“No, I do not,” Severus growls in response. “I do not have that luxury!” He Apparates before Potter can recognize his intent. Let the idiot make his own fucking decisions in regards to the dead.

He lied. He knows where the bodies are. The Dark Lord is fond of the Inferi, and he wipes out entire Muggle villages to create them. Severus just doesn’t think anyone needs to try to discover Voldemort’s Inferi hiding places, no matter which side of the battle lines they’re standing on.

It was while rifling through the papers in a building beginning to smoke that Severus realized he no longer wants any part of Voldemort’s war. He just doesn’t have a choice any longer.

It is only too late when you are dead, his thoughts remind him in Narcissa’s cool tones.

Fine, then. It isn’t about having no choices at all so much as not having been presented with any choices that would be viable options for getting the hell out of this mess.

Severus walked into this with his eyes open, certain he was doing the right thing, until it was too late to choose otherwise. If he ever gets ahold of a Time-Turner, he is going to go back in time and punch himself in the face for being so bloody stupid.

In April, he overheard a prophecy that spells out Voldemort’s defeat. He debates it for all of five minutes after his abrupt departure from The Leaky Cauldron before deciding to tell the Dark Lord. Voldemort has been displeased with their progress this year, and Severus is not up to another bout of Cruciatus right now. He gives Voldemort the prophecy, is thanked for his efforts, and then thinks no more about it.

In June, Narcissa delivers a son, one of the few things that can apparently reduce Lucius Malfoy to speechlessness. Lucius absconds with the infant in order to show him off to anyone willing to stand still long enough. Severus never saw the appeal of children, but he supposes he can understand Lucius’s pleasure in finally having an Heir for his line. The Malfoys have been in danger of dying out for three generations now. Severus, however, is aware of the fact that the Prince line will die out with him.

While Lucius is gone, Severus slips into Narcissa’s room, though he is careful to leave the door standing open. “Congratulations,” he says.
Narcissa smiles at him and waves him closer. “Idiot husband took off with my son before I had a proper look at him. What did you think, Severus?”

Severus glances in the direction of the door. “I think it’s fortunate for us all that he appears to take after his mother.”

“Yes. Fortunate.” Narcissa grimaces. “Something went wrong.”

“Wrong?” Severus sits down on the edge of the bed without even realizing he was choosing to do so. In the years since January of 1977, this is his one companion who has held true. Lucius says the words, but they’re learnt rhetoric. Narcissa means them. “What do you mean?”

Narcissa glances up at the ceiling. “The midwives from St. Mungo’s acted as if all was well—perhaps they even believe it. Maybe they did not notice…but Severus, I know something is no longer right inside my body, and it has nothing to do with the fact that I just birthed a child.”

Severus looks towards the door again. “You know my discretion is absolute.”

Narcissa nods. “I do. Please. You’re one of the few among this entire lot who I would trust to know the proper diagnostic spells, let alone use them correctly.”

“Madam Pomfrey taught me,” he says, retrieving his wand before blowing out a long breath to steady his nerves. “A long time ago, when I was wretchedly bored and desperate for something to do.”

Severus begins the spells over her midsection, which is how he finds the problem at once. Dammit. “Malfoys do not believe in adoption, magical or otherwise, do they?”

“No.” Narcissa blinks a few times. “Be honest with me, Severus. What do you see?”

“Your uterus did not appreciate being used for its intended purpose,” Severus says dryly, which causes Narcissa to emit a snort of unladylike laughter. “It’s twisted—I would almost say that a pre-existing birth defect appears to be the culprit.”

Narcissa doesn’t seem shocked by the information. “I am a Black; a birth defect would not surprise me. Can anything be done?”

“A good Healer could put the organ to rights, but that easy twisting speaks to me of underdeveloped muscles, or perhaps walls that are too thin.” Severus has to shake his head. “I would still allow someone to make the attempt, but I fear they’re going to tell you the same thing I will.”

“That I cannot bear another child.” Narcissa bites her lip as her eyes tear up. “I wanted—”

“I know.” Severus holds her hand while Narcissa weeps in silence.

The world has never been fair. That does not mean that this is right or just.

Listen to you, he thinks snidely. You sound like a bloody Gryffindor.

When Narcissa masters her feelings with a Black woman’s well-bred control, Severus hands her a silk handkerchief from her bedside. “Would you like me to chemically neuter Lucius on your behalf?” he asks her, glad when the result is startled, watery laughter.

By mid-August, he just feels tired, all of the time. Autumn of 1980 otherwise does not differ much from any other autumn he’s ever seen but for the nature of the last four years of war. The entire
British countryside is intense, as if picking up on the magic that has been flung across the land so very often. The Northern Irish revolt against British rule is probably not helping matters.

Lord Voldemort has chosen to reside in the Bulstrode home at this time. The Bulstrodes have kept to their masks, and are not yet under suspicion by the Ministry. Severus tried to do the same before finally giving up on the idea. It isn’t as if most of Dumbledore’s Phoenix nitwits aren’t aware of whose side he fights for.

He exchanges greetings with those Death Eaters already present, including Lucius, who is still practically glowing over the birth of his child. If he is aware that Draco Malfoy will be his only child, he has shown no sign.

“We have news of the prophecy’s intentions, My Lord,” Avery says, standing tall with his younger, just-of-age son at his side.

Voldemort turns to them, a faint smile of pleasure on his face. It is still disconcerting to realize that the Dark Lord has aged not at all. Not since Severus’s introduction to the man in 1977, and according to the photographs he found, not since 1967, 1957, or even 1950. His hair is an unchanged rich brown, his skin barely touched by lines, his eyes an intense jewel-blue that is still causing married Bellatrix Lestrange to occasionally swoon in delight.

“At last,” Voldemort breathes. “Report, please.”

“Dumbledore must have been aware of the prophecy’s intentions, as well. It took a series of quiet bribes and investigations of Ministry birth records to find the two of whom the prophecy might speak,” Avery says.

“Two.” Voldemort lifts one graceful eyebrow. “There were two children born in the final week of July with parents who have thrice-defied me?”

“They’re breeding in desperation,” Rodolphus says in disgust. “Many among Dumbledore’s fools are bearing children at ages far too young when it comes to proper wizarding sensibilities.”

“Nevertheless, they have bred a potential danger to what we wish to accomplish,” Voldemort reminds Rodolphus. “Tell me their names.”

Avery nods. “Neville Frederick Longbottom, born to Frank and Alice Longbottom, and Harry James Potter, born to James and Lily Potter.”

It feels like Severus’s heart stops beating. He had no idea she’d married—and a poor choice, at that—let alone had a child.

Lily has a child. A child whose very existence places Lily in grave danger.

“A Potter and a Longbottom. Both Pureblood names of sterling quality, if of odd ideas.” Voldemort taps his wand against his open palm. “Two possibilities.”

“It must be the Longbottom brat. Only the two Aurors have bred a true Pure-blood,” Macnair says in derision.

Voldemort’s smile is a mocking curve of amusement. “Never underestimate the Half-bloods, Walden Macnair. They often have the means of surprising you. Where are these two families now?”

“Hiding under the Fidelius Charm—have to be,” Antonin Dolohov says. “No one’s seen hide nor hair of them since the first of August. I’ve had searchers out since Will Avery got the information My
Lord requested, but all known addresses for the Longbottoms and the Potters appear to be abandoned, empty, or missing altogether."

"Then it will take some subtle work to reveal either.” Voldemort inclines his head at Avery and Dolohov. “You have both done well.”

“And the bratlings?” Bellatrix asks. She’s sitting on a table, swinging her legs back and forth with a wide smile on her face. She resembles nothing more than a happy school girl, but it only covers up the fact that Bellatrix Black Lestrange is starting to succumb to the infamous Black family madness.

Voldemort smiles. “As I said—one should never underestimate the Half-bloods, dear Bella. The Potter child is the threat. We shall concentrate all our efforts into finding the weak link among those who are Secret Keepers for that particular family. Go, now, all of you. We still must fight, and soon this threat to our power will be eliminated.”

Severus waits an entire day, the full cycle from evening to evening, before deciding that he must speak. If it causes his death, so be it, but he cannot leave Lily in danger without attempting to do something about it.

“I didn’t realize you had returned, Severus,” Voldemort greets him when Severus enters the Bulstrode parlor that evening.

“Only just,” Severus says, pausing long enough to drop into the low and proper bow for greeting the Dark Lord. Others may have begun to neglect the full grace of the gesture, but he knows them now to be fools. “I have a request for My Lord, if he would do me the great kindness of hearing me.”

When he rises, Voldemort seems amused. “This would be about Lily Potter. I know of your feelings of old, Severus.”

Severus doesn’t pretend to deny it, even if Voldemort seems to believe that romance was his intent. It was not, but to some there is no explaining the difference. “It is.”

Voldemort nods. “Speak, then.”

“I would ask, that when the time comes…spare her life.”

Voldemort’s eyes seem to glimmer in the fainter light of dusk as he looks at Severus. “I will need reasons that are based upon more than sentiment.”

“I am aware.” Severus pauses, as if collecting his thoughts. “I am not discounting the threat her child represents to My Lord’s power. However, despite the circumstances of her birth, Lily Evans was one of the most talented of witches to ever grace Hogwarts’ halls. She may have turned her back on me, but I did not stop paying attention to her aptitude and skills in the matters of magic. If she could be convinced to join us, she would be a tremendous asset.”

“An asset that many would not approve of,” Voldemort notes.

Severus allows himself a frown. “Then they are fools. They may delude themselves all they like that My Lord is concerned with blood purity over all, but we are both Half-bloods of exceptional ability—a fact you told me yourself, though it took me some time to come to believe it of my own talents. My Lord’s aims are not about blood purity, but about those among us who hold true power.”

“Careful, Severus. You might assume too much of my aims to speak of thus,” Voldemort warns him.

“Perhaps I might,” Severus admits, inclining his head. “Which is why it is an opinion I have voiced
to none other than you, My Lord.”

“Very wise of you, Severus. Kneel.”

Severus does so, highly aware of the fact that it might be the last act of his life. “My Lord.”

Voldemort’s hand comes down on his shoulder. The chill of that touch always seeps through Severus’s cloak, as if there is nothing left in Voldemort’s body to warm him. “You have been my most loyal and faithful of servants from the moment you bared your arm in order to accept my Mark, Severus Snape. I cannot promise you that she will live; as the prophecy notes, she has already thrice defied me. I will promise you this: when the time comes that I face her once more…I will ask her to join us, one more time.”

Severus refuses to betray any hint of his emotional reaction to that statement. It has taken him years of practice, but by Merlin, he’s mastering that skill. “My Lord is most generous. No matter the outcome, you have my gratitude.”

“Faithful, loyal, and exceptionally brave,” Voldemort muses. “Rise and depart, my friend. There are things I must consider alone, and we have many plans to make.”

Severus does so and departs. It isn’t until he’s Apparated many miles distant that he hits his knees in the spring muck of a water-drenched valley.

It will not be enough. Lily has always, always held the fire of a Gryffindor. She will stand in front of Voldemort’s wand and protect her family with her last breath.

Severus shows up at a skirmish against the Order that evening. As Dolohov said, James Potter, Lily Evans, and Frank and Alice Longbottom do not appear, though Augusta Longbottom chooses to turn up. Wearing a vulture.

Perhaps Severus is not a Pure-blooded wizard, but he has more sense than to wear taxidermied birds on his head! He does his best to blast the vulture-hat off of her head in a fit of offended sensibilities, though he is careful not to strike Augusta herself. He misses the bird and Apparates before anyone on either side can realize his intent was never to wound the Longbottom matriarch at all.

He sits in an underground crypt throughout most of the next day, his knees drawn up to his chest, letting his thoughts churn in a way he usually does not allow. He is surrounded by ghouls, but they leave him be—he is far, far more frightening than they are, and the ghouls are well aware of that fact.

When had that happened? When had he become more frightening than ghouls, of vengeful and powerful spirits, when he does no more than sit among them?

Would a thestral run from his presence? A unicorn? A dragon?

No. Not a dragon. They really do not see people as much more than inconveniences or food.

Dark wizards cannot cast a Patronus. That’s what he has been taught for his entire life.

Bugger all of that. He is absolutely tired of being told what he can and cannot accomplish.

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Nothing. What did he expect, anyway? He hadn’t given it a proper try.

“Latin, you idiot. Latin. It can’t just be a Patronus. It has to speak.” Intelligent words, but the other
requirement is a happy memory. When was Severus last happy?

Severus leans back, his head resting against the stone wall of the old crypt. The more he tries to find a memory that is pleasing, the more he utterly fails at it.

Finally, he just closes his eyes. This is doomed to failure. He won’t be able to save her—

“Am I saving you again?”

Severus looks up in relief to see Lily standing there, holding out her hand. He grips it, trying not to let out how much he desperately needed her in that moment. It’s now second-year, and things are not improving. He sometimes wonders if he wouldn’t have been better off remaining in Spinner’s End.

“And you two!” Lily says, turning around to glare at the others. “You aren’t acting like proper Gryffindors should!”

“He’s just a Snake—” James Potter tries to protest.

“He’s a person,” Lily seethes in response. “Just like you. You call yourselves brave and true? What I see are two bullies tormenting one person who only asked you to leave him alone! That isn’t how a Gryffindor is supposed to act. You’re just—terrible people!”

Severus can’t admit it until only then that he saw a flash of shame in James Potter’s eyes. There was none in Sirius Black’s gaze, but Sirius is a Black. He didn’t have to care.

Then Remus Lupin appears. The boy has always been the tallest in their year. Instead of joining in on Potter and Black’s antics, as Severus half-expects, he reaches out and grasps both Potter and Black by their ears in a hard pinch.

“Up to this shite again? Honestly, I have no idea why I’m friends with you idiots,” Lupin says scornfully. “Lily’s right. You haven’t seemed to have figured out which House you belong to. He might be in Slytherin, but he’s not the one attacking people in the hallway!”

“HE STARTS IT—” Black tries to yell, but his voice ends in a yelp when Lupin pinches harder.

“Please. At this point, Snape is definitely riding the low end as to who started what,” Lupin retorts. “Lily, I’ll be removing my favorite idiots from your company. See you at dinner.”

“Sure, Remus,” Lily says, smiling, and watches with satisfaction as Lupin all but drags Potter and Black away.

Then Lily gives Severus an exasperated look. “Twice this week. You really need to make more friends, Sev. You need bodyguards.”

“The only bodyguard I would put up with is you,” Severus replies, taking her hand. Lily grasps his hand in return, them against the entire bloody world—

“Expecto patronum voce mea loquero!”

Severus opens his eyes and gives the corporeal Patronus a look of vague frustration. “A runespoor. How very original.”

The three-headed snake’s tongues dart out, one after the other, as it waits for instructions.

Severus swallows hard. A runespoor needs a message in three parts, one for each head, or they’ll
forget themselves and fight. “Please seek out Albus Dumbledore. Tell him that Severus Snape wishes to meet him under conditions of peace. I will be waiting three hillsides to the immediate north of Cokeworth tonight after the sun sets.” The runespoor heads take turns hissing a repetition of his message before departing in a wisp of silvery magic.

Severus bites his lip. “I did it, Lily. A corporeal Patronus. I wonder if you would still care.”

It rains when he arrives on that hillside at dusk. Of course it does.

Severus waits as dusk becomes true night, casting a basic warming charm. He’d forgotten that Cokeworth likes to grasp hold of winter’s chill as early as possible, and tonight is no different. He keeps a firm grip on his wand until his knuckles are even whiter than the rest of his pale skin. Albus Dumbledore has no reason to let him live. A smart leader would show up just long enough to vaporize Severus where he stands—

A jagged jet of white light strikes his hand, sending his wand flying. It’s one of the most painful bouts of *Expelliarmus* he’s ever experienced. His hand is partly numb as he drops to his knees. “Don’t kill me!”

“That was not my intention.” Dumbledore is suddenly there, his robes being whipped about by the wind, his face illuminated by his wand. “Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?”

Severus is so insulted that he stutters like a panicked fourth-year. “No—no message—I’m here on my own account!” He’s tempted to add an insult, but he’s riding the edge of disaster and death as it is. Instead, he wraps his right hand with his left, trying to soothe the numbness in his cold fingers. He shakes his hair back out of his eyes. “I—I come with a warning. No, a request—please—”

Dumbledore flicks his wand. Severus flinches before he realizes that despite the spring wind still howling across the hilltop, everything around them has become silent. Useful, that. “What request could a Death Eater make of me?”

“The prophecy—the prediction that Trelawney—”

“Ah, yes.” Dumbledore peers down at him. “How much of it did you relay to Lord Voldemort?”

Severus frowns. “Everything I heard! That is why—it is for that reason—” God, still stuttering like a fourth-year. “He thinks it means Lily Evans!”

“The prophecy did not refer to a woman. It spoke of a boy born at the end of July—”

“You know what I mean!” Severus wonders if he’s made a foolish decision, after all. He does not recall Dumbledore being deliberately dense. “He thinks it means her son; he is going to hunt her down, kill them all—”

“If she means so much to you, surely Lord Voldemort will spare her?” Severus does not think he is mistaking the mockery in the old man’s voice. “Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?”

“I have—I have asked him—”

Dumbledore gives him no time to complete that statement. “You disgust me,” he says in utter contempt. Severus shrinks back from it; of course. This was a mistake from the start. Dumbledore has never had room in his heart for a Slytherin. Why would he change his mind at this juncture? “You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you
Severus stares up at Dumbledore. He can’t voice the words, he’s so enraged, but he can’t help but think them: *I want my best friend to live, you doddering old fool.* That won’t help, regardless. If Dumbledore missed the fact that Severus has already voiced concern for Lily *and* her family, then that is not Severus’s problem. “Hide them all, then,” he whispers. “Keep her—them—safe. Please.”

*And for God’s sake, do a better job of it than you’ve already managed.* If the task had been done properly, Avery would never have found those records of birth.

“And what will you give me in return, Severus?”

Severus does his best not to gape at the old man, but doesn’t succeed. “In—in return?” The one thing Voldemort had not asked of him, Dumbledore does. The old man must have been a Slytherin in his youth. “Anything.”

Dumbledore seems to contemplate that declaration. “Would you spy for the Order, Severus? Appear to be a double-agent against the Order working on Voldemort’s command, report to Voldemort only the things I wish for him to know, while presenting a façade of mistrust to others in the Order of the Phoenix?”

Spy? That’s his bargain?

“I,” he spits out in rage, “have wanted a way out from beneath Voldemort’s thrice-bedamned thumb since last year!”

Dumbledore lifts an eyebrow in surprise. “Have you, now?”

“Did you think one can merely walk away from Voldemort’s service once they’ve been Marked?” Severus retorts at his most sardonic. “A traitor bearing a Mark is a traitor who does not live for very long. The Dark Lord can reach through that magic and kill whomever he likes, whether they have displeased him, or if he is simply not in the best of moods.”

“It pains me to say that no, that had never occurred to me.” Dumbledore lifts his hand; a moment later, Severus’s wand comes to him. “Then those few Death Eaters who remained to fight on, even after their allies had fled…”

“Were hoping for a painless death?” Severus shakes his head. “Of course that would never occur to you. I’ve never seen you, or any of your delightful followers, treat a Slytherin as anything more than the scum beneath your boots.”

“Stand up.”

Severus lets out a resigned sigh and does so. Maybe he will be fortunate enough to be granted the same painless defeat. Voldemort will never give him the same.

Dumbledore is gazing at him with cold blue eyes, but at least there is some measure of honesty lurking there. “You said you asked this of Voldemort. Did he offer to spare her life?”

“Yes, though the extent of his offer centers on her willingness to join him.”

“Which you are already aware Lily Potter will not do, else you would not be here.” Dumbledore’s expression of cool regard has not changed.

“Lily would sooner shove a Muggle trainer down his throat in the gleeful hopes that he might choke
“At this juncture, that might be putting it mildly,” Dumbledore agrees in a thoughtful voice. “And what did you offer the Dark Lord in return for his favor, Severus?”

“Offer?” Severus looks at Dumbledore like he’s stupid. “I merely asked. If you understood that man at all, you would know that the act of making any sort of request of him is to risk immediate, painful death.”

“I see.” Dumbledore lowers his gaze.

Severus looks down to see that the old man is offering him his wand, handle first. “I have no reason to trust in you.”

“No…no, I suppose I never gave you one, did I?” Dumbledore extends his arm so that Severus’s wand is easier to reach. “Trust in this, then: I, too, wish for the Potter family’s survival. A great deal of Wizarding Britain’s future depends on their child, and I would see him raised by those who love him.”

Severus gives in and grasps his wand, only to find that Dumbledore has not yet released it. “Dear God, now what? Shall I offer up a blood sacrifice and a herd of cows in payment, as well?”

He thinks he sees a flicker in Dumbledore’s eyes that might—might—be humor. “You realize that no matter the results of our venture, Lily Potter may never forgive you, or speak to you, again in her life?”

“Never once have I claimed that to be the point,” he says, and his wand is released to his hand.

September. October. Spying is a taxing role, and he keeps a grasp on his sense of time by the barest margins. Somehow he maintains the trust of certain Death Eaters while alienating the others entirely, even though his role has been clearly outlined by their own Lord. Lucius still treats Severus with respect, as does Narcissa, though Lucius draws the line at allowing Narcissa to name a Half-blood as their child’s godfather.

Regulus disappears in November. When he does not return, Snape hopes that he chose his death well.

He really doesn’t understand how he earns any respect among those in the Order of the Phoenix, no matter the story of his role as a spy. He is a Slytherin; he is not to be trusted…but some of them, he thinks, might one day change their minds. Since he has no idea what to do with that information, he most often ignores it. He has other things to worry about at the moment, aside from the fact that it is nearing Hallowe’en, and Voldemort usually plans his worst atrocities on that date.

The Prewett twins are thrilled by his presence. Severus tells them, to their faces, that this does not do a blasted thing to prove that they have any hint of sanity or sense of self-preservation whatsoever.

Gideon merely shrugs. “Yeah, but what’s a little bit of fire among friends?”

Severus glances at Fabian. “Does that mean we can also set your brother on fire? He is the only one still lacking the experience.”

“Oh, I knew this one would be fun. Let’s adopt!” Gideon declares.

The expression of sheer horror on Severus’s face causes the twins’ brother-in-law, Arthur Weasley, to laugh until he starts to run out of oxygen. These two idiots are dangerous. Severus idly wonders if
they were Slytherins and then immediately dismisses the notion as foolish.

December. To his complete irritation, he finds that he’s good at this dual deception, even if he sometimes has to work with those he’d really, really prefer to avoid. “Lupin.”

“Severus. I received your, er, interesting Patronus,” the werewolf says. He looks tired, despite this being a new moon, not a full one. “A runespoor?”

“Appropriate for a spy, yes?”

Lupin frowns. “Two heads to serve two different masters. What is the third doing?”

“If it’s smart, leaving Britain and never coming back,” Snape replies. “Listen. Tell Dumbledore that Voldemort seems certain that he’s found a way to crack a target’s Fidelius Charm. I have no idea who, why, how, or even when—just Voldemort’s certainty.”

“Christ.” Lupin rubs his face with both hands. Snape finds it odd that he isn’t holding a wand. In opposing circumstances, he sure as hell would be. “I’ll pass the word along. I just hate to bear such negative word when it will soon be January.”

“What has the month to do with anything?” Snape retorts, even though he knows full well why Lupin would be concerned. “Just go tell Dumbledore, and for Merlin’s sake, tighten up your sloppy fucking security! None of you—dammit. The third head is reminding the other two that they also cannot be so fucking sloppy. The Order cannot take any more losses, Lupin.”

“I didn’t realize you gave a damn about any of us,” Lupin replies, looking at him through hooded eyes.

“My cares and concerns are my own, but I meant it about the Order’s shoddy security. Why is no one taking Alastor Moody fucking seriously?”

“I think we’ve all heard one too many shout about ‘Constant Vigilance,’” the werewolf says. “I’ll see what I can do. Thank you.”

Snape Apparates away without responding. He does not need a werewolf’s thanks.

The Longbottoms are fighting again as of January of the new year. With Voldemort now blatantly focusing his attention on locating Harry James Potter, there is no need for them to remain in seclusion. Severus hears from the Prewett twin horrors and Arthur Weasley that Augusta has Neville in hiding with a Fidelius Charm, just in case. It’s a trend that continues; if there is a battle that Severus is forced to be a part of, Frank and Alice are on the front lines of all but the most unexpected of skirmishes. They are aware of the role he must play, but Alice’s hexes are still not any fun to contend with at all.

Severus finds out about an impending ambush from Voldemort and Lucius in March, one led Dolohov, Yaxley Senior, Karkaroff, and Macnair, who has in his possession an anti-Apparition Charm. “I hope they do well,” he says in a mild voice, before he goes to find a quiet room in the house to squeeze his hands into fists. He can do nothing. He either rushes to their aid and reveals his position to Voldemort, or he remains and hopes that the Order’s infamous luck continues to hold It does not.

By the time Severus can justifiably break away, the better to perform his role to Voldemort’s preferences, Alastor Moody is telling those few who’ve gathered that Gideon and Fabian fought like heroes—that their defiant fire is the only reason any of them survived at all.
“Heroism doesn’t change the fact that they’re dead,” Severus says, his fingernails digging into his palms.

“Didn’t think you cared,” Moody says. He’s wearing a new patch over his eye, a cursed removal courtesy of Bellatrix from yet another recent battle.

“I preferred their company over yours, at least,” Severus retorts, and goes outside. He’s grinding his teeth as he stares up at the night sky. He’d liked—he had. He’d liked the ginger bastards. Even when they were still formally enemies, confrontations with the twins had been a bright spot of fun more often than not.

Bellatrix takes advantage of the fact that the Longbottoms are no longer hiding. In late April, she drags several Death Eaters along in her mad intent to destroy the Longbottoms for daring to birth a potential threat to her favorite Dark Lord. Severus judges the situation regarding Voldemort’s claimed fondness for him versus the amount of torture that Severus has received at the man’s hands of late, and knows that to skip this raid will bring true suspicion onto himself.

Dammit. He goes with Bellatrix’s chosen group of Rodolphus, Rabastian, and Barty Crouch Junior, hoping that Frank and Alice have maintained proper wards on their home.

God, no. They haven’t. What guards their residence is easy for an amassed group of powerful Death Eaters to break through.

That leaves Severus hoping that the Aurors will not be caught unawares, and that hope is quickly dashed. Frank and Alice get to their wands, but they’re outnumbered and trapped by the Death Eater’s anti-Apparition Charm. Their curses blast near Severus, but never strike him directly. He offers them the same courtesy under cover of Yaxley’s blundering, still hoping that someone from the Order will come and help save Frank and Alice’s lives—

Bellatrix breaks through their defences and has them both down and screaming under the *Cruciatus* curse before he can finish the thought. She doesn’t kill them outright. Instead, the madness in her veins presents itself as a horrifying continuation of Voldemort’s trends. She casts *Cruciatus* again and again, but unlike Voldemort, she does not stop.

Severus glances around, wondering if he dares hex Bellatrix’s backside…but he is outnumbered. There is nothing he can do to stop this that would not immediately result in his own death, and Frank and Alice will still be lost.

This is so fucking horrific that he does the only thing he can; he distances himself from it as far as he can mentally go without leaving his own blasted body. At least Bellatrix was useful enough to teach Severus the magics of Occlumency and Legilimency before she went and lost her bloody mind.

“Well?” Bellatrix asks him in a sweet voice when she’s finally had enough fun torturing her prey. “Are they broken, Severus?”

Severus doesn’t need a diagnostic spell to know the answer to that question. “Yes.” He notices the flat shine to Alice’s eye and refuses to wince. “Potentially irreparably so.”

“Good!” Bellatrix takes his arm. “Time to go!”

“You’re not going to finish the job?” Severus asks in derision. *Please, please finish the fucking job.*

Bellatrix shakes her head. “I did finish it!” she chirps, and Side-Along Apparates them back to Malfoy Manor.
Severus has no idea how Albus Dumbledore finds him in a rural Welsh Muggle graveyard in June, but the bastard manages it. “Are you all right?”

“Go away, Dumbledore.”

“Ahh. Well, that does answer my question,” Dumbledore says, and sits down beside him without asking permission.

“I know that you are not deaf,” Severus mutters.

“No. I’m not. I am also not blind. You were required to be in attendance regarding Frank and Alice’s fate, weren’t you?”

Severus frowns. “If you already know, then why are you asking me?”

Dumbledore doesn’t respond right away. When he finally speaks, he says, “Their torture is something you would never have approved of.”

“I,” Severus grates in return, “have done terrible things that can never be put right.”

“That is true,” Dumbledore admits. “You are not the only one.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Of course not.”

“It’s something I should have paid attention to the first moment the Prewett twins made mention of it, but I—I let prejudices continue to blind me, as perhaps you also did,” Dumbledore says. “From the time you took the Dark Mark until the time you came to me, you killed. You burnt buildings to ash. Your interesting little Sectumsempra creation took part of Moody’s nose, among other body parts he’s lost to this war.”

“Moody looks better without it.”

Dumbledore makes a dismissive sound. “Members of the Order report to me on the actions of all known Death Eaters the moment we’re certain that they’ve taken the Mark. What I always heard others report of you is that you did not torture. You did not relish in another’s suffering. Either you killed a perceived enemy outright, or you fought by other means.”

“Torture serves no point.”

“Voldemort, I’m sure, does not agree with you,” Dumbledore says.

Severus doesn’t deny it. It’s true.

“Would you like to forget?” Dumbledore offers. “What happened to Frank and Alice was—that is more than I’ve ever asked of you. Too much.”

“Ah. So you wish me to die, then,” Severus murmurs. “Or do you think Voldemort would not find it odd that I suddenly do not recall what Bellatrix did?”

“Surprising as you might find it…no. I do not want you dead.”

Because I am useful, Severus thinks. He’s always known this. “Leave me alone, please,” he requests, and then Apparates when Dumbledore refuses to leave. Doddering old bastard.

It becomes harder to maintain the dual roles. Voldemort tells his Death Eaters that Severus is his spy among the Order, foolishly trusted by Albus Dumbledore himself, and in their company he performs
that role to its fullest. Dumbledore tells the Order that Severus has always been his agent among Voldemort’s Death Eaters, trusted by Lord Voldemort himself.

Dumbledore, Severus thinks, is a manipulative bastard.

The first of October finds Severus in a burning house with a squalling toddler in his arms. “I hate small children. Please shush!” he begs Nymphadora Tonks, who only buries her face against his robes and increases the volume of her wailing. He can’t really blame her, not with her childhood home burning down around their ears.

When he finally stumbles out of the house, singed and trying not to cough all over Nymphadora’s flame-colored hair, someone’s arms reach out to take the child. Severus tightens his grip until he can focus enough to realize that it’s Arthur Weasley reaching for her.

“Oh, thank God,” he croaks. “I thought one of his might have lingered.”

“No, we drove them back just in time to see you run into my flaming house,” Ted counters as he and Andromeda join them, wiping his face with his sleeve. “Bollocks. I always did like this place,” he says. They all watch as other members of the Order move in, attempting to quench the flames.

“You saved my baby girl,” Andromeda whispers, taking Nymphadora from Arthur’s arms. “I can’t believe it.”

“You must be joking,” Severus replies in disbelief. “Narcissa would flay the meat from my bones if I allowed her only niece to die.”

Ted looks surprised by that declaration, but Andromeda raises an eyebrow. “Actually, he has a point.”

“I always do.” Then Severus walks over to the fence, clings to it, and coughs out char and smoke until he’s vomiting. Great day. Great decisions he’s made.

Hallowe’en.

Traitor. Someone betrayed them. That’s all Severus knows. All he can see is that the home of Potter’s grandfathers has a hole blasted through it, one that came from the inside. The Mark on his arm has suddenly gone from a source of constant pain to nearly invisible.

There is no sign of Voldemort. Not anywhere.

When he goes inside, he spies a pair of wands lying on a table near the door. The spider web carvings are distinct on James Potter’s wand, as is the unvarnished willow and gracefully detailed handle on Lily’s.

Severus stares at the wands in stunned horror. This is a war—Fidelius Charm—why leave them there? Why?

James Potter is lying dead a few feet ahead of him, his arm still outstretched. Danger recognized, but recognized too late. Severus looks down at him, but the only thing he feels in his heart is black rage that James was incapable of getting to his wand in time to prevent the deaths Severus knows he will find upstairs.

Climbing the stairs is like agony. Walking down the hall feels like he’s drowning, but he keeps going. He knows, he already knows, but this is his fault, and by God and Merlin, he will see what his actions have wrought!
Lily is lying in a crumpled heap on the floor of her son’s nursery, her red hair spread out like the petals of a magnificent, fallen flower. There is a gaping wound in the wall, revealing the night sky while letting in chill autumn air.

He doesn’t even allow himself to think about it. He gathers her up, hoping, hoping, that there is something—

There is nothing. Lily is gone; her eyes stare up at him, blank and empty. She should be accusing him of something, but there is no spark remaining to do so.

Severus reaches up with one shaking hand, brushing her eyes closed. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he whispers. Only then does he realize that a child’s sobbing is coming from behind him.

He puts Lily down on the floor, gently, crossing her arms over her chest. If someone realizes another has been here, he no longer cares. Instead, he crosses the few steps of the nursery to stare down at the toddler in his crib.

Harry James Potter is grasping the wooden bars, tears dripping from his huge green eyes. A fresh scar, still edged with blood, trails down like a bolt of lightning above his right eyebrow.

It is otherwise irritating to realize that Harry Potter looks exactly like James. Severus hates those sorts of omens.

“You are going to be quite the irritant in ten years, aren’t you?” he murmurs, reaching out to touch the young one’s hair. Alive; Lily’s son is alive. It seems that at last, Voldemort has made a fatal miscalculation.

“Sleep.” Severus tells the baby, using the strength of magic in his voice to convince young Potter to lie down in his crib. “When you awaken, there will be—someone will be here who will protect you. I—it cannot be me.” Severus waits until the boy is asleep, his mouth and tiny brow puckered in misery, before he Apparates.

Snape does not need Dumbledore to tell him that Harry Potter lives. He will not give Dumbledore that sort of satisfaction, not after that man’s merciless reminder of how baby Potter has his mother’s brilliant green eyes.

“Is this remorse, Severus?”

“I wish—” It should have been him. Not her. Not—not even them. “I wish I were dead.”

“And what use would that be to anyone?” Dumbledore asks in a cold voice. “If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear.”

Way forward? Snape looks up at Dumbledore. “What do you mean?” There is no forward. He has done his job, and he will happily go to his death for failing at it.

“You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me to protect Lily’s son.”

Snape tries not to stare at Dumbledore in disbelief. The man has cracked. “He doesn’t require protection. The Dark Lord is gone—”

“The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does.”

That would explain why Snape can still see the Mark. He’d thought, perhaps, that it would continue to fade, but it remains the same washed-out, faded appearance it gained after Voldemort’s apparent
Snape takes a moment to get his breathing under control. “Very well. But never—never tell anyone, Dumbledore! This will remain between us. Swear it! I cannot bear—especially Potter’s son—I want your word!”

If he is to continue on this path, no one can know this. Not this one real weakness, the true chink in his armor. Not even Harry James Potter—especially not if the baby decides to take after James Potter in attitude as well as appearance.

Dumbledore sighs. “My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?” Snape gives him a sharp look. “If you insist.”

After that farce of a trial the second week of November, he sits his N.E.W.T.s off-schedule, strings pulled by Dumbledore within the Ministry so it will happen. Griselda Marchbanks oversees them all, though it is clear she would rather be doing almost anything else.

When he receives the list of Os afterwards, Snape has to put the paper down, walk away, and then come back to take it up again. In all eight subjects he chose. Os. That includes Transfiguration, which he was completely horrendous at while in Hogwarts as a student. He blames the war for that improvement. He blames the war for a lot of things.

It’s the last week of November when he clenches his fist to bleed into the earth above Lily’s grave, making an oath that may well see him die horribly before he can carry it out to completion.

He is the youngest Potions Master in Britain to gain both his certifications and his title at age twenty-two, just after his birthday that January. There is a stir in the potions community over this, but he doesn’t care. He published valid and useful potions, even if a few of them could still use some refining work.

In the summer of 1982, Snape writes a letter, charmed to respond to the touch of only one other for the words to be visible. It is the last such thing he dares to send.

Dearest Narcissa,

The best and wisest Slytherin I have ever met taught me that a good product of our House understands the nature of resourcefulness, determination, and self-preservation, along with the also-desired traits of clever, cunning ways that are ambitious but not foolish.

She taught me that it is only too late when one is dead, and I am forever grateful for the lesson.

I hope your family will thrive and grow as best it can. I wish you all the best in life that it is possible to gain.

In Sincere Regard,

Severus Prince Snape

He doesn’t expect a reply. Why would he be granted one? Narcissa is well aware of Snape’s role as a spy, of his apparent betrayal of Voldemort by now. The idea of losing her friendship is as painful as it was to lose Lily’s.
He at least has the comfort of knowing that Narcissa still lives, as does her son.

Then a young but matured horned owl comes to his table at Hogwarts, where he has been eating alone out of preference and habit. Given the looks Professor McGonagall has been leveling his way, she is going to lose patience and drag him by the ear to the faculty table come August.

Dearest Severus,

Congratulations on your new posting as both Potions Master for Hogwarts, and your position as Head of House for our beloved silver and green.

When Draco comes to Hogwarts in September of 1991, I know that you will teach him well.

All my love,

Narcissa Black Malfoy
Opening his eyes to the infirmary’s familiar ceiling is such a baffling experience that at first, he can only stare at it. That is not—that was not the last thing he was doing. Was it?

He’d been with Minerva, reviewing lesson plans—

No. Not that.

Minerva is correct. The setting, their activity—that is wrong.

Minerva. Office. His office.

*Please, please pull your head back into some semblance of order!* he begs himself.

Wrong. Damned. Office. That office belongs to someone else.

Who?

Fuck, this is terrible. He’s going to kill whoever did this to him.

Wait, he might not be allowed to do that anymore. Dammit!

The most useful clarification comes by glancing over when he realizes there is a person at his bedside. James?

NO!

Not James. James is—gone.

Harry. Harry, who fell asleep over a book with his arm resting across one of the pages.

He lifts his head just enough to see that it’s a pristine copy of *Moste Potente Potions*. A sheet of parchment is tucked into the page, with a Muggle ballpoint pen sitting atop that.

Mitigating the effects. Portraits.

*What does it do?*

Those were not his worst memories. Not his favorite, and God, but there had been some terrible things relived in utter, perfect clarity…but 1977. 1978. The first half of 1979. Those had not been the prevalent years. That is where the worst of things lurk.

He lets out a sigh. Mitigating it. That shouldn’t have been possible.

Harry James Potter, eighteen-year-old youngest Potions Master in Wizarding Britain and Europe, youngest teacher to ever hold a post at Hogwarts, and apparently an insane genius who hasn’t shaved in several days, made it possible.

“Atrocious brat,” Severus murmurs.

Harry jolts awake, wide-eyed, and stands up in a sudden rush while forgetting to hold onto his belongings. Severus is treated to the sight of a heavy book being flung directly at Sirius Black’s face.

“Severus?” Harry gasps out, staring down at him.
Severus lifts one shaking hand to point at Sirius, who still looks startled by the fact that a book just bounced off of his head. At least Remus was there to catch it. “That…worth it.”

“I was going to ask if you were all right, but that is fairly conclusive,” Remus says while Sirius rubs his head and winces.

“Well…not dead,” Severus points out. “What’d you do?”

Harry drops back down in his chair and scrubs at his face. “Shoved every single fucking Euphoria Elixir and Calming Draught down your throat I could find, and added several dozen bezoar tinctures blended with Felix Felicis for good measure. I still didn’t even know—towards the end. I wasn’t sure if it would work.”

“1981 was…” Severus swallows. “A terrible year. July 1979, though. That was…a bright point.”

“Dear God, how?” Remus asks, tucking the book up under his arm.

“That’s when he hung me upside down from a tree with a Permanent Sticking Charm and left me there,” Sirius replies, shoving his hands into his robe pockets and grinning. “Always did wonder why you took off without finishing the job.”

Severus breathes out and closes his eyes. Now that he’s waking up, his head hurts. “Didn’t have a piñata bat.”

“Let me guess,” Remus says. “That’s an acceptable answer for you, isn’t it?”

“Why not?” Sirius counters. “It’s just not sporting, otherwise.”

“1981?” Harry asks in a low voice.

“January 1977 through…” Severus frowns. That was why the confusion. “Mid-summer of 1982.”


“Cursed potion…” Severus gestures at his left arm without bothering to open his eyes. “Probably latched on to…a cursed memory.”

“Oh, my word, he is?”

Severus opens his eyes just in time to witness Poppy Pomfrey burst into tears. “What?”

“I told you—I didn’t know if it was going to work,” Harry says in a low voice while Remus goes to comfort Poppy. “She’s been worse than any of us about panicking.”

“Poppy, panicking…never helps,” Severus tells her.

“Yes, but that is twice in a single year I thought you were going to die, and this one was that much worse!” Poppy retorts, viciously flinging tears from her eyes. “Don’t you dare enter this room again unless you’re checking on some other daft fool who is ill, Severus!”

Severus stares at her. “I’m…missing something. Aren’t—are I?”

“What day was it when you were last in your office?” Harry asks, not looking at him.

“The—thirtieth. I’m…not going to…to like this, am I?”
“It’s three in the morning,” Harry says, his throat working. “The sixth of May.”

“Oh.” Severus thinks about that for a moment. “You had…better bloody well…have been teaching your classes!”

Harry finally grins. “Nope. Had Charlie come in and cover them.”

“Charles Weasley.”

“N.E.W.T. O in Potions, older brother to Fred and George. The only two with better skills available would have been Fred and George themselves, but I wanted the classroom to still be standing afterwards.” Harry finally reaches out and grasps Severus’s hand. “It really was that bad. Jade is…upset.”

That is probably putting it mildly. “She’s…going to have my head,” Severus whispers, and then spies a table about an arm’s length from Harry. “What is all of…that?”

“Students wanted to know what to give to a Headmaster who hates sweets for well-wishing. I suggested potions ingredients.” Harry smiles. “They really, really took me seriously. I don’t think that table will ever be the same.”

“Ah.” There are quite a lot of offerings, far more than he would ever expect. Severus glances at Harry. “If I go to sleep and awaken once more, will the world make sense again?”

Harry gives him a look that holds too much relief for it to be sarcastic. “You say that like it’s ever made any sense in the first place.”

* * * * *

“Who else knows how to make Bottled Dementor?” Harry asks.

They’re both sitting outside early in the morning on Friday, though Severus is still wrapped in a robe that covers the uniform of the infirmary escapee. He wasn’t quite ready to get out of bed, no, but after sleeping through most of Thursday, he’d felt a desperate need for a change of scenery. Even pre-dawn light and chill fog are preferable to too much time abed.

The fact that he chose Hogwarts’ cemetery was less a preference and more a firm desire not to be discovered before he can stand up on his own. It took Harry’s hand on his elbow and a bloody cane to make it this far, but even if students decide to begin their day outdoors early, not many venture out this far until evening.

“Bottled Dementor.” It’s as good a name as any. “Theoretically, it should be no one, but there were many Death Eaters roaming around Malfoy Manor in those days. There are any number of people who could have copied the formula and kept it.”

“Which means it could be hiding in any number of bigoted Pure-blooded desk drawers.” Harry draws up one leg to rest his foot on the bench, letting his other leg stretch out in front of him. “That really doesn’t narrow things down.”

“I am quite honestly too tired to be concerned as to who wants me dead. A lot of people want me dead, Harry.”
Harry glances at him, smirking. “A lot of people want you to be alive, too, idiot. Every teacher, and a lot of students, stopped by often to see if you were improving. Narcissa has been in and out of the infirmary almost every hour. I think she only went to sleep Thursday morning when I was able to tell her that you were going to be fine.”

*It's not too late until you are dead.* “Narcissa was—after your mother, she was the first friend I ever had. I’d forgotten a lot of those details. A lot from those years is…I tried not to recall it, if I could help it.”

“I know there has to have been something else in there that was worth remembering. Aside from hanging Sirius upside down from a tree, anyway,” Harry adds, grinning.

“The Prewett twins. Somehow, from the summer of 1979 to January of 1980, our confrontations went from vicious to…to…playful,” Severus finally says, giving up on trying to find another word for it. “Gideon was the first one to ask me to join them.”

“What made him do that?” Harry asks.

“I’d just hexed his brother into being pummeled by invisible fists after he uttered the words, ‘beats me,’” Severus says, and has to bite back a smile that wouldn’t be a smile at all. “I couldn’t see him, but I could hear him. Gideon literally fell over laughing and said that was the funniest thing he’d seen in a year. They were…Fred and George are a lot like their uncles, except Fred and George actually have more self-restraint.”

“I—I’m sorry, I cannot possibly have heard you just declare that Fred and George have any measure of restraint at all.”

“It is a terrible truth to face.” Severus tightens his grip on the simple wooden cane Harry acquired from God knows where. “I’d forgotten why Ted Tonks did not immediately hex me into atomic bits when I brought the translated potion to show you all. Death Eaters went to the house he and Andromeda shared at the time. They were both away, involved in another battle. Nymphadora had a sitter who was fool enough to come outside, and died for it. The others set the house on fire and left. I knew—I knew she was still in there.”

Severus draws back his right sleeve, revealing a shining burn scar about an inch long on his arm. “I didn’t even notice that was the result of rescuing a very loud toddler until much later. By then, it was too late to prevent it from scarring…not that I was overly concerned. I didn’t expect to survive that war any more than I expected to survive this one.”

“You are so very fortunate that Jade was not present when Dumbledore’s portrait told me what you’d said—about how your death was a year behind schedule.” Harry is scowling at the white marble stones laid out before them. “Don’t you ever say anything that fucking stupid ever again.”

“I make no promises. I have a proven record of saying exceptionally stupid things.” Severus releases another sigh. He feels so bloody wrung-out. He’s an idiot for creating that potion.

Speaking of. “There isn’t a chance in hell I’ll be allowed to teach my class today, is there?”

Harry lets out a brief snort. “Not unless you want Poppy to sit on you, sedate you, and then string you up in the infirmary as a warning for others. I’ll cover it; Charlie has to go back to Romania this evening.” He hesitates. “I wonder if Tonks knows. Nymphadora, I mean.”

“Probably not. She has the same reasons not to want to remember it as I do.”

Severus is fortunately in his own quarters before Jade swarms him. It’s like being assaulted by a
singularly large attack hummingbird in a top hat. “You are stupid!” Jade declares.

“Yes. That has firmly been established,” Severus replies, and then wraps her up in a hug. “I’m fine.”

“You weren’t, though!” Jade argues, and then starts crying. “Y’can’t go an’ do th’stupid shite no more!”

“What, drink tea? Perish the thought. Please let me sit down,” Severus begs, and gets to sit on his own sofa before his legs collapse from beneath him. Jade cuddles in next to his side, which is not an unwelcome arrangement. He falls asleep that way and wakes up to lunch, a tea tray that Harry is grimly testing with his wand.

Severus holds out his hand, watching it tremble. Dammit. “Jade, your wand—no, you’re casting the spell. I do not need to fall on my own face making the attempt,” he interrupts her mid-protest. “I need a Restorative Draught.”

Harry glances up. “That—yeah, that would be less likely to interact with everything else than a Pepper-Up.”

“I wouldn’t accept one of those, anyway,” Severus says. “I spent nearly a week in the infirmary. I am not also putting up with the indignities of steam.”

Jade smiles. “Oh, how bloody terrible,” she says, but gets out her wand. “Arcesso implerent potione.” One of the drawers in his quarters rattles and opens the allow the potion escape. Harry’s hand darts out to catch it in mid-air before it can sail across the room.

“Once a Seeker, always a Seeker,” Severus murmurs, but Harry shakes his head.

“Had a lot more fun as a Chaser, actually. Well, except when I got swatted in the face with a Beater’s bat. That wasn’t as much fun.”

Jade is staring at them like they’re speaking a foreign language. “Seeker, Chaser, Beater, what?”

Harry stares at her. “Merlin, how the hell did we not introduce you to Quidditch yet?”

“She left Hogwarts last fall before the season started.” Severus thinks about it. “Oh, and last summer’s tournament was canceled because everything was terrible.”

“That’s being fixed this summer. We already have re-scheduled World Cup tickets—Viktor’s buying for everyone, even if his team doesn’t make the finals.” Harry points at Jade. “You’re going to love that, and then we’ll probably need to hide every single broom in Wizarding Britain from you.”

After the Restorative Draught takes effect, Severus can at least lift a tea cup without the liquid being in danger of sloshing out. Then he glances down at the tea. Poisoning always makes him paranoid.

“We’re certain—”

“Winky made it herself from an entirely new tea tin, and threatened to kill any house-elf who dared touch her Master Severus’s things ever, ever again.” Harry doesn’t sound like it was an idle threat, either.

“I love our house-elves,” Jade says. “Even if they’ve sommat got weird ideas.”

Winky pops in as if summoned and immediately wraps herself around Severus’s leg. “You’ve never be takin’ no tray from no one else!” Winky orders. “Never again! I’s be findin’ that elf and I’s be makin’ them pays!”
“Not until they’ve testified, Winky, please,” Harry requests. Winky subsides, still grumbling, but she also has not let go of Severus’s leg.

“Testified?” he asks blankly.

“Yes, testified.” Harry frowns at him. “Someone tried to murder the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Severus Prince. Yes, there is a full M.L.E. investigation in progress, right now!”

Severus groans and leans back against his sofa. “Buggerfuck.”

“Right sure tha’s th’ point o’buggering,” Jade says.

“I will abuse the English language all that I like, thank you.” Severus finishes his tea and manages a single scone before his stomach tells him that enough is enough.

“Got you a ‘glad y’not dead’ gift,” Jade says, and gets up to go over to his Muggle stereo. She opens up a CD case, drops in a disk, and forwards ahead to a particular track. “Not usually t’my taste, but you’re th’ miserably depressed bastard—”

“Thank you,” Severus interjects dryly.

“—so I thought y’might like this’un. It’s called “Witness,” done by a girl out from Canada. Nice voice,” Jade says.

“Make me a witness
Take me out
Out of darkness
Out of doubt
I won’t weigh you down
With good intentions
Won’t make fire out of clay
Or other inventions
Will we burn in heaven
Like we do down here
Will a change come
While we’re waiting
Everyone is waiting
And so when we’re done
Soul-searching
And we carried the weight
And died for a cause
Is misery
Made beautiful
Right before our eyes
Will mercy be revealed
Or blind us where we stand.”

“I like it.”

Jade glances over at him. “A’right, so tears? Not what I had in mind, y’nutter!”

“It’s fine, Jade,” Severus reassures her, blinking several times until his eyes behave themselves. “After this week, things like that are simply going to have more of an impact. Harry, I need paper, a pen, quill—whatever, as long as it writes.”

“I could write it down for you,” Harry says, as if he understands exactly why Severus is asking for these things. It’s entirely possible that he does.

Severus shakes his head. “I need to see it. If I’m not looking right at it, I might miss something—and right now is the best time. If we wait, I might forget it again. I didn’t want to remember Bottled Fucking Dementor in the first place.”

“Why, why would’ja want t’go and make one’a those fuckers in a bottle?” Jade asks, appalled.

“The human condition,” Severus replies. “We all have a terrible propensity towards creating things just to see if we can, while often forgetting to stop and wonder if we should. I believe your degree has more than one ethics class in that regard.”

“We do, yeah.” Jade watches him take a Muggle clipboard with a piece of paper trapped in place, then another Muggle ball-point. He would prefer the quill with Narcissa and Draco’s gifted golden nib, but an ink pot might truly be beyond his capabilities right now.

Severus ponders the blank sheet for a long time. “When Narcissa is done with her class for the day, I need to see it. If I’m not looking right at it, I might miss something—and right now is the best time. If we wait, I might forget it again. I didn’t want to remember Bottled Fucking Dementor in the first place.”

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Severus ponders the blank sheet for a long time. “When Narcissa is done with her class for the day, I need to see her,” he says, and begins to write. “She was there when it was done, and she has an excellent memory.”

He can remember this. He can. Thanks to the damned potion itself, those memories are close.

Jobberknoll feathers, twice the usual number as used for Veritaserum—and that is besides the fact that properly brewed Veritaserum itself, six drops, is another ingredient. Belladonna, harvested when its flowers bloom on a new moon. Hemlock, stems sliced vertically, the seedpods crushed. Black henbane ointment made from cow’s lard. Water-infused asphodel, as in a Draught of Living Death, but the powdered asphodel is halved, while the Valerian root, sliced vertically, is triple the normal dose. Properly crushed sopophorous beans, six in number. Half of a sloth’s brain, pickled in a ginger and salt brine. An entire staff of dead bamboo, crushed into a fine powder. Three ivy leaves, added whole, for longevity. A mandrake, harvested at maturity and also dropped whole into the cauldron brew. Enough woad plants to create four full ounces of dried granules created by specific application of heat. A whole white hydrangea blossom, freshly severed. Cuttings from a salvia plant, smoked in a globe before placing the smoke, not the plant, into the cauldron. A yellow carnation, dried upside down through a full lunar cycle. Ground-up cypress root from a tree growing along the banks of a tannic-colored stream. A fresh black rosebud and a dead white one. Anemone root from a flower in bloom. All the dying marigold blossoms from a plant that has been abandoned. Morning glory seeds,
a natural psychedelic, harvested only from violet flowers. White poppies, five in number.

“Sev?”

Severus shakes his head to clear it and glances at Jade. “Yes?”

“Sev…thassa scary long list,” she says.

Severus glances down at it. “Twenty-nine individual aspects. It was rather complicated.”

Harry gets his attention when Severus is trying to remember if there was more. He doesn’t think so; twenty-nine is a prime number, which is often of Arithmantic significance. “Do you mind if I get Narcissa, Sirius, Remus, and the two M.L.E. agents assigned to this while you’re writing down how to make this shite?”

Severus grimaces. “I’d prefer it not be the M.L.E., but I suppose politics leave me no choice in the matter. Go ahead, Harry. I’ll be trying to remember how the hell I put this together.”

Jade gives him a concerned look after taking off her hat. “You think y’can handle another a’ those Restorative Draughts?”

“That might be a good idea. Thank you.”

To his vast relief, the two Aurors Severus has to contend with are Alice Longbottom and Ronald Weasley. He glances at Alice, feels a moment of crushing guilt, and then ruthlessly puts it aside. He can’t; she doesn’t need to know, and he can’t bloody fucking cope with it, besides.

“Glad to see you’re all right,” Alice says, waving her hand to assure him that she doesn’t want Severus to stand. It’s just as well—Jade is all but sitting on him to make sure he doesn’t move.

“Thank you.” Severus glances at Ron. “I wasn’t aware that you’d returned from Mumbai, or that you’d been made officer yet.”

“Very, very recent on both of those.” Ron smiles. His red-blotched white skin has actually managed to pick up some hint of a tan from the constant barrage of Indian equatorial sunlight. “Kept up with my own classes by Port Key while Padma and Parvati were putting in their semester, and finished up not long ago. The moment the Ministry realized I’m actually not bad at this job, I all but got shoved in this direction, handed a badge to fill in the ranks, and was told to try not to kill anyone. Not exactly hard to keep to those instructions.”

“Also, we’re two of the current Aurors you won’t be able to verbally send packing,” Alice says wryly.

“Dear Alice: I am currently not capable of that level of verbal fortitude.” Severus hands the clipboard over to Harry. “That needs to be copied. One stays here, at least for the moment, but our favored Aurors need to know what they’re searching for.”

Harry hands the clipboard to Narcissa first, who scans the ingredients list with a growing scowl on her face. “Bastards,” she finally hisses. “If Ron and Alice don’t find them first, then I will, and there will be nothing left of them afterwards!”

“I am going to politely pretend that I didn’t hear that,” Alice says.

“It’s correct?” Severus asks Narcissa.
Narcissa nods. “It is. Severus, I thought you’d destroyed this once you realized what it could do?”

“I did. But…” Severus closes his eyes. “I was interrupted. A task, something that called me away from the laboratory. Anyone in the Manor at the time could have copied what I’d written down.”

“That particular list of beings is not as long as it used to be, at least.” Narcissa glances at Sirius. “We may need to go pretend to play nice with several individuals I would rather see forgotten in shallow graves.”

Sirius just nods. “If I can pretend to be nice to fucking Voldemort, I can pretend to be nice to a bunch of stuck-up, strutting peacock pricks.”


“We need to get to the point before he falls over,” Remus says, inclining his head in Severus’s direction.

“Right.” Ron takes a breath. “Technically, we know this already, but we need to hear it from you, Professor. What happened last Friday after Professor McGonagall left your office?”

Severus doesn’t begrudge them the explanation. As he often told Harry—all information is useful, even if it seems otherwise. The downside is that, aside from identifying the poison used, and being able to show the Aurors what it looks like, he is of little assistance.

“So our investigative points are what, Ron?” Alice asks.

Ronald holds up his hand and starts ticking off points on his fingers. “Someone with a grudge, though we don’t know the reason. Someone with house-elves of their own—the kitchen elves are actually bound not to harm anyone residing within Hogwarts. Someone who was in Malfoy Manor in September of 1978, though at this point it probably was not a Marked supporter of Voldemort. Someone who has a talent for potions, because this is seriously uni-level work. I’d probably destroy a portion of Britain if I tried to brew this mess. That means our suspect probably has a copy of this potion in their possession. I wouldn’t trust this kind of complexity to memory alone.”

“No, one more,” Severus remembers. “The bloody tea. Mangalam Assam. Someone knew I’d developed that preference, and that has only happened within the last year.”

Alice looks frustrated. “Checking the Ministry import records on tea won’t be difficult, but if it was a Muggle purchase—”

“Somehow, I highly doubt it would be purchased through Muggle means. If this is the sort of being that kept company with Voldemort, the idea of purchasing Muggle tea would probably never occur to them,” Narcissa says dryly.

“Right. Who is still alive that would have been in that Manor in 1978, Madam Black?” Ron asks.

“1978.” Narcissa frowns. “Augustus Rookwood’s sister, Audrey. Antonin Dolohov had a nephew, Gilbert—young at the time, but not so young that he wouldn’t recognize the value of a poison if he saw it in written form. Rodolphus Lestrange’s first cousins—there were two, though Rabastan is dead now. Travers had a boyfriend in 1978 named Victor Hoargood.”

“Justin Wilkes,” Severus says. “His father might be dead, but he was nearly of age at the time. He didn’t turn up for the second war, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t a supporter. Theresa Parkinson and Gertrude Parkinson. Albert Runcorn had a wife at that point, but I’ve no idea what happened to her. Corban Yaxley had a brother, Lincoln, who he was trying to sway into joining Voldemort, but I
don’t know if he succeeded.”

“Anyone else?” Alice asks, after Narcissa and Severus both stare at each other.

“By proper protocol, you must also investigate me, since I was present,” Narcissa says, ignoring Severus’s glare. “This man has been my friend since 1977, and he quite literally saved my son from certain death at Voldemort’s hands. While you both know I am innocent, the gesture must be observed.”

“What if someone planted something in your house to make you look guilty?” Ron points out. Severus approves; excellent strategic chess player.

“If they did, it would most likely be a recent enough act to have a magical signature attached,” Narcissa replies. “And that would be exceptionally useful.”

“You still can’t kill whoever tried to kill Severus,” Alice tells Narcissa. “Though I do understand your desire to do so. Whoever this is, they must go on trial. This incident is too public, and far too personal to many of us in the wizarding world, to simply toss a body aside. This must go to trial.”

“Don’t care, just want them dead,” Harry mutters. “By wand or by trial, just as long as they are dead, dead, dead.”


“You didn’t have to counter this potion for nearly a solid week trying to keep him alive, Ron,” Harry retorts. “Dead. I want them fucking dead. I will happily sit through a trial if dead is the result!”

“Calm down, y’bloody ratel,” Jade says, smiling. Harry rolls his eyes.

“Trial.” Narcissa looks irritated, but she nods. “I reserve the right to maim the perpetrator.”

“Blind eyes,” Ron and Alice both say. “And none of you heard that,” Alice adds.

“Deaf,” Sirius assures them.

“Distracted,” Remus says, which is true—he is busy copying down the potion so that there is a third copy. “For the evidence stored within the Ministry,” he says, handing it over. “If something goes sour and the copies we have are destroyed, we still have record of the potion’s composition and brewing instructions. By the way, Severus, this is so beyond university level that it’s terrifying.”

“I know. That’s why I destroyed the original copy.”

“No, I mean—this is well beyond wizarding university level. You were eighteen,” Remus emphasizes. “I’m not fond of its purpose, but the construction is fucking amazing.”

“I was always good at crafting things that were only capable of terrible things,” Severus says.

Jade nudges him hard in the ribs. “Maybe then, but there’s naught saying it has t’be tha’ way now, is there? Daft brother.”

“You’re going to pay for that,” Severus warns her.

“Yeah? How?” Jade asks, grinning.

“Pillow,” Severus announces, and falls asleep in a heavy slump against Jade’s side.
He wakes up to Jade crying again, which is alarming enough that consciousness returns quickly. He opens his eyes to realize he’s lying down on the sofa. Harry and Jade are standing, and Harry is doing his best to comfort Severus’s sister.

“He’s fine, Jade.”

“He almos’ wasn’t!” Jade retorts in a choked voice.

“But he is. He is fine. Probably not happy at the moment,” Harry adds, smiling, “but he’s all right, Jade.”

“Yeah.” Jade stands back and wipes at her nose. “Remind m’how I got into this mess o’ caring f’you idiots, again?”

“Well, let’s see. I passed you on the street, and you tried flirting with me by offering me a cigarette.” Harry grins. “I asked you if you were out of your bloody mind, and you got all offended, thinking I was bothered by the cigarettes. Then I told you I was only fourteen, and you almost swallowed the one you were smoking.”

Jade sniffs and tries drying her face with her sleeve. “Thought it was so funny, you did. Then you told me I had t’buy you dinner for makin’ tha’ kinda blunder, or you’d ne’er stop w’th jokes about me tryin’ t’date a tyke.”


“I thought it was Slytherindest Gryffindor to flap and slough,” Harry replies, smiling.

“Whichever.” Severus pushes himself up into a seated position, which isn’t as difficult as it would have been earlier in the day. “What bloody time is it?”

“Getting on towards evening meal, which is in about an hour.” Harry sighs, but he’s smiling. “You want to try for it, don’t you?”

“I have no appetite whatsoever, but I think it would be politic,” Severus says, and enjoys the ratel-fueled glare Harry levels at him. “A bargain—if I can make it through a bath without falling asleep in the stupid tub, then I’m going. If otherwise? I will gladly stay here.”

“Deal.”

Walking into the lavatory with the cane is easy enough. The idea of staying upright long enough to disrobe without falling over is daunting. Jade and Harry stay to help him, which just sets him off on a verbal rant about modesty, wanting them out, he is fine, just please, leave!

“You’re m’ brother, daft git,” Jade says, rolling her eyes. “Not interested in any o’your goods, for multiple reasons.”

Harry eyes him. “Virtue already so very compromised. Besides, we live in the same fucking house, Severus, and this kind of assistance is probably going to be necessary for another day or two unless you want to just live in pyjamas for the duration.”

He gives up. He’s the one who let his guard slip so much that he was caught out by a fairly amateurish poisoning attempt but for the substance involved.

Instead, once he’s hiding in hot water up to his ears—bless this barmy castle’s heating charms—Severus asks them to fill him in on the last week. Aside from his vastly unwanted trip down memory
lane, there isn’t much. Jade has gossip rather than teaching reports, though that is just as useful. Harry ignores his own advice and falls asleep while propped up against the bathroom wall.

“That man can go an’ sleep anywhere,” Jade whispers. “Needed it, though. Been awake for days, he has.”

“He was asleep when I awoke,” Severus says, curious.

“That weren’t sleep, tha’s what’s called bein’ unconscious,” Jade returns, rolling her eyes. “Though, Harry did say t’tell you tha’ th’ Restorative Draught’s got a limit o’ fifteen doses in twenty-four hours before y’regret it.”

“Good to know.” He’d topped out at thirteen without daring to push further, not wanting to be exhausted, ill, and possibly dwelling near a commode for an unforeseen amount of time. “What were the side-effects?”

“Hypermania and vomiting,” Harry says without bothering to open his eyes. “Really not the best combination.”

Getting dressed leaves him so winded that Severus is genuinely tempted to not go through with the idea. He was right about an evening appearance being politic, though. He lets Jade pull the cork of another Restorative Draught and holds the phial in his hands. “Fifteen, hmm?”

“You’re nowhere near that point.” Harry glances at the two he’s holding and then downs them both at the same time.

“Please stop emulating my bad habits!”

Harry snorts. “I’ve yet to be poisoned by tea, Headmaster.”

Severus finally stands up, relieved when he feels stable on his feet, if not particularly healthy. “Someone please do something about the color of this walking stick that is not immediately mindful of Lucius Malfoy.”

“Well, tha’ rules out color coordination,” Jade complains. “Black’s in!”

“I’ve got it.” Harry pulls out his wand and taps the walking stick until it turns to an exceptionally dark wood-stained green that could pass for black in terrible lighting, but isn’t. “I’ll leave off the silver. You’re supposed to be impartial.”

“I find it genuinely horrible that I’m doing a better job of succeeding in impartiality than Albus Dumbledore.”

He has to stop twice on the way to the Great Hall to convince trembling muscles that he is not still actively dying. The rest of the walk passes in silence, which is comforting in regards to Jade and Harry, but rather disturbing in regards to the rest of the castle. Hogwarts seems exceptionally silent this evening.

It’s not until they arrive at the Great Hall that he realizes why. Every student, every teacher, every damned ghost is gathered and waiting. When Minerva lets out a piercing whistle and directs their attention to the entryway, the entire room breaks out into applause and—and cheering.

“I’m hallucinating,” Severus says under his breath.

“Severus, you cranky shite: they like you,” Harry replies quietly. “We all do, idiot.”
“Our Headmaster is a badass!” Cadwallader shouts.

Severus shakes his head. “Please. This is actually not the first time I’ve been poisoned!”

“Oh? And what is the count up to now?” Narcissa asks from the faculty table. “I have still not forgiven you for the Hollyberry Potion, Severus Prince!”

“Eighteen,” Severus says, after thinking about it. “Which does include the ones that were my own fault, so you can’t hold that one against me twice, Narcissa.” She does not look impressed with his logic, but she also had not been impressed by the accidental creation of a toxin that was the wizarding equivalent of mustard gas.

“Thank you for that…unexpected, interesting welcome.” Severus glances at the students and treats them to one of his more traditional impassive looks. “You lot do realize you’re all blocking the way, yes?”

The students laugh and clear the center aisle that separates the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables. Severus can’t make the walk at his preferred pace, but doesn’t mind. He’s more concerned with not letting on that he’s having to rely that much more on the blasted cane.

Minerva does not help things. Instead of getting to sit down, he’s being hugged by a crying witch. He has quite honestly given up on trying to understand what’s going on.

“We were so worried for you,” Minerva whispers in his ear. “And we are all so very glad that you’re still with us, Headmaster.”

Severus takes another brief look around. “I don’t expect applause for mere survival, Minerva.”

“Survival.” Minerva scoffs and shakes her head. “It isn’t about that, you daft man. You nearly died in a way that was far more noticeable than last year’s battle. When that happened, these students realized they might very well lose their Headmaster…which is when they realized exactly how much they care for him.

“You are theirs, Severus Prince.” Minerva grips his arm with a warm smile on her face. “They’ve claimed you, all of them. Not just Slytherin, but every House. This is Hogwarts united.”
Severus escapes from his minders early the next morning when they’re still sleeping. Jade is snuggled up in his armchair in an impossible position that looks more like cramped nesting than sleeping, while Harry is lying in an ungainly sprawl on the sofa. Given the way that neither of them stir at any sound Severus makes in the living area, he suspects they’re both still exhausted.

He isn’t feeling fully recovered—not by a long shot—but today is a lot better than yesterday when it comes to getting dressed, grabbing the stupid cane, and going outside without bothering to put on shoes. The cool stone of the castle giving way to the cold wet grass is as invigorating as caffeine… and he can feel the magic of the castle and grounds right against his skin.

The cemetery is like an early-morning beacon, and he finds himself sitting there again, not minding the spring chill. The bench is closest to the place the cemetery began, which is Albus Dumbledore’s tomb.

“I’m still angry with you,” Severus tells the white marble crypt. “It’s been nearly two years, and I’m still angry. I suppose that means I won’t cease feeling that way at any point in the immediate future, but you’re well aware of the fact that I am capable of holding grudges to a ridiculous extent. You manipulated me, so I manipulated you in return. Sometimes I have no idea if we were both aware of it and politely pretended ignorance, or if we both thought each other to be that clever.”

The breath he tries to draw in comes out as a cough. Poppy will kill him if he picks up a virus after being poisoned, but he suspects this is more in line with being abed too long. “I’ve spent a long time wondering what kind of person I would be without Voldemort, or without your blasted meddling… and I no longer want to find out. I don’t mind who that person is anymore, which is among any number of things I never thought I’d say.

“You would like Miss Lovegood’s nargles. You probably find it hilarious that I am likely going to end up with a Ravenclaw for a sister-in-law, if Harry is correct as to Miss Lovegood’s tenacity. He probably is—he is right about quite a lot of things.”

Severus blinks a few times, refusing to weep over this man. The call of the Hallows brought closure, in a sense, though he’s still amused that it gave Minerva the opportunity to slap Albus Dumbledore. “Harry was right about me, too. Even when I refused to be aware of it. Stubborn bloody Gryffindors who were bloody Sorted into the wrong damned House.

“I miss your inane lemon sherbets, but I still wouldn’t accept one if you offered.” Severus pauses, letting the feel of Hogwarts’ magic tell him the identity of the person he can hear approaching through the grass. “Good morning, Alice.”

“Good morning, Severus. I wouldn’t accept one of those lemon sherbets, either. Frank was always too bloody cheerful afterwards. I can be cheerful enough on my own.”

Severus pats the bench. “Sit, please. Either you’re following me around in some misguided notion of guard duty, or you have other reasons.”

“I was only coming out to say good morning to Frank. I do that every time I’m at Hogwarts, which isn’t as much as I’d like.” Alice sits down next to him, the tufts of her grey-blended brown hair sticking up in an artful mess. “Besides, do I need concern myself with bodyguards?”

Severus pulls back his sleeve just far enough to reveal the handle to his wand. “Please, absolutely
not. I will hex them and toss them outside the castle gates.”

Alice smiles. “Thought you would. It’s why I didn’t bother except for when—when you wouldn’t have been capable of it yourself.”

Severus hates to say the words. It’s too similar to the sensation of admitting weakness, but at this point it’s required. “Thank you, then.”

“You’re welcome. Not like Harry would have let that happen, anyway. I didn’t actually bother with a security detail until everyone was all but falling down on their feet.” Alice leans back and sighs a little as sunlight leeches its way through the ground fog to start illuminating tombs and headstones. “I do have news. It narrows things down, but it also opens up an avenue of suspicion I’d greatly prefer to avoid.”

Severus tightens his grip on the cane. “Student access to the tea?”

“Yes.” Alice huffs out a breath. “Anyone in Hogwarts who knows how to tickle that pear in the portrait guarding the kitchens had access. All the house-elves keep faculty teas in a cupboard down there. Labeled by name, no less…though in Minerva’s case it’s labeled by name, time of day, and by average of how many students she’s glared at throughout a meal.”

“Dammit. That is not a direction I want this to go. Too many of these children have lost enough.”

“I know. It’s why I’m speaking to you, first. If a student was involved, how would they get a lethal poison past the castle wards?” Alice asks.

Severus frowns. “It isn’t about a person or an object, it’s about their intent. It’s how Peter Pettigrew could hide in his Animagus form on Hogwarts ground through the ownership of multiple Weasleys. He intended no mischief, only to hide, so the castle wards didn’t see him as a threat.”

“Oh, that’s almost worse.” Alice puts her hands over her face and groans. “If some jackass told their darling that they were only dosing their Headmaster’s tea with something they believed was a prank, not a poison…”

“Exactly. Are you certain we can’t just kill whoever did this?” Severus hears the cane creak beneath his hands and loosens his grip. “Involving a student in what could have been murder is…I do not find it very forgivable, Alice, and it has nothing to do with my being the victim.”

“I didn’t think it for a moment.” Alice crosses her arms. “The morning after the battle, when Voldemort and his bastard Death Eaters came out of the woods. People looked to you. You smiled at us like Voldemort was going to be the one regretting what happened for daring to march on the school, and Merlin, we believed it. I know exactly why Hogwarts loves you, Severus.”

Severus bites back a smile. “You know, I did not actually have a plan aside from telling that man to go fuck himself.”

Alice laughs. “Oh, believe me, at the time? That was definitely plan enough!” She dashes at her eyes. “Now, shall I help you get up before a ratel and a scary hummingbird girl come hunting you down, or can you manage it on your own?”


“You’re welcome. Please join me in hoping that our tea poisoner is not a student. My job is depressing enough, and I don’t want underage attempted murder to be Ron’s first case.”
Severus grits his teeth as she helps him to stand. “It won’t be. Intent. Ron will be arresting an adult; our potential student may just need to testify.”

* * * *

The weekend gives him enough recovery time that he can discard the stupid cane in time for his sixth-year Potions class on Monday. The class goes well, though all nine students in that year all seem to be paying far more attention to his words than normal.

“If those are the results I get in N.E.W.T. Potions, I’ll poison myself every bloody week,” Severus says to Harry when the latter arrives for third-year’s split Gryffindor-Slytherin class.

Harry glares at him. “I can and will beat you to death with this outdated and useless textbook. Don’t think I won’t. I don’t care if you’re my boss. I will beat you to death with a book.”

“What? And let all your hard work at countering the last poison go to waste?”

“Please.” Harry rolls his eyes. “If I could save you from Bottled Dementor, it can’t be hard to kick the life back into someone who’s been beaten to death with a book.”

“You guys are weird,” Miss Ewhurt announces, the first to turn up for class.

“If you think there is a teacher in this school who is not odd in some form or another, you’ve definitely not been paying attention.” Harry glances at his watch. “Oi, go yell out into the corridor for the others to get a move on, will you? You’re supposed to be brewing something that takes the full hour. Literally.”

“Neat!” Ewhurt declares, and skips out of the classroom to go start shouting up the rest of her classmates.

“A nice change from January,” Severus observes, collecting what little he’d brought with him.

“Considering the fact that I’ve made it a fucking goal to expand your average N.E.W.T. class size to at least twenty per year? Yes, it is.”

Severus lets the revolving stairs take him up and then tries not to slump against the wall when he’s dropped in front of the doors. Still tired. Bollocks. At least the rest of his day just requires meals—he is not turning up in the Great Hall for lunch—and paperwork.

“Still alive?” Dumbledore’s portrait asks him cheerfully when he walks into his office.

“Still annoying?” Severus counters, saluting the portrait with two fingers. Dumbledore only beams at him, so they do, at least, still understand one another.

Then he discovers that Minerva has defeated most of the hated pile. He has only correspondence to sign off on after reading what she’s written, and N.E.W.T. year essays to grade.

He starts with the essays from his sixth- and seventh-years. It’s only a torment when the writers are eleven-year-olds who don’t know how to open a book.

He’s cleared through the essay pile, an easy task when he only has seventeen students, total, and is working on verifying Minerva’s correspondence when there is a gentle tap at his door. “Come in,”
Severus says, very much aware of what a young one’s hesitant knocking sounds like.

The door creaks open and shuts again, but he doesn’t look up until he’s done reading through Minerva’s delightfully witty rebuttal to the Board of Governors that no, they don’t get to choose the Headmaster when the current one is still alive. Bloody Scrimgeour. That man is just as irritating as his dead uncle.

“Sir?”

Severus puts down his quill and looks up, spying the blonde hair and brown eyes of one of his second-years, wearing the neutral black tie of one who went into the new dormitories. “Miss Bainbridge. How can I help you?”

Tabitha Bainbridge is wringing her hands together so much that her knuckles are showing bone-white. “It’s… it’s… he lied to me!” she shouts, and then bursts into tears.

Severus rounds the desk more slowly than usual, which helps keep him from startling her. “Miss Bainbridge, if anyone has harmed you in any way—”

“No!” She sniffs and stares up at him with tears pooling in her eyes before they run down her face. Up close, she looks gaunt from lack of food and sleep. “But you were hurt, and it wasn’t supposed to be like that! He promised!”

Severus bites back a lot of inappropriate language and reaches for her hand. “Miss Bainbridge, if anyone has harmed you in any way—”

“Are you gonna kill him if I do?” she asks, still sniffing.

He sighs with an air of frustration. “I’m not allowed to. Being an adult is often exceptionally unfair.”

Bainbridge bites her lip. “My—my uncle was a Death Eater. You, uh, killed him.”

“Uncle?”

“Corban Yaxley,” she supplies.

Severus leans back. “Yes, actually, but to be fair, he was trying to kill me first.”

“And he was a—one of his,” Bainbridge whispers. “Mum says they were all stupid, and we weren’t to be having anything to do with that.”

“Then truly, your mother is wiser than so many others,” Severus replies. “Your father was Corban’s brother?”
Bainbridge shakes her head, wringing her hands again. “Bainbridge is my Dad’s name. William Bainbridge, Headmaster. Mum’s name before she married him was Deanna Yaxley.”

Severus feels like either hexing something to bits, or possibly banging his head against the closest wall. “Lincoln Yaxley.”

Bainbridge nods, biting her lip again before her next words tumble out in a rush. “He said we weren’t trying to hurt you! He said he was just still mad about Uncle Corban, that it was just gonna be a prank to give you a lesson! Uncle Lincoln said the liquid he gave me was just like some of the stuff Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes sells, only I couldn’t give it to anyone but you or it would spoil the surprise!”

“I’m very glad you kept to those instructions—no, I do mean that. I am,” Severus insists, when Bainbridge’s eyes start leaking tears once more. “I knew exactly what had been done, and what was being fought against. If you’d given that to anyone else, they would really be dead, and I am very upset with your uncle for using you that way.”

“But you’re still not gonna kill him?” Bainbridge wipes her eyes. “I mean, everyone says you can have an awful temper, and you’ve killed plenty of people, but…he’s never done anything bad before this! I swear!”

*That, I highly doubt*, Severus thinks, but doesn’t let a hint of that show on his face. “No. As I said, I’m not allowed to. It is currently my job to not kill people.”

“Okay. I just—I didn’t want that to happen.”

“But you were not worried about being punished?” Severus asks.

“No,” Bainbridge says, dropping her gaze to the floor. “I sort of figured that was a given, sir.”

Severus releases a near-silent breath and then places two of his fingers beneath her chin, lifting her head. “Miss Bainbridge. You have just displayed a stunning amount of bravery. I refuse to punish someone for doing the right thing.”

It takes a Calming Draught for Miss Bainbridge to be capable of repeating what was done when Alice and Ron arrive in his office. Miss Bainbridge tells them that she already knew the pear trick because of a Hufflepuff third-year who was worried she wasn’t eating enough last year, and how she crept downstairs and poured her uncle’s gifted flask of clear fluid into the entire tea tin, as instructed.

Severus calls for Rolanda and Aurora both to escort Miss Bainbridge back to her dormitory, with strict warning that they cannot reveal the reason behind the girl’s visit to his office, but to impress upon Miss Bainbridge the need for silence until they know her uncle is detained. Alice, Ron, and Severus would all prefer that a Pensieved testimony from the Aurors be acceptable, but even an enlightened, re-staffed Wizengamot may want to hear the words from Miss Bainbridge herself. If that’s the case, Severus wants her involvement to stay out of the press for as long as possible. Harry might not have cared about the *Daily Prophet’s* slandering of his character for a solid year, but Miss Bainbridge is younger and more vulnerable than Harry ever allowed himself to be. One does not become a bloody ratel Animagus by being vulnerable.
The other difficulty lies in arresting Lincoln Yaxley. Aurors sent out to his last known address find an empty home.

“Lincoln Yaxley isn’t on the list of known Death Eaters. Not for either war.” Alice looks frustrated. “Unless there is a reason he didn’t make the lists?”

“There were several supporters of Voldemort during the first war that kept their allegiance quiet, refusing to take the Dark Mark, so that they could continue to be useful in their societal positions or places of employ. Lincoln might well have been one of those who chose to do so this year, and with Corban dead…”

“There would be no one to tell us any different, not if he’s managed to keep a tight lid on things.” Ron stuffs his hands into his pockets. “Think we’ll catch him, Professor?”

“I would immediately say yes, but Corban was the stupid one, hence why he’s dead.”

“Right. Well, we do have the flask. It was still in the girl’s school trunk,” Alice says.

“A flask.” Severus lifts his head and glances at the portraits. “Find Harry. Tell him to come here.” Half of the frames empty. “Alice, where is that flask now?”

Ten minutes later, Harry turns up. “Oh, please let this be good. I just abandoned brewing Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws—” He halts when he sees Alice and Ron. “Okay, yes, definitely worthwhile, and yes, William is watching over our dangerous hooligans.”

Severus smiles. “I am well aware of the fact that you wouldn’t leave a class unattended. I need you to perform an essence location spell on that.” He tilts his head at the flask Alice is holding, though it’s been wrapped in clear cellophane before being formally submitted as evidence at the Ministry.

“You could have done that—no, wizarding law.” Harry frowns. “Can’t track down your own bloody murderer. Hold on.” He pulls out his wand and rests it over the wrapped flask. “There are no Aurors that could be doing this?”

“Time might be of the essence,” Alice says.

“And we’re not that organized yet,” Ron adds, watching as Harry closes his eyes. “The Ministry casualties were so bad, the records so bugged, that we’re not sure who even has that kind of training.”

“Percy knows how. Not sure I’d want him anywhere near the M.L.E., though,” Harry murmurs, his lips moving silently as he performs the spell. “No, that would be Miss Bainbridge—I’ll kill this bastard myself for using one of my kids. The other essence, let’s see…oh, he’s not local. In fact—hold on.” Harry twitches the end of his wand again, then again, then again. “Tracking him along stages—Port Key, not a straight path. There; I’ve got the bastard.”

Ron already has a Muggle pen and a notepad out. “Where?”

“Hold on, still looking for landmarks. Road signs, building names, something bloody useful!”

Alice leans in close to Severus. “Is he…is he live-tracking Yaxley right now?”

“Yes.”

“That’s amazing,” she whispers.
“He could perform the basic version of that spell as a third-year,” Severus replies. “No, the M.L.E. can’t bloody have him.” She grins at his declaration but holds up her hands in a peaceful gesture.

“Oh, why is it always bloody French? I hate that language.” Harry frowns, his eyes still closed. “Right now, he’s in Arlon, Belgium, but I don’t know for how long.”

“Arlon is bigger than a village, Harry,” Ron complains. “I’d need something more specific.”

“Yeah, yeah, I—no, wait. Finally, a damned sign. He’s in Gaspar Park, behind the museum. He’s looking for another Port Key, but from what I can hear, he’s not finding it.”

“Floo.” Alice strides over to the fireplace without waiting for Severus’s permission.

“Not fast enough,” Ron pulls his wand and casts a Patronus Charm, revealing a corporeal demiguise. “Go find Casey Gulliver, tell her the bastard’s in Arlon, Belgium, Gaspar Park, behind a museum.”

The demiguise turns invisible instead of misting off through a wall like a typical Patronus. “That has to be the first time I’ve seen that particular type of Patronus,” Severus observes.

“Everyone thinks it’s ruddy funny, but if my Patronus doesn’t want to be seen, then it’s not,” Ron says, scowling. “The whole point of spying or investigating is to not be noticed!”

Severus, recalling what Harry stated about Ron Weasley’s long-term prophetic abilities, decides he is, for once, not going to comment.

“I have another team dispatched,” Alice announces. “Only two that we can spare outside of Gulliver.”

“That is a pathetic number of available Aurors.” Severus gives Alice a side-long glance. “You know, I have a number of seventh-years who fought in the Battle of Hogwarts.”

“I’m aware,” Alice says, but he can tell she’s already trying not to smile. “And?”

“And, if you or Mister Weasley were to, oh, stage a very, very quiet recruitment drive, I will turn a blind eye to such blatant attempts at favoritism and headhunting.”

Harry lowers his wand and opens his eyes. “Well, it took all three of them tackling the bastard to the ground, but they have him.”

Alice sighs and then smiles. “Excellent. Another Death Eater to put on trial and then bury in Azkaban.”

“Harry, if I’m sitting on the Wizengamot, do I have to be present when the case involves me personally?” Severus asks.

“No; conflict of interest. You can witness from the floor, but you don’t get to vote to put your own attempted murderer in prison.” Harry grins. “I’m voting for it, though.”

“Bloody ratel.” Severus leans back against his desk. “Then, unless the Wizengamot demands Miss Bainbridge’s testimony, I will happily ignore the entire proceedings.”

* * * * *
Miss Bainbridge is not required to testify when more intelligent heads in the Wizengamot prevail, declaring that Auror testimony is acceptable. Harry, Griselda, Remus, and Narcissa return to Hogwarts the evening after the trial and tell Severus that Lincoln Yaxley put up an entirely undignified blend of shouted innocence, whining, pleading, and castigation.

“Worse than Pettigrew?” Severus asks Harry.

“Pettigrew was just pathetic. This was actually kind of entertaining,” Harry replies.

Yaxley is found guilty and shipped off to Azkaban. Miss Bainbridge is upset, but at least the result is prison, not execution.

If only all of Severus’s problems were so easily dealt with by others. The rest, he has to see to himself.

*          *          *          *

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has its year-end review with the Board of Governors on the twenty-ninth of May, the last Saturday of the month. It’s the first time Severus has dealt with the group since late spring of 1996. He isn’t sure what to expect; with only two exceptions, the school governing board has been entirely rebuilt from the ground up.

Severus strides into the vast meeting hall in the Ministry of Magic, flanked by Minerva McGonagall to his right and Sirius Black to his left. Following them in something very much like an arrow formation is every single permanent faculty member of Hogwarts: Filius Flitwick, Remus Lupin, Aurora Sinistra, Griselda Marchbanks, Bathsheda Babbling, Pomona Sprout, Sybill Trelawney, Rolanda Hooch, Viking Korkohen, Harry Potter, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank, Narcissa Black, William Weasley, Augusta Longbottom, and Julius Westenberg. Argus Filch is with them, Mrs. Norris riding on his shoulders; Rubeus Hagrid is a bit slower to follow, since he has to duck beneath every single doorway they pass through. Severus introduces the staff in no particular order of importance beyond Minerva’s role as Deputy Headmaster, leaving the strangers on the board to discern on their own who is important and who is not.

If they do not realize that every single person standing with Severus is important, then they are utter fools. However, now that the depth of Draco Malfoy’s favor has become clear, Severus doesn’t think that will be much of a concern.

Gilead Scrimgeour, Rufus Scrimgeour’s nephew, is the most annoying, and the one that had sent the rather pre-emptive letter about Hogwarts needing to replace its dead Headmaster. Severus did not appreciate being named a corpse while he was still breathing.

The others are far more interesting. Chelsea Marchbanks is Griselda’s youngest niece. Susan Bones, the only member of her ancient House to survive both wars, is sitting proud at the table with her chin lifted high, displaying every bit of the steel and grace her aunt held while serving the Wizengamot. At age twenty-five, Francis Fortescue is the youngest son of lost Florean Fortescue, and is a scholar like his father before him. Arachnea Figg is the wizarding sibling of Arabella Figg, Albus’s Squib spy who lost her life while alerting the Order to the Dursley family’s impending danger.

Sitting next to Arachnea is Draco Malfoy, who looks entirely too pleased with himself for having retained his father’s seat on the board. Severus can’t blame him for the expression. Draco has, as
Sirius Black put it the previous summer, “stacked the fucking deck.”

Gilead still holds his place as table head, and calls the meeting to order without offering any of Hogwarts’ staff seating. It’s a pathetic slight, but Severus has been playing this game for much longer than Gilead. Everyone knew in advance of the possible insults offered, knowledge shared by Sirius, Severus, or Narcissa during the last week.

Severus doesn’t want to sit down. He wants to loom over this scrawny fool and terrify the hell out of him until he’s satisfied that Gilead Scrimgeour will stop interfering with his school.

“Our first order of business would be to discuss the new placement of a Headmaster of Hogwarts, as the current one is leaving his post at the end of the year,” Scrimgeour says.

Severus widens his eyes, affecting surprise. “I am? That’s odd. I hadn’t announced any such intention.”

Scrimgeour makes a show of adjusting his spectacles. “Yes, well, it is for the best, I should think.”

“Why.”

Scrimgeour blinks a few times. “I should think the post better suited to one who is…”

“What, exactly?” Sirius asks, smiling at the man the same way a scenthound does when it’s finally found a rabbit.

“We’d very much like some details as to what a proper Headmaster should be,” Harry says cheerfully.

“Currently we have one who is a war hero, willing to risk his life for decades in service to the wizarding world under the Order of the Phoenix.” Minerva peers over her glasses at Scrimgeour. “Unless you somehow have let your subscription to the *Daily Prophet* lapse? I imagine that’s the only way you would not know.”

“Seventeenth year teaching N.E.W.T. level Potions, classes that have seen some of the most successful graduates of the last twenty years,” Filius adds. “At least two students per year go to university with that as a basis for their field of study. Old Horace Slughorn only managed to convince one student every two years.”

“A full year of teaching *Defence Against the Dark Arts* right under Voldemort’s nose, when He-Who-Is-Thankfully-Dead wanted it to be a mere Dark Arts class,” Griselda says.

Trelawney gives Scrimgeour a squinty-eyed frown. “Someone more far-sighted than you, to be quite certain.”

Wilhelmina smiles at Scrimgeour. “A man who maintained unity in Hogwarts for two years—one the worst sort, and one the best sort.”

“One who did the job of Headmaster and protected our children, even when others, myself included, believed he was the enemy,” Aurora says.

Augusta gives her rejuvenated buzzard hat a swift pat before glaring at Scrimgeour, who is starting to visibly wilt. “Now. You were saying something about appropriate credentials, I think?”

“Oh, he was, and I do not think he warned his fellow governors as to what the first order of business was going to be today.” Narcissa graces Scrimgeour with an icy smile. “How terribly rude of him.”
“Since he brought it up,” Francis says, giving Gilead a side-long glance, “did you have any intentions of retiring at end of term, Headmaster Prince?”

“Not a chance in hell,” Severus replies, privately amused by the faces Chelsea, Gilead, Susan, and Francis make in response to that declaration. “Why would I wish to retire when Hogwarts is currently in the middle of proving centuries of belief absolutely, utterly wrong?”

Arachnea locks eyes with him at once. “You saw results greater than what you told me?”

“Far greater. Argus?” Severus defers to the older man, who steps forward with his permanent scowl firmly in place. Mrs. Norris jumps to the floor, where she promptly transforms back into Alberta Norris Filch.


“Thank ye, young Lord Malfoy,” Alberta replies. “Hat always did say I would’ae been great in that House. It’s almost too bad I was schooled at home.”

“I would very much like to know what’s going on,” Susan Bones says, but she looks utterly entranced. Chelsea seems to have been aware of the situation already. Gilead is the only one on the board that is scowling, aware that his control of the meeting is now utterly gone.

“At the conclusion of the last school term, I told everyone in Hogwarts that we needed to begin teaching Squibs,” Severus says, standing with his hands laced behind his back, his face impassive. “The faculty discussed and approved the idea, though we knew the idea would not be approved of by the Board of Governors if we waited until for this illustrious body to reform. In July, letters went out to eleven known Squib children, informing them of their acceptance into Hogwarts. Individual teachers then approached each family to confirm that yes, the letters were legitimate; not a mix-up, not a cruel prank. Using funds donated from charitable sources, each of those Squibs was taken to Ollivander’s. Originally, the idea was that, since we were experimenting with an additional aspect of wizarding education, we would keep these children’s Squib status a secret from others. Wands were required so that they fit in with their peers, though they would never take classes where wands were necessary.”

“Our very first amazing discovery is that each Squib child was not assigned a wand, as we feared Ollivander would need to do.” Minerva smiles with pride. “Eleven wands chose eleven Squib children—eleven wands lit up in the hands they were destined to go to. If you don’t believe us, Garrick Ollivander will be happy to confirm it for you.”

“No one has allowed a Squib to be chosen by a wand in untold centuries, to the point where even Ollivander doesn’t have record of it,” Remus says. “This was our first clue that perhaps we have been going about the treatment of Squibs the wrong way entirely.”

“The original idea, helpfully laid out by Madam Pince, was that these Squib children would be educated in classes that require no wands—and that includes a great deal of subjects in Hogwarts, not merely one or two. Argus and Alberta Filch were going to teach those eleven children in an individual class set aside only for them, meant to instruct Squibs on the best ways to work and thrive in a world where they could feel and see magic, but not use it.”

Minerva glances at Severus; he nods for her to proceed. “But the results—the results! We no longer have eleven Squibs in Hogwarts, ladies and gentlemen. We have eleven new witches and wizards who, after a year’s study in Hogwarts, can actively use magic.”

“What we discovered,” Severus says, enjoying the way Gilead is starting to turn purple, “is that there
is actually no such thing as a Squib. Merely children born to wizarding parents who show no signs of magic at all, and without those signs, the Hogwarts registry doesn’t record their names for eventual schooling in Hogwarts. The problem is not in lack of ability for a Squib, but in a lack of the opportunity to develop their skills in the first place.”

“Next year, these ‘Squibs’ will be in regular magical classes, learning alongside their peers in a way that no one ever thought possible,” Harry says. “And damn, are some of them good at potions. They were worried they’d never be able to advance beyond the first two years of Potions, but now I think some of them have the talent, and the gift, to make it to N.E.W.T. level.”

“Madam Figg.” Severus inclines his head at Arachnea. “Your sister was able to raise half-Kneazles for sale in Diagon Alley. If she had truly been without magic, that venture would never have succeeded. Argus Filch would never have been able to live and work in Hogwarts. Argus?”

Argus juts out his chin before he draws forth the wand he was granted only months ago from Ollivander’s hands. “Now, ain’t so good at this yet. I’m an old man tryin’ to learn new tricks.” He points the dark brown wand at the quill in front of Susan Bones. “*Wingardium Leviosa*.”

Arachnea all but squeals with joy when the feather rises into the air. It is a bouncy, hesitant lift, but still a successful spell. “Arabella would be so, so happy. She would have loved this revelation, Headmaster.”

“She would have been an absolutely brilliant student,” Severus says to her. “And we are all sorry for your loss.”

Arachnea nods. “Thank you for your kind words.”

“I’m pulling nobility rank,” Susan Bones announces, surprising them all. “Gilead, shut the hell up.” Gilead, in the middle of opening his mouth, slams it shut and nearly cracks his teeth. “I am the last of the Ancient House of Bones. I see a success where so many others would see only a failing at maintaining outdated traditions which serve no purpose at all. Headmaster Prince, this year has seen several proven ventures under your guidance. Please tell me what else you wish to institute at Hogwarts, as I know you do not come in with all hands just to recount the year.”

“I want to teach these dunderheads real bloody Latin!” Severus snaps out. “We’re crippling half of our student body by not bothering to teach them the language they use magic in, and I’ve seen proof via my own experiences that mastery of the language improves a student’s ability to use non-verbal and even wandless magic.”

“A Latin teacher is not the flouting of tradition I quite expected,” Francis says with a wry smile. “In fact, I think that is an excellent idea.”

“What’s the catch, Severus?” Draco asks, grinning like a fiend.

“We have students from other countries in Hogwarts. I want them to be allowed to use the language from their own magical heritage, not be forced to learn another unless they wish to do so,” Severus replies.

“What about testing?” Chelsea asks, but she’s looking at her aunt.

“Gaining translators for O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams for those students who do their spellwork in non-Latin languages would not be a hardship. It’s just never been properly suggested before,” Griselda answers, looking pleased. “It’s high time we abandoned useless traditions and embraced the world we live in now, not the world we lived in five hundred years ago.”
“Squib students,” Gilead finally mutters. “Real magic. You’re being serious?”

“I,” Minerva draws herself up haughtily, “have an eleven-year-old Squib student who has actively begun to do practical Transfigurations, not merely learning Transfiguration theory. There are no Squibs, Gilead. I will readily admit that I doubted Severus and Madam Pince at first…but they were right. Squibs are wizarding children with just as much a right to education as a child with active magic. Even if we do gain Squibs that never learn how to use a wand at all, they deserve to be taught alongside their peers. However, I am firm in my belief that no Squib is truly non-magical, simply…”

“Enervated,” William supplies.

“That, yes,” Minerva agrees. “We have a great deal to make up for by abandoning our children, and I won’t stand by and see it happen any longer.”

“But…” Gilead gestures helplessly. “Squibs!”

“For their protection, we are keeping their original magical status and identities secret,” Severus tells the man. “When, in six years, we have graduated our first successful batch of wizards and witches who formerly bore the title Squib…then we’ll make sure that everyone knows.”

“You are very, very different than dealing with Albus,” Arachnea notes, smiling.

“Albus preferred not to rock the boat overly much.” Severus smiles in a way that is probably not very pleasant at all. “I do not actually care if the boat bloody well capsizes. I’m more concerned with educating these children.”

“Thought you hated kids,” Susan Bones says, but she seems amused.

“No, I hate stupidity, and thus am too impatient to teach the young ones, so I don’t,” Severus replies. “But if you’d learned nothing from me, you wouldn’t have passed both your O.W.L.s and your N.E.W.T.s with an E in Potions, Susan.”

“I’m satisfied,” Arachnea pronounces. “The school of Hogwarts may continue on this course. The Board of Governors will monitor, as is our role, and only step in if it seems things are going awry.”

“Seconded,” Draco says, smiling as he glances at his mother. Narcissa inclines her head at her son.

“Absolutely. I love these ideas,” Chelsea agrees. “There are not Squibs—oh, my eight-year-old cousin is going to go to Hogwarts, Aunt Griselda! I won’t tell her yet, but she gets to go! I’m so bloody excited!”

Susan Bones nods. “I am satisfied.” She turns and glares at Scrimgeour. “Well?”

“I’m already outvoted, so it’s not as if it matters,” Scrimgeour retorts sourly. “Fine, fine.”

“I’m in agreement.” Francis rests his chin on his hand. “Last question, then. Are you going to give the Ministry back its Time-Turner?”

Severus gives the man a look of polite incomprehension. “What Time-Turner?”
Severus makes certain that he’s the last into the Floo for the trip back to Hogwarts. He emerges into a crowded office, dusts off his robes, and takes in the number of victorious smiles. “Well, Minerva?”

Minerva clasps her hands together over her breast. “You did it!”

“Absolutely not!” he retorts, and then wraps her up in a hug that lifts her off the floor. “We did it, foolish woman.”

Minerva stares at him in utter astonishment when she’s set back on her feet. “Severus Prince, you have to stop doing that, or I’ll be paranoid about checking for Polyjuice!”

“That is an excellent idea.” Severus glares at Dumbledore’s portrait. “Is Polyjuice detection written into the wards?”

“Thankfully, yes,” Dumbledore replies. “I was not a complete fool, Severus. Merely a partial fool. Polyjuice will not work anywhere in Hogwarts. The only exception is granted to the Potions classroom during N.E.W.T.-level classes.”

“Well, that’s one less concern. Winky!” When the house-elf appears, Severus nods at her. “Please do as we’d planned earlier.” Winky smiles and disappears again.

“I would just like to let you all know…that I’m staying,” Griselda says, surprising him. “I know I said I’d leave at the end of the year, but I’d like to see that first graduating class of our new witches and wizards. Then you can find a university student to take over, and I’ll happily retire back to overseeing this school’s O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.”

“Yeah, me too.” William grins at them all. “I actually had a lot more fun than I expected, doing this. Fleur’s busy with the baby at the moment, and really fond of how often certain teachers invade our quarters to sit for her so she can sleep, but we’re both—we like it here. With Floo access, we can turn Victoire over to Mum for the day, and Fleur can go back to her job in Gringotts when she’s ready—probably next January, after Victoire’s a year old.”

Argus reaches up to scratch Mrs. Norris’s ears. “Means we don’t really need a Squibs in the Wizarding World class overly much, though.”

“No, we still need it. That class did a lot to reassure those kids that they were in the right place,” Aurora says. “If you don’t believe me, ask Rolanda.”

“Sirius?” Remus gives his fiancé a nudge. “Staying or going?”

Sirius gives Remus a look of wide-eyed innocence. “I’m teaching a bunch of little buggers how to not get caught at anything. What do you think, Moony?”

“Oh, yeah.” Remus smiles. “You’re staying.”

Most of them turn around when the double doors to Severus’s office open to admit Rolanda, Rubeus (who had to return by Side-Along-Apparition with Sybill) Irma, Poppy, Firenze, who looks most put-out by the staircase, and the last quarter’s History of Magic teacher for upper years, Dayo Babatunde, whose specialty lies in magics from western Africa.

“It went well?” Poppy asks, smiling.

“It went very well, and it was interesting to see Gilead Scrimgeour turn some very interesting colors.” Viking grins. “Also, please someone tell me if Madam Bones is single?”
Minerva looks at Harry, who shrugs. “I don’t keep track of those things. It’s not my job! Ask Hermione the next time you see her. She might know.”

“Viking, please be aware of the fact that if you do intend a courtship, and it results in a permanent arrangement, you will be required to take Madam Bones’ family name,” Filius tells the man in a stern voice.

Viking blinks a few times. “That is an issue still in the British Isles? I do not mind that sort of necessity—many witches in Finland do not even bother to change their name after marriage, and children bear her family’s name.”

“I’ll find out,” Minerva says, giving Viking an approving look.

Winky finally returns, bearing two different baskets. “Sorry I’s bein’ late. Had to count out so many glasses!”

Narcissa claps her hands in Pure-blooded glee when she sees the bottles Winky removes from the first basket, placing them in a row upon Severus’s desk. “Oh, those are going to taste like ambrosia!”

“What is that?” Aurora asks, wiping dust from the label. “Oh, illegible. That doesn’t speak much for a vintner.”

“Those are the oldest wines in the Peverell House that have not devolved into vinegar,” Severus says. “I decided, after this past year, that we bloody well deserve it.”

“There are still children in this school, and this is all of us,” Poppy says, frowning.

“If you can get sodden, sloppily drunk off of a mere eight ounces of wine, then there is no hope for you at all,” Severus retorts.

Once Winky has made sure everyone has a full glass, which empties all of the bottles but one, Narcissa holds her glass up to her nose and inhales. “Oh, lovely, lovely. Someone had such good sense when this was crafted. It’s a white oak Bordeaux.”

“That one tosser portrait that only speaks Parseltongue in the house, Richard—he says the wine predates the house’s construction,” Harry says. “It’s British wine because of Eleanor of Aquitaine’s marriage into the Plantagenet line.”

“I am not sure I want to drink something that nearly dates to the Founding.” Bathsheda eyes the wine in distrust.

“You would be missing out on drinking history.” Narcissa gives Bathsheda a tight smile. “Live a little, dear.”

Remus shakes his head at Bathsheda and raises his glass. “What are we toasting?”

“To our next year,” Minerva says firmly.

“And to finding a Latin teacher who isn’t a bloody imbecile,” Severus adds.

His office full of busybody portraits just have to get in on the occasion. “TO HOGWARTS!” they yell.

“SHUT UP!” Severus yells back, and focuses on enjoying a vintage crafted when the Founders were overseeing the running of the school they’d created the previous century.
“All right, I was wrong,” Bathsheda admits. “That is amazing.”

“I’ve just been spoiled forever,” Augusta sniffs. “No wine I’ve ever had is a match for this.”

Harry grins at him from across the room. “Sev, we’ve given them nine hundred year old wine, and they’re whinging about it.”

“Then I suppose we won’t be telling them that there is more,” Severus replies, and smiles at the sudden lack of whinging when a dozen teachers of Hogwarts immediately demand to be spoiled rotten.

It is a long time before his office is empty of all but himself. Severus sits down on top of his desk, rests his hands on his knees, and thinks idly about textbooks. About expanding the dormitories for every House and year—the next generation of Squib children is twice the size of their first batch. Students who’d escaped to the Continent during the war are beginning to return to Britain.

It’s an absolute pleasure to contemplate things that do not relate intimately to murder, death, terror, and horrific levels of intrigue.

There is a knock on his door a few minutes later, the familiar firm rap of a teacher’s hand, not a student. “Come in.”

Harry sticks his head through the doorway. “Company?”

“Entirely acceptable.” Severus watches as Harry shuts the door and then leans against it. “You’re being nervous again. Spit it out.”

Harry smiles and comes closer, tucking his hands into his trouser pockets. “I was just thinking…why wait until our Squib kids have graduated?”

“Strategic importance,” Severus says. “Why do you think otherwise?”

“If I didn’t remember living with the Dursleys, I don’t think it would ever occur to me…but Severus, I know what it’s like to be treated like I don’t matter because of who I am. We know now that there are no Squibs, just kids with potential. There are a lot of children in Wizarding Britain who are being treated like they’re unwanted burdens because their parents hate them for not being magical. It won’t ever make their parents’ actions right, but—but if telling people now saves even one kid from having to live through that, I think it’s worth it.”

Severus thinks of his terrible childhood and tries not to wince. “You’re right, but it would have to be done with finesse. Some of the more brick-like methods might endanger these children.”

“Finesse.” Harry smiles. “I’ll fetch Remus and Sirius. We’ll all go speak to Narcissa, and see if she has any ideas.”

“Remus and Sirius for finesse,” Severus says, raising an eyebrow. “Have you taken leave of your ratel-influenced senses?”

“Not at all. Trust me.”

Severus tilts his head and then smiles at Harry. “I do. Go create mayhem, Professor Potter.”

“Mayhem with finesse, Headmaster Prince,” Harry promises, grinning.

The story of Hogwarts’ goals of educating the wizarding world’s Squibs, and those results, become
an exclusive of *The Quibbler*. Severus never asked if Harry had actually done anything to back the tabloid-like newspaper, but the story gives *The Quibbler* the boost it needed to finally begin seriously competing with the *Daily Prophet*.

Xenophilius devotes an entire week to stories of each child—their names, families, what their childhoods were like, being chosen by their wands, their time at Hogwarts, and the talents they have after a mere year of schooling. The reaction of the wizarding world is such that Severus is glad he is still at Hogwarts, and nowhere near Diagon Alley.

It’s the correspondence that tells him that opinions are becoming more accepting and enthusiastic as the week of *The Quibbler’s* exclusives continue. Severus receives multiple Howlers; the only thing he does with those is write the names of the senders, making a note to find out if there are Squibs in those families. He receives multiple letters from Squib children, who are cautious and enthusiastic, but the feeling that most saturates that correspondence is *longing*.

Severus puts those letters aside to keep, either for himself or the school records, he isn’t sure. He just knows that thirty-eight children have reminded him of how much he once wanted to belong, and how utterly overdue this action really is.

“You are a brilliant man, Severus,” Dumbledore’s portrait says in a soft voice. “A visionary.”

“Rubbish,” Severus replies, trying to figure out how to deal with the letter he’s holding from another child who is being accused of being a Squib by his family, despite his accidental magic that proves otherwise. The boy is terrified out of his wits that he’s going to be ejected from the household and left to flounder instead of attending school.

*That, Severus resolves, is not going to happen. Not to any of them. Never again.*

“You are,” Dumbledore says patiently. “Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that you care more about students than politics. To do what you’ve done, to defy hundreds of years of tradition—Severus, you are the bravest man I’ve ever known.”

Severus shakes his head. “I spent eighteen years as a spy while having to deal with that rotten bastard. This is easy in comparison, Albus.”

“Oh, I’m sure it seems that way,” Dumbledore agrees cheerfully. “But no Headmaster in the history of Hogwarts has ever tried to bring about the sort of reforms you’ve created in a mere year’s time.”

“We’re very proud of you, cousin,” Edessa says, smiling at him.

Severus has no idea what to say to that. “I am doing nothing more than my job.”

“We know!” Godric shouts from far above him. “That’s why it’s so damned welcome! People need stirring up now and then. Keeps things from stagnating!”

When Severus goes to the End-of-Term Feast, he walks between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables, but the layout of the Great Hall changed at the beginning of the year. Instead of four long tables, there are five shorter tables—one more to host the first-years and second-years who won’t be sorted until their third year. What pleases him is how the entire student body has all but adopted their eleven non-Squib classmates. They’re as proud of that batch as any instructor, and fiercely protective of their friends.

*Hogwarts united,* Severus thinks. Dumbledore’s portrait might say it, but he knows Albus himself would be pleased.
“Good afternoon,” Severus says to everyone before the meal begins. “It’s been an interesting year. We’ve all learned quite a bit about the way magic works, and you’ve all learned that your Headmaster is a stubborn git who is going to insist things be done properly.”

“And that you’re bloody tough to kill!” Pritchard happily yells.

“Please. You should have known that already,” Severus replies dryly. “The last student participants of the Battle of Hogwarts will be graduating in a ceremony next week, but most of you won’t be here to see it. Therefore, Ginevra, Garrick, Dean, Trevor, Sujita, Brendon, Matthew, Kousuke, Luna, Becky, and Gerald: I would like you all to stand, please.” He waits until they’ve done so. “These ten students, most of them underage and foolish, stayed behind to safeguard Hogwarts. Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw stood and fought together to defend this school. I hope Hogwarts never sees another battle, but their actions that day are the epitome of what your last Headmaster wished for—the unity of this school. Please recognize them; they deserve that and more.”

Ginevra smiles and turns bright red, but her chin is lifted high. Luna seems amused by the applause and cheering. Garrick, the sole surviving underage Slytherin from that terrible day, is absolutely astonished. The others all look some level of gobsmacked. Serves them right; if they’re going to act like heroes, they have to put up with all of the associated nonsense.

Severus sits down and is immediately the subject of Minerva’s attention. “That was a nice way to close out the year, Headmaster.”

“I actually couldn’t think of anything else aside from, ‘Get out!’” Severus admits, which makes Minerva laugh. At his other side, Narcissa reaches out and rests her hand on his arm, a pleased smile on her face.
Magical Biology

It isn’t until they’re home for the summer that Severus finds Harry working on one of the potions textbooks—the replacement for *1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi*. “Are you nearly done?”

Harry looks up from his notes and smiles. “Nobody said anything about *when* we started. Just who finished first over the summer.”

“Good. If you hadn’t started at once, I would have mocked you relentlessly for the rest of the year,” Severus replies, holding up a book that’s half-complete.

Harry points at the impending fourth- and fifth-year text with his quill. “And that is exactly why I started in bloody January. Your two books together are still smaller than one of mine.”

Severus glances at the thick pile of paper. “That’s not everything, is it?”

Harry shakes his head, leans over, and rests his face on the sheet he’d just been working on. “No, it is not.”

“How thorough are you being?”

“For something that’s supposed to be a reference for all seven years? Severus, I’m writing down *everything*.” Harry lifts his face and shoves his hands into his hair. “That’s not actually the difficult part. Charming it to only show ingredients to those who are ready to learn about them…”

“By knowledge and not by year.” Severus lifts an eyebrow. “That is very good thinking.”

“Thanks. It’s not even the charm, really. It’s embedding the magic so that it replicates automatically at the printer’s.” Harry drops his quill. “I need a break. What are we doing about the fact that we’re sort of out of enemies to steal blood from in regards to the Appearance of Youth Potion?”

“Honestly, I’m tempted to go to Azkaban and offer anyone there a Galleon for a pint of blood. I want almost everyone residing there to become dead in some fashion. That counts.”

“But when they die off, then it’s a difficulty again,” Harry says. “Look, I’ve been thinking—something I have time for now that we’re not spending every waking minute trying to figure out how to kill Voldemort. Why is enemy’s blood even a necessary ingredient?”

“Stolen life force, perhaps,” Severus muses. “That is typically its use.”

“It’s not the only blood in the potion, though, and enemy’s blood is really specific, Sev.” Harry picks up his quill again, twirling it around his fingers. “Not regular blood. Enemy’s blood. Stolen blood would make more sense if it was about thieving a life resource. Veela blood fits the profile of the potion for something meant to restore an appearance or feel of youth. Aside from beauty, they live a long time, but we still only need a single drop. Two ounces of chimera blood still fits, a merging of differing parts into a single homogeneous solution. What?” he asks, when he realizes Severus is staring at him.

“Harry, if you were not in the middle of writing two books, I would be all but ordering you to write another one,” Severus says. “Bloody brilliant little atrocious brat.”

Harry points at him. “Hey, I’m going to be nineteen this summer, and I’m five feet ten inches tall. You’re going to have to leave off that ‘little’ part there at some point this century.”
“Very funny.” Severus gives up and sits down at the library table across from Harry. “Then I suppose the only way to find out would be to make the potion exactly as is while leaving out the enemy’s blood.”

“Are you going to be the one explaining to Luna that we crushed one of her friends for the sake of a potion?” Harry asks. “Because I’m not ready to risk death again quite yet.”

“You have a point.” It was one thing when the potion had to be perfect for the sake of poisoning Voldemort, but they weren’t working under those same constraints. “Then we’re back to needing enemy’s blood until we find out how to use Golden Snidgets in this potion without killing one,” Severus hesitates. “Please tell me she has not also gone out and fallen in love with the fire crabs.”

“No, Luna just thinks of those as food,” Harry says. “I told her I would buy her normal crab, all she wanted, but she has to leave the emerald-shelled crabs in the magical enclosure alone.”

“Unicorn hair, at least, isn’t a problem. I just need to ask a different one each time.” Severus lets out a sigh. “Acquiring blood was so much easier when I could just kill someone for it.”

Harry’s grin is wide and mocking. “What an unfair world it’s turned out to be when you can’t simply murder whoever you like anymore.”

“It is not my fault that the world is full of people so utterly unacceptable that making them dead should be the default response.”

“Hold that thought.” Harry goes over to the library’s ancient stone fireplace. He grabs a handful of Floo powder, turns the flames green, and kneels down next to the fire when a house-elf appears. “Hi, Basily! No, everything’s fine. I just need to speak to Sirius.”

“Okay, young Master Harry!” Basily replies. “He is being right here.”

“What? What did you break?” Sirius asks cheerfully. “We’ve only been on holiday for two days!”

“Hello to you, too,” Harry returns dryly. “Listen. I was wondering how you felt about going to Azkaban to scare the living hell out of Pettigrew so he’ll willingly hand over sixteen ounces of blood. We’re trying to figure something out.”

“You want me to go to Azkaban for the express purpose of causing Peter to wet himself in terror. I didn’t know Christmas in July was really a done thing!”

“Thought you’d like the idea. Hold on. I need to check the calendar for the right day…” Harry pulls out a tiny notebook from his trouser pocket and flips through it, revealing a tiny version of the lunar calendar Severus keeps at his desk. “July thirteenth. That gives us time to prepare on this end.”

“Time to give the Youth Potion another go?” Sirius asks.

“Yes and no,” Harry replies. “Step one is to figure out how to do it without killing Golden Snidgets. I am not going to risk Luna rounding up every species of nargle in Britain to enact revenge.”

“All right. Consider the trip on the thirteenth a certainty. Hell, I’ll ask if anyone else wants to volunteer to share their blood while I’m at it. Don’t forget that George and Angelina are getting married on the first, and you need a date!”

“Date?” Harry gives Sirius a blank look. “Why?”

“Because you’re nearly nineteen, Heir to the legacy of Peverell, Heir to the Potter family, and a
damned war hero. You either take a date, or you get mobbed by every single female who attends that wedding,” Sirius informs him. “Probably more than a few men, too.”

“Oh. Right. Great. Talk to you later, Sirius.” Harry steps away from the fireplace and sits back down when the flames return to normal. “Fame is stupid.”

“There are plenty of people you already find tolerable who would be pleased to attend with you, even knowing it was only for friendship,” Severus tells him. “Just because they have also been issued an invitation doesn’t mean that it’s necessary to find someone lacking such.”

“Right. Well, in that case, you’d best go ask Narcissa before someone else does,” Harry says.

“What? Why?”

Harry looks at him like he’s stupid. “Sev, if you’re not aware of the fact that you also are a Peverell Heir, a Prince Heir, and a war hero, you haven’t been paying attention.”

“Dammit!” Severus exclaims in utter dismay, and nearly hexes Harry when the man laughs at him.

Jade runs into the library, probably saving them both from making terrible life choices. “It’s there it’s there it’s there!” she squeals, and flings the morning delivery of *The Quibbler* at Severus.

Severus leans back. “We’ve never discussed the meaning of decorum, have we?”

“Don’t be daft. We both know you’ve got more’n enough decorum for both o’ us,” Jade retorts. “Read th’ bloody paper, brother!”

Severus accepts it from her and unfolds it to reveal the front page. The headline is devoted to some bits of import regarding one of Kingsley’s recent legal decrees. The latter half of the front page is devoted to a picture of Luna Phoebe Lovegood and Jade Isolde Prince embracing in a photo, with Xenophilius proudly penning the article that announces their engagement. Jade is wearing her hat; Luna’s rose nargles put in another appearance as a hair accessory.

“You could have done this in January, like I asked,” Severus says. It’s a nice picture. “Twenty-fourth of June, next year. Right after the school term lets out. I’m surprised the two of you are waiting that long.”

“Luna says it’s family tradition. I don’t care. We don’t have t’ be chaste, and it’s not like I can go out an’ knock her up,” Jade replies, grinning. “When can I move m’fiancée in properly, you daft idiots?”

Harry is trying not to laugh at the expression on Severus’s face. “Jade, you can do that whenever you like, but you need to make sure you announce her properly to the house using the stairwell sigils.”

“Great!” Jade puts her hands on her hips and glares down at them. “Now where’s m’congrats, you?”

“Jade, we knew you were going to marry Luna six months ago,” Severus returns, refusing to be baited.

“Yeah, but t’weren’t official then!” Jade tilts her head. “Sev. C’mon. Your sister’s gettin’ married, an’ there will be babies an’ things roaming about th’ house!”

“You are really, really set on making this as painful as possible, aren’t you?” Severus scowls at her. “I do not like small children!”

“You’ll love ’em because they’ll be your own nieces an’ nephews.” Jade leans down and kisses his
cheek. “Daft git.”

“I didn’t even know you wanted kids,” Harry says.

“Well, before? Nope, wasn’t a thing at all,” Jade admits. “But Luna? She’s m’odd love. I could raise little ’uns wi’ her an’ not hate it, I s’pect.”

Severus finally stands up and looks down at Jade until she her smile starts to fade. “What?” she asks. Without responding, he bends down and lifts her up off the floor. “Congratulations,” he whispers in her ear, “but you’d best hire a proper nanny so I am not tripping over your offspring.”

Jade giggles and squeezes him until his ribs ache. “Tha’s more like it. I love you.”

“Love you, too, Hummingbird Girl,” Severus replies, and sets her down on her feet.

“Now, then.” Jade adjusts her hat and grins sunnily at them both. “Who’re you daft blokes escortin’ t’the wedding?”

* * * *

George and Angelina’s wedding is held in a massive white outdoor tent set in the field beyond the Burrow, which Severus hears, from multiple family members, has been properly de-gnomed for the occasion. Given that he already sees the stubborn buggers climbing back over the fence, it won’t be long before the lot of them are underfoot again tomorrow. The reception is later; for now, the tent is filled with rows of white chairs and an aisle marked by a white silk sheet. There are hummingbirds darting through the air—not the attack kind, thank God—along with fairies that have been bribed into only shining with slow, white flashes of light for the occasion. The guests are slowly trickling in, though there has yet been no sign yet of George and Angelina—or Fred and Alicia, for that matter.

Jade brings Luna, to absolutely no one’s surprise, though they garner quite a few number of delighted squeals of greeting from other female guests. The congratulations from male or otherwise-gendered guests is more dignified, but not by much. Katie Bell and Millicent Bulstrode arrive hand-in-hand, though they’ve announced no engagement. It makes Severus wonder if they plan to bother. Neither woman strikes him as the type to care a whit about legal arrangements unless they need to concern themselves with legally recognized Heirs. Neville Longbottom is still in Ginevra Weasley’s good graces, and the pair look happy together. Severus is glad to see it, even if he isn’t going to say a word; war brought them together, and the end of war could easily have torn them apart.

Charles Septimus Weasley brings a bloody baby dragon as his plus-one. Severus has to excuse himself, hide behind a tree outside the tent, and stifle far too much laughter. Charles never did like to send mixed messages, and that is a man who’s announcing that the love of his life will never be found in a human being.

William and Fleur Violette Delacour-Weasley arrive with Victoire in their arms. They corner Severus when he’s nearing the tent again, and inform him of something he’d missed during the school year.

“Victoire Severina?” Severus asks in complete disbelief. “Why?”

“Because,” Fleur says, talking to him like he is an exceptionally slow child, “you helped to bring us victory. William and I both know how to be grateful for such things.”

“Thank you for not making it her first name,” Severus says at last, and William laughs.
Narcissa arrives before any single mingling men or women can get ideas, presenting herself as Severus’s invited plus one. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he tells her fervently, kissing her hand in greeting.

“I wouldn’t miss the opportunity for the world. I’m looking forward to the hair-pulling the gossip mongers will be doing, trying to figure out if we’re dating,” Narcissa replies.

“Narcissa Theia Black, you could do so much better than myself.” Narcissa lifts an eyebrow. “No, I really could not. You are fortunate I truly do consider you a mere friend, or I would be attempting to court you in earnest, Severus Prince.”

“Stop threatening me. Courtesy dictates that we do not threaten each other at weddings.”

Ron Weasley arrives not in British attire, but in something far more suited to Hindu tastes and clime. It does a very good job of impersonating a robe without being one at all. The Patil sisters he’s escorting on each arm are wearing far more adult versions of their favored traditional top, skirt, and sari. With all three of them in deep, dark violet edged by yellow and gold, it’s easy to recognize that they’re presenting as a triad, not friends.

Narcissa’s eyes practically light up with glee at the possibility of a triad that may become legally recognized. If Ron, Parvati, and Padma require an ally while gaining recognition of their relationship, they already have one.

“We should invite them to live in Hermione and Viktor’s wing of the house,” Harry says, surprising Severus by appearing at his left shoulder unexpectedly. “Except Ron has this terrible thing about mistaking friendship for unwanted charity. Hermione and I are still trying to figure out how to word the invitation so he understands it’s not an insult.”

Severus glances at him. “You want to cram a Weasley ginger into our house?”

“Temporarily, at least. Padma and Parvati come from a family that’s…well, loaded, if you want to use the Muggle term,” Harry replies. “But it would give him a good place to work from while he’s in England, Flooing back and forth from here to Mumbai. After they graduate, if he hasn’t convinced the twins to kill him, Ron would be moving into their house.”

Severus decides to be glad that the Peverell House is extensive. “Who did you bring to avoid herds of adoring fans?”

Harry disappears for a moment and returns with Lavender Brown. She’s resplendent in dark blue velvet cut for the warmth of July, with blue cord braided through her dark hair before it hangs in multiple strands down her back. Her scars are unchanged, but she refuses to be ashamed of them. To Severus, it makes her appear as beautiful as any socialite in this blasted tent, and he tells her so.

Lavender smiles. “Thank you, Headmaster. From you, I know the words are the absolute truth.”

“Always,” he promises her. “Do be sure to infuriate the few idiots here for this illustrious occasion with the fact that Harry picked you above every other option.”

Lavender’s grin turns feral. “Oh, I do plan to enjoy that during the reception.”

Sirius and Remus arriving together should surprise absolutely no one, ever. Draco and Astoria are already officially engaged, and enter with a regal bearing that is happily marred by the wide smiles on their faces. Andromeda Black arrives with the new infant Black twins as her plus-ones, which mean Nymphadora and Oliver can enter as a couple rather than two beings loaded down by newborn
children.

“What are their names?” Harry asks, grinning down at the tiny infants. Severus pretends disinterest, and politely refuses to notice that Narcissa is absolutely cooing over her new grand-niece and grand-nephew.

“This is Theodorea Iola,” Andromeda announces, gesturing to the tiny girl. “Nymphadora named her after two Black women who were hidden from the family tapestry or blasted off for daring to have improperly Black ideas. This is—” Andromeda’s voice cracks, but she recovers smoothly. “This is Ted Tonks Black. Nymphadora insisted.”

“I think they’re excellent choices,” Harry says, and takes tiny Theodorea from Andromeda’s arms when she indicates permission. He smiles down at the infant in a way that makes Severus’s chest hurt. Heirs. Luna and Jade will not be the only ones needing to produce offspring at some point, and Harry already seems to be enamored of small children with no encouragement needed.

Several of his faculty and graduated students from Hogwarts are in attendance, most of them women and men who participated in the Battle of Hogwarts. Viking Korkohen shows up with Susan Bones on his arm. Susan is comporting herself with dignity, but Viking is grinning like he’s been handed the greatest treasure in existence. Argus and Alberta come as themselves instead of Argus and Mrs. Norris, which delights everyone; no one seems to have been aware of Argus’s wife unless they were Hogwarts staff. Minerva is present, as is Filius, Pomona, Augusta Longbottom, Poppy, and Firenze, that latter of whom arrives in the company of a female centaur named Ifalda.

As they slowly find their seats, it doesn’t take Severus long to find Alice Longbottom. She sits down next to Neville and Ginevra. Molly is in the front row next to Percival, who is accompanied by a young blonde named Audrey Sanderson. Given Percival’s body language, it seems to be a long-term arrangement that’s been kept quiet. Alicia Spinnet’s and Angelina Johnson’s parents are in the other front row.

Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang, who will marry next year, arrive together and settle themselves next to Harry and Lavender. If anything becomes of that particular blend, Severus desperately does not want to know. Cedric’s parents are seated behind them, but if they’re aware of the former triad’s existence, they’re pretending obliviousness.

Lee Jordan brings a newly graduated Gryffindor, Nandini Johar. His face is lit up like it’s Quidditch season, and she also seems pleased. Muriel Prewett seats herself with great, aging dignity next to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who is then blocked in by Jean and William Granger. Viktor and Hermione arrive on the verge of tardiness and seat themselves quickly behind Granger’s parents.

Aberforth brings a bloody goat. This seems to have been expected; his chair is sitting next to an upright bar so that the goat can be tied properly during the ceremony. Rubeus and Olympe Maxime are last to arrive, and stand in the back of the tent instead of risking the structural integrity of the chairs.

“That’s everyone,” Hermione whispers to Kingsley, who stands and politely makes his way out of the row to stand in front of the room. He’s wearing a more refined, silken version of his favored robes for the occasion.

“It’s not every day one is honored by being married by the Minister for Magic himself,” Narcissa notes in a low voice.

“Under Fudge, it wouldn’t have been considered an honor at all,” Severus mutters back, not bothering to disguise his contempt. Narcissa smirks in silent agreement.
George Weasley enters the tent and makes his way up the aisle. He’s dressed in a white suit with just enough length to barely qualify as a robe, wearing one of the top hats that Jade has indeed brought into fashion. Severus just refuses to wear one in July. Then George turns around and grins at the audience in a way that makes Severus brace himself based on seven years of scholastic instinct.

Fred Apparates into place to stand next to George, dressed in a more silvery-white version of the same suit and top hat. “So, yeah, we decided not to waste the opportunity,” Fred says, patting his hat and grinning at everyone. “Nobody was going to be pleased no matter what we did, Alicia and I, so we said sod that—we’re just going to be pleasing ourselves, thank you.”

“Allways wanted a double wedding,” George adds. “But I did make him also swear to minimal explosions first.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” William says at once, which brings laughter from several throats.

Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson enter together. Angelina is in a lilac dress with deep violet embroidery that trails along the floor; charmed purple lilacs are woven into her hair. Alicia is wearing a darker maroon dress of a similar cut, though her embroidery is all done in gold; she’s added a sari over the sleeveless dress and bound her hair up with shining gold leaf.

“Alicia!” Mrs. Spinnet bursts out.

“Do be quiet, Mum,” Alicia replies, scowling at her parents. “I’m not going to be putting off my happiness just because you have something against ginger politics!”

“Too right!” Lee shouts. Mrs. Spinnet subsides, but she doesn’t seem happy about it.

“Welcome,” Kingsley says, once brides and grooms are standing next to each other in their proper places. “I’ve not had the opportunity to conduct a wedding in a long time, and at everyone’s insistence that the reception is the better part of any wedding, it’s been requested I keep this short.

“All four of the people standing before you today are heroes of a war that took too much from us. I’m told that they themselves nearly fell to enemy spells on more than one occasion, but they persevered. Their bonds are strong, built from a life together in school, and then onwards into adulthood as they fought together against He-Who-Is-Thankfully-Dead.”

Kingsley smiles. “Fred Gideon Weasley, do you take Alicia Jacklyn Spinnet as your wife, to respect and cherish, to keep faithful to her in sickness and in health, for the rest of your days?”

“Damn straight,” Fred says, which makes Alicia’s grin widen. “That means yes, by the way.”

“I’m aware,” Kingsley replies evenly. “Alicia Jacklyn Spinnet, do you accept this utter lout as your husband, to respect and cherish, to keep faithful to his lunacy in sickness and in health, for the rest of your days?”

“I was doing most of that by our sixth year of school.” Alicia nods. “I absolutely do.”

“George Fabian Weasley, do you take Angelina Roxanndra Johnson as your wife, to respect and cherish, to keep faithful to her in sickness and in health, for the rest of your days?”

“She’d beat me to death if I said anything except yes,” George says cheerfully.

“Then, for the final time: Angelina Roxanndra Johnson, do you except this man as your husband, to respect, cherish, and possibly rein in on his madness, to keep faithful to him in sickness and in health, for the rest of your days?”
“I’d have married the lout in 1997, but my parents would have been a little upset.” Angelina smiles. “Yes, I do.”

“Then, by the power invested in me by the Ministry of Magic, standing before you as the Minister for Magic, I declare these vows to be legal and binding, and that the pair of you are both wed in the eyes of the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain. You may demonstrate the strength of your affection,” Kingsley pronounces.

“NO TONGUE!” Ron yells, which makes Angelina and George nearly choke laughing mid-kiss. Fred simply lifts Alicia from her feet and swings her around in a circle, before placing her back on her feet and giving her a kiss that is utterly chaste, probably to appease the unhappy Spinnet parents.

“I will admit, I am very fond of the formalities of the ceremony being properly adhered to, but this was…enjoyable,” Narcissa says. “However, I would still prefer it if your sister does not bury us all in hats during the reception.”

“Tha’ was an accident!” Jade whispers, a blush staining her cheeks. “It were!”

“An entertaining accident,” Narcissa says, to Jade’s surprise. “Therefore, if you’re going to make another such interesting ‘blunder,’ it should be of an entirely different sort. One must remember to keep society on their toes, dear.”

“Oh, I like you. Can she move in wi’ us?” Jade asks while Molly stands and indicates it’s time for everyone to leave the tent so it can be converted over to host the dual reception.

Narcissa is entertainingly flabbergasted by the offer. “I—”

“Jade, Narcissa is one of the few people who could move into the house who I would not want to hex on a daily basis,” Severus replies. Jade grins while Narcissa continues to look stunned. “You will probably wish to move out of Malfoy Manor after Draco and Astoria’s wedding,” he adds in a low voice. “Unless you’ve found other prospects?”

“Not as such, but it certainly will add to the gossip fodder,” Narcissa says as they make their way out of the tent.

“Please, Narcissa. The Daily Prophet will have us all involved in some complex magical group orgy before the end of the summer.”

Narcissa tilts her head. “That would be entertaining to read about. I’ll think on the offer, Severus.”

When they reenter the tent in ten minutes, it has been entirely transformed, the space expanded to allow room for guest tables, a dancing area, a cake entirely in line with Pure-blood expense and is thus ludicrous, and a pile of presents meant for one bridal party, not two. “So basically, when wizards hit a theme, y’go an’ stick wi’ it,” Jade observes. “White tent an’ floating things. No bubbles this time, though.”

“No, there are plenty of other things for Tonks to trip over,” Harry adds, grinning at Tonks when she gives him a hard nudge with her elbow as she walks by. Then she ruins the silent rebuttal by finding the edge of the carpet with her shoe. At least Oliver had always been very good at catching things that are flying through the air.

When someone raises a concern about not having presents for Fred and Alicia, they’re the ones who answer. “If you think the expressions on your faces wasn’t gift enough, you really haven’t been paying attention.” Alicia smiles. “Besides, we don’t exactly need piles of stuff. We’ve got you lot.”
“Victims,” Luna says under her breath, biting her lip against a smile.

Fred hears her anyway. “Exactly so, Miss Engaged-To-Be-Wed Lovegood!”

Wizarding weddings often prefer to reverse Muggle traditions, and presents rule the day before food. Severus doesn’t mind, especially when several men and women who went to Hogwarts with the Weasley twins use the opportunity to enact revenge under cover of wrapping paper. It’s a wasted effort, really; grooms and brides all think it’s hilarious, or the twins thank the giver for handing over new ideas for their shop.

Alicia opens a package that turns her skin as gold as her dress’s embroidery. She looks at her hands, shrugs, and decides that it’s an elegant complement to her gown…which is when her parents finally seem to give up and accept the inevitable. Alicia then shakes the remainder of the spell over Angelina’s head, which leaves Angelina’s skin dusted with shimmering violet that makes her look ethereal. If anyone sought vengeance with that gift, they gain it by the wide-eyed look of blatant adoration on George Weasley’s face.

Food is delivered by an entire flock of Peverell, Black, and Bulstrode house-elves, all three sets of whom seem to adore weddings entirely too much. Basily and Cicily have had their first children, and though the twin house-elves aren’t yet old enough for service, Cicily makes a great ceremony of binding her first children to Fred and George’s new branch of the Weasley line.

“What are we gonna do with house-elves?” George asks in consternation, staring down at the tiny bundles of brown and green that Basily and Cicily are holding.

Hermione slaps him on the back of the head. “Be nice to them, that’s what!”

“Now, look. You’ve absconded with two of our house-elves,” Remus teases the twins.

Cicily gives him a dignified sniff. “You is not be needing more house-elves until you go and have proper Heirs, Master Remus,” she says, which causes that entertaining look of twitching disbelief to reappear on Sirius’s face.

Severus absolutely refuses to touch that monstrosity of a cake. Too many people look bespelled after eating it.

“It’s not magicked,” Narcissa tells him, rolling her eyes. “It’s the refinery of the ingredients.”

“I am still not eating anything that causes this many people to make entirely undignified faces afterwards,” Severus retorts. “Also, the brides and grooms probably did not need to practice that particular Muggle tradition.”

Narcissa and Harry glance up to see Fred and George both wearing far too much cake while their brides look smug. “No, I think that’s entirely them,” Harry says. “But if it gets any worse, I’m conjuring an umbrella.”

“Jade—Jade, no,” Severus insists, recognizing the mischievous glint in her gray eyes. “No, you will not.”

“I’m not thinkin’ no evil thoughts!” she protests, which is a blatant lie. She does at least wait until the house-elves have whisked away dinner and cake remains before uttering the spell. “Ego vocabo despumat umbrellas rosea et purpura!”

Umbrellas the color of the brides’ red and pale violet dresses rain down from out of nowhere, though at least not to the extent of last summer’s absolute mound of top hats. “Neat!” Nymphadora exclaims,
picking up the closest red one. “A new tradition!”

Severus glares at Jade. “What did I say? Did I not say no?”

“Yep. I just didn’t care,” Jade replies, grinning at him.

“Oh, lovely!” Luna exclaims as she opens one of the violet umbrellas and is promptly showered in a gentle fall of purple bubbles. “I simply must remember that spell. Fairy-truckles love bubbles!”

“Wait, that sort of baiting actually produces valid offspring?” Narcissa asks, glancing over at Luna in surprise.

“Of course it does. Otherwise there would be no point to such a mating imperative, would there?” Luna returns seriously. “They remain unnoticed because they do not glow. They are more like…” She pauses. “Winged chameleon Bowtruckles.”

“All right. That’s it. I’ve had enough.” Severus turns around in his seat, glaring at Luna and Jade. “Jade, you are acquiring a damned camera. Luna, if you do not write a book about your ‘friends’ and allow Jade to photograph them as evidence, I can and will figure out how to make your lives an absolute living hell until you do so!”

Luna stares at him. “A…a book?” Then she startles him by leaping across the table to hug him. “No one has ever wanted to know enough about my friends to want a book!”

Severus gently extricates himself from a tearful ex-student future sister-in-law. “I have no idea if I’ve just blundered or not.”

Jade is smiling. “Sounds like a lark, actually. Maybe it can be a honeymoon project!”

“Definitely not a blunder,” Harry says once Luna and Jade have dragging each other over to the dance floor. “Luna is going to float through the rest of the year because someone important in her life is not only acknowledging her friends, but wants other people to acknowledge them, too.”

“I desperately want to meet a chameleon Bowtruckle,” Narcissa admits. “It’s been a while since I’ve indulged in the studies I intended to pursue after Hogwarts before Lucius decided to disrupt my plans.”

“Studies?” Harry asks.

“Magical biology. I was quite good at it. Art is one of my best loves, but it became my focus because it was an acceptable hobby for a Pure-blood lady of exceptional breeding.” Narcissa frowns thoughtfully as she opens one of the red umbrellas and allows it to mist red bubbles down over her hair. “Combining the two sounds lovely, and I am not above doing my part to lend Miss Lovegood’s research further credibility.”

Harry raises his champagne glass at her. “I suspect a great deal of that altruism is due to the fact that you absolutely adore fucking with people.”

Narcissa smiles. “One should enjoy one’s delights to their fullest pursuit, Harry.”

“They should, really. Excuse me, please.” Harry wades through the bubbles gathering along the floor to go greet what looks to be an impromptu reunion of Gryffindor’s 1991-1993 Quidditch lineup, sans Seeker. Miss Ruth Mina held the Seeker’s position for the 1993-1994 term, but quickly discovered she enjoyed spectating the sport far more than she did playing it.
Severus rests his hand on Narcissa’s arm, requesting silence, as he shamelessly listens in on the conversation. Narcissa gives him a smug look, but joins him in eavesdropping.

“Hi, guys,” Harry greets Katie, Fred, George, Oliver, Angelina, and Alicia. Oliver bites back an anticipatory smile. “Congratulations. Now I’m the only one out of this batch who hasn’t gotten themselves permanently involved or married off.”

“This batch?” Katie asks, raising an eyebrow.

Harry grins at her and holds out his empty hand. He squeezes it into a fist, and when he opens it again, that very first Golden Snitch is resting on his palm. “Yeah. This batch.”

The noise from six ex-Gryffindor Quidditch players mobbing their former Seeker is atrocious enough that Severus considers a charm to protect his hearing. Harry disappears as the group closes ranks around him, still making a horrendous racket.

By the time they release him, Harry looks as if he’s been politely mauled by unruly beasts. “Thanks. I think.”

“You didn’t tell us you could remember this now!” Angelina accuses him, but she’s smiling.

“That’s because I still didn’t remember any of it, not until November of last year. Oliver was nice enough to keep it to himself.”

Oliver winces as five other Quidditch players turn to glare at him. “Harry asked me to!”

“Saving your own skin by throwing our baby Seeker under the bus.” Fred tsks at him. “What’s this world come to?”

“Call me a baby Seeker one more time, and I will beat you to death with a bubble-spewing umbrella,” Harry retorts. “Seeker-Chaser, thank you.”

“We have to have a Quidditch match. Right now, before we’re distracted by doing other fun things this evening,” George declares.

Katie glances at him. “Quidditch? During a wedding reception?”

“Pssh. It’s my wedding reception. If I can’t play Quidditch during my own wedding reception, what’s the bloody point?” George asks. “Besides, tell me you don’t want to.”

Katie winces. “I can’t. I really, really do want to play with the old team lineup again.”

“Love?” George asks Angelina.

Angelina glances down at her dress. “I can Transfigure this for the duration, I suppose.”

“Old Quidditch favorites versus the babies that replaced us,” Alicia says sagely.

“Oh, shite.” Oliver grins. “Yes, let’s!”

“Mum’s gonna kill us all,” Fred says. “Let’s go round up the competitors!”

Severus grabs Harry by the arm before he can disappear into the crowd to help the others hunt down other players. “Please, for Merlin’s sake, set a point limit, or this will take three blasted days!”

“Good idea,” Harry acknowledges, and shoves his way through the bubbles. “Hermione!”
“Will we need to go outside to watch this debacle?” Narcissa asks, though she sounds amused.

“Not at all. The tent’s set up between the places where we hide the goal posts when we’re not using them.” Ginevra waves her wand at the tent ceiling. It becomes transparent, revealing clear blue late afternoon sky.

“Okay, someone has t’go an’ tell me what’s happening,” Jade says, watching as fourteen insane fools on brooms start to circle the air high above the tent. “Also, I want a broom.”

“I was very much afraid you would say that,” Severus mutters.

“Then it simply must be a broom of acacia wood,” Luna says. “It’s much less prone to tossing its riders.”

“Tossing,” Jade repeats, staring at Luna.

“Mm,” Luna agrees. “It’s why brooms for the young ones are made from it more often than any other wood. Of course, underneath all that varnish, who can tell?”

“I have actually had fantasies about this sort of game,” Lee announces, which gets him a hard elbow to the ribs from Nandini. “What? Come on, that’s at least something proper I can say in public!”

“Lee, come here and please inform Jade as to what’s going on. She’s never seen Quidditch before in her life,” Severus requests, which makes Lee grin and rush over to join them at their table.

The 1995-1997 team of Hermione, Ginevra, Ron, Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan (who replaced Harry as a Chaser) is joined by Charles to fill in their missing Chaser’s spot. Only one of their Beaters is at the wedding, so William is up in the air with Ginevra, intent on keeping a gaming balance so that the veterans won’t run the named “underdogs” into the ground.

“All right, so—Oliver and Ron up there? They’re hanging out in front of those round goal posts to act as Keepers, those who keep the other team from scoring. Yes, their title is a pun, it’s great. That big leather ball that Katie, Alicia, Angelina, Dean, Charles, and Seamus are tossing about—that’s a Quaffle, and that’s what gets used to do most of the scoring work. Fred, George, Ginevra, and William are carrying bats to send those leather Bludgers at the other players to interrupt flight and scoring attempts. Harry and Hermione are Seekers, going after that little golden twinkling bit called the Golden Snitch. Team what captures that gets one hundred fifty points, and if the Quaffle hasn’t racked up enough of a score to counter it, catching the Snitch can win your team the game,” Lee tells Jade.

Jade’s eyes are huge. “It’s like rugby to the extreme. I wanna play.”

“Please learn to fly without dying before you make the attempt,” Severus requests.

“Four of them have just been married, and they’re all up there playing Quidditch,” Molly says with an air of resignation.

“Molly, I find that I rather want to join them,” Kingsley admits.

Narcissa glances over and sees the wide smile on Draco’s face, one mirrored by Astoria. “Absolutely not.”

Draco snorts. “Please, Mother, we know better.”

“We’ll wait until after the dried-up sticks have departed,” Astoria says primly.
Narcissa nods. “Quite right,” she says, and turns back to watch the game.

Quidditch composed of two sets of Gryffindors who are all stubborn, cunning, and sly players lasts until twilight, when Harry finally captures the Snitch just before Hermione can get to it. That leads to another five minutes of flight as Harry does his absolute best to escape Hermione, who is trying to pelt him off of his broom with a stolen Bludger.

“Who won?” half of them ask at once when they return to the tent. At least they were sensible enough to clean up and Transfigure their clothes back out of uniform when the game ended.


“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me!” Alicia blurs in anger. “That will never stand!”

“Defend your honor some other time, please, dear new sister-in-law,” William says, wrapping his arm around Alicia’s shoulders. “Some of us are done in. Not as young as we used to be, raising a toddler, et cetera.”

“Oh, wow. Right.” Alicia blinks a few times in astonishment. “I have a lot of in-laws now, don’t I?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Spinet says in a mournful voice.

“Neat!” Alicia replies cheerfully. “More people to torture.”

“And if anyone ever wondered why she and Fred get along so well, there is your answer.” Hermione then pretends to trip and bump into Fred, which causes him to flail sideways and clobber George with his arm.

“Sore bloody loser,” George declares, rubbing his jaw. “I did so miss your delightful presence on the Quidditch pitch!”

“Nobody lost,” Harry reminds them, rolling his eyes.

“Slytherin veterans versus Gryffindor veterans, next month?” Draco suggests, resting his chin on his clasped hands.

Dean grins. “Oi, we’ll have to all but hold a lottery just to get it narrowed down to seven of us.”

“Oh, no you don’t. I haven’t flown against Harry since second year. He’s Seeker for the game. My wedding, I’m declaring it,” Draco says. “I’ve already flown against Hermione.”

Ginevra puts her hands on her hip and gives Draco a haughty look. “But you’ve not flown against me, Malfoy.”

“No, and I’m not going to,” Draco retorts. “You’re the most ferocious Beater that Hogwarts has seen in thirty years. You’re too vicious to play a Seeker. It’s my wedding day, and I’d like to live long enough to enjoy it.”

Ginevra smiles, wide and happy. “You think I’m vicious?”

There is an immediate, shouted chorus of “YES!” from the wedding reception crowd.

“There is a reason the Hollyhead Harpies are clamoring for you to accept their offer, baby sister,” Charles says.

“And they’re not getting me until they offer me a proper year’s salary!” Ginevra snaps. “Honestly,
you’d think they missed the part where I could go to any team in Europe and be handed buckets of gold if I signed with them.”

“Do that anyway,” Viktor suggests. “Let them learn the lesson the hard way. Distance need not be a concern; we have Port Keys for good reason.”

They wait until Fred, Alicia, George, and Angelina have left for the evening before departing. Hermione and Harry are still flushed from flying in the impromptu Quidditch match, followed by the chase afterwards; Luna has one color each of Jade’s conjured umbrellas resting over her shoulders as they Apparate back to the house. Viktor kisses his fiancée’s forehead before politely escorting her into their lower east wing of the Peverell House.

“Wizard weddings are fun,” Jade says as they walk up the stairs. “We’re havin’ one o’ those, right?” Luna gives her a startled look. “Is there another sort of wedding to have?”

“You got it,” Jade replies, hooking her arm around Luna’s elbow. “I like this’un much better.”

Severus gets out of the clothes he wore to the wedding, which are all but saturated in multi-colored bubble residue. Winky mutters direly over the bubble stains and kidnaps his clothes. He changes into black denims and a t-shirt in deference to the informality of the late hour, contemplating working on one of the books, but finds himself too restless to do either.

He finds Harry sitting on a chair in the back courtyard, listening to the sounds of Golden Snidgets trying to settle in for sleep. There is a glass of wine in one of his hands, but he seems less interested in drinking it than in staring quietly at nothing in particular.

“What’s on your mind, Harry?” Severus asks. “Or is this regret that you chose teaching and now desire a career in Quidditch?”

“I wouldn’t want to play Quidditch professionally. If Ginny’s contract negotiation is any sort of sign, it sounds like a nightmare, and Viktor breaks enough bones for all of us put together as it is.” Then he glares at Severus. “Besides, I happen to like teaching. Or did you fail to notice I didn’t resign at the end of the term?”

“Oh, so I shall only need to hunt down one teacher this summer instead half a dozen? A minor miracle, to be sure,” Severus replies.

“Yeah.” Harry hands over his glass. “Not to my taste at all. You want to give it a go?”

Severus sniffs at the glass and feels his eyes water. “Willow barrel, not oak. Doesn’t break down the tannins as efficiently, and it smells like someone was trying to turn this into hard alcohol.” He thinks about it. “I wonder how it would burn.”

“Like rancid grapes, most likely,” Harry says. “I was thinking of asking Hermione if she’d let me adopt her as my sister.”

Severus is glad he wasn’t trying to drink the eye-watering wine, or it would be residing in his sinuses. “What brought this on? Aside from the fact that she already lives here.”
“Well…” Harry frowns. “I don’t have a family, Severus. I live with my friends, and believe me, that’s more than I once thought I’d have, but I also don’t—it’s like Jade said about Luna and children. She can see herself raising children with Luna, but not on her own. I feel the same way, and I don’t—I doubt I’ll be in that sort of relationship anytime soon.”

“That almost sounds like giving up,” Severus observes.

Harry shakes his head. “No, not that. Narcissa is right, though. I’m it. If I die, even if it’s just from some stupid accident, then my entire family line is gone. Mum’s is, too, unless Dudley carries out his threat to change his name to Evans.”

“Dear God and Merlin, I would pay him to do that just to witness the expression on Petunia’s face.”

“I was polite enough not to say that when Dudley mentioned it,” Harry says in a wry voice. “Hermione doesn’t know yet, but I went to London and spoke to Jean and William, explaining the adoption and how it would mean Hermione wouldn’t have their family name anymore. They expected that anyway, what with her engagement to Viktor. Hermione has cousins with the family name, so it won’t die out. Same for Viktor—he has a younger brother and entire hordes of cousins, and I already know Hermione and Viktor want children. It’s a legal guarantee, but it’s also me being able to publicly declare that I think of Hermione as my sister, which was true both before and after the stupid Obliviation.”

“I feel like you’re trying to ask my permission, which I will note hasn’t stopped you from randomly inviting people to live here,” Severus says.

Harry smiles. “Well, you would be the one having to cope with two more legally-named Potters in your life.”

“Oh, no; there would be two more intelligent Potters in my life whose existence I’m already coping with admirably,” Severus drawls out. “I’m horrified.”

“It’s really entertaining how you made that entire statement sound like, ‘Harry, you’re stupid,’” Harry says.

“That’s because it is stupid. I didn’t ask your permission in regards to Jade.” Severus rolls his eyes. “Just warn me before you ask her so I can protect my hearing from the inevitably loud response.”

Severus was wrong; Hermione doesn’t shriek. She breaks down in a sodden heap and cries into Harry’s shirt while Harry holds her and looks completely baffled. Viktor, at least, just nods as if Harry voiced the most sensible idea he’s ever heard.

Once Hermione calms down, Viktor asks, “How would this work? Must we marry now?”

Harry shakes his head. “I don’t know about Bulgarian law, but that doesn’t matter here. I can adopt Hermione as my sister whenever she likes, and when the two of you finally decide on a marriage date, you agree to take her name.”

Hermione wipes her nose with a handkerchief. “You’re just trying to get out of having kids!” she accuses Harry.

“No, but I am plotting on how to spoil yours rotten,” Harry replies, which is when Viktor lifts him up from his chair and subjects Harry to a hug that looks to be the verge of cracking ribs.

“So…is that a yes?” Harry ventures.
Hermione slaps him on the back of the head. “Yes, you idiot!” Then she sniffs again. “I always wanted a brother.”

Harry tries to shrug, but he’s avoiding her gaze. “I always wanted…someone. A sibling is—well, I didn’t think I’d get one, y’know?”

At least this time when Harry and Hermione embrace each other, it doesn’t involve sobbing. Viktor runs down into the wine cellar and returns with one of the bottles that’s in the three-hundred-years range, pouring wine for everyone with Dobby’s excited help so that such a declaration can be toasted properly. Their eight house-elves are all but over the damned moon that there are going to be two more legally named Potters in the Peverell House.
Appropriate Gifts

Jade brings Severus a first-level chemistry book for a Muggle university as his introduction to what he can expect from one of those august bodies. He pages through it one morning in July while taking a break from textbook-writing, and is scowling by page thirty.

Severus goes downstairs to the kitchen, where Jade and Luna are finishing up a late breakfast. “Are all Muggle university texts written to be utterly condescending to whomever is reading them?”

“No all o’ them,” Jade answers, fluffing up her short hair before she puts on her hat and flattens it right back down. “But a lot o’ th’ first year books are…well. Stupid.”

“How the hell did you put up with this?” Severus asks in disbelief.

Jade smiles at him. “Tested out o’ every first year class I was allowed t’test out of. Didn’t have t’put up wi’ it beyond making sure I knew what sort o’ questions they’d be asking during th’ tests.”

Severus glances down at the book he’s holding. “I am honestly not sure if university is worth enduring this printed garbage.”

“Give it a break, then. There may be ways ’round it—like readin’ a decent bloody chemistry book tha’s not meant for uni,” Jade suggests, and then stands on her toes to kiss his cheek. “Back for dinner, Sev. Luna m’love and I are goin’ into London. There are s’posed t’be urban nargles, and we’re off t’find ’em.”

Severus leaves the book on the kitchen table and opens the door to the laboratory, discovering Harry frowning down at an unfamiliar contraption and a Golden Snidget. The feel of magic is heavy in the air. “What are you doing?”

Harry holds up one finger over his lips to request silence. His wand is hovering over the still, unconscious Snidget. There are two extremely thin pieces of tubing stuck to either side of the bird. One is dispensing blood into a beaker that is sealed but for the tube’s entry to keep out contaminants. The other is filled with clear fluid that appears to be entering the Snidget as the blood is removed, powered by a silent, square contraption that looks just as foreign as modern automobiles had in 1996.

After another few seconds, the tube removing the Snidget’s blood runs empty. Harry glances at the amount of Snidget blood in the beaker, scribbles down the amount in a rush, and then uses his wand to reverse the flow. Blood goes into the Snidget at a gentle pace that matches the clear fluid’s departure, which seems to be going back into a pouch attached to the odd machine.

“You are an insane genius,” Severus says as he realizes what Harry is doing. “Will it live?”

“That’s why I all but ordered Jade to get Luna out of the house,” Harry murmurs, still holding his wand over the bird. “If this fails, I didn’t want Luna to be upset. It’s a Preservation Charm combined with a low-power Body-Bind and Stupefy. It’s the only thing I could come up with that would allow us to figure out how much blood a single Snidget holds without killing one.”

Severus comes closer to the table as the flow of blood in the tubing ceases, all of it returned to the Snidget. “I’d offer to go and purchase another as a replacement, but Luna knows all of these blasted birds by name and feel. It would be a miserable failure of an attempt.”

Harry nods, his wand twitching as he begins releasing spells. “Expergo,” he whispers.
The Golden Snidget blinks its eyes open, chirps, and scrambles up onto its feet. Then it pecks Harry’s hand.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” Harry scratches the bird under its beak. “You did great, and no harm done. Come on. You can go hang out with Pyrrhus. He likes you guys so much he’s all but spending the summer with all your mates.” The Snidget chirps again in agreement and hops into Harry’s hand.

Harry smiles and goes outside to return the bird to the enclosure their whispering of Snidgets dwell in. Severus studies the table; aside from the blood measurement and the machine, there is a pile of golden fluff in a sealed jar.

Severus holds up the jar when Harry comes back. “Is this an entire measurement?”

“There is a Snidget in that enclosure who is never going to forgive me,” Harry says, grinning. “Poor little bald bugger. At least the feathers will grow back, but it’ll take a month or two.”

“And this contraption?” Severus asks, gesturing to the tubing and the device sitting next to it.

“Got the idea from reading about heart transplants and Muggle dialysis,” Harry explains. “If you’re drawing blood from an animal and need to take more than the body can handle, what with needing moisture and oxygen, you add fluid as you’re removing the blood to purify it of whatever is wrong. In a heart transplant, you keep the blood flowing so you can swap out the organ. I sort of did both, but—well, it’s not really the same thing, taking all the blood from a bird and then putting it right back. Once I figured out the setup, I did all of this in about five minutes. Taking too long risked dead bird from lack of oxygen. The machine there, once I figured out how to make it function without electricity, pushes an electrolyte-based fluid into the bird. The electrolytes stay behind when the fluid is removed, so it gives the bird an extra boost in health and a better chance of surviving. Which it did.”

Harry sits back down, puts his wand down on the table, and then buries his hands in his wild hair. “Ho, shite. I have got to come up with less anxiety-inducing things to do first thing in the morning.”

Severus picks up the parchment Harry was writing on. Not only is there the measurement for an entire Snidget’s worth of blood, he also recorded the exact number of feathers a Snidget has by type and place on the body. It’s extremely precise work. “Did you even sleep last night?”

“Maybe.” Harry removes the tubing and puts a proper seal over the container of Snidget blood. “I used to have a lot of trouble sleeping as a kid. I remember entire nights I would just…be awake. I’d read a book in the cupboard, if I could get one and the torch was working. Once school started, I’d just stare out of a window at Hogwarts to watch the stars. Sometimes that comes back on odd days. I know I woke up early enough this morning that it was still dark out.”

Severus doesn’t know how to respond to that, so for the moment, he ignores it. “Then our options after the thirteenth are to place an entire Snidget’s worth of feathers and blood, plucked and harvested from different birds so as not to irritate the entire whisper, into the potion…”

“Just the blood alone,” Harry says.

“Just the feathers by themselves,” Severus continues.

“Or only the primary feathers,” Harry suggests, glancing at Severus.

“Oh, so you’d like to make an explosion. It’s probably the other feathers balancing that aspect out,” Severus counters, frowning.
“Maybe, but we know this potion is powerful already, or Voldemort would have spent his last days still lacking a fucking nose,” Harry replies. “If it’s nothing to do with the blood at all, that’s one way to find out.”

“Four batches, then,” Severus agrees. “That is a lot of ingredients to gather in a single lunar cycle.”

“Hedwig definitely can’t supply that much owl down by herself. I’ll raid the school owlery and ask the snowy owls who live there if they’d like to help.” Harry frowns. “Maybe the shop in Diagon Alley, too. Six and one-quarter ounces of down—that’s a lot. At least it’s dandelion season.”

“Oh, Merlin, don’t remind me,” Severus mutters. “Searching for dandelions in late August was not easy. At least at the moment, I know where to find them without wading across a blasted moor.”

“Twenty-four Opaleye scales. I wonder if anyone in New Zealand sells them who would also be trustworthy about giving us scales from a pregnant dragon.”

Severus shakes his head. “No idea, but now is the time to find out. It’s the tenth.”

“I will happily buy the Acromantula venom and the chimera blood,” Harry says. “Not in the mood to go convincing either creature to donate four ounces of venom and eight ounces of chimera blood.”

“Four. Fucking. Water. Lilies.” Severus considers burying his face in his hands. “I know where one kelpie dwells, and that one won’t be in the mood to be cooperative so soon after the last time.”

“We’ll find them,” Harry says absently, taking notes on the backside of the parchment sheet. “Honey, unicorn hair, thestral hair, Horklumps, and fire crabs are a given. Mooncalf dung is easy, just annoying. Maybe we can ask Fleur if her grandmother’s clan would take something useful in trade for four more drops of thorn-collected Veela blood.”

“You can go to Russia and deal with the damned Pogrebins,” Severus says. “Between those and the Kneazles, they’re already mad at me. It can be your turn to be loathed by those two creatures.”

“Sure, why not?” Harry taps his quill against the parchment. “And the Bowtruckle bribery for the Wiggentreed leaves?” He glances up at Severus.

“Remus,” they both say at once.

“Better him than myself. I don’t care if an actual species is the result of that sort of bribery. I am not interested in the slightest.”

“Oh, no,” Harry groans, burying his face in his hands. “Oh, this is going to be horrid.”

“What?” Severus wants to know, concerned. “What did we miss?”

“Not four batches. Eight batches!” Harry says through his hands. “Four batches with the enemy’s blood and the Snidget alterations, and four batches of the alterations without the enemy’s blood!”

“Oh, I see. You’re proposing we don’t sleep for an entire month.” Severus leans back in his chair, scowling. “Otherwise, we’ll have to do the same thing twice in a row, and that runs us right into the beginning of next term. I really, really despise the fact that you’re correct.”

“We can’t do this on our own. It’s too blasted much, not when the textbooks have to be done, too.” Harry lowers his hands. “Padma, Hermione, Draco?”

Severus nods in approval. “Astoria, Ginevra, William. I’d prefer not to have Sirius anywhere near a
cauldron, but he and Remus would probably be willing to help collect the ingredients out of the sheer boredom they’re already complaining about. Narcissa, as well.”

“Not Jade,” Harry says. “I’d rather not drop her off the deep end into Potions.”

“And not Luna, either. Her mother had great talent for it, but Luna herself is easily distracted.” Severus considers it. “Ron did help with the last batch. Perhaps he and Viktor would be willing to assist when their current responsibilities do not intrude.”

“Then there is bribing Kreacher into letting us borrow the mortar and pestle.” Harry grabs another sheet of parchment. “I’m just going to damned well buy the other things. We need them, anyway.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Dare I ask how?”

“Let’s just say the Potter family vault is one of the most daunting places I’ve ever stood in aside from the Black or the Lestrange vaults,” Harry says. “My school vault is pathetic in comparison, and it wasn’t exactly lacking. Besides, as Sirius likes to say, you can’t eat gold. Might as well do something useful with it, and make sure we can work in this laboratory.” Harry glances up when he realizes Severus is looking at him. “Now what?”

Severus raises both hands in the air in an abbreviated shrug. “I am still trying to figure out how this has become my life.”

Harry smiles. “So am I. So is Jade, Hermione, Viktor, Ron, the twins, Tonks and Oliver—I think the only person who isn’t baffled by anything that’s happened is Luna. This time last year, we were all roaming around, shell-shocked, trying to figure out what the next step was, or even if a next step existed. This time two years ago, we were all holding our breath, hearing about people disappearing or dying, and waiting for the Occupation to become a formalized nightmare instead of a looming threat. A year before that, we were in the middle of setting up Voldemort for his eventual, well-earned poisoning.

“And six years ago this July…” Harry swallows. “I didn’t know who any of you were. All I had were faces with identifying labels attached. Trust me, if you’re trying to figure out how your life got to this point? You’re not the only one.”

* * * *

The others are, thankfully, willing to assist in the experimental potion’s massive undertaking. Even more gratifying is when Sirius Black delivers an absolutely daunting amount of blood on the morning of the fourteenth, placing it on the requested laboratory shelf for east-facing sunlight. “Five pints?” Harry asks. “I’m sort of horrified.”

“It’s prison. You’ll do a hell of a lot in prison in exchange for a Galleon,” Sirius replies. “I wasn’t stupid enough to hand over hair, blood, or body parts, but our current residents of Azkaban are not exactly intelligent. Is it enough?”

“It’s a pint extra, but I’m glad,” Severus says. “We might need it. If not for this, I’m sure I can find another use.”

“Eight batches.” Sirius lets out a long breath. “You’re both insane. You’re aware, yes?”
Harry laughs. “I grew up in your house, Sirius. How could you possibly miss the fact that I’m mental?”

Dry ingredients appear in the sealed cupboard with gratifying regularity. All of them will have to be processed and measured the night of the full moon on the twenty-eighth, including the dragon scales. Those, Severus fetches from New Zealand himself. When he can’t find a merchant who can guarantee him the dragon’s state when the scales were shed, he dares the dragon reserve. That loses him a robe to an angry mother dragon’s flame, but it’s easily replaceable, and burns heal.

Luna, Jade, and Narcissa go after the Bowtruckles instead of Remus. Narcissa is delighted by the opportunity to study Chameleon Bowtruckles after Luna identifies them. Jade comes home complaining that she never wanted to watch a stick try to mate with a nightlight, and now she can’t forget witnessing it.

Harry isn’t at breakfast the morning of the seventeenth, but none of the house-elves are frantic. Severus assumes that means all is well, at least until Harry pops into the kitchen courtesy of Kreacher’s grasp on his arm.

“Hello, cranky cousin,” Essil greets Kreacher, who just snorts and mutters under his breath.

“And we’re borrowing another house-elf…why?” Severus asks.

In answer, Harry holds out the pestle to the mortar and pestle set owned by the Black family. “I had an idea. If anyone else has one of these, they’re not sharing…but what’s stopping us from finding the actual stone and crafting one ourselves?”

Luna is intrigued. “A point-me spell using a part of the stone itself! That’s a lovely idea, Harry!”

“Kreacher is along for the ride because he doesn’t want part of one of his Mistress’s things out of his sight,” Harry says.

“What sorta thing are you lookin’ for, again?” Jade asks, quirking an eyebrow at the unassuming bit of gray stone pestle.

“The stone that held the sword Excalibur, of course,” Luna says in a matter-of-fact voice.

Jade stares at Luna, then at the rest of them. “Come off it!” she says, wide-eyed. “Tha’s a myth!”

“Jade. You have a wand with which you have conjured top hats and bubble-spewing umbrellas,” Severus says in a dry voice. “Merlin was a teacher of the Hogwarts Founders. Arthur was a real king who existed in the fifth century. It was the sword aspect that the wizarding community didn’t know about until we needed to recreate this potion.”

Harry hands the pestle over to Jade. “Give it a feel.”

“That is a horrid joke t’be making right now,” Jade retorts, just before her eyes widen. “Wow. A’right then. That’s something, it is. But…Excalibur?”

“Which do you want to spend more time doing?” Harry asks, grinning at her. “Debating about a sword that might or might not have been yanked out of a rock, or broom flight?”

Jade squeals and runs for the stairs. “GETTING MY BOOTS! LEAVE WITHOUT ME, AN’ I’LL HEX YOU ALL!”

“You bought my sister a broom,” Severus says, glaring at Harry.
“Actually, I bought Luna and Jade a broom. Engagement present. I’m allowed to do things like that now,” Harry replies, still smiling. “I had to get one for myself, too, since the last broom dates to an old model of Nimbus. I might be able to outfly what Oliver and Tonks gifted you now.”

“Brat.” Severus then Summons his shoes instead of bothering with the stairs. “Luna, please tell me you know how to properly fly.”

“Flying is the only way to observe wastrels.” Luna smiles at him. “At night, of course, and only under the light of a proper crescent moon. I theorize it’s where the Muggle image of a witch upon a broomstick comes from.”

Severus pauses in the midst of lacing one shoe. “I’m assuming you do not mean wastrel.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” Luna pauses. “Though, they do tend to have periods of idleness while in flight.”

“Wastrel wastrels.” Harry tilts his head. “That better end up in the book.”

Luna smiles. “I would be neglectful of my friends if I didn’t include them.”

Once they’re outside, Jade turns the broom over and over in her hand several times, checking out the distinct curve to the handle, the notches in the wood for additional traction, the grips, and the collection of twigs. “Why twigs? Seems kinda…y’know. Trite.”

“Trees are inherently magical; different woods, different effects. We’ve had that conversation,” Severus tells her. “Wands, Jade.”

“Point.” Jade glances at Harry. “You’re the gifter. Tell m’what t’do.”

“Broom on the ground.” Harry waits while Jade gives him an odd look and places it down in the grass next to her. “Then call it to your hand.”

She stares at him. “How?”

“It’s a magical object, dearest.” Luna gives Jade a look of fond expectation.

“Right.” Jade tilts her head, holds out her hand, and lets out a gleeful squeal when the handle smacks against her palm. “Neat!”

Severus glances at Harry. “Not a word,” Harry murmurs as Luna demonstrates how to properly mount a broom to her fiancée. Severus nods in agreement; he isn’t going to be the one to tell Jade that she keeps performing non-vocal spells at a stage of learning when it’s entirely unexpected.

Jade is not a natural flier, but Luna is slow and sedate on a broom, which helps to keep Severus’s sister from feeling like an immediate failure for not taking to broom flight right away.

Severus waits in the air with Harry, arms crossed, as Luna patiently guides Jade around the field in front of the house. If it weren’t for Disillusionment Charms already in place, the local village would be very, very confused at the moment. “Did it have to be a Firebolt Absolute, Harry?”

Harry shrugs, shoving his hair back from his eyes when the wind blows it over his face. “Nimbus had a terrible year, and their model is shite in comparison. Besides, if something ever goes wrong and speed is required, I’d rather be flying something capable of outpacing everyone else.”

“I admit, I cannot fault that logic.” Severus watches Jade swing upside down, keeping her legs wrapped around the broom, one hand on the handle and the other rescuing her hat before it has the
chance to hit the ground. Then she swings back up into place and reseats herself properly. “That was well done.”

“Jade might not be a natural for flight, but she used to be a gymnast. Gave it up when she had to concentrate on uni.” Harry smiles and waves at the other two. “Come on! This will take all day if you two keep zipping around the field!”

When Jade and Luna reach their altitude, Jade is grinning so hard it’s a wonder she isn’t cracking her face. “This is th’ best. You’re an awful brother for not getting’ me a broom sooner, Severus Prince!”

Severus glares at Harry. “It was to be a birthday gift. Now I will have to think of something else.”

“As if you don’t keep contingency lists,” Harry replies. “Kreacher!”

Kreacher pops into place, standing on Harry’s broom handle, before he sits down on the broom itself. “Kreacher is being ready,” the old elf says gruffly, and then hands Harry the pestle.

“Right. Let’s see what we can find.” Harry rests the pestle in his left hand and touches it with his wand tip. A moment later, he lurches forward, wide-eyed, with a white-knuckled grip on his wand. “Fuck! Okay! Yes, that was definitely a result. I almost lost my bloody wand!”

Severus watches as Harry pulls his wand back like he’s fighting an invisible magnet. “A Point-Me spell is usually not that strong.”

“Yes, but how many of us have ever pointed at…well, this particular rock?” Harry counters. He hands the pestle back to Kreacher, who clutches it in one hand while holding onto the broom with the other. “South by south-east. I don’t think it’s all that far, either. Maybe fifty miles.”

“Then we can take our time!” Luna exclaims, pleased. “That is a very short broom flight.”

“Oh. Well. Tha’s good.” Jade is looking down at the ground, which is now very far below them. “An’ none o’ you lot are worried ‘bout falling?” She doesn’t seem concerned, though it’s a wise question to ask.

“I can fly without a broom,” Severus says, which makes Jade glare at him. “You can also Apparate, Jade.”

“Barring that? Kreacher would be able to rescue you,” Harry says. Kreacher’s perpetual scowl deepens, but he doesn’t object.

“Right, then.” Jade pulls her hat firmly down so it will stay in place. “Let’s go find this stone thingy.”

It is, indeed, a short broom flight over fields and tiny villages before Harry’s wand begins to direct them towards the ground. “Where are we?” Jade asks. She’s kept up with their flight, sometimes outpacing them, and has utterly lost her concern over their height relative to the ground. Severus blames her chosen academic profession for the swift adjustment.

He consults his internal aerial map of Britain. “Catterick, I think. I hope this particular rock isn’t sitting in the middle of a garden.”

“Hold on, let’s take a flight around it. We can’t just land our brooms in the middle of town in full daylight, anyway.” Harry leads them around the village, though he’s clenching his jaw in a way that suggests he’s fighting the pull of his wand the entire time. “Not in the village proper,” he finally says. “East, just before the river—that cluster of trees protecting the field right before the riverbank.”
“The trees will also disguise our landing, if there are no Muggles about,” Luna points out, smiling. They either have Merlin’s own timing, or the local residents have chosen other areas of the River Swale for recreation that day. They land in the field, which is full of one of England’s great crops—rocks. “Harry?” Severus asks.

Harry is in the midst of tripping over his broom as his wand drags him southwest of their landing point. His destination appears to be a cluster of rocks sprouting up from the ground, all of them just as dull and unassuming as the pestle and mortar.

The closer they walk, the more intense the feel of old magic becomes, until it’s like breathing it in through the air. “Wow,” Jade says in a soft hush.

Luna has her eyes closed as she follows Jade. “It’s beautiful. It’s like magic is singing.”

“Finis incantatio, Finis incantatio, I am not going to dig my wand out of this stupid rock!” Harry is shouting. The pull on his wand eases all at once, causing Harry to almost topple backwards off the rock pile before he recovers his balance. “It isn’t just a single stone. It’s all of them, this entire cluster!”

“A node that was centered and anchored in stone,” Luna says. “I don’t think anyone has known how to do that since the same was done to Hogwarts.”

Severus glances at her. “That isn’t written down anywhere that I’m aware of. The portraits in my office are the ones who informed me. How did you know?”

“I didn’t.” Luna smiles and pats the nearest stone. “It just makes perfectly logical sense when confronted with other evidence.”

“Ravenclaw,” Severus says with absolute fondness. He wasn’t sure what it would be like to have one as a sister-in-law, but without the social detritus of Hogwarts in the way, he finds he enjoys her presence—and her exceptional reasoning.

“Luna.” Harry is frowning down at the stones. “I don’t—I can’t figure out where to even begin. I’m not even sure if we should. You’ve always been better at this sort of thing than I am. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Luna replies, and makes her serene, unhurried away around the stones. Then she clambers back and forth over the pile a few times, her head tilted as she listens to the music she claimed to hear. She makes one more complete, counter-clockwise circle around the cluster before picking up a stone the size of a Quaffle. Severus knows it was not there a moment ago. “This one. If you ask nicely, sometimes you are granted very kind answers. The magic was quite pleased with us. Others only took.”

Harry accepts the stone from Luna when she offers it. “This feels different than the other mortar and pestle.”

“Because they were taken,” Luna repeats patiently. “This one will do much better work once it has been shaped.”

“I can’t fly carrying this thing.” Harry glances down at Kreacher. “Would you mind taking myself, this rock, and my broom back to the Peverell House?”

Kreacher looks up from where he is caressing one of the node-imbued stones. “Kreacher will do so,” he says, without a trace of gruffness at all. “Kreacher was young when wizards still knew how to talk to the magic. It is good to be seeing it again.”
“We’ll fly back,” Severus says, pretending to ignore Jade’s victory dance as she runs around in circles with her broom held over her head. “See you in about an hour.”

“Sure,” Harry agrees. Then Kreacher grasps his arm, Disapparating with Harry, broom, and stone.

When they return to the house, Severus leaves Jade and Luna chasing each other in circles around the field. He goes inside, trying to figure out where to even put a broom when they have no coat closet, before Winky appears and holds out her arms to take the broom. “They is a hidden area. I be showin’ you later,” she promises, and disappears with a pop.

Severus listens to the house and goes straight back to the laboratory to find Harry there with Narcissa, who is studying the Quaffle-sized stone with an air of utter wonder.

“Severus, you can’t tell anyone where this was found,” she says, not even bothering with a greeting. “If other wizards and witches knew of it…”

“They would strip it down in no time. I’m aware. Hello, Narcissa.”

“Good afternoon, Severus.” Narcissa glances up at him, a radiant smile on her face. “Harry called me and asked if I would be willing to carve the mortar and pestle, given my artistic background. He’s granted me such an honor, Severus.”

“He was being practical,” Severus counters, and Harry smiles.

“However.” Harry grins at Narcissa. “If you can figure out how to get a dual set out of this single stone, then the other one is yours. Consider it pre-payment on some grand, Black-like favor for me or, oh, my descendants.”

Narcissa laughs. “Darling little Slytherin-Gryffindor. You’ve challenged me on two fronts. I will do my best to complete it in seven days, as I know you need it by nightfall on the twenty-eighth.”

“We do, yeah.” Harry holds up a differing marble mortar and pestle set to indicate the size required.

Narcissa turns the rock around in her hands. “One large and one small, I should think, but even a small set would be an incredible gift. Do you have a quiet place for me to work? I cannot be distracted while carving this stone.”

Severus shows her to an empty room on the upper floor’s opposite wing, where no one yet resides. The house-elves, upon hearing what is needed, are quick to comply by supplying a workbench, comfortable seating, a tea tray, and a globe that emits lights like the slow, meditative blinking of fireflies.

“We won’t be interrupting you unless you call for us,” Delinka promises Narcissa. “We be knowing better than to startle a witch at work.”

Narcissa nods. “I appreciate your consideration.” She frowns. “However, if you and your fellow elves recognize that I’ve spent more than eight hours at work without food or drink, enter the room, wait until I am not actively using my wand, and get my attention. I will be snappish over the interruption, but I will understand at once when you inform me of my delay.”

“That will be what we is doing, then,” Delinka says, and pops out of the room.

“Have you made a decision regarding your next place of residency?” Severus asks, watching as Narcissa Summons specific tools to her craft before placing the stone on the center of the workbench.
“Severus, this house is amazing,” she admits. “But I do not yet know if it is…befitting is the incorrect word. Once Harry finalizes his adoption of Hermione as his legal sister and Heir, as you did Jade, this is going to be the home of two families. I fear I would very much feel like a loose stone rolling around. Pun not intended, of course.”

“Then what of this: the lower west wing of the house has been entirely set aside for guests in a desire to be…politic,” Severus says. “It would be no hardship to set aside one of those suites as permanent guest quarters for you and you alone. You would be free to come and go as you wish without feeling as if you were beholden to a household.”

Narcissa smiles at him. “That sounds like quite the long-term bribe…or payment.”

Severus bows his head. “Narcissa, you once saved my life. Such an offer is only appropriate.”

*          *          *          *

In the days approaching the full moon, while Narcissa busies herself with crafting a mortar and pestle, Harry busies himself in actually turning their laboratory into a completed workspace. Five workbenches appear, along with a second storage cupboard standing next to the first. On one bench are two full distillation setups; one of standard glass, and one of exceptionally fine crystal. On a third table, by itself except for gold, silver, and glass measuring scales, is another full distillation system made from carved quartz. Three different racks on the northern wall are devoted to the differing types of beakers, bottles, cylinders, flasks, phials, pipettes, beakers, and stirring rods, each in the corresponding material of the distillation setups. The ceiling is high enough to also act as storage space, and two rows of cauldrons of every conceivable metal line the room from north to south. The metal stirring rods and ladles which match the cauldrons are stored in the second, newer cupboard, along with more standard types of mortars and pestles of varying sizes, knives of differing metals, half of which look to be goblin-crafted, and cutting boards from several different types of wood. Genius little atrocious brat.

“I feel like I’m being spoiled,” Severus comments, glancing up at the dual rows of cauldrons. “However, that is still only two pyrite cauldrons. We’ll need six more, at least on a temporary basis.”

“It’s not spoiling, it’s called having the necessary tools to do the damned job properly the first time,” Harry retorts crossly. He’s standing on a wooden stepladder, using his wand to affix a drying rack to the ceiling on the far side of the laboratory, where drying herbs will be in prime position to enjoy the heat of western sunlight. “Those two cauldrons were almost impossible to find, and you do not want to know what I paid for them. I’m going to be borrowing the other six cauldrons from the Ministry.”

“Are they aware of this?” Severus asks dryly.

“War hero. I could ask for someone’s first-born and I’m sort of terrified that they’d just find one and hand them over,” Harry replies. “I think I’ll use that influence when we’re done to make sure Hogwarts gets a pyrite cauldron. We should fucking well have one.”

“Senile damned Sorting Hat.”

“Still Draco’s fault for doing an excellent impersonation of Dudley Dursley at his absolute worst,” Harry says. “Besides, late Sortings look to be improving things at Hogwarts. Let’s just stick with that.”
“That was the plan, yes.”

The moment the sun has officially set at six-thirty on the evening on the twenty-eighth, Narcissa presents them with a completed mortar and pestle set large enough to easily grind up whole dragon scales without needing to crack them in half or quarter-pieces first. “Will it suit?” she asks, a sly smile on her face.

“It’s bloody gorgeous,” Harry says, tracing along the inside of the bowl with one finger. “You should definitely introduce that stone-working course you were thinking about for the upper-year art students.”

“Thank you, Harry.”

“Thank you, Narcissa. This would be a venture we’d otherwise be forced to repeat in Sirius’s cramped laboratory, and it’s occupied these days by busy werewolves,” Severus says.

Narcissa pats his arm. “I never thought I would see the day when either of us would be concerned as to the welfare of werewolves at all.”

“Nor did I.” Severus frowns. “One of Sirius and Remus’s newest tenants is a ten-year-old who was thrown into the street by his family. They labeled him a Squib instead of a werewolf in order to ‘spare themselves the shame of a werewolf child’ which is apparently worse than if the boy had indeed been a Squib. I am reminding myself that I’m not allowed to Apparate to certain places and murder the deserving anymore.”

“Will this one be at Hogwarts in the fall?” Narcissa asks.

Severus nods. “He will be eleven on the thirty-first of August. He will not be the only werewolf student, but with the Lycanthropy’s Bane Potion, none will not come down furry and ill with every full moon.”

“You are a good man, Severus Prince,” Narcissa says in a low voice.

“Still rubbish,” he replies, and sets to work on refining, compounding, and measuring dry ingredients with Harry at his side. Eight batches means the work literally takes all night, even after Draco, Astoria, and Hermione arrive in order to assist.

“Bugger all of this,” Draco declares after the dry ingredients have been packed away in their quartz containers, hidden in a dark cabinet before the sun can rise. “It really will take all of us working to make sure eight batches of this stupid potion are completed.”

Harry glances down at the half-Kneazle who ignored the locked laboratory door and came inside anyway. “And Crookshanks needs to set to work on finding us some more arthritic, aging mice.”

“The dandelions, Acromantula venom, and the honey?” Hermione asks, bending down long enough to scratch her cat’s ears.

“Tomorrow,” Severus declares. “After we all have the chance to sleep. No one is to take chances with Acromantula venom.”

“I would like to not volunteer for Acromantula venom work,” Astoria says. “It makes my eyes water fiercely even from across the room if a jar is unsealed. I’ll ask William to swap out for me. What day?”

Severus glances at Harry, who shrugs. “The thirtieth, I suppose. Then this idiot has a birthday.”
“I don’t—need anything,” Harry tries to protest. “Really.”

Draco looks at Harry like he’s being exceptionally stupid. “Potter. Shut up and let us gather ’round on the thirty-first and embarrass the life out of you for your nineteenth birthday.” He smiles. “Consider it revenge for what you absolute bastards did to me last month.”

Harry rolls his eyes and gives up. “Fine. Revenge it is. Just remember that it gives me an entire year to plot for your twentieth birthday, Malfoy, and Astoria has already agreed to assist.”

“Astoria!”

Astoria grins at her fiancée. “Fair is fair, love.”

Draco, William, Hermione, Harry, Padma, and Severus work overnight on the thirtieth to decant the eight batches of Acromantula venom to stew with dandelions and honey. At least all that is required afterwards is that the eight jars sit in the east window, waiting until the night of the new moon.

Severus bids the others good night and goes upstairs as dawn breaks the sky on the thirty-first. He intends on remaining awake for the day, if only to take pleasure in Harry’s bafflement over the idea of birthdays.

“He was that way in 1992,” Ron confided to Severus during his delivery of mooncalf dung, gathered up in eight quartz jars. “He wouldn’t tell me why, but I suspect.”

“The Dursleys,” Severus muttered.

Ron nodded. “Harry acted like we’d gone out of our way, or inconvenienced ourselves. After the Obliviation, it was just a confusing notion for a few years. Then he decided it was an anniversary method of saying ‘Fuck you’ to Voldemort.”

Severus is working on sorting the notes he made on the old sixth-year textbook when Harry comes into the office and surprises him by dropping two books on Severus’s desk with a solid thunk. “Happy birthday to me,” Harry announces.

Severus picks up the first of the two black-bound, silver-lettered books. He likes the title at once, which is far less pretentious than the out-of-date text it’s replacing: Draughts and Potions for Any Beginner. “This is my textbook for first- through third-year students?”

“My students, thank you. And yes, absolutely, one hundred percent done. One less shite textbook in our arsenal,” Harry says, and then yawns.

Severus glances up at him. “If I cast a stunning hex on you without using my wand, would you fall over?”

“Yep.”

“Go to bed, idiot,” Severus tells him, opening the book to investigate. “At this rate, you’ve lost that wager for certain.”

“Oh, I gave up on that partway through the month. Jade is already threatening me with movies about something called Ewoks while cackling, so it’s sure to be an experience to immediately try and forget. Oh, and if you send the second copy to the printer’s, they’re expecting it.” Harry waves at him and then staggers off to bed to nap for a few hours.

He watches Harry go and shakes his head. Severus has been pushing himself hard, trying to work on
both textbooks as well as the eight damned batches of the youth potion experiment, but he suspects Harry has spent most of July not sleeping at all.

Severus’s notes are forgotten as he spends the rest of the morning perusing the new textbook. His intent was to check it for errors, given Harry’s erratic schedule, but it is also utterly fascinating to read a book for young dunderheads that might actually keep their attention for more than five seconds.

He needn’t have bothered searching for errors. The book is flawless, just like the seventh-year text that Harry presented him with last year.

The replacement textbook for Severus’s O.W.L. studies students has been ready for the last three days, but Severus held off, suspecting it would be joined by another. It’s nice to have been proven right. The title for the fourth- and fifth-year text looks pretentious by comparison, even though he was nothing less than honest: Intermediate Potions with an Introduction to Healing Draughts.

Severus packages up both books, along with a pre-written letter he’d set aside for the occasion. Both books and letter are sent off to the printers by owl under a rush order—one thousand copies of each, billed to Hogwarts’ primary account before being displayed for purchase in Flourish and Blotts.

Harry’s birthday is that evening, an hour before their usual dinnertime. Jade and Luna plotted the event so that Severus could keep his hands out of the entire affair, aside from the need to attend. Dudley drives up from the south, accompanied by a woman named Elisa Escobar he’s been dating. Elisa’s ethnicity is causing Petunia Dursley to all but bite a hole through her bottom lip in silent disapproval. Jade meets them in Bampton, where Dudley leaves their car, before they walk south along the road to cut through the woods. With the Disillusionment charms in place, the pair would otherwise become convinced they were in the wrong location and try to find the Peverell House elsewhere. Elisa takes realities such as “magic,” “magical house,” and “house-elves” in stride, as only the way someone who teaches primary school could manage.

To the delight of their cadre of house-elves, the house now holds the most guests it’s seen since last Christmas. They expand the kitchen table and then push back the kitchen wall, revealing that the area serves a dual purpose as vast formal dining room as well as their more intimate kitchen. That restructuring hadn’t been necessary for the holiday event; tables had been set up in the front courtyard, the entire area treated to warming charms, which kept the more private areas of the house mostly undisturbed.

Sirius, Remus, Jade, Luna, Hermione, Viktor, and every Weasley ginger with their associated spouses, dating partners, and one toddler put in an appearance. Narcissa, Draco, Astoria, and Alice arrive together; Andromeda, Tonks and Oliver bring Theodorea and Ted, who are proving that the Metamorphmagi traits bred true by turning their tufts of hair different colors as the whim strikes. Katie and Millicent attend with still no announced engagement mentioned in either wizarding newspapers; Minerva, Poppy, Rubeus, and Olympe join them, as does Lavender Brown, Argus and Alberta—Jade is such a Slytherin for that decision and Severus loves her for it. The elves even find seating that Olympe and Rubeus can use without chancing shattered wood. Cedric and Cho Chang are only a few minutes late, and in Lee Jordan’s company, though he now lacks Nandini; the Doctors Granger and Kingsley Shacklebolt arrive by Floo. The latter seems to have ulterior motives about trying to tempt Harry over to the M.L.E.

Severus thinks of the laboratory beyond the kitchen and smiles. Kingsley doesn’t have a chance in hell of convincing Harry to give up Potions and Hogwarts for detective work.

Molly Weasley brings a cake, which is one of the ugliest, least formal cakes Severus has ever laid eyes upon. Harry stares at it, unblinking, before he gets up out of his chair and hugs Molly for
several minutes. Molly bites her lip and looks like she’s on the verge of crying, but whatever Harry says to her is spoken in such a low voice that Severus can’t make it out.

Aside from the cake incident, the party is entirely informal, which seems to be Harry’s preference. His guests know him well enough not to bring ridiculous gifts; most of them are books, a combination of wizarding texts and Muggle fiction. Severus purchased Harry a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. If he has to suffer through that monstrosity, he will not be the only one.

Narcissa, Draco, and Astoria continue the quill tradition they began last year. They gift Harry with a solid silver ink nib attached to the long, pristine blue-green and gold feather from a Superb Starling—a perfect match for the sigil’s colors Harry activated on the left side of the staircase.

There is nothing overtly frivolous about the evening, aside from Jade’s insistence that glittering snow drifts down from the ceiling. At least water is edible and doesn’t ruin food. The night is mostly devoted to a flow of conversation among adults who’ve seen too much, with perhaps a bit too much alcohol taken from the wine cellar, and an air of contentment that Severus never once suspected he would ever feel in his life.
The evening of the eleventh of August, Hermione and Viktor arrive at dusk with twelve different shrunken cages. Expanding the cages reveals twelve different mice, definitely long-time veteran vermin who are potentially on the verge of expiring before the night is over. Harry has temporarily acquired more workbenches along with the additional pyrite cauldrons; the brewing instructions are copied out on parchment next to each workstation.

“You must be exact,” Severus warns their assistants in a grave voice. “If any part of this brewing process is done incorrectly, it utterly ruins the point of the evening. I do not wish to repeat this; it is too much of an absolute pain in the backside to put together this sort of mass experiment.”

Astoria, Draco, William, Padma, Hermione, and Ginevra all glance at each other, but these are seasoned brewers who all made Os on their Potions N.E.W.T.s. “We’ve got this, Severus,” William says, smiling. “Let’s de-age some mice come morning, huh?”

Padma grins. “Shields, so many shields. I don’t want to wear a potential blunder.”

With eight of them available, it means each of them can concentrate on a single cauldron and its necessary ingredients. Severus feels less rushed throughout the process. He knows this, now. He knows how the potion will react, why and how the times are right for the necessary additions. He is done by four in the morning, staring at a brew that matches the pyrite of the cauldron it was brewed in. He had the closest match to the original formula—enemy’s blood, the amount of blood held by a Snidget, and all of a Snidget’s feathers. The whisper had taken very well to having their blood drawn in stages, and at losing various feathers but not all of them at once. The Snidget that is still growing out all his feathers is sulking towards the back of the enclosure, hiding under one of Pyrrhus’s wings.

The potion feels exactly the same to his senses as the original did. That doesn’t necessarily make it a success.

A sudden, liquidy explosion makes him turn around just in time to see metallic fluid splash within the confines of well-constructed Protego shielding. “Well, then!” Hermione yells, sounding rather gleeful. “Primary feathers by themselves do not work with the enemy’s blood batch!”

Harry glances at Hermione, looks at the cauldron he’s been using, and fetches an extra beaker of Snidget’s blood from the windowsill. He was, Severus remembers, working on the potion that would try primary feathers without enemy’s blood. Instead of only the primary feathers, however, Harry adds both the Snidget blood and feathers.

“Why did you do that?” Severus asks, curious. The potion doesn’t have the same messy, partially explosive reaction that Hermione’s did. In fact, it doesn’t seem to mind the alteration at all.

“It just felt like the right thing to do,” Harry says. He gives it a careful stir with the silver rod, head tilted. “Right color, and it sounds correct.”

“Then two possible successes—or perhaps proof that not all the feathers of a Snidget are necessary.” Severus glances at Harry. “That was excellent thinking.”

“Luna would call it ‘drawing the logical conclusion,’” Harry says.

The two potions that only use Snidget’s blood both turn an unsavory bronze, though neither of them feel toxic. The two potions that receive only Snidget feathers turn a horrific oxidized copper green, and are not safe to use on anything, ever. William winces over his and then Vanishes it without
needing to be told. Padma glances over, nods her agreement, and does the same.

The cauldron Ginevra worked on, Snidget feathers and Snidget’s blood but lacking enemy’s blood, is also the same rich pyrite of a successful youth potion. “All right, then,” she says, stepping back once she’s completed every step. “This is either a good sign, or I’m going to be haunted by an angry mouse.”

“Well, two of the little buggers don’t have anything to worry about except to sit there and act like good little control mice,” William says, dropping a few sunflower seeds into each cage. “Enjoy your retirement, guys.”

After a brief discussion, two cages are placed on either side of the remaining six cauldrons. The left cage is marked with a bright red swath of green to denote the pre-sunrise testing mouse. “Silver ladles, quartz beakers for sampling, and quartz pipettes,” Harry reminds them.

Severus tilts his head at his pre-dawn mouse, snags it long enough to remove some of its fur, and drops the fur in the test beaker. The results are still exactly the same as they’d been in September of 1997. He breathes out, puts a mouse’s dose into the quartz pipette, and then feeds it to the angry, bald-patched mouse before it can bite him. The mouse looks entertainingly boggled when it suddenly becomes young and juvenile in appearance, all at once.

The bronzed potion doesn’t kill the mouse. Instead, the mouse is hyperactive to the point where Hermione stuns it, concerned the mouse will literally run itself into suffering cardiac arrest.

“Got a success,” Ginevra says in surprise.

“I did, too,” Harry adds.

“As did I.” Severus pulls out his pocket watch and checks the time. “Sunrise is at six. We can break for an hour and return.”

The elves must have spent most of the night fretting, considering the breakfast spread they lay out on the table in record time. Severus ignores most of it in favor of coffee, wanting to be able to be alert and functional for the rest of the morning.

“What do you think, Harry?” Hermione is asking.

Harry is still staring in the direction of the lab enclosure. “I’m thinking that if you’d added primary feathers with Snidget blood instead of the feathers alone, that would have been a fourth success.”

“Because the other successes worked with or without enemy’s blood.” Draco scowls. “If it works fine with that ingredient missing, then what is it even listed for?”

Severus shuts his eyes and puts his head down on the table. “Merlin, I haven’t missed something so obvious in years!”

“What? What is it?” Astoria sounds excited. “You’ve figured it out; you have to tell us!”

“I don’t have to do any such thing,” Severus mutters into the table, but he lifts his head and looks at the others. “Kreacher said that Walburga repeated this potion every five years…but where was she getting eight ounces of enemy’s blood each time?”

Harry raises his eyebrows. “Kreacher!”

The elf pops into the kitchen, rubbing at his eyes before scowling at Harry. “It is being time to
“sleep,” he insists. “What does Master Harry want?”

“When your Mistress made the Appearance of Youth potion, did she use enemy’s blood?” Harry asks.

Kreacher scratches his liver-spotted, palsied ear. “No, no enemy’s blood. That is a suspicious ingredient to be fetching, so the Mistress never used it.”

“Thanks, Kreacher. Go on back to bed, okay?” Kreacher gives them all a suspicious look before Disapparating.

Severus is resting his face in his hand, feeling like an unobservant idiot. “Enemy’s blood is for permanence. Without that blood, the potion must be repeated every five years. With the blood…”

“You never have to worry about it again.” Draco glances back towards the laboratory. “Wedding gift, Severus.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Of course that would be your first concern.”

“It would save us from trying to figure out what to give to two people who literally could buy anything,” Harry says dryly.

That is also a valid point. “There are only seven doses, Draco. Minerva gets the first one for not killing me at any point during the Occupation’s school term.”

“Then there are four left,” Draco replies, grinning.

Hermione shakes her head. “I’m really not all that fussed about it. If I ever decide I’m that vain, we have a working five-year version that doesn’t involve stealing someone’s blood—which I would prefer to avoid, by the way.”

Severus doesn’t realize that Harry has slipped away until he returns with Jade and Luna. “Two left.”

Jade rubs at her eyes and then glares at Harry. “Please explain why I am awake afore the sun’s up, y’daf berk.”

“Wedding present.”

Luna recognizes what’s going on before Jade does. “Oh, there are successes with the potion! Wonderful. If two samples remain, they should go to Argus and Alberta.”

Severus finds himself smiling. “That, Luna, it a very wise, kind decision.”

“They’ll all but lose their minds,” William smiles. “And if anyone’s wondering, I’m of Hermione’s mind on this one. I’m not fussed, and Fleur won’t ever need it. The five-year version will be repeatable and available if I ever change my mind. Right?”

Harry nods. “That was the idea, yeah.”

“I don’t want the permanent version,” Luna announces. “Give mine to Molly Weasley.”

William and Ginevra offer her near-identical looks of comical surprise. “You’re sure?”

“Why not?” Luna counters. “She did quite a bit for all of us. If Jade doesn’t mind…”

“I’m no’ even twenty-four yet. I’m chuffed wi’ th’ way I am,” Jade grumbles, and then buries her
face in a tea cup.

“Then Kingsley Shacklebolt,” Luna says decisively. “He is going to be very, very busy for a long time yet. He should have the physical longevity to carry him through as Minister for Magic on our behalf.”

“My very wise friend,” Harry says, and leans over to kiss Luna’s cheek. “That’s a fine idea.”

“Besides.” Ginevra gestures towards the laboratory. “It isn’t as if we don’t have fourteen other five-year samples, as long as they all prove to work after sunup. We could sell them…or, oh, give them away. After all, there are twelve more teachers who were with us during the Occupation.”

“If no one objects…I’d like for the last two doses to go to my parents,” Padma says. She’s staring down at her hands and the collection of gold rings on her fingers, turning them in the light to cause the patterned metal to refract light in different patterns. “Parvati and I put them through a lot, refusing to leave Hogwarts when they demanded we do so, and then terrifying the life out of them by participating in the battle. Now they’re all but losing their minds over the idea that we’re dating someone who is most decidedly not Hindu. A peace offering would be no bad thing at this juncture.”

“I have no objections,” Severus tells her. “But next time, they will have to buy it from a shelf like everyone else.”

Padma smiles. “Well, that’s just proper then, isn’t it?”

It does not surprise Severus very much when all potions that involved Snidget primary feathers (or all feathers) with Snidget blood test as successful, before and after sunrise. It is a pleasing result, though. With the right sort of planning, this could be a venture that will support his familial lineage, reborn through Jade and Luna’s children, for decades to come.

*          *          *          *

On the thirteenth of August, Severus, Jade, and Luna are present when Harry greets Hermione when the latter topples out of the Floo after attending one of Viktor’s latest games, elimination matches for the final game on the twentieth. By the glow on her face, Bulgaria is still a contender.

Harry gives her no time to announce the news and thrusts a Ministry-sealed scroll into her hands after Hermione’s had the chance to dust off. “Might want to read this, first,” he suggests. “Then you can lose your mind over your fiancé’s success.”

Hermione gives him a suspicious look, but cracks the scroll and begins to read aloud:

“This is to officiate——” Hermione breaks off, her eyes welling up with suspicious moisture. “This is to officiate that on this thirteenth day of August 1999, one Hermione Jean Granger, born to Jeanette Helen Brown and William George Granger on 19th September 1979 in London, England, the United Kingdom of Britain, has been formally declared an adopted sister and Heir of the Potter family by one Harry James Potter, born 31st July 1980 in Godric’s Hollow, England, the United Kingdom of Wizarding Britain.

Per the requested change of name, Hermione Jean Granger is henceforth to be referred to in all legal and magical matters as Hermione Jean Potter. All biological children of Hermione Jean
Hermione flings herself at Harry, who was expecting that sort of reaction. Jade gives vent to a great sniff and then leans against Severus, who wraps his arm around her shoulders.

“What a delightfully odd family we shall have,” Luna says in her dreamy voice.

“Family. That reminds me,” Severus leaves Jade and Luna to become roaming handkerchiefs for Hermione’s sopping response and goes to the portraits of Ignotus and Karânî. Ignotus seems to be in the middle of a nap, but Karânî is awake, as if she was waiting for him to arrive at that very moment.

“Greetings, distant grand-nephew. You have questions lurking in your eyes.”

“At least one,” Severus admits. “Last November, you said that the Houses will be joined together again—that the Peverell line will be whole.”

“I did say that, yes,” Karânî says.

“Is this what you meant?” he asks. “The lineages continuing through mine and Harry’s adopted siblings and their children?”

Karânî smiles at him. “No, it isn’t what I was referring to at all.”

Severus frowns. “What, then?”

“When you are ready, you will know.”

“Ah. Divinatory cryptic nonsense,” Severus mutters. He should have known better than to expect a simple explanation.

Karânî laughs in delight. “You should not be so disparaging of such things, not when your sister by impending marriage carries her own gift of Sight. All your descendants may find it to again be a part of their line.”

“Divination didn’t seem to prevent Antioch’s death,” Severus observes dryly.

“Antioch always had a terrible habit of drinking too much. The grape would have meant his early death, even if he had not accompanied such with foolish boasting. His children were raised by myself and Ignotus in this very house. Both Alyna and Lucas had their own gifts of Sight, though dear Alyna passed while attempting to birth her first child.”

Severus lifts his head. “I wasn’t aware of any of this.”

“The wing of the home that Ignotus and I face, the wing that their parents, Mariot Uxor and Allanus Peverell face—these halls hold the portraits of the line of Potter, including the two that Harry added near Ioanes and Lucretia.” Karânî looks sad for a moment. “You see, it did not take long for our children to realize how dangerous it could be for others to mistakenly believe we held Death’s own Elder Wand. Our eldest daughter Iolanthe married Hardwin de Brus of Godric’s Hollow, a young man who’d taken to being called Potter after his chosen craft. Iolanthe’s sisters and their husbands all
chose the same new family name. None lost access to the Peverell home by doing so, though by the late 1700s, for varying reasons, only descendants of Iolanthe’s line remained. Cadmus’s only heir, Petrus, wed gentle Agnes of Voreda. She gave birth to a daughter, Milesenta, who married into the Gaunt family. Afterwards, none of us ever saw the pair again. We only knew what became of them when you informed us as to that line’s fate. The Peverell name lasted longest in Antioch’s line, though sadly that was but for a few generations before hard times befell your ancestors, and they lost the knowledge of how to seek out the family home. If you enter Antioch’s wing upstairs, the portraits at the very end of the hallway will show you the first two generations of Antioch’s line: Alya, Lucas and his wife Diana, and their twin sons Arkil’ and Aylmer’ just as they came of age. They shared a triad marriage with a distant cousin of mine from Al-Mari’yah, which you now call Seville, but we have no painting of Lyra or their children.”

“What of the others, then? There are far more portraits than those, and many of them do not speak or bear names.”

Karânî sighs. “When Mariot and Allanus’s portraits were painted, the magic that gave us portraits memory and personality to represent our living counterparts were not yet common, and still quite expensive—worse, the trade was considered secretive. If an artist died before you had the means to purchase the charms that would give voice to a portrait, then they are forever silent, even if they move; the artists tied their works to themselves so that no one else could alter them. Such is the case with many of the portraits in the upper wings, most of whom predate my birth. They are of magic workers of great renown in the British Isles. Many are those who survived the Christian magical purges of the fifth century.

“We are not always wise beings, grand-nephew. It was thought that such identifying words would never be necessary, as someone would always dwell in the house who would be taught the names and importance of those other portraits.”

Ignous snorts awake and shakes off what looks to have been an unexpected nap. “Oh, yes, our other portraits! We can help you to name them, though it will require bringing them down from upstairs and presenting the portraits to us directly. There is even a set depicting baby-faced Myrddin Wyllt and Arthwys ap Mar making cow eyes at each other across the hall.”

Mryddin—Severus’s eyes widen in disbelief after he translates the name. “I am aware wizards often have long life-spans, but…Merlin? The man would have to have been at least five hundred years old by the time of Hogwarts’ founders!”

“Gray-bearded grumpy bastard by then, too, from what my great-great-grandfather Salazar told us tiny ones before he passed,” Ignous says. “Arthwys is the family member responsible for those pretty eyes my brother had, so you can rightly blame my mother for that if your families have children with blue eyes. You go upstairs to Cadmus’s wing. You’ll find Arthwys’s portrait by that feature alone, with Mryddin and Cywair right across the way.”

“Arthwys.” Severus tries not to slap his hand over his face. “Dear God, it’s a wonder Harry wasn’t dragged by his own wand over fifty miles of British countryside for casting that spell to find the stone.”

Ignous tilts his head. “Hmm. Yes, that…that might actually have been something important to mention, wouldn’t it?”

“It would, yes. Be relieved that your many-times great-grandson is an excellent Quidditch player.”

Ignous lights up like a Muggle Christmas tree. “Oh, that’s excellent! You simply must yank me down from this wall so I can view a game at some point soon!” he declares. Karânî rolls her eyes to
signify long tolerance of another’s love affair with the sport.

_I have portraits that half of the wizarding world would kill for in my home_, Severus thinks in amusement, _and all one of them cares about is Quidditch._ “How did you come by such portraits of Arthur, Cywair, and Merlin?”

“My mother’s people were from Guotodin, up in the Old North—those who’d been Votadini before the Roman Empire ditched the isles. A fine lady of the Guotodin line married Arthur’s second son, who conveniently disappears from the Muggle records when he became part of the wizarding lineages. You would use the term matrilineal, I believe?” Ignotus peers at Severus for confirmation. Receiving a nod, he continues. “They intermarried with Wessex families when that kingdom got pushy and regained control of the region from the Danelaw, but kept to the old traditions. By the time the man who began my father’s line, Ridel Peverell, came to England with the invading Norman armies, the portraits of Myrddin, Arthwys, and Cywair were long-established family heirlooms.”

“We’re related to bloody King Arthur?” Harry asks in disbelief.

Severus glances over his shoulder, noting that Harry, Luna, Hermione, and Jade have edged over to listen in. He’d been aware of their presence, just politely ignoring it. “Harry, half of Great Britain could probably claim such.”

“Not in their direct line of descent, they can’t!”

Luna smiles. “No wonder the rocks liked us so much. Such wonderful family magic, recognizing us all!”

Jade glances at Luna in confusion. “We’re not married yet, m’love.”

Luna only nods. “But we have announced in public printed record of our intent to do so. Magic likes that sort of thing. I just hope that Draco and Astoria’s wedding of strict protocols doesn’t stifle the magic of the event too much.”

On the fourteenth of August, Draco and Astoria do indeed get married in a fully observed, pretentious Pure-blood ceremony, followed by a mind-numbing reception. They wear more wedding traditional garments instead of their old Quidditch uniforms, though Astoria is dressed in a silken gold corset and skirt instead of a lace-embedded option. Draco’s robe and hat are both of matching gold brocade with Slytherin green patterning.

If anyone is of a mind to mutter complaints about the lack of white, they don’t dare. Daphne is in attendance, keeping a watchful eye over the guests while floating above them. The Greengrass parents seem rather distressed that their lost daughter isn’t lost at all, but some people simply refuse to accept or understand the nature of death and the afterlife. When the vows are completed and the marriage announced, Daphne’s cheering is louder than anyone else’s.

As promised, the moment the worst of the guests have passed on their regrets and left for the evening, there is a Quidditch match in the field beyond the reception tent. Even the concept of the event more than makes up for having to sit through several hours of a reception populated by beings that Severus would sooner set on fire than converse with.

Representing Slytherin, first and foremost, are Draco and Astoria. In honor of Draco’s rather vengeful request, she gracefully cedes the Seeker’s position over to her new husband so that he can fly against Harry. Astoria takes up the position her sister flew as a Chaser, while Millicent returns to her favored place as Keeper. William and Charles once again join with the supposed underdogs to
fill out Slytherin ranks as Beaters.

Draco flies over on his broom and comes to a halt, hovering in the air a few feet above Severus. “You’d better join us. We’re out of tolerable Slytherins, otherwise. Blaise absolutely refuses to mount a broom, the sour twat.”

Severus frowns. “I never played for the school team, Draco.”

“But you were excellent at coaching us until you decided Millicent needed more to do,” Draco counters. “You know what you’re doing on a broom. Get up here; we need another Chaser!”

“You’re not going to give this up, are you?” Severus asks, bemused.

Draco grins. “I consider that permanent youth potion to be an engagement gift. Flying in Quidditch would thus be a wedding gift to us both.”

“Seconded!” Astoria yells as she loops by overhead.

“Bloody hell,” Severus mutters. “Winky!” The house-elf appears, takes in the scene, and disappears without needing to be told what to fetch. “Jade!” Severus yells. “You’re about to pretend to be a Slytherin!”

“Pretendin’, my shiny rear end!” Jade retorts. “By the way, I have no idea what I’m doing,” she tells Draco as Winky appears with three of the four family brooms.

Draco shrugs his lack of concern. “But I still get most of a Slytherin team in the air. Charlie and Bill can be honorary Slytherins—they’re sly enough. We’ll make sure you get the hang of it, Jade. Tryouts are basically throwing someone into the game to see how they do, anyway.”

“Fab,” Jade announces, and grabs her broom. “Someone Transfigure m’clothes into body armor. I refuse t’go into this mess unprotected!”

Harry realizes what’s going on as he comes over to accept his broom from Winky. “Oh, this is going to be disastrous.”

“You mean fun,” Jade counters, once her wedding outfit has been properly Transfigured.

“Same thing,” Harry says, and all but vanishes as he mounts his broom and jets into the air.

Jade grins. “If I die, y’can’t have m’hat, brother.”

“You already gave me a proper one,” Severus retorts. “Come on. We’ll take turns embarrassing ourselves in spectacular fashion.”

They fly against Fred and George as Beaters, who refuse to stay out of the air, while their wives, both pregnant despite only a month’s marriage, wisely elect to remain on the ground. Katie, Ginevra, and Seamus are Gryffindor’s Chasers, with Oliver acting as Keeper again. Draco and Harry are already cheerfully taunting each other from across the pitch.

Minerva shamelessly roots for Gryffindor, her solid black hair shining with health and a complete lack of stressful frizz in the fading sunlight. She is their ultimate test to prove the potion does not truly de-age the recipient, but removes the signs of stress from harsh living. Minerva could easily pass for a witch of well-preserved fifty, though it is obvious to anyone with eyes that she is indeed in her seventies.
In direct counter, Narcissa cheers on the Slytherin team. She trades insults with Minerva in the manner of friends who know the words are not insults at all.

The rest of their audience is composed of Neville, Charles, Ron and the Patil twins, Cedric and Cho Chang, Hermione and Viktor, Luna, Molly—who is utterly resplendent with the stress of mothering seven children removed from her face—Percival and Audrey, who announced their engagement last week, Terry, Rose, Lavender Brown, Sirius, Remus, Lee (with Nandini again, somehow), Kingsley, Rubeus and Olympe, Filius, Rolanda, and Alice. Argus looks like a man renewed, standing with a smooth-furred Mrs. Norris on his shoulder; Viking and Susan are waving the players on regardless of team affiliation. Tonks and Andromeda have the twins; Fleur is holding Victoire, who is utterly fascinated by the game and following it with avid blue eyes. In the growing crowd, Severus can also make out the faces of Garrick, Trevor, Aurora, Griselda, Abigail, Sujita, Bathsheda, Augusta, Kousuke, Matthew, Gerald, Poppy, and Becky; the parents of Cedric, Cho, and the Patil twins—who indeed were pacified by the gifted five-year youth potion—Aberforth, Reiko, Abigail, Chie, Pomona, and finally Astoria’s parents, who alternate between shouting encouragement for Astoria’s flight or gasping in terror that their precious child is going to have a terrible broom incident. The team cheering is split decently down the middle, a far cry from what it would have been like five years ago.

*It’s us,* Severus thinks idly after passing the Quaffle on to Astoria to escape a dual assault by Fred and George’s overenthusiasm with Bludgers. *It’s all of us who stood and defended Hogwarts that day. Whenever one of us marries or publicly celebrates a birthday, we’re all here.* It’s an odd connection to have, but it also seems quite fitting.

Jade manages to fly directly into the path of the Quaffle during the next pass, catching it against her chest. The impact sends her looping over backwards in the air in a full rotation before she rights herself. “Fuck! Now what do I do wi’ this thing?”

“Try to beat Oliver to death with it!” Severus yells.

“NO!” Fred counters, all but falling off of his broom laughing. “Put it through a goal post, woman! But if you hit Oliver with it, I might count that as a scored point anyway!”

Severus tails Jade as she zips through the air, listening to her chant: “I do not want this bloody Quaffle, I do not want this bloody Quaffle, I do not want this bloody Quaffle!” Then she banks hard and tosses the Quaffle at the furthest goal post from her position, not the closest. It’s a nice tactic; Oliver misses the Quaffle and their Slytherin-composed team scores ten points.

“STILL DO NOT WANT THE BLOODY QUAFFLE!” Jade yells as one of the Malfoy house-elves obligingly changes the score to place them at forty-twenty, Slytherin in favor. “GIMME A BAT, YOU BERKS!”

William flies over, laughing so hard he’s turning colors. “Here’s a bat, love. Join Charlie in the second Beater’s position, and I’ll join in with the Chasers. Now you just have to hit the Bludger at other players, not cart a Quaffle about.”

“Excellent. I can definitely hit things,” Jade declares. She zips off with her new Beater’s bat to chase down Katie and Seamus, who are tossing the Quaffle back and forth on their way back around to make another run at the goal.

“Perhaps we should have told her that the point is to keep the Chasters away from the Gryffindor goal posts, and not merely to sow chaos,” Severus notes.

“Maybe, but sowing chaos is still a good strategy.” William grins. “I never lost a game while playing
at school, and no matter whose colors I’m wearing, I damned well refuse to lose a game now. Let’s see you fly, Severus. We can try to beat Oliver to death with a Quaffle.”

Severus glances at him. “That was meant to be in jest.”

“Doesn’t mean it won’t be fun.”

Severus smiles at him. “I would dearly love to get all of your siblings back into Hogwarts to put that senile Sorting Hat on each of your heads, just to see what it would now say.”

“Great Aunt Muriel would have conniptions if the Hat said anything other than Gryffindor.” William catches the Quaffle when Astoria passes it over. “Time to go!”

The game becomes intense after that, leaving little time for conversation. Harry and Draco zip by overhead several times as the game progresses, and each time, Severus can hear Harry laughing like a man who has found freedom after years of oppression.

Astoria doesn’t have the arm strength to heave a Quaffle through the goal posts quickly enough to avoid Oliver, but she does have speed and agility on her side, stealing the Quaffle from Katie, Seamus, and Ginevra so she can pass it to Severus or William to ensure that goals are scored. Ginevra practices the same tactic, but Severus was a sly flyer even when Slughorn was too society-blind to see it. He evades her and scores two goals in a row, jumping the game to eighty-fifty with Slytherin still leading.

“Damn, you’re good,” Ginevra says, braking next to him as she tries to catch her breath. She’s grinning, bright-eyed and delighted. “Slughorn was a fucking idiot for never putting you on the team.”

“He did put Narcissa on the team, though,” Severus says, glancing down at her. Narcissa’s shark-like smile is putting in another appearance.

“Draco’s mother played Quidditch?” Ginevra sounds like he just announced gravity did not exist.

“And she was a vicious Beater, one not to be crossed. Speaking of…” Severus ducks one of Fred’s swings so the Bludger won’t impact against his head. “Your brothers are maniacs.”

“They are,” Ginevra agrees dryly, and then the game is on again.

By the time Draco and Harry are truly in pursuit of the Snitch, flying so close to each other they could straddle each other’s brooms, the point counter is up to one hundred ninety to one hundred sixty, still in Slytherin’s favor. Severus has discovered that he has a pressing dilemma.

“God take it, I DON’T KNOW WHICH ONE OF THEM TO CHEER FOR!” he yells, which sends Astoria, George, Charles, and Katie into fits of laughter.

“I still refuse to lose this game,” William says, joining Severus in the air. He’s holding onto the Quaffle and grinning.

“Running interference?” Severus asks, tightening his grip on his broom.

“Nailing the Seekers with a Quaffle,” William replies.

Severus glances at him. “That is cheating, William Weasley.”

William grins in the bright way his father once used to disarm the foolish. “It sure is.”
They fly in tandem after Draco and Harry, who are still crammed together at the shoulder in an effort to get to the Snitch evading them. William takes aim with the Quaffle, one eye squinted shut while Jade and Charles fend off the others with their bats. “Going for them both!” he announces, and then throws.

William has good aim; the Quaffle bounces off of Draco’s shoulder hits Harry in the back. They break apart in a flail of limbs that sees Harry flung upside down on his broom, holding on with one leg and one arm.

Then Harry grins at William and holds out his hand, revealing the fluttering Golden Snitch in his grasp.

“Dammit!” William yells. “You ruined my perfect record, you shite!”

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Draco shouts, banking so that he can chase down the man who grabbed the Snitch while in the middle of a potential broom accident.

“CAN’T HAVE IT, FERRET!” Harry yells back, diving to escape Draco. “IT’S MINE NOW!”

Severus hovers on his broom while William continues to swear. He doesn’t actually mind losing this game. It wasn’t played for any reason except for Draco and Astoria’s enjoyment, and despite Draco’s attempts at chasing down his rival, he’s still smiling.

“We need to do this again. More often, I mean,” Ginevra says, coming to a halt next to Severus. “I think this should be a regular thing.”

“Don’t you have professional games to be playing?” Severus asks her.

“Yes, but not all the time. Viktor would like to be up here, too, Ron wants a turn as Keeper again, and Hermione is a great Seeker. We’re all decent or terrifying players. Why not just enjoy it?”

Severus smiles. “Would it shock you to hear that I was just thinking along similar lines?”

Ginevra smiles back. “Not anymore. Who knows? Maybe one day we’ll be able to keep Neville on a broom for more than five minutes.”

“Ginny Weasley, that would require divine intervention.”

Severus is still aching a bit from Saturday’s Quidditch match when he attends Hogwarts’ first official staff meeting on Monday. It should have been the previous week, but there was a mutual decision made to delay it, allowing for Draco and Astoria’s wedding.

Severus glances through the student registry of first-year inbounds as the other instructors discuss the upcoming year. There are thirty Squibs on the list, more than double last year’s count, but there are several ludicrously rich staff members in Hogwarts who are more than willing to pay for anything those students might need, wands included. All of his senior staff appear rejuvenated by the gifted five-year youth potion, though Severus did not tell Minerva that hers was the only permanent version. She’ll discover that for herself in five years, when the effects do not fade.

During his first debacle of a year as Headmaster of Hogwarts, there had been a mere five hundred seventy-three students, a by-product of fear and the necessity of temporarily relocating Muggle-born magical students. The castle had felt half-empty, but terror permeated much of the atmosphere in those days—terror and defiance. Severus had been thrilled that the next school year put them almost at normal attendance levels, with Hogwarts hosting nine hundred ninety-seven students. He is paging through now, though, and there are a lot more confirmed attendance marks than Severus has ever
“Registry,” he says, which catches the others’ attention. “Please give me the total number of students attending Hogwarts for this term.”

The number appears in golden text floating above the registry: fifteen hundred and three.

“Oh, shite,” Sirius blurts out. “How much of an increase is that over last year?”

“Five hundred and six,” Minerva says, wide-eyed. “The last time we saw numbers like that, it was 1978!”

“You don’t have the staff to oversee fifteen hundred students,” Gaia Costa points out. Their new Latin teacher looks just as flabbergasted as everyone else.

“We have fifteen days to figure out a solution to this. Can we work miracles in fifteen days?” Wilhelmina asks.

Harry gives her a dry look. “It’s not like we’ve been specializing in that sort of thing for the last four years or anything.”

Severus leans back in his seat, propping his chin on his hand. “We need dedicated Heads of House, and dedicated staff for the first- and second-year dormitories. People whose only job is to look after those students.” He glances up at William, Filius, Pomona, Rolanda, Aurora, and Narcissa. “I’m sorry, but you must choose between teaching or overseeing students in a permanent position.”

“We really need to get the registry to give us more advance warning than this,” Harry says.

“Agreed.” Severus glares at the book. “Please begin informing us of attendance levels in mid-July, not bloody mid-August!” If a book could look contrite, the student registry is doing a decent job of it.

“I teach one class to one year of students that requires no paperwork,” Rolanda finally says. “I can manage both, Severus, so the first-years need not be a concern.”

“Teaching,” Aurora decides, wincing. “I know that puts us in a bind, but I’ll not give up Astronomy.”

“I’ll take Gryffindor House on, if no one minds,” William says, surprising him. “Teaching is fine, but I’ll be doing that in either position. I think I might even have a line on a music teacher with better instrument training than I’ve got.”

“Done,” Severus says. “For all three of you.”

“Severus, I can remain Deputy Headmistress and Transfiguration teacher, but we will have to hire a bloody secretary.” Minerva adjusts the brim of her pointed hat. “The amount of correspondence and associated paperwork will otherwise be completely intolerable!”

“It’s more polite to refer to a secretary as an administrative assistant these days,” Hermione informs them.

“I don’t care what they want to be called as long as they can write letters that do not incite Wizarding Britain to rise up against us,” Severus snaps, and then closes his eyes, letting out a harsh sigh. “If this is a sign of student population size increasing to what used to be normal, we’re going to need more teachers in every subject!”
“Make the seventh-years do it,” Augusta suggests.

Severus glances at her. “Do what, specifically?”

Augusta pats her hat’s vulture and then regards them all with the haughtiness of a veteran instructor. “The sixth- and seventh-year students have passed their O.W.L.s and narrowed their focus. Let the more accomplished and responsible seventh-years teach first-year classes for each of us. Start the tradition now. Sixth-year students can act as assistants to the senior teachers, grading essays and reports for everyone below O.W.L.-level. Let them gain more experience in their chosen field by showing them some of the work involved!”

“In short: treat our adults like competent adults,” Remus murmurs. “Augusta, are you opposed to werewolf hugs?”

“I am not,” Augusta retorts indignantly, and squeezes Remus so hard Severus is all but certain he’s hearing werewolf ribs creak in protest.

“Filius?” Severus asks, glancing at their Charms teacher.

Filius looks like he’s about to burst into undignified tears. “Teaching. There’s not one better than myself in the whole of Britain. We just need to find a true Ravenclaw to watch over my children.”

“If you want the epitome of a Ravenclaw, ask Luna Lovegood,” Harry suggests.

Filius blinks a few times while Severus stares at Harry. “Luna? She’s not otherwise occupied?” Filius asks.

“She’s writing a book with Jade’s help, but otherwise, no. I think we should ask her. Luna is the Ravenclaw who accepted the odd, intertwined it with known truths, and made fairy tales real. If you want a wise one to look after that House, you want Luna,” Harry says.

Filius nods. “I will send her an owl once our meeting is over. Thank you, Harry. That is a brilliant suggestion.”

“It really is,” Severus adds. “Pomona?”

“Oh, Merlin. It has to be teaching.” Pomona starts to weep. “They’re my dear badgers. I can barely stand the idea of giving them up.”

“Nonsense,” Minerva says at once. “None of us are giving any of them up. They’re still here, our students, and all of them of every House and dormitory are ours.”

Pomona nods and wipes her eyes. “Point taken, Minerva.”

“You know, as far as I’m aware, Cedric is currently looking for employment,” Sirius says, eying one of his hands without looking at Pomona. “A Triwizard Champion as a Head of House?”

Pomona clasps her hands together and smiles through her tears. “Sirius Black, you are a mad genius. That is a brilliant idea. I’ll do as Filius has said, and send him an owl the moment we’re done planning the year.”

“Draco,” Narcissa says unexpectedly. She looks grim and unhappy, but her words are firm. “Draco Malfoy as Head of Slytherin House. We do not have another art instructor available with the credentials I bring to the subject. It might appear as favoritism, but he is a known war hero with an excellent reputation, which will appease quite a number of Pure-blood families who would otherwise
protest a different choice.”

Severus puts both of his hands over his face. “It’s a good choice, but it will also involve me giving up and telling Astoria that she may room with her husband in his new quarters instead of the dormitory.”

“They’re married. I doubt there will be much fuss about impropriety,” Wilhelmina says. “It’s the accusations of favoritism you should be more concerned with.”

“Given Astoria Malfoy’s track record of pristine behavior, I doubt that will be a concern,” Severus replies. “If she had a previous record for mischief, then Draco’s appointment would have to wait until after her graduation, but she’s probably the most well-behaved Slytherin we’ve ever had—and yes, that includes her illegal Animagus form. She registered, by the way,” he informs Minerva, who rolls her eyes.

“Some might accuse us of favoritism, regardless,” Firenze notes. “Many of us here, and many names I’ve heard suggested, were participants of the battle that saved this school and this land.”

Sirius shakes his head. “Trust me, Firenze—from a Pure-blood perspective? This isn’t even close to registering on the scale of favoritism. That was better exemplified by Lucius Malfoy’s construction of the prior Board of Governors.”

“Speaking of favoritism, of which you are not,” Severus emphasizes, eying Sirius with a faint smile on his face. “Despite the increase in potential students, I wondered if you would be willing on to take on a second, different class.”

Sirius grins. “Severus, you know that if it involves teaching others how to fuck with people, I’m probably going to say yes.”

“Given your successful track record at teaching underage children how to be Animagi, and having done so yourself without adult supervision, you complete idiot, I’d like for Hogwarts to offer a one-year course available only to sixth- and seventh-year students: Advanced Transfiguration for new Animagi. The only other requirement is that the student must pass their Transfiguration O.W.L.s with at least an…” Severus glances at Minerva.

“I’d prefer an O, but sometimes tests are not indicative. Students who achieve an E on their O.W.L.s can also apply for the class, but they must be interviewed by myself and Sirius to see if they have the potential to perform well.”

Sirius raises both eyebrows. “I’m still saying yes as of yesterday. This sounds like an absolute thrill. Final grade dependent upon successful Animagus form, or an understanding of the subject?”

“That, I’ll leave up to you. You’ve already shown the ability to discern that sort of thing among your first batch of Occlumency students,” Severus says.

Minerva is treating Sirius to a glare over the rims of her spectacles. “This is the best revenge I could ever conceive of for you and James teaching yourself Animagus magic directly under my nose.”

Gaia is shaking her head. “You know, this is not quite what I thought I would be getting into when I agreed to this teaching contract, Severus.”

Julius gives her a wry look. “Professor Costa, I felt the exact same way when I began here last year. You adjust. Hogwarts is different than many schools, but I find I like the differences.”

“I also began here only last year,” Viking says to Gaia. “The weather is too warm for my preference,
but otherwise? What has been created here since Voldemort’s war is amazing. It will be a challenge
to have higher student attendance per class, but not impossible.”

“Gaia, I hired you to teach Latin for all years. If the class burden will be too much, inform me at once
so that I can hire you an assistant,” Severus says.

Gaia frowns. “As I do not yet have any successful older students to serve as assistants? Yes, please,
Severus. I’m going to need a lecture hall in which to teach the first level classes as it is.”

Harry points at her. “Room of Requirement should be able to provide one of those. I’ll introduce you
to it after we’re done here.”

Severus waits until he has Harry’s attention. “Augusta’s idea is a sensible one. I’m going to make
seventh-year N.E.W.T. Potions students teach the first-year classes, as we now require more than
one class period to teach all the students in a safe manner. I’m shifting you up to second- through
fourth-year classes; you’ll have a cadre of sixth-year assistants to help you keep an eye on our
dunderheads, since all years above first are two-hour classes.”

Harry nods. “I thought it might be something like that. We’ll make it work, and at least the seventh-
years will have decent source material to use.”

“That they will. I’m going to send an owl to Millicent Bulstrode to see if she would be willing to
accept watch over the second-years,” Severus announces. “Are there any objections?”

“Not from me,” Poppy says. “It sounds more like we’re finally rounding out our staff proper.”

To Severus’s absolute amazement, William somehow lures Professor Barnaby Harper back to
Hogwarts. “How?” Severus asks William the moment he can corner him.

“Gave that man a long overdue Calming Draught slipped in with the Firewhiskey I brought for my
nice visit with my former teacher. I sat down with him and did nothing more than discuss how much
I enjoyed teaching the music class last year, and how interested the students were in learning.”

“Well done,” Severus says, and decides to ensure that William discovers a bonus in his pay for the
term. He also makes sure the castle knows to increase the room allotment for Gryffindor’s Head of
House to something more properly sized for a family spending ten months out of a year in Hogwarts.

Severus thinks about it, realizes he’s probably never going to be rid of Astoria even after her
graduation, and asks the castle to create the same adjustment to the Head of House suite the castle
made for Horace when Severus refused to give up his original quarters. The rooms are nothing
compared to the luxury of Malfoy Manor, but Severus truly doubts that Draco and Astoria will care.
Draco’s priorities regarding housing and the associated appearance of wealth underwent a drastic
change during the war.

Cedric. Luna. William and Draco are not the only ones who are going to be followed to Hogwarts
by their chosen partners.

Severus puts his hand over his face, goes to Ravenclaw Tower, and informs the castle that the same
sort of expanded suite will be required for Ravenclaw’s new Head of House. At least Jade will again
be spending most of her time in London for the term, putting in further research towards her
doctorate, else he would be tearing out his hair in an attempt to find his sister something to do for the
duration. Cho Chang is also gainfully employed, but Severus is not stupid enough to ignore the fact
that she will be spending her evenings with her fiancé.

Hufflepuff’s section of the castle gives him the worst blasted trouble. The House might profess to be
accepting of all, but if you are not a bloody badger, getting into the Common Room is all but impossible, even for him. Instead, Severus spends an irritating hour sitting atop the barrels near the kitchen, one hand on the wall, all but swearing at Hogwarts’ magic to shift the Head of House’s residence from a mere bed and bath to a full-sized suite and additional office. Fuck, but he never wants to have to convince that part of the castle to do anything ever again.

If Millicent one day requires the same for herself and Katie, Severus will wait until it’s confirmed to be necessary. Enough is enough for one day.

Severus goes back to the Peverell House feeling like he spent the entire day arguing with every Slytherin who ever attended Hogwarts. “Are you getting married, engaged, or otherwise acquiring extra companions in some fashion?” he asks Harry crossly.

Harry pauses the film he’s watching and gives Severus a baffled look. “No?” he ventures, and then grabs ahold of the stack of notes in his lap before they can slide to the floor. “Also, normal people say hello when they emerge from the Floo.”

“I saw you three bloody hours ago, Harry.” Severus dusts off his clothes. “And thank you for that information; I am not expanding housing for anyone else this term. They can sleep on the floor for all I care.”

“Sev, I live in your quarters during the school term,” Harry reminds him. Then he tilts his head. “Though, come to think of it, everyone in Hogwarts who rooms together is either married, engaged, or probably hand-fasted in some fashion. People are going to think we’re doing the same. Aren’t you the one who was so concerned with compromised virtue?”

Severus glares at him. “First: I do not care what anyone else thinks, and given your now publicly known former relationship with Cho and Cedric, it probably would not ever occur to anyone to conceive of such a notion. Second: we already live in the same damned house, and no one has uttered a word about dating. Three: why am I talking about this with you? Four: what of your own virtue, Harry?”

Harry snorts out a laugh. “Sev, I lost any hope of remaining virtue in the bed of two different people at the same time. I don’t think that’s much of a concern.”

“Stop reminding me of that, please.”

Harry smirks. “You brought it up. Suffer, Headmaster Prince.”

Severus glares at him and then glances at the television. “What the hell are you watching?” he asks as animated and clothed animals dart about onscreen.

“A retelling of Robin Hood, except, uh, different. It’s kind of addicting. I blame Jade.”

Severus observes the animated foxes, bears, and random bard rooster for a moment. “You should ask Johnathan if he’d like to watch it. I want to see the look on that man’s face.”

Harry makes a desperate-sounding noise that Severus realizes is a choked-back laugh. “Friar Tuck is a badger in this movie, Sev.”

“You say that as if it’s not a reason to subject him to this film.”

Cedric, Luna, Draco, and Millicent all respond in polite amazement—or curious bafflement, in Luna’s case—in regards to being asked to act as sole child-minders for three Houses and the second-year dormitory. Cedric lasts about a minute before he says yes, smiling.
Draco holds out for a pay increase that Severus isn’t giving him, as Draco is already ludicrously rich. Draco finally grins and gives up on that particular negotiation, as he currently has nothing better to do than pester Gilead Scrimgeour or roam around an empty Manor during the school term.

Luna merely looks at Severus, and he knows at once that she’s already accepted the role. The classmates remaining in Hogwarts who attended school with Luna may be in for quite the deserved shock.

Millicent is hesitant until Severus reminds her that she was the most capable Head Girl he ever had in sixteen years of teaching. She cares for the younger ones; therefore, she is already perfect for the offered job. She finally accepts, still frowning over the idea that anyone is willing to trust her in such a position.

“Do we get to be professors?” Cedric finally asks.

“You’re not teaching, so absolutely not. Your titles are Master or Madam…or you may forgo them entirely, if you wish.” Severus lets the corner of his mouth turn up in a faint smirk at the expressions he receives in response to that statement. “You are not instructors. You are, essentially, accepting the task of becoming adult guidance and counselors in a dormitory setting. You will need to convince the students in your charge that not only can they trust you, they can confide in you. I want no repeats of previous years, when students believed they could confide in no adult within Hogwarts at all.”

“Not to mention being extra pairs of watchful eyes for our sudden population boom,” Draco says, shaking his head. “Fifteen hundred students. That’s going to be amazing to see, Severus.”

Severus nods. “It truly will.”

That same week, Harry brings Severus a book that is four inches thick and three-quarters complete, with the last quarter still in note form. “I don’t care anymore about the stupid wager. Our students need this reference manual. I’ll put both of our names on it as equal contributors, but please help me finish the damned thing!”

“How do you know I’m not too busy finalizing the sixth-year text?” Severus asks, hiding his concern. Harry rested well after the wedding and Quidditch match, but since the school meeting, he is beginning to look like he’s dragging himself through the dirt. Severus suspects the reference manual in question is the cause.

“Because you’re you, and you re-wrote the damned thing when you were sixteen,” Harry counters, dropping his paperwork on Severus’s desk. “I’ve stared at it too long, Sev. I don’t know if I’ve got it correct any longer, and it has to be precise. I don’t want someone to die because I made a mistake.”

Severus pulls the pile of notes closer and indicates another seat in his office for Harry’s use. “Harry, you do not make mistakes…but I admire your caution, and I’m honored that you would include me on a project that you conceived the moment you recognized it was needed.”

“Honored?” Harry gives him a blank look. “I just want to have a decent reference manual.”

Severus shakes his head. Reacquired memories or not, sometimes Harry still misses the moments when he’s done something truly admirable.

With both of them at work, they have the book finished in time for the Quidditch World Cup on Friday. Dobby personally delivers a book that is six inches thick to the printers, an emergency rush order for one thousand copies with double-pay for compensation. Severus feels that its title, A
Complete Compendium of Potion Ingredients for Knowledgeable Brewing, is as accurate as it is possible to be without tossing in nargles. In a second package, capable of being taken by Hedwig, is the completed sixth-year text: Advanced Healing Draughts and Potions with An Introduction to Experimentation.

Between the two of them, they have completely re-written the entire Potions curriculum at Hogwarts, something that has been staid and unchanged for two centuries. By God, Severus expects amazing results to come from this, no matter how many dunderheads they’re saddled with. The books themselves are also available for any curious adult to buy once the students have all purchased their copies. Hogwarts funds provided by the Ministry cover the cost of printing; Flourish and Blotts, or any other bookseller, keep a percentage of the sales profit. The rest goes to the author, and Severus plans on making sure that money goes straight into their respective vaults as further income to support their families.

Kingsley Shacklebolt all but crams every member of the Order of the Phoenix into the VIP booth at the Quidditch World Cup, held this year in Sweden for some unknown reason. Fortunately, the space has an Extending Charm, else it would have been like bloody sardines in a can. Jade watches the game with her face practically glued to the viewing pane. Harry is more decorous in his behavior, but his eyes are still tracking play after play as Bulgaria and South Africa try to pound each other into the dirt. Ginevra is wearing her Hollyhead Harpies uniform for the occasion, protecting herself from the Quidditch headhunters that often attend the World Cup.

Viktor Krum waits until the points are racking up before actively pursuing the Snitch, which he’s had his eye on for the entire game. He then pulls off a feint of the Wronski Feint, leaving the other Seeker frantically braking before landing face-first onto the ground. His broom bounces once and then lands on the poor man’s backside.

Viktor flies around the stadium, letting the Viewing Charms pick up his image to reveal the Golden Snitch in his hand. Bulgaria wins over South Africa by ten points. Severus is then very glad they are in the VIP booth, as the stadium riots in what is either sheer adoration or a fierce desire to tear the Quidditch players to shreds.

Severus glances at Hermione. “If you’re talking to Viktor the way I think you are with one of Fred and George’s wireless Extendable Ear Charms, please tell that man not to land. I think the crowd might actually suffocate him.”

Hermione smiles and relays the message. Viktor peers down at the fans crowding onto the pitch and wisely remains on his broom, well out of reach of grasping hands.

Jade spends the next few days after the Quidditch World Cup subjecting them to movies of dubious quality, but apparently of cultural value. Severus remembers hearing about Star Wars in 1977, but he wasn’t prepared for three films plus what she calls a bootlegged copy of the new movie, which is still playing in the cinema. Then she shows them two films about the blasted Ewoks. The first one is ridiculous, though Jade assures them it was meant for children, so Severus gives up and enjoys the occasional magical aspects in the film.

The second Ewok film is basically a disaster within the first five minutes. Harry leaves the room after the main character’s entire family dies, fuming and upset. Jade has to be talked down from hyperventilating over accidentally upsetting Harry by Severus and Luna. Then they can approach Harry, who is all but fuming in ratel-rage that they spent an entire movie watching a family be reunited only for the next film to kill all but the youngest child for no damned reason. Jade promises she’ll get rid of the “a young child’s family dies horribly” movie, and only torture them with six Star Trek films instead. Severus is fine with this idea, even if the first movie seems overly fond of pastels.
He glares at her when Spock dies in the second film. He is doing his absolute best to set his sister’s bloody top hat on fire with his gaze alone. It’s infuriating when the hat refuses to ignite.

Jade shushes him and tells him to be patient. Spock becomes significantly less dead in the third movie, which is an immediate improvement and a reason to watch the remaining films…except the fifth one. Severus isn’t sure what to make of that disastrous mess and decides he’s going to pretend it never happened. Jade tells him that seems to be the default response among the Muggle fan base, too.

The last weekend of August, on the twenty-eighth, Sirius and Remus finally get married in a private ceremony in London with invitations only sent out to family. Severus isn’t sure how he is supposed to count as family, but Harry threatens him with actual snakes in his bed on some unknown morning if he doesn’t attend.

Severus witnesses the event, which takes place in the Black family parlor, with Harry, Luna, Jade, Hermione, Viktor, Ron, Narcissa, Draco, Astoria, Andromeda, Nymphadora, Oliver, and the twins, who turn their hair scarlet and gold for the occasion after they spy an old Gryffindor banner in the townhouse. Kingsley Shacklebolt officiates the marriage after ducking away from the burden of duties waiting for him, even on a Saturday.

Harry starts teasing them the moment the marriage is confirmed legal and binding. “So, kids?”

Remus glares at his godson. “I would very much like to get used to the new way Hogwarts is going to be running before I contemplate adding yet another complication, thank you very much.”

“You could probably get a volunteer surrogate,” Harry continues blithely, smiling as Remus growls under his breath. “War hero and all. Even with the werewolf bit. Might even discover an entire crowd who’d find it a thrill.”

Remus gives Sirius a flat, unimpressed stare. “I am blaming you for this entire conversation.”

“Absolutely not my fault!” Sirius protests.

“You don’t even have to participate. Syringe bulbs,” Harry says, which is when he gives up. Severus politely excuses himself, staggers out into the hallway, and laughs until he feels ill.

“Did anyone take the other’s name?” Hermione is asking when he returns. Severus leans against the doorway; if Harry breaks out that damned joke again, he is otherwise going to meet the floor.

“No. No reason to, really. I mean, who cares? I don’t need an heir; I already have five,” Sirius says. “Remus is the one who gets to broach that topic.”

Ron slaps his hand over Harry’s mouth. “No, mate. Just—whatever you’re thinking of saying? No.”

Harry glares at Ron, but whatever he’s muttering remains indistinct, thank Merlin.

The reception afterwards is also held in the townhouse, which is populated by werewolf boarders. Their presence ensures that the only people who attend the reception are people that all of them can tolerate—or in some cases, possibly even like. It’s a nice alternative from the Malfoy reception, which Draco says was dust-dry even by Pure-blood standards.

The only thing lacking is the burgeoning Quidditch tradition, which can’t be played in London. Instead, four different games take place on Sunday above the field fronting the Peverell House. All of their available Seekers take turns except for Viktor, who says that he just won a World Cup for the job, and thus is currently on vacation.

The events of the last two months, a full summer of experimentation and social events, should have
left him drained. Severus does fall into bed that night and sleeps like a bloody rock, but when he awakens on Monday, he’s ready to pack up and go to Hogwarts. That gives him two full days to finish any lingering preparations before the Start-of-Term Feast on Wednesday evening, where he gets to inform the massively increased student body that he’s once again shuffling around their entire academic lives.

Severus smiles when Tabitha Bainbridge is Sorted into Gryffindor. Once the Sorting is complete, with five hundred new students of varying ages introduced to the school and sitting at the expanded tables, Minerva asks him if he’s taken leave of his senses.

He glances at her. “Miss Bainbridge was a Slytherin before we rearranged the Sorting schedule. She already knew how to be loyal and cunning, and then she chose to be brave. I think further honing of that trait is going to serve her well.”

Minerva settles down in her chair, looking impassive. “I am proud to be sitting here next to you, Severus.”

Severus lets out an amused snort. “You’re just saying that because you know I’ll be the one blamed if this all blows up in our faces.”

“That, too,” Minerva agrees primly. “I am glad we’d already asked the castle to expand the width of the Great Hall to accommodate the new tables, else there would be no place for the full breadth of our new faculty of thirty-four members to sit.”

Severus glances down each side of the table, taking in the sight of familiar faces, new instructors, and new Heads of Houses. His gaze lingers longest on Harry, who is talking animatedly with Griselda about creating a second-year introductory course for Arithmancy, taught by her seventh-year N.E.W.T. students.

Minerva follows his gaze. “You and Harry are the reasons we’re all sitting here this way, right now, with fifteen hundred students to instruct. The two of you saved all of us, and we’ll never forget it.”

“What sorts of favors can you call in with, ‘Saved the entire wizarding world’ as your credentials?”

Minerva sniffs and picks up her silverware to begin eating. “Apparently, you get a pyrite cauldron, an extensive addition to the teaching tools within Hogwarts, and a greatly expanded budget to cover all the new expenses and necessary instructors’ salaries.”

Severus thinks about it for a moment before smiling. “That sounds like a worthy trade.”

* * *

They make it through mid-October with no one suffering a nervous breakdown, nothing exploding, and everyone adjusting admirably to an entirely shifted scholastic environment. Severus is cautiously optimistic that the new arrangement is not only working, but that it is going to be an incredible success. He won’t dare say the words aloud until the term ends in June…but it is. It’s working, and his students are happy.

“BLASPHEMER!” Brian Wulfric yells from his place near the top of the tower as Severus enters his office.

“SHUT IT!” Severus yells back as he skirts his assistant’s empty desk. They’re probably up in the owlery, sending off the day’s correspondence. “Hello, troublemaker.”
“Good evening, Severus,” Dumbledore’s portrait replies. “You’ve had a visitor in the last hour. They left a gift on your desk.”

“Gift?” Severus frowns and rounds his desk to see what’s been left behind. There is a CD resting on the only available clear space on his desk, the irritating cellophane already removed. He picks it up and smiles. Live produced another album, and he missed it. The cover art is an interesting, almost psychedelic Asian motif; the album’s title is on the side of the case: *The Distance to Here*.

Someone with no true recognition of how much Harry likes to write things down introduced the man to Muggle Post-It notes. They’re convenient, but Severus finds them bloody everywhere. One is attached to the front of the CD when he opens the plastic case: *It only came out on the fifth. Got hold of an imported copy the moment it arrived and all but snatched it out of its shipping crate in the store. I swear this band is spying on us and using our society for inspiration. –Harry*

Severus removes the note, pastes it to the front of the CD case to cover up part of the koi fish (why?), and puts the CD into the stereo he keeps in his office. He sits down and listens to it, one song at a time, while trying to work on what is required of him politically that evening—a written update to the Board of Governors, who want to be kept apprised of the progress the new system is making. Given that the overwhelming majority of the board wishes to help rather than hinder, Severus does not mind writing to them at all.

Severus glances up at the stereo during the second song. “Is it my imagination, or is this album happier than their previous three?” It would certainly fit in with the theme his life these past few years.

“It does seem a great deal more cheerful,” Dumbledore says.

Edessa is smiling. “I like it. Some of it reminds me very much of the music that came from the east when I was young.”

Severus drops his quill and pulls out the liner notes when the fourth song ends, immediately rewinding it back to the beginning. He needs to know more about what just caught his attention and dragged it around like a magnet introduced to iron.

“Don’t try to find the answer

When there ain’t no question here

Brother, let your heart be wounded

And give no mercy to your fear.”

“Adam and Eve live down the street from me

Babylon is every town

It’s as crazy as it’s ever been

Love’s a stranger all around.
In a moment, we lost our minds here
And lay our spirit down
Today we lived a thousand years
All we have is now.

Run to the water,
And find me there
Burnt to the core, but not broken
We’ll cut through the madness
Of these streets below the moon
These streets below the moon.

And I will never leave you
‘Till we can say, “This world was just a dream,
We were sleeping, now we are awake.”
‘Till we can say,

In a moment we lost our minds here
And dreamt the world was round
A million mile fall from grace
Thank God we missed the ground.

Harry knocks on his door and enters his office while Severus is still frowning at the stereo. “Whoa. Is the CD that bad?”

Severus pauses the track and shakes his head. “No, not that. It’s different, but one thing in particular caught my attention. What do you need, Harry?”

Harry tilts his head at the wall behind Severus. “I need to talk to Dumbledore’s portrait, actually.”

“Certainly.” Severus slides his chair to one side; honestly, wheeled chairs should have become a thing the moment Muggles conceived of the idea. Sodding stupid Wizarding Tradition. “Should I leave?”

“No, I don’t mind if you hear this. Hello, Professor,” Harry says.
“Good evening, Harry.” Dumbledore’s portrait takes a moment to adjust his spectacles. “What do you wish to discuss?”

Severus watches Harry take a breath and wonders if he’s about to bear witness to an explosion. “I went through every single item, piece by piece, drawer by drawer, of what Severus was kind enough to take out of the house in Godric’s Hollow—which was literally everything, by the way,” Harry adds. “Then I checked the Ministry with Tonks’s help to see if they were ever turned in as evidence of some sort.

“Where the hell are my parents’ wands, Dumbledore?” Harry asks in a low growl.

Dumbledore just smiles in response. “Ah. I hoped the day would come when you would ask, for I could not turn them over without the request being made. James and Lily’s wands were stored in a safe place as part of your inheritance…along with one other thing that, given how I once thought events would play out, I decided you might wish to see. Just a moment; I have to fetch them.”

Harry comes closer while Severus watches the portrait, scowling. He’d been wondering about the missing wands, too, but it had never occurred to him to just come out and ask the blasted portrait as to their whereabouts.

Dumbledore gets up from his painted chair and leaves his frame. There is a sound of indistinct conversation, unintelligible to their ears, before Dumbledore returns. In one hand he holds two familiar wands; in the other he has a stoppered glass phial.

“When I hold them out, you will reach towards me and take them,” Dumbledore instructs in a quiet voice. “The magic allowing for this exchange will not last for very long, so you must not hesitate, Harry. Are you ready?”

“Bollocks.” Harry swallows and steps forward. “Do it.”

Dumbledore nods and stretches out what he holds. Severus, seated at an angle, can see that nothing emerges from the canvas on Dumbledore’s side, but when Harry reaches for wands and phial, he touches them easily and retrieves three solid, physical items from the painting.

The moment it is done, Dumbledore collapses back down in his seat. “Dear me, that was tiring. If you gentlemen do not mind, I shall nap. Even portraits have their limitations.”

“Yeah. Sure.” Harry glances down at the wands, blinking a few times. “Thank you for—for keeping them safe.”

“You are quite welcome, Harry,” Dumbledore replies, and then seems to fall into immediate slumber. Severus doesn’t trust it to be genuine until the portrait begins to snore.

“Harry?” Severus waits until Harry looks up, dry-eyed but clenching his jaw. “That was an interesting request.”

“I think ‘request’ is putting it too nicely.” Harry puts both wands down atop Severus’s desk. They look exactly as they had when Severus last glimpsed them, and do not appear damaged from being stored within Hogwarts’ portraits. “When I finally realized they were nowhere to be found, I wanted them back. They’re mine—they belong to our family. Even if no one can ever use them, they should be in the Peverell House. Not…” Harry glances at the portraits. “No offence, but not stuck in a portrait.”

“No offence taken,” Elizabeth says, smiling. “It was an honor to guard them.”
“I’m offended,” Phineas mutters.


Harry holds up the glass phial, watching the silvery mist swirl around on the inside. “I almost don’t want to know.”

“I feel similarly,” Severus admits. That phial could contain anything, and some of his interactions with Dumbledore are not ones he wishes to recall—again—in any great detail.

Harry sighs in resignation. “I’ll get the damned Pensieve. It’ll drive us both mental if we don’t look at it.”

After the Pensieve is collected, Harry gingerly picks up the phial, brings it down close to the stone bowl, and pulls the stopper. The memory leaps out of the glass in a bid for freedom before the Pensieve captures it. The memory swirls around, unhappy at being imprisoned.

“That is a lot of strength for a memory,” Harry observes.

“That’s because it isn’t a copy. It’s an actual memory that was never returned to the mind it came from.” Severus glances back over his shoulder at the snoring portrait. “You’re right. Now I really do want to know what needed to be so stridently safeguarded that a man who could Occlude wouldn’t put it back where it belonged.”

“Face-planting method?”

Severus makes a disgruntled face. “I would desperately prefer not to, but…yes.”

Harry waves his hand at the bowl. “After you, Headmaster.”

“You must stop abusing my rank in order to avoid unpleasant tasks,” Severus tells him in annoyance, and then enters the Pensieve.

The place he finds himself is so familiar that Severus nearly yanks himself right back out of the memory. He knows this room because he stood in it during the summer of 1997, muttering foul language about the Ministry under his breath as he stripped it bare.

Harry appears next to him before he can act on the desire. “Fuck,” he whispers, wide-eyed. “I’ll kill him.”

“You can’t; he’s dead, and it was all but self-inflicted,” Severus replies, not offended in the slightest when Harry grasps his hand. Harry remembers this room from a time long ago, and doesn’t want to be here any more than Severus does.

As if Harry’s arrival was the signal, the main players involved in this memory emerge from the hallway leading to the front door, entering the kitchen. Lily is walking next to Dumbledore, a frown line between her eyebrows. Her hair is pinned up in a pile on her head, even if a few stubborn strands are trying to escape.

“I’d chew on it, otherwise. Teething,” Harry says when he notices what Snape is looking at. “I didn’t know the why then, but it makes sense now.”

“She hated to wear it up like that. You must have been persistent.” Severus watches James enter the room with a child that is still less than a year old resting over his shoulder. “That does look to be the correct age for persistent teething.”
Harry swallows. “Yeah.”

Lily and Dumbledore seat themselves at the kitchen table, which holds enough seating for six plus one wizarding high chair, charmed to keep an infant’s flung food from leaving the wooden tray. James remains standing, pacing back and forth in the kitchen with his hand resting over his son’s back. Given the clothing the infant is wearing, it must be March, or perhaps early spring’s chill latched onto Godric’s Hollow and refused to let go.

“May,” Harry says in a low voice. “First part of the month. I remember because Mum let me dip my hands in paint and slap them down on a sheet of paper, and it’s already hanging on the fridge. That’s where it stayed until…well, it was in with the rest of the paperwork you rescued from the house.”

“All right.” Lily’s voice breaks through their conversation. “The Fidelius Charm is intact, though we’ll have to arrange a new password with Peter. Every single blasted ward I know how to construct is in place. Now please tell us what was so important that you decided you had to come here.”

“Also, please have dinner here. The house-elves of Hogwarts are baby-addled, and they’re trying to feed us to the point of exploding.” James adds. “I can only run around the garden so many times before it’s just going to become an exercise in futility.”

Lily glares up at her husband. “James.”

“I have nothing else to do aside from care for our child and make up puns. What do you want from me, Lil?” James asks, quirking one eyebrow.


Dumbledore isn’t smiling, and there is no hint of that annoying twinkle in his eyes. “I am here because I made a mistake, one that nearly cost us everything.”

James stops pacing. “Go on.”

“I wanted to discuss it with two people whom I know are well aware of the fact that others can change, for good or ill. That we are not static entities until death, and even then, I have my doubts,” Dumbledore says.

James lifts his chin. “You’re talking about Snape.”

Lily glances up at her husband, but says nothing. She presses her lips together and then stares at Dumbledore.

“Fabian and Gideon to declare we needed to adopt a Slytherin, but other actions…” Albus looks at James and Lily both. “What do you know of what’s happened of the war since the necessity of hiding became apparent last August?”
“Almost bloody nothing!” Lily bursts out, scowling. “Peter doesn’t bring us news or tell us anything, claiming he’s worried we’ll do something rash if we know how the war is going. I’m this close to strangling our favorite rat’s scrawny neck.”

“Oh, if only you’d done so and saved us all the trouble,” Severus murmurs.

“Lil, Peter’s just worried,” James says, walking close enough to bump up against Lily’s arm.

“Besides, now we have a news source. At least, we’d better have one,” James adds, peering over his glasses at Dumbledore that looks to have been learned straight from Minerva.

Dumbledore nods. “I need to tell you several things without interruption. Never fear; I will get to the point quickly.”

Lily and James look to be bracing themselves. “All right.”

“The worst news is that…Bellatrix attacked Frank and Alice. They are—it would be kinder if they had died from it. They are in St. Mungo’s, but their prognosis is not good.”

“Oh, God,” Lily whispers, reaching up to clasp James’s hand.

Dumbledore continues, but he does acknowledge Lily’s reaction. “I am sorry. The blame—you’ll at first wish to insist otherwise, but the blame for this is all upon my shoulders. Yes, it is,” he adds, when James begins to open his mouth. “Listen: I knew last spring that one of Voldemort’s followers had overheard at least part of the prophecy that endangered both yourselves, Frank, and Alice. I even knew which follower, but as I wasn’t certain what that follower would tell Voldemort, I did not demand that anyone go into hiding until it was confirmed that both your children were born in a manner that fit the prophecy’s guidelines.

“The moment that Voldemort’s Death Eaters discovered the identities of the only two wizarding babies born at the end of July—records that were supposed to be well-hidden but discovered, regardless—the Death Eater who’d overheard the prophecy sent me an interesting, verbal-capable Patronus, and asked for a meeting to tell me of the very real danger your families were now in.”

“Sev,” Lily whispers.

“Sev,” Lily whispers that evening…” Dumbledore sighs. “The very first thing he voiced to me of concern was not merely horror for Lily’s potential fate, but the killing of all three of you. I chose to ignore those words, still placing the man into the same category I placed all of our Slytherin students into—guilty without a crime ever being committed. I castigated him for caring only for Lily, even though he had already proven that not to be the case, else we would have lacked Sirius and the Prewett twins, the latter possibly many times over. I all but blackmailed Severus into spying for me, even though I think he would have happily volunteered if I’d but listened.”

Lily bites her lip, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears. “A corporeal Patronus with a voice?”

Albus smiles. “He is most put-out that it is a runespoor. I do not think he appreciated the irony, or the difficulty that lies in the fact that a runespoor, Patronus or no, must always be given three messages to pass on, else it forgets its task.”

Lily reaches up and clasps James’s hand. “Dark wizards can’t cast a corporeal Patronus.”

Albus shakes his head. “It is not about darkness, but evil in the heart which prevents such a spell. There is no doubt that your one-time friend is still dwelling in a very dark place, Lily. Severus is performing the role I forced him into with an exactness that I should always have paid more attention to in Hogwarts, but my blunder is, at least, providing us with information we would not otherwise
have. We’re gaining ground in this war, Lily and James. Despite our losses, past and present, I am beginning to believe that Severus may be the key to attaining true victory over Voldemort.”

“Because people can change. Merlin, but I hope you’re right about a victory. I hope he’s still alive at that point,” James says. “After he hits me, I owe him a sincere apology.”

Severus stares at James Potter. If it had not been for Harry’s use of the Hallows to summon the dead, this would have been the sort of thing he might have needed to see at the war’s conclusion. If he’d survived it, anyway. He wonders if Dumbledore’s portrait would ever have thought to grant this memory to him.

“How?” Lily asks. Her knuckles are beginning to turn white as she squeezes her husband’s hand. “How, Albus?”

“A double-agent in truth,” Dumbledore says. “Voldemort’s belief in Severus’s loyalty is absolute, something Severus goes to a great deal of effort to maintain. The Order believes that Severus’s reports are valid only if I verify them, but such things help add to the illusion Voldemort believes in—that Severus is spying on the Order on his behalf.”

Lily bursts into tears and covers her face with her hand. James looks half-panicked, glancing from his wife to his son, before he strides over and hands Dumbledore a sleeping infant. “Hold him for a minute!” James orders. He goes back to Lily, enfolding her in his arms.

Dumbledore looks bewildered at his sudden acquisition of infant, even more so when the baby reaches out, grabs a fistful of beard, and stuffs it into his mouth. “That probably does not taste nearly as interesting as you might believe,” Dumbledore says, and winces at pulled hair.


Lily nods and wipes her face before she glares at Dumbledore. “He had to be there, didn’t he? If it’s a maintained duplicity, he had to see it.”

Dumbledore seems to deflate a little. “He did, yes. He did not participate in Bellatrix’s torture of the Longbottoms when their defences failed, but…” Dumbledore gives baby Harry a stern look and reclaims part of his beard. “Severus refuses to see me, and at the moment, I do not blame him at all. Right now the only member of the Order he will speak to is Arthur. His diligence is unchanged, but…this is now information we gain at a terrible cost. Worse, I think I might one day have to ask for more.”

“Whose allegiance do you think he truly follows, Albus?” James asks. “I trust your judgment. I’d like to know.”

Albus smiles at James. “Severus Snape is a Slytherin, James Potter. He does not loyally follow Voldemort, myself, or the Order of the Phoenix. Right now, his loyalty belongs to you, Lily, and Harry—those whose fates he cares for, far more than his own.”

Severus realizes Harry is looking at him and tries not to grimace. “He isn’t incorrect. In those days, the only other person who held that sort of loyalty from me is Narcissa, but I never confided such to Dumbledore.”

Harry nods, squeezing his hand. “We can leave, you know.”

“Stupid rabbit holes,” Severus mutters. “Not yet.”

Lily nods, as if she expected that answer. “If only I’d accepted the apology he offered. I could have
“You will never know. We can only work with what today has presented us with and go forward.” Dumbledore hesitates. “He has never forgiven himself for that day, and holds no blame for you at all. He risks his life for your family’s safety, even though he believes that you will never again speak to him.”

Lily shakes her head. “No—absolutely—no, not at all. The moment Voldemort is dead, I am hugging my stupid friend. James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter will behave themselves as I introduce Severus to my son.”

They get all but tossed out of the memory when it abruptly ends. Harry and Severus are staring at each other from opposite sides of the Pensieve; Harry looks as bewildered by the sudden shift in location as Severus feels.

Then Harry swallows. “Do you ever need to watch this again?”

Severus shakes his head. “No.” It’s one further bit of pain lifted from his heart, to know that Lily was aware of his true intentions before her death, but he doesn’t need to witness that conversation ever again. It would too easily become self-castigation.

“Okay.” Harry picks up the Pensieve and turns it over, letting the memory spill out onto the office floor. It remains a solid silver mass for a few seconds before breaking apart, floating off in different directions until it vanishes completely.

Severus sits down in his chair while Harry places the Pensieve back in its cupboard. He has no idea why Dumbledore refused to keep the memory instead of bottling up a copy. Guilt, perhaps? Dumbledore still needed to ensure the Order’s survival, as well as Wizarding Britain’s—Merlin knows that the Ministry was utterly incapable of doing the job. If guilt would have kept him from doing what must be done…yes, he can easily see Dumbledore making that decision.

It was the wrong decision, and Severus knows it. If Dumbledore had faced that particular demon when it first presented itself, things might have gone differently. Perhaps the idiot might not have shoved a cursed ring onto his finger.

“Can you imagine?” Harry asks, sitting down in one of the other chairs.

Severus glances at him. “Imagine what?”

“If things had gone differently. My parents inviting you over for dinner. Can you imagine the faces Sirius would have been making?”

“Yes, I can. Far too easily,” Severus admits, biting back a smile. “Whereas mine would most likely have been entirely unpleasant.”

Harry shrugs. “It wouldn’t have mattered. Mum always knew when you were faking.”

“Yes,” Severus agrees. “She always did. Devious cheater.”

“What did I interrupt?” Harry asks, noticing the radio’s digital display is blinking to indicate a paused track. “I wasn’t expecting, ‘Where are my parents’ bloody wands?’ to become Pensieve face-planting.”

“It wasn’t necessarily an interruption,” Severus counters, but he presses the button and lets the fourth track play from start to finish again.
“What’s the name of this song?” Harry asks. “I didn’t buy my own copy.”

“‘Run to the Water,’” Severus replies. “It caught my attention before you came in.”

“Burnt to the core but not broken.” Harry tilts his head. “That describes quite a few of us, Sev. You in particular, though.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “I have a letter to finish writing. Get out, atrocious brat.”

Harry grins, collecting his parents’ wands as he stands up. “If I’m not in our quarters when you get done appeasing the Board of Governors, it’s because I’m still at the Peverell House. I’d rather keep these at home than just lying around Hogwarts.”

Severus waves him off, picking up his quill. It seems like there should have been a more dramatic response to the Pensieve’s offerings, but at the same time, this feels correct. Severus hates whinging and flailing that serves no purpose, and Harry’s few bouts of whinging have usually been utterly justified. That Harry is not doing so shows that he’s made his peace with those memories, possibly even as they watched them unfold.

“Burnt to the core but not broken.” Severus murmurs as he returns to his work. Harry is giving him credit he does not particularly deserve.

He does rewind that particular song a few more times, though.
Chapter Notes

This is the only time in SbS I feel the need to put a warning at the front of a chapter, even though I go into no specifics on any event at all.

Anyone in London of a certain age knows the significance of the date on this chapter. Much like I do in a certain novel, I write *around* the event instead of writing of things in the midst of it; I'd rather not stomp on anyone's grief if it can be avoided. If you'd rather only know part of the first half of this story's epilogue, you can read most of this chapter and avoid the rest without difficulty. See notes at the end of this chapter for a non-spoiler-spoiler. I don't use the event in question for titilation value--it's used because it's a historical event that happened, one that is a minor catalyst for one of Severus Prince's bits of long-term plotting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s their last faculty meeting of the term. Things have finally calmed down enough in the past few years that Severus ensures it takes place between their students’ departure from Hogwarts, but before the graduation ceremony in the last week of June. Afterwards, all that is required is for someone to send out the O.W.L. results the second week of July. That is followed in August by the student necessities lists, letters to those new sixth-year O-grade students who’ve been assigned to assist teachers in their chosen concentration of study for second- and third-year classes, and missives to the handpicked seventh-year N.E.W.T. students chosen to become teaching assistants. All of those tasks became a lot easier when Severus and Minerva decided to make someone else write all the blasted correspondence, a job that now requires two people who start prepping the form letters in May.

No one expected their student population to expand to such an extent in a mere five years, not when the initial population recovery was so slow after the first wizarding war. Fifteen hundred students once seemed daunting. Now they’ve spent a full year dealing with two thousand, three hundred twenty-one dunderheads inside of one barmy castle. The estimate for next year is sitting at twenty-five hundred.

Severus extended the faculty lounge exactly once before giving it up as a lost cause; the numbers came in too quickly. They no longer have individual teachers per subject, but bloody Department Heads. If they tried to cram in all of Hogwarts’ faculty, half of them would be claustrophobic before the first five minutes passed.

He’s gone to Augusta Longbottom no less than six times this year alone, thanking her for introducing the teaching assistant idea when their numbers first expanded. Instead of chaos, everyone was used to the new system when their numbers first jumped to two thousand students.

Rubeus refused to be Head for Magical Creatures, so Wilhelmina took the job, pointing out that ghouls were also in that same category, along with the other classes now taught for specific creatures that required devoted topics—and two of those classes are entirely Luna’s fault. Aurora became Astronomy’s Department Head, while Bathsheda and Julius share the position for history, given that their subjects are both based on the ancient or near-ancient. Firenze and his mate Ifalda took Divination when Trelawney utterly balked at that level of responsibility; Griselda’s replacement,
Prima Greenwood, caters to all of Arithmancy and Magical Theory, to Augusta’s vast relief.

Narcissa claimed all of the art-based subjects, despite Barnaby’s protests, and rules that department with a reasonable iron hand. Pomona runs Herbology—and is making noises about retirement, which Severus is still trying to figure out how to bribe her out of not doing for another year. Neville is an excellent instructor in the subject, but Severus would like Pomona to remain until Neville has the confidence to front an entire department. Gaia adjusted nicely and now heads all of their language courses, expanded from Latin to other languages that should really not have been abandoned in the first place. Argus and Alberta didn’t need to change anything, though Muggle Studies has a new permanent head under Dean Thomas. Poppy now has two fully trained assistants in the infirmary; Irma refuses to let anyone else touch her precious books.

Remus is still baffled at being Head for Defence, but he also keeps mocking Sirius for being beholden to both the Defence department and Minerva’s Transfiguration department. Filius is happily coordinating an entire batch of Charms teachers, given that every subject below sixth year now requires eighteen teaching assistants, a cadre of sixth-year assistants, and eleven teachers to keep classroom ratios at a level that is both safe and effective—mostly blasted safe. The Department heads claim sixth- and seventh-year, or only seventh, depending on what’s needed. Their Heads for the younger dormitories and Heads of House remain unchanged, though if it hadn’t been for the influx of necessary teachers, most of them would have resorted to tearing out their hair by 2002. Severus told tradition to sod off and increased the number of Prefects per year, per House, to four instead of the original two. If they ever breach three thousand students, he’s doubling that number.

Severus still refuses to give up his N.E.W.T. Potions classes, even if he now has an average of two hundred students instead of the original twenty-five. It’s still less effort required of Severus from the days when he ran every single Potions class by himself. However, he refused to be Headmaster of Hogwarts and the Potions Department Head. He made Harry do it, instead. That initial request led to Harry following Severus around the castle for two days, asking if Severus had lost his fucking mind, especially as it meant he would become Viking’s boss.

“Seniority,” Severus pointed out, which made Harry glare at him. “Also, you now only have the fourth- and fifth-year students who show N.E.W.T. aptitude. Let everyone else have the dubious pleasure of completing the younger students’ core requirements for five years of Potions.”

The restructuring means he only has to face twenty-three people at the end of the school year. At least by this point, everyone is well aware of what is expected of them. “Is there anything—anything—that has not already been mentioned, ordered, requested, or otherwise requires our attention before we can declare this term formally closed?” Severus asks.

“Flourish and Blotts is complaining that we’re giving them too much work to do,” Aurora says.

“Oh, the horror. They’re profitable.” Severus rolls his eyes. “Let me clarify: is it something I specifically have to care about?”

“We’re graduating our first batch of not-Squibs,” Wilhelmina finally ventures. “Perhaps additional security might not be amiss next week.”

“Half of the M.L.E. already volunteered, probably just to get on the guest list,” Minerva says.

“Pyrrhus is allowed to eat anyone who attacks a student that day.” Pyrrhus lifts his head and gives Severus an annoyed squawk. “It isn’t my fault that you’re a picky eater.”

“Can we support twenty-five hundred students?” Bathsheda asks. “The roster hasn’t confirmed it yet, but it wouldn’t surprise me.”
“This year? Yeah,” Harry answers her. “But if we gain even twenty more students above that, we’re going to need new staff. Again.”

Gaia looks appalled. “How in the names of the gods did you all keep up with this workload when there were so few of you?”

“We were extremely overworked. Fifty to seventy hours of classroom time per week, substandard textbooks, and zero assistants,” Severus replies. “Why do you think I fired that idiot who whinged three times too many about how twenty hours of teaching per week was entirely unreasonable?”

“I thought it was just because he was an idiot,” William says.

“No, that was merely a pleasant bonus.” Severus waits and then tries not to sigh in relief when no one speaks. “Then everyone who does not live here throughout the year? Go away. I’ll see you again Friday morning. In the meantime, someone please latch up Rita Skeeter in another jar so that she does not attend next Friday’s graduation.”

“I’ll do it for hazard pay,” Cedric offers, an innocent look on his face. “That woman bites, and I’m still not convinced she isn’t suffering from some wizarding form of rabies.”

Draco grins. “Split the hazard pay, and I’ll help you.”

Cedric glares at him. “No, you pay me, and then you can help.”

Draco shrugs in response. “All right. Either way, it’s still fun.”

“So. Selectively. Deaf,” Julius mutters. “Please stop talking about these things in public!”

William’s smile is too wide to be anything but mischief in the making. “My wife writes erotic wizarding fiction in her spare time. Anyone in favor of us discussing that, instead? Perhaps recitation of the material?”

Julius grimaces and hides his face in his hands. “Let’s just go back to plotting to capture a reporter in a jar.”

One hundred twenty-eight graduates is the highest number the school has seen since the first wizarding war. Severus and Minerva both agree that such an event needs to be held outside, even if the weather is uncooperative. No one wants to stuff the sheer amount of necessary attendees into the Great Hall, which is starting to get cranky over the times resizing it has become absolutely necessary, and now protests structural changes like the worst of whinging ancient wizards.

The graduation for their seventh-years, thankfully, does not require Severus to hex anyone into their component parts. He would be lying if he said safety was not a lingering concern; he still receives the occasional Howler regarding his defiance of tradition when it comes to schooling undeserving Squibs. Some idiots are just never satisfied by anything, including evidence being blasted into their faces by an enraged not-Squib cornered in Diagon Alley by a Pure-blooded idiot.

That had been a fun trial to witness. Not for the Pure-blood wizard found guilty of assault upon an underage student of Hogwarts, necessitating her performance of defence magic, but certainly entertaining for everyone else.

Severus is also not above using the graduation ceremony on the first of July as a demonstration regarding the continued stupidity of that belief. Every Department Head that worked directly with their original eleven not-Squib students plots a suitable demonstration of that new witch or wizard’s talents with a wand—or in one case, Sirius’s not-Squib Animagus student, who mastered the magic
and is now a newly registered polar bear Animagus. No one has quite managed to figure out why this particular student’s form finalized into a bloody polar bear, but it’s not a dissatisfying result, just an untoward one. Hogwarts’ teachers all looked at each other on that particular day and decided to leave well enough alone.

It is also particularly difficult for someone to accuse a student of faking magic when they can Transfigure themselves into an actual bear. Severus suspects it might have something to do with the students’ newfound ability to eat whoever has just displeased them.

Mingling might be a required function after the fact, but Severus refuses to alter his way of coping with people. It keeps unwanted conversation to a minimum, while otherwise wanted conversation does a very good job of driving away those whom he does not wish to listen to. He lets others who enjoy that level of political gameplay handle the occasion, such as Draco and Narcissa, Remus, Viking Bones and his wife Susan, and Julius. Minerva, Harry, and Augusta deal with the conversationalists who do not know how to take hints when they’re given. Those three are nicer about it than Severus would be, but they refuse to forgo their blunt nature for the sake of politics.

When the last guests, reporters, and graduated students are gone, Winky pops in without being asked, bearing the wine that became a tradition after their first confrontation with the reconstructed school governing board. Given how many instructors they now have, it takes six Peverell House house-elves to bring enough. It’s the one time of year they agree upon to raid the Peverell wine cellar; their own wine is now purchased from other sources for that damned yearly Christmas party. Hermione works at Hogwarts for two weeks out of the year for Muggle Studies; Viktor has taken over Rolanda’s September flight classes so Rolanda can concentrate on the first-year dormitory’s shenanigans; Jade takes another two-week session of Muggle Studies. Luna, Harry, and Severus reside at Hogwarts throughout the term, so all who live at the Peverell House are present except the children, watched over by Dobby and Gilly.

“Please not more than twenty-five hundred students,” is the very first toast that Gaia proposes. “At least not next term. After that, then we’ll be ready for another shuffle of faculty resources.”

“None of you are allowed to die horribly over the summer, as I don’t want the task of replacing you,” Severus says. “Yes, I am absolutely serious. Pomona, you’re not allowed to retire yet.”

“Dammit, Severus!” Pomona glares at him. “At this rate, I’ll be dead before I get the chance!”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Stop revealing my plotted goals to everyone. It’s not polite.”

“Let’s just go with the first two toasts,” Rolanda says, trying to laugh quietly enough for Pomona not to turn around and swat her. “I’m not retiring! Why are you in such a hurry?”

“Because Neville will be an excellent replacement, and I don’t want him to get bored and leave!” Pomona retorts.

“Leaf, maybe,” Harry says, and gets slapped on the back of the head by Hermione. “Dammit, no! Do not spill this wine!”

“I have had to listen to your puns for six years now, and I will curtail them when it’s appropriate,” Hermione retorts.

“If Hermione hadn’t done it, I would have,” Neville says in a mild voice, one that doesn’t fool anyone who witnessed him slice a giant serpent Horcrux in half.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake. To Hogwarts!” Minerva yells before anyone else can get it into their heads to
delay the process.

Once that is done, and perhaps far more of the available wine is drunk than necessary, Cedric retrieves a jar from Cho’s arms and holds it up. “So, should I be letting her out now? Or should we let her sit for a few minutes longer?”

“Oh, let her out. The language is sure to be entertaining,” Sirius says.

Cedric pops the lid on the jar, letting the blue beetle fly free. A moment later Rita Skeeter is standing on the ground, glaring at them and looking a touch worse for wear after spending a week in a jar. She sputters on the verge of incoherency for a few minutes before finally shouting, “I should press charges against the lot of you!”

“Please do try. There are quite a number of us, and merely one of you,” Bathsheda reminds her sweetly.

Hermione looks amused. “You’d think she wouldn’t keep falling for the same trap.”

Skeeter scowls and points at Hermione. “It’s your fault this keeps happening! Ever since bloody 1995, you horrid woman!”

“I do believe it had something to do with saying terrible things about my womanly wiles and implying that I’m a whore.” Hermione gives Skeeter an unimpressed look. “Slander or libel of character is also a crime in Wizarding Britain, Rita, especially in regards to an underage witch or wizard. Minister Fudge might have tolerated your nonsense, but Minister Shacklebolt won’t—and funny, isn’t it, how the term limits for pressing charges never end when it comes to sexual misbehavior regarding wizarding minors?”

“Hurrah, wizarding law school,” Harry says under his breath, grinning.

“This won’t stop me from reporting on the ceremony and your ridiculous Squib graduates!” Skeeter declares.

“No, of course not. Granted, The Quibbler already has the exclusive, ready for evening printing.” Luna smiles at Skeeter. “I’m sure it will be wonderful to read. Our presses are ever so much faster than the Prophet’s.”

Skeeter makes an unintelligible noise, shifts back to beetle form, and flies away in an angry buzz. “That moment just gets better every single year,” Irma says, calmly watching the Animagus depart.

“I’d consider being ever so much nicer to that woman if she hadn’t gone right back to being despicable after the war paranoia began to fade,” Poppy grumbles. “The things she still gets away with saying!”

Harry puts his arm around Luna’s shoulders. “How many subscriptions has The Quibbler gained over the Prophet?”

Luna ponders the question. “I can’t recall the exact numbers, but Father has made mention of needing to extend the warehouse again for the printing press. Oh, and several of my cousins now wish to serve apprenticeships beneath him, perhaps in hopes of acquiring employment.”

“Oh, the miraculous things money does to mend family rifts,” Narcissa says in amusement.

Except for those who make Hogwarts their home, Severus has always made sure he’s last to leave the school at the end of term. He walks through the halls one more time, listening to the silence of a
castle settling down to enjoy its own two months of well-earned rest. Argus, Alberta, Minerva, Trelawney, and Barnaby will have the run of the place but for the portraits and the kitchen elves.

He still has a small crowd in his office when he enters the room. Jade and Luna are waiting by the fireplace, holding hands and exchanging whispers that suggest Luna is plotting a new venture for her second book. Hermione and Viktor are doing the same, but that is not book plotting; that is the sort of plotting that leads to more children, and Severus does not want to know those details.

Harry waits for Severus to affirm that everyone is where they should be before he tosses in the first handful of Floo Powder. “I don’t understand why we don’t all just off an’ walk outside t’Apparate. I mean, bricks,” Jade says. It’s an oft-voiced complaint with no real objection behind it, especially since she’s already stepping into the green flame. Luna shrugs, smiling, and follows just after her. Hermione renews the powder before darting around behind Viktor to shove him into the Floo.

“What?” Hermione bats her eyes at Harry and Severus in mock-innocence before she darts into the flames.

“Five Galleons says we don’t see them again until tomorrow morning,” Harry says.

“I am not giving you five Galleons that easily.” Severus waits until Harry snickers and enters the Floo before he glances up at the portraits. “Behave, troublemakers.”

“Absolutely not,” Phineas says, sniffing in disgruntlement. The last thing Severus sees of his office that term is the delightful sight of Edessa rolling her eyes.

When he steps through the Floo in the Peverell parlor, Jade and Luna are already on the floor, buried underneath their daughters. Jade’s daughter Lazuli’s blonde hair is pinned atop her head with moving butterfly clips. Severus suspects house-elf mischief; they often try to do the same to Circe. Luna’s daughter always scowls, turns the clips into real butterflies, and then escapes before anyone can try to do anything else to her hair.

Harry already has baby Rose in his arms. She has one of her hands shoved into dark red hair, trying to remove a single butterfly clip. She’s grown even more into looking like a carbon copy of her mother, though she leans towards her father’s temperament. “They said hello to Rose, and then suddenly I’m holding a toddler,” Harry explains. “I’m not complaining, mind, but more than twenty seconds of warning would have been nice.”

Rose is already reaching for Severus, who she decided was her absolute favorite for reasons that confound him. Severus gives in to the inevitable and takes the girl from Harry’s arms. He really, really does not understand why he is this child’s favorite. Rose already has an uncle, who is already being kidnapped by Severus’s nieces.

“That is not your hair. That is my hair,” Severus says without looking at Rose. She lets go of her fistful of his hair and then pats it back into place. “Thank you.”

Jade smiles. “Y’know, she only listens t’you about things like that.”

“That is because I told her to concentrate on eating your hair, or Luna’s, as yours is much longer and thus perfect for chewing.”

“Oi! That is…” Jade scowls. “I should’a thought o’ that. I’ll have to send her after Harry.”

“Good luck with that. The only reason Circe succeeded was because she was willing to climb atop that man’s head to make the attempt,” Severus counters, leaving the parlor with Jade and Luna. House-elves are appearing by themselves or in pairs as they realize everyone is home for the
summer. Harry is still in the parlor, making indignant noises that suggest Circe and Lazuli are trying to turn the man into a climbing pole.

Severus is beyond grateful for the existence of house-elves, who adore children to levels that is probably not mentally healthy, and are enthusiastic child-minders. He has been appreciative of both tendencies since Luna awoke Jade in the middle of night in December of 1999, saying they had to get pregnant, that very day, or it wouldn’t happen properly for another ten years. Why Jade did not do the intelligent thing and suggest that waiting another ten years was just fine is beyond Severus’s comprehension. When Jade eventually confessed that she didn’t think it would work on the very first attempt, Severus mocked her for not requesting in-depth information regarding wizarding surrogacy before agreeing to the process. Then he laughed himself to the point of gasping for breath as Jade tried to beat him to death with a throw pillow. He’s still not sure whether it was the mockery or the terrible pun that incited the response.

Jade was at least finished with her doctorate by that point, and spent a lot of time running around the Peverell House shouting that she was a real doctor and no one could stop her now from conquering the world via explosive orbital lasers. That was a declaration which entailed reassuring the house-elves that Jade wasn’t serious. Jade countered by writing up and publishing an article detailing the entire scientific process of how she could actually do so.

Luna was far more sedate during their dual pregnancies, though she’d been Severus’s true point of concern. She’d just graduated that June, and was already starting a family—an odd family, at that. Luna smiled at Severus’s concerns and told him that having children would not stop her from studying her friends, writing about them, or publishing works that proved their existence. She might even have a goal, Luna confided, of outperforming Newt Scamander’s studies, which she felt hadn’t gone into enough detail regarding proper social behavior between wizards and each distinct species.

Severus had a much more thorough understanding of Luna’s urgency in the matter of childbearing when both girls were born on the twenty-first of September, the Autumnal Equinox. Their conception date fell on the twenty-first of December, the Winter Solstice. Then Luna had to compound the issue by naming her black-haired, black-eyed, bronze-skinned daughter Circe Pandora. “Well, Pandora was my mother’s name, and she was a Greek witch,” Luna said at the time. “And Circe just seems appropriate.”

“You are vaguely terrifying, Luna Phoebe Prince,” Severus told her, and she’d smiled at him like he’d given her a wonderful compliment.

Jade, the one Severus would most have expected to give birth to a child with the Prince family’s black eyes, had instead borne a blonde-haired, jewel-blue-eyed girl she immediately named Lazuli Persia because of birthing pain-killers and a complete inability to resist the available pun. The genetic gift of Cadmus’s blue eyes at least look proper and fitting on Lazuli’s face, whereas Tom Marvolo Riddle just made them terrifying.

Severus still thinks naming a child Circe Pandora is just asking for trouble. Pun really, really not intended. Ever.

At least Hermione and Viktor’s Rose Katarina Potter wasn’t conceived until after her mother graduated from her chosen university. Rose turned one on the fifth of February that year, and is therefore not quite ready to join Circe and Lazuli in crafting whatever mischief their terrifying little minds can conceive of. If they were dealing with three children of an age, Severus would not come home from Hogwarts over the summer. He would be hiding in the fucking Black Lake, instead.

While four adults and eight over-excited house-elves try to convince three children to eat, Luna reveals that yes, she is indeed beginning a plot to capture her next unknown creature for her second
Harry doesn’t seem surprised to discover that it will mean another trip to London; an abnormal number of unknown magical creatures seem very fond of the region. “Are they like the Kyoto Garden species of nargles?”

“In a sense, at least in terms of varying species.” Luna gives a chip a thorough inspection before handing it to Circe, who doesn’t trust food unless an adult has confirmed that it isn’t toxic. Lazuli, much like her mother, doesn’t care about the source of food as long as there is plenty of it available.

“There are multiple species of invisible flying squirrels in the world, but this type is found only in Russell Square.”

Severus redirects Rose’s hand away from a wine glass and back to the plastic drinking contraption Hermione acquired in the Muggle world. Spill-proof, his entire backside. The designers of that cup never dealt with wizarding children. “I’m not sure the world needed invisible flying rodents.”

“It’s a very good defense mechanism for city-dwelling squirrels,” Luna counters. “It means they can steal food in safety, and their natural predators don’t notice them.”

“Natural predators being…?” Harry asks.

“Feral cats, dogs, humans, and mobs of pigeons,” Luna replies. “Especially the pigeons. They don’t like the competition.”

“I truly believe that pigeons just hate everyone,” Harry says. “When are we going—and please don’t say tomorrow. I would very much like for my first real day of summer vacation to involve sleeping in.” Harry glances at Rose, Circe, and Lazuli in turn. “Well, at least until someone lands on my bed and demands attention. At least the Kneazles just curl up in my bed to go back to sleep.”

“No, no, tomorrow would be terrible. You need a weekday, or there isn’t a large enough population sample.” Luna tilts her head, thinking, after giving Circe another chip. Circe rejects that one for not being pristine enough by dropping it into Harry’s water glass. He just shakes his head and fishes it out again. “Thursday would be best,” Luna decides. “The most Londoners are out and about on Thursday, eating their meals outside, because they’re excited that tomorrow will be Friday and they can go home early. That means less things to eat over the weekend, so on Thursday the squirrels are most plentiful.”

“Didn’t think you’d be goin’ wi’ us,” Jade says to Harry.

Harry shrugs. “Narcissa’s busy, so I’m working under orders to observe.” The moment the children are distracted, Harry leans in close to Rosily, who is also pregnant with her first set of children. “Please, please, if they wake up before six in the morning? Please distract them until at least seven.”

Roslly smiles and pats Harry’s hand. “Rosily and Essil can be watching the young witches proper. They just be getting too unhappy if they be without their witches and wizards too long.”

“I know. That’s why I’m sensible enough to ask for just an hour,” Harry replies, smiling. “You’re amazing, Rosily.”

Roslly beams. “You is welcome, Master Harry. It being bedtime for tiny Rose!” she announces.

Rose scowls, lower lip protruding. “No,” she announces. Her vocabulary is not yet as developed as Circe or Lazuli’s, but she definitely has a favorite word.

“No is meaning nothing to me,” Essil says, kidnapping Rose from the table with expert house-elf hands. “Not cooperating means no bedtime tales, though.”
Rose’s eyes widen. “Bedtime, bedtime, bedtime!” Despite her favorite word, she also has an absolute fascination with house-elf tales, considering this batch has centuries of material to draw upon.

Circe just scowls. “Chips!” she demands, and holds out her hand for the next three that have been inspected. At least none of these end up in Harry’s water glass…and Lazuli ate the one that did. When Severus glances at her, half of it is still sticking out of her mouth. Lazuli is wide-eyed, looking as if she’d been caught trying to eat a Snidget. Again.

Jade and Lazuli pick up the four-year-olds and take them upstairs to their family suite. Severus glances at Harry, who is giving the kitchen table a blank stare.

“Harry?”

Harry shakes himself and glances up. “Oh—sorry, I didn’t mean to drift off, there. I just haven’t been sleeping well.”

“I don’t think any of us sleep properly until we have everyone on the train and the paperwork is complete,” Severus says.

“Normally, that isn’t an issue,” Harry frowns. “Oh, and I didn’t mention it during the meeting, but we need to revise the Complete Compendium for Potions again.”

“A third revision?” Severus tries not to sigh at the idea. “We’ll get Howlers from Flourish and Blotts, you realize.”

“They can cope,” Harry returns in a dry voice. “Besides, it wouldn’t be fair for every student to purchase the full revision when they already paid for the first or the second. I’m thinking that yes, we have a third revision printed, but the additions should also be available as a supplement text for those who already own the first two versions.”

“A good idea, though it still will not prevent Howlers,” Severus says.

“They know how to use Extending Charms just like everyone else. They just like to whinge.”

Severus wakes up at six the next morning, tries desperately to go back to sleep, and fails at it. He hopes Harry has better luck at his attempt to sleep in; it often takes Severus a few days to shake the school term habit of early rising. He gets dressed and goes downstairs to find Hermione has claimed half of the coffee from the French Press, and is already dressed for work. “An enjoyable day awaits?” Severus asks, pouring coffee and attempting not to bury his face in it. “It is Saturday, you know.”

“Enjoyable for me, perhaps. Not so much for those whose days I’m about to ruin,” Hermione replies with a wide, shark-like smile. Narcissa can deny it all she wants, but Hermione Potter learned that expression from one of the most delightfully venomous witches that Severus knows. “I do hope that weekends have some sort of meaning again by next year, though.”

“I can’t wait to hear about your terrorizing of the Ministry once the news is legally available,” Severus says, and then informs her of Jade, Luna, and Harry’s plans for next Thursday.

Hermione nods, reaching out without turning to hoist Rose up onto her lap when Rose toddles over. She is followed by Viktor, who is still yawning and trying not to stumble around the kitchen. “I don’t have to work that morning, but Viktor has to be in London early for a potential Quidditch negotiation with one of the British teams. We could all meet for breakfast near King’s Cross. I found a delightful café that not only mastered proper coffee and tea, but their food is magnificent.”
“Proper caffeinated bribery is likely the only way we’ll get Jade out of this house in time to make it to Russel Square before noon.” Severus just nods when Hermione smirks at him. “Yes, that is also the sort of bribery required to get me into London before noon. Excellent plotting, Mrs. Potter.”

“Plotting to ensure my household’s comfort is easy in comparison to dealing with Ministry officials.” Hermione gets up, holding Rose in her arms; a house-elf absconds with her empty cup and plate. “Viktor, I’ll see you this evening.”

Viktor accepts his daughter as well as a kiss from his wife. “Slaughter your enemies, darling.”

“Always, dearest.”

The rest of the week is normal, or at least what has come to be normal in Severus’s life. He and Harry toss notes back and forth about the necessary new entries to the Compendium, along with some additions to original entries that have been found to not be quite specific enough, given the melted bronze cauldron that resulted. That took some very creative, ill-advised brewing on a sixth-year student’s part…though to be fair, it had been a very good idea.

The elder kids help by carting notes from Harry’s office to Severus’s and back again, thrilled to be useful. Rose helps by keeping the clowder of Kneazles in the house away from Severus. He isn’t allergic, and he is not opposed to cats, but he doesn’t appreciate their presence when he’s working. They’re far too fond of moving quills.

There is a single Wizengamot meeting the first Monday of July that requires everyone’s attendance. It’s nothing more than a monthly review of what was done in June, and what is expected of July. It’s so blasted boring that the only thing keeping Severus awake is Draco’s scathing commentary of other attending members, especially when Narcissa and Remus begin helping. It is also an opportunity to mock Remus for not breeding an heir, as he is the last of their core group who has still neglected to do so. Remus always retorts that he’ll do so when Sirius stops twitching over the idea. Severus tells him it would be simpler to wait for the heat death of the universe.

The only thing of interest happens just before the meeting is declared complete. The announcement comes from Kingsley and their new Chieftess Witch of the Wizengamot, Griselda Marchbanks: Muggle-borns will have rotating representation in the Wizengamot as of next month. Five chairs will host educated and preferably Ministry-employed wizards or witches to help represent the interest of Muggle-borns in Wizarding Britain.

Harry smiles. “I was wondering why Hermione looked so smug of late. You know she has one of those chairs. They might as well carve her name onto it now.”

“They might not. Two Potters on the Wizengamot may be seen as conflict of interest.” Narcissa reminds him.

Remus shakes his head. “I don’t think they can afford to worry about it. There aren’t a lot of Muggle-borns that the whole of the Wizengamot would accept, not yet. Hermione is a war hero, for all she’s adopted into the Potter line. Justin Finch-Fletchley might be acceptable, but I can’t think of anyone else right now.”

Remus is correct; the list is very, very short. “I’m glad it is not my job to worry about that.” Severus says.

Thursday finally dawns, literally, with Rose landing on Severus’s bed just as the sun breeches the horizon line. “London, London, London!” she chants.
Severus pulls his pillow over his head. “Not yet, not yet, not yet,” he replies. “Go wake up your mother and father. They’re the ones heading into London this early.”

“Okay!” Rose chirps, and bounds off. Severus thinks dark thoughts about trying again to create a childproof lock for his bedroom door. The first four attempts have been failures, but that doesn’t mean the next attempt is doomed.

By seven-thirty, they’re all awake, dressed, and ready to depart, even if everyone seems unhappy about the prospect except for Luna, Lazuli, and Circe. They take the Floo to the Ministry, which puts them far enough from King’s Cross that walking the four miles would take too long. The bus runs late, which is standard for that time of morning. It’s also overcrowded; Harry convinces them to get out of the bloody sardine can with only a quarter-mile left to walk.

“Why’m I agreeing t’be awake this early again?” Jade asks in a plaintive whine.

“Because you agreed to help me with my second book, dearest,” Luna replies. Severus winces away from their reintroduction to bright sunlight, which is the exact opposite of the day’s forecasted rain. He did not have enough tea, coffee, or sleep to deal with cheerful weather of any sort.

“Why am I the one holding these kids? These kids do have parents, right?” Harry asks, grinning. Lazuli is slung over his shoulder, giggling like a fiend. Circe is hanging off of his arm, swinging back and forth.

Severus glances at Jade. “Because one of their mothers might trip and fall this early in the morning due to gravity’s influence, and the other is technically working.”

“Right. You miscreants hear that?” Harry asks, trying to sound stern and failing utterly.

“She could, yeah,” Harry agrees, and then lowers his voice. “I am so glad you, Hermione, and Viktor are kidnapping your nieces before we get on the bloody train.”

“You adore them. You just refuse to admit it in public.”

“And as we are currently in public, please be quiet.” Severus takes pity on him and snags Lazuli from Harry once he’s certain Luna has Jade firmly by the hand, escorting Severus’s bleary-eyed sister towards breakfast and caffeine. Unlike the siblings’ cheerful abuse of Harry—and Harry’s cheerful tolerance for it—Lazuli allows herself to be carried without trying to escape Severus’s grasp. It only took sixteen attempts before his niece realized that Severus would simply use his wand toSummon her right back.

“Where’ve you been?” Hermione asks when they arrive at the café, wrapping Harry and Circe in a hug at the same time. “We expected you ten minutes ago.”

“Blame foot traffic inside the Ministry, or London traffic, to your preference,” Severus answers.
“Good morning, Viktor.” Viktor smiles back. His toddler has her arms in a stranglehold around his neck, probably preventing her father from saying a word. “Hermione, if our table is not indoors, I’m going home.”

“Of course it’s indoors.” Hermione grins at him. “If you didn’t stab someone for being subjected to sunlight at this hour, then Jade most certainly would.”

“Coff-eeeeeeeee,” Jade repeats. She allows Viktor to steer her into the café while she holds out her arms and impersonates a cinematic zombie.

“It isn’t my fault that you cannot find proper sneezes of London flying squirrels after ten o’clock in the morning,” Luna says. “They turn invisible afterwards to steal from everyone’s sack lunches.”

“How do you know?” Harry asks, following Hermione into the restaurant with Circe still slung over his shoulder. If the incessant giggling is any indication, she truly doesn’t mind being carted around while inverted.

Luna purses her lips. “The piecemeal of nargles in Kyoto Gardens told me, at least after I could get them to hold still long enough. They’re in the middle of some sort of territory war, though no one could quite explain why. Apparently it began several generations ago, and everyone has forgotten the reason. Now it’s simply tradition to keep arguing about it.”

“Bloody native Londoners,” Severus mutters, rolling his eyes. “Why did I agree to this again?”

“Because two little girls looked up into your pre-caffeinated face and very nicely said ‘Please,’ and you folded like a house of wet cards,” Harry informs him.

Severus glares at Harry when he finally gets to sit down. “Then why are you here?”

“Narcissa is terrifying. Also, I really want to watch invisible squirrels steal people’s lunches.”

Hermione and Viktor might be terrible morning people, but they have good taste in dining establishments. Severus does his best not to drown himself in properly brewed coffee, which is finally, finally becoming more common in the Muggle world.

“You know, six years ago I would never have guessed that you hated mornings,” Hermione says, daintily sipping from a cappuccino.

“Six years ago I had no choice. During the school term, I still have no choice. I have become spoiled by having two months of true vacation during the summer, and I have several decades’ worth of sleep I wish to catch up on.” Severus waits for the staff to leave the table again. “One would think you would be wise enough to take the same opportunity.”

Hermione smiles. “I come from an entire genetic lineage of morning people. There is a reason why my parents are dentists with two additional doctorates, after all. I am, however, enjoying my morning off from the Ministry. When I told Kingsley I’d be glad to help him set up some sort of proper Muggle-born representation system in the Wizengamot, I didn’t expect to work for an entire year without a proper day off. Half-days do not count. That man owes me a months’ vacation.”

“They were most off-put when Hermione brought Rose to work.” Viktor’s daughter is standing in his lap, giving his face the very serious inspection of someone who is still trying to figure out noses. “I do not think they appreciated being told it was their fault, even if it was true.”

“Which is why I told Hermione to be sure and leave your daughter’s used nappies in places to be the most effective form of chemical warfare outside of using actual chemicals,” Severus says.
“With Viktor playing Quidditch and my parents having jobs of their own, they deserved what they got. I fed my daughter pureed mangos for two days just to leave one of those treasures in Gilead Scrimgeour’s office.” Hermione props her chin on her hand and smiles.

Jade lifts her face out of her second cup of espresso. “Ain’t that th’ treasure it took th’ cretin three days t’find?”

“That would be the one,” Hermione confirms, and then grimaces. “I still can’t stand the scent of mangos.”

“Bubblehead Charm,” Severus says crossly. “Or Breathing Charm variants to keep the stench out.” He’s still trying to figure out why he isn’t the parent, yet is the only adult present with any common sense when it comes to such aspects of childrearing.

Viktor moves his food to one side before Rose can plant her hand in his eggs. “My mother claims the stench is part of the experience.”

“Your mother is a masochist,” Severus counters.

Circe finally deigns to use a chair and sits down. “What’s a mas-chist?”

“A glutton for punishment,” Harry tells her. “Are you going to eat real food today?”

Circe looks offended. “Toast is food!”

Harry shrugs. “Fair enough. Are you putting anything on the toast?”

“More toast!”

Breakfast is finished in the chaotic fashion Severus has grown used to. The girls eat, or pretend to eat, and the adults eat while trying to distract the children. It’s much easier to have a meal at home, where the house-elves act as excellent diversions for children who still think mealtime is an extracurricular activity. By the end of it, Jade is definitely less zombie-like, but she’s still scowling over the idea that it’s not yet nine in the morning.

Harry twitches when the sound of an electronic vibration emerges from his trouser pocket. “Merlin, I do not like that new addition to a mobile,” he says, pulling his phone out and flipping it open. “Good morning, Dudley. Why are you panicking?”

Severus is sitting next to Harry, so he can just make out Dudley Evans’s voice. “Mornin.’ What makes you think I’m panicking, Harry?”

“Because you have two small children, it’s early in the morning, and I know Elisa works on Thursdays,” Harry replies, grinning.

“All right, yes, I’m panicking,” Dudley admits. “Uh, Lily and Marcus are floating up near the ceiling. Again.”

“You named one of your kids after my mum, and you’re surprised that they can fly?” Harry glances over at Severus, who is trying not to bite through his tongue to keep from laughing. It isn’t as if the man wasn’t warned of the trait possibly being genetic.

“I was only a little bit surprised,” Dudley claims. “It’s just—what do I tell a sitter, Harry? ‘Oh, don’t worry, my kids aren’t possessed, they’re just magical?’”
“Not in Cokeworth, you don’t,” Severus murmurs under his breath.

“You’re going to have to give in and accept a list of magically-schooled sitters, Dudley,” Harry says. “I know Elisa’s fine with it.”

“Yeah, but you know Mum. She’s barely coping with the fact that she’s got a nephew, a grandson, and a granddaughter who’re magical.” Dudley sounds frustrated. “I don’t want to alienate her completely.”

Harry frowns. “Dudley? If your need to make certain that Lily and Marcus are safe alienates Aunt Petunia, it isn’t going to be your fault. That’ll be her fault, and her loss. You have two kids who can fly. Right now they have a ceiling over their heads and two parents they listen to. If a regular sitter they don’t respect takes them outside, the sky is literally the limit.”

“Yeah. Okay. Bollocks,” Dudley says, and then makes a choked sound. “Kids! You didn’t hear me say that! Harry, what do I do?”

“You kept up on owl treats like I told you to, right?” Harry asks. “Good. Then I’ll send Hedwig to you with a list tomorrow of potential sitters. They’re all vetted—you need to have some serious licensing on this side of the magical border to look after someone else’s kids, since most of them also act as primary school tutors. You and Elisa can borrow Hedwig long enough to send out invitations to the lot, interview them all, and pick from the ones who are the least annoying.” Harry pauses. “Or we try to find you a house-elf, but they’re a lot harder to explain than a person.”

“Thanks, Harry. I’ll be waiting for Hedwig. Maybe I’ll see if the cat can find a mouse before your owl gets here. She likes a good fresh mouse.”

“That’s really thoughtful. Talk to you later, Dudley—or the mobile can drop the signal,” Harry says, holding out a mobile displaying the NO SIGNAL message on its screen. “That’s also a good way to end a call.” He folds up the mobile and puts it back in his pocket. “Is it wrong if I say he deserves what he’s getting?”

Severus smiles. “Not really. I just think it’s Petunia who is the deserving party in this instance.”

He agrees to carry Rose for the trip home, which keeps her from fussing overly much about being separated from Harry, Jade, and Luna again. Viktor and Hermione abscond with Circe and Lazuli for the walk back to a Ministry Floo. Severus would prefer to Apparate than to go back inside the madhouse, but considering how often Apparition causes Lazuli to vomit, it’s an endurable trade-off.

“I will wager that these three will be ready for a nap when we get home,” Viktor says.

“That is only two-thirds useful,” Severus replies. Circe does not believe in napping.

Lazuli and Rose do indeed announce napping intent by yawning the moment they emerge from the fireplace. Circe glares at Hermione when asked if she’d like to join them. Severus glances down at her after the others leave the parlor. “You know, you should quite possibly not be mimicking the way I choose to communicate with others.”

Severus has taken only three steps to the parlor doorway when he feels Circe tugging on his sleeve. “What?” he asks, glancing down at her.

Circe is staring up at him, wide-eyed. “Bad,” she whispers.

“I didn’t say my method of communication was bad; I said you shouldn’t mimic it.”
“No.” Circe shakes her head. “Bad!” she insists.

“What is—” He never gets the chance to finish asking. It’s almost a sound, even though it’s just the Peverell House’s magic informing him that something dire has occurred. At the same time, Circe bursts into tears.

Severus snatches her up with one arm and then grabs his wand with his free hand, casting his Patronus. The hell with the Statute; he needs to know what happened immediately. “Find Harry, Luna, or Jade,” he instructs over the sound of Circe’s wailing. “Tell them to bloody well assure me that they are fine!”

He’s pacing the room with an extremely upset toddler when Hermione and Viktor return, out of breath. “Please tell me the house’s magic was more specific for you, and you know what’s going on!” Hermione demands at once.

Severus shakes his head. “I’ve no idea, and no one is responding to the Patronus I sent.”

“Oh, the Ministry will be thrilled,” Hermione says, shaking her head. “I should have thought of that.”

“As Jade and Harry are fond of reminding me, the Muggle population will think a transparent unicorn an interesting bit of performance art,” Severus tells her.

“If you’ve already sent one to them, I’m sending one to Ron.”

Viktor glances at his wife. “A good idea, I think. I will send a message to Tonks.”

It isn’t reassuring when neither Patronus is answered. Alice also doesn’t respond, which makes Severus scowl before he sends another Patronus off to Kingsley.

Kingsley’s lynx appears from nowhere and trots up to him about a minute later. “Incident in the subway. I know nothing else,” it says, and then vanishes.

Hermione bolts for the telly and turns it on, flipping through stations until she finds a news source. “Nothing,” she says, disheartened. “It can’t be that bad if the Muggle news isn’t covering it.”

Severus shifts Circe to his other shoulder. “This child disagrees with you.”

Viktor glances back and forth between Severus and Hermione. “I did not fight in your war, so I am at a loss. What do we do?”

“Some of it. Not all of it.” Severus draws up short. “God take it,” he mutters, casting another
Patronus. “Go find the dog and the werewolf and tell them to Floo over.”

Hermione bites her lip. “I forgot. I forgot they’d need to know. I’m glad you remembered.”

Five minutes later, there is a burst of green flame before Sirius emerges from the fireplace. He steps aside and dusts off his robe as Remus joins him. “What’s going on? Where—” Sirius’s expression goes flat and grim at once. “Harry, Luna, and Jade?”

“We don’t know,” Hermione says, possibly to keep Severus from a snide response. “Kingsley says that there was an incident in the subway, but he didn’t know anything else.”

“The house’s magic,” Severus answers the unspoken question Remus levels at him. “We know something is wrong, but nothing else.”


“We were just *in* London. We should go back—” Sirius growls, stopped only by Remus’s hand on his arm.

“If the Ministry or the M.L.E. send word, it’s going to come here first, you idiot!” Severus reminds Sirius.

“Okay. Fine.” Sirius passes his hand over his mouth. “Now what?”

Hermione draws in a breath. “Now, we wait.”

Chapter End Notes

No character death in this chapter or the next. Just harsh reality being a pain in the ass.
It isn’t Sirius or Remus’s presence that drives Severus out into the back garden. He just can’t take sitting there, among others who are doing the same, waiting for word. This isn’t as bad as the month he spent waiting for the results of a Gringotts Horcrux theft (plus one Grand Larceny in the form of Gringotts Dragon), but then, he had other things to occupy his mind and his hands.

Right now, he doesn’t even have that distraction. He can’t bloody concentrate. He just hopes that word comes before he sits down and helps Sirius Black and Remus Lupin to break into St. Mungo’s.

“Severus!”

He jerks around at once in response to Hermione’s voice. “Well?”

Hermione has two false starts before a smile of relief crosses her face. “They’re all right. Let’s go.”

St. Mungo’s is a bloody madhouse. The only reason they even get through the front lobby is Nymphadora’s presence and an inter-building Portkey. That takes them upstairs to wards that are busy with roving nurses and healers, but without the disastrous thronging crowds.

“Those are Muggle victims,” Remus says in a low voice as a nurse escorts two boys past them.

“If they needed magic to get anyone out of the subway, then Kingsley must be having a field day.” Hermione looks grim. “I might have to go in and help him deal with it, but not until I’ve seen the others.”

“This way.” Tonks takes them through two more corridors and turns into a recovery wing. “I can’t tell you anything of what happened yet. I can give you twenty minutes to collect yourselves, not to mention give Terry a nudge, and then I’ll get you all home for a proper brief.”

They’re escorted into a room that has two beds and four chairs. Luna and Jade are in the beds, while Harry claimed one of the chairs.

Luna is scratched and bruised, but she doesn’t seem injured. She’s sitting curled up on the first bed, calmly building a pyramid out of a stack of mirrors like one would build a house of cards. She glances up and smiles at them in welcome. The blue steel in her eyes seems particularly pronounced today.

Severus sucks in a breath, as Jade looks decidedly worse. Her face is covered in healing scratches that still shine with fresh Dittany, her hat is missing entirely, and her leg is resting in one of the magical braces meant to promote proper growth realignment when the limb has been twisted too far to rely on Skele-Gro alone.

Jade is holding her finger to her lips, brow furrowed in worry. “Shh,” she whispers. “That ’un’s not awake, yet.”

Harry also has healing scratches on his face, neck, and his left bare arm. His right arm, like Jade’s leg, is encased in a contraption that is keeping his upper arm, elbow, and forearm bound in place. Unlike the other two, his eyes are closed, and there are hints of violet beneath them—along with a paleness to his skin that Severus strongly suspects is related to blood loss.
“Harry,” Sirius whispers in shock.

Harry’s eyes open wide before he recognizes who else is in the room. He slumps in the chair in apparent relief. “Oh, thank bloody Merlin. Please tell me that you’re getting us out of here!”

“We just got here,” Viktor points out sensibly. “We have no idea what has happened, Harry.”

Jade smiles. “That one sneakin’ out o’ his room to come join us in ours, f’starters.”

“That’s because I’m hiding!” Harry insists. “It turns out if you use yourself, all unwitting, as a prop to keep a tunnel from collapsing, people either think you’re insane or brain-damaged, and don’t trust you to make your own decisions or release you on your own recognizance.”

“Or it could have had something to do with the fact that you were bleeding to death,” Jade says crossly.

“Okay, yes, that’s a good point.” Harry settles back down in the chair. “Two Blood Replenishing Potions really aren’t enough to keep up with an active arterial bleed. Maybe more like four per hour.”

Severus tries not to feel distressed by that information, not when it’s now well after the fact. Harry always carries two Blood Replenishing and two standard Replenishing potions on his person; the lingering wartime habit probably saved his life. “How is your arm?”

“I’ll be fine. I still hate Skele-Gro, but I’ve since learned that the potion to regrow nerve bundles is so. Much. Worse. I can wiggle my fingers, though,” Harry demonstrates this, “and an hour ago I couldn’t even do that.”

Hermione meets Harry’s eyes and waits for him to nod at her. “I have to go to the Ministry.” She stands on her toes to kiss Viktor’s cheek. “I’ll come home at the first opportunity.”

Viktor pulls her into a brief hug. “Go. We’ll all be well, darling.”

As another hour crawls by, the only things they learn of substance is that there was an explosion on the Piccadilly line, and it was not the only explosion that took place in London that morning. The lack of information is grating on Severus’s nerves.

Severus scowls. “We need to go home.”

“Yes, that’n,” Jade agrees, giving the door to their room a narrow-eyed, expectant stare. “We’re the ones wi’ a bloody telly, an’ I wanna know what’s what!”

When Tonks finally returns, Harry glares at her. “If you’re supposed to be a jailer, go away.”

“Nope. I’m your escort out of the madhouse,” Tonks replies, smiling. “As long as everyone can walk.”

“Why the hell do we need an escort?” Harry asks.

“An’ where’s m’wand?” Jade grumbles.

“I have everyone’s wands,” Tonks reassures them, patting her coat. “They had to be investigated for spellwork, per the Ministry’s rules about the Statute to confirm you were all acting in a life-saving manner, but it was just a formality. Half of Wizarding Britain knows what we were up to this morning. We’re the absolute worst gossips.”

“Hey, you lot.” Terry Boot peers around the open doorway, grinning. “We’re bloody heroes again!”
“Oh, Merlin, no,” Harry mutters. “And this time, people know where we live.”

Severus tries not to make a face. “Perhaps we can borrow one of Charlie’s dragons, and let it live in the field before the house.”

“Can we just go…somewhere else? Anywhere else? Istanbul is probably nice,” Harry suggests.

“Why Istanbul?” Jade asks, looking at them all as if they’ve lost their minds.

“Because it’s not bloody Britain!” Harry exclaims. “If Rita Skeeter tries to enter the house, I’m letting Crookshanks eat her.”

“I keep having to be selectively deaf around this family. At least I’m practiced at it.” Tonks says with a wry smile. “We’ll be Apparating out of here directly, Harry. It’ll keep the mob from descending.”

Jade starts to look horrified. “Mob?”

“I keep forgetting that not only did you miss the war, you’re of the wrong generation to know what the last one was like, too,” Sirius says. “We’re all war heroes in Wizarding Britain, Jade. Some of us twice over. If I’m guessing even half of what went on this morning, they’re going to act like Harry and Luna helped save Britain all over again.”

Severus takes Jade home by Side-Along Apparition. Sirius, Remus, and Tonks help the others, though most of it merely involves Tonks being assured that everyone returned to the Peverell House in one piece.

The moment the others are distracted by house-elves, children, and the telly, Severus pulls Tonks aside. “How bad was it?” he asks Tonks in a low voice.

“Harry says he smelled peroxide on the train, but also suggests Luna be retested for precognition,” Tonks answers. “If Luna hadn’t cast a Shield Charm in time, none of them would be here.”

Severus feels his stomach tie itself into a knot. “Dear God.”

“They were in the first car on the line,” she continues after smiling reassurance at Circe. “There isn’t much left of it.”

Severus nods. Everyone is alive; he can cope. “Go on.”

“Most of the survivors were in the last three cars, but some were from the second and third. I have a bad feeling that it was only the three of them from the first car,” Tonks says. “The train operator didn’t make it, either. I don’t know what else we’ll find. Ron is fronting the investigation in the tunnel; Padma is there to tag the bodies; Parvati is Apparating between the tunnel and the Ministry, keeping Percy’s underlings updated on the situation. I imagine that now includes Hermione and her minions.”

The elves make sure that enough furniture is moved to the parlor to hold them all. They gather around the telly, watching news stations continually try to update all of Britain on the day’s events.

“Kingsley is with the Muggle Prime Minister,” Tonks reports during one of the repetitions of the scene outside two of the other tube stations that morning. “Right now, the M.L.E. knows more about what happened than the Muggle investigation teams. We’re trying to figure out how to share information without violating the Statute. Percy suspects it’s mostly going to rely on letting their investigators confirm what we tell them. We also have official Downing Street permission to keep Aurors in London tube stations for at least the next week. Nobody wants a repeat of the American’s
“Wait—this was terrorism?” Jade gapes at Tonks, wrapping her arms tighter around a sleeping Lazuli. “In my bloody city?”

“It’s starting to look that way. Suicide bombers, from what some of us can pick up on.” Tonks scowls at the television as it shows the collapsed tunnel for the Piccadilly line. The last three cars are partly buried, but not crushed. Everything beyond that point will need to be excavated. “I quite honestly would prefer a blasted Death Eater over anything like this. At least they weren’t blowing themselves up just to kill other people.”

Luna narrows her eyes in offence at the scene on television. “That is so very impolite. You do not put others’ murdered bodies on display until they’ve been removed from the murder scene.” Circe is mimicking her mother’s expression with eerie accuracy.

“Someone must have crept down there with a camera. There are Muggle vulture reporters just as there are wizarding ones, Luna.” Viktor is holding his sleeping child in his arms while frowning at the broadcasted chaos.

“What about our Muggle victims in Saint Mungo’s?” Remus asks.

Jade is reading the scrolling feed at the bottom of the screen, which is discussing concussive force in an open space versus an enclosed tunnel. “Dunno, but they were right glad t’be outta that mess, same as the rest o’ us.”

“We can’t Obliviate them,” Tonks says. “Not for something as big as this. Instead, twenty-one Muggles took some very well-worded instructions home to London—that they were treated at a private hospital in the initial chaos after being rescued by the volunteers who were first on-site. I believe the British PM’s staff is backing up that story if someone tries to question it.”

“Ah, bending the truth without actually lying. It’s still a hell of an improvement over what Fudge would have done,” Sirius notes.

Severus rolls his eyes at the reminder. “Fudge would have been angry that we didn’t simply let everyone die just to uphold the Statute.”

“I hate that you’re right. Merlin, that man was useless,” Sirius says.

Tonks finally shakes off the hypnotic effect of horrific television. “I have to go. There is still an investigation happening, and I’ve used up all the time it could reasonably be expected to take, grilling the three of you as to what happened in the tunnel.”

“Give them back their wands first, woman!” Severus reminds her.

“Oh! Right, yes.” Tonks pulls two wands from the inside of her coat, handing them to their respective owners, before she takes a third shattered wand from a separate pocket. “I’m so sorry, love.”

Luna gives her wand a curious look as it hangs in two sad, broken pieces, held together only by its core. “I’m not. Its last act was a very good one.”

Harry gestures for the broken wand. “Bring that here for a minute, will you?”

“Broken wands can’t be repaired, Harry,” Remus says, but he does pass it along to Harry when Luna nods her assent.
“Why not?” Harry glares at his bound right arm before gripping his wand in his left hand. “Latin with a pain-killing potion hangover. Always fun.” He closes his eyes. “*Reparare et reddere quae confregisti*!”

Severus is of Remus’s opinion, that nothing will happen, until Luna’s unvarnished beechwood wand begins to glow. The revealed unicorn hair core straightens out, disappearing into both halves of the wand before the wood rejoins along the broken edges. When the work is done, there isn’t even a scar in the wood to reveal the previous damage. The delicate carved acorns that were severed or damaged are also completely restored.

“There. See?” Harry holds out Luna’s wand, handle first.

Luna takes it in her hands, staring down at her repaired wand. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Saving us will not be its last act, after all.”

“Maybe one day it will be, but not today,” Harry replies. Then he drops his wand onto his lap and leans back against the sofa. “And that’s me, utterly done in.”

Remus is still staring. “*How*?”

Harry blinks up at the ceiling a few times. “Because I wanted it to?”

“I know of exactly one other wand capable of repairing a broken wand, and you gave it back to Death in 1998.” Severus tries not to glare at the idiot sitting in the other chair. “I once asked your father if you were holding a second Elder Wand, and he said no. I should have hexed him, ghost or not.”

Harry gives him an odd look. “Why? He was telling the truth. It’s not an Elder Wand. That was never meant to be held by human hands—and look at what a fucking disaster that turned out to be! This is a wand made by human hands, Sev. Ollivander made what the Elder Wand *should have been*, not what it became.”

“Which means what, exactly?” Sirius asks, glaring at his godson.

“That the wand works for anyone who holds it, and does whatever is *needed*.” Harry scratches at the back of his right hand, making a disgruntled face at what must be the nerve-regenerating potion at work. “You can’t even kill anyone with that wand unless you really, really need them dead. I’m going upstairs to try and sleep for the next twelve hours in a vain attempt at ignoring the fact that it feels like someone has allowed ants to roam around inside my arm.”

Gilly appears in front of Harry and glares at him. “You is not to be walking up those stairs! I be taking you.”

Harry gives her a bleary-eyed look. “I am fine with this plan,” he says, holding out his hand. The house-elf nods decisively and Apparates them both upstairs.

Jade finally breaks the awkward silence Harry leaves in his wake. “Y’know, outside of m’job, I’ve lived solidly in th’ wizardin’ world for almost five years now, an’ half the shite you lot say is still goin’ right o’er my head.”

“How did you know about the Elder Wand’s ability, Severus?” Luna asks.

Severus glances over at her. “Rubeus Hagrid’s wand was broken when he was expelled from Hogwarts. Albus Dumbledore already held the Elder Wand at the time. Hagrid’s umbrella has some very interesting characteristics for something that is merely rumored to hold pieces of a broken wand,
especially as broken wands do not function.”

Luna smiles “I always did think his umbrella had a particularly odd handle, but decided it would be rude to mention it.”

“We still aren’t mentioning it. I’ve been trying for seven years to get that man’s expulsion stricken from the record and corrected, and still the Ministry is dragging their feet. Prejudiced fucks—Circe, you did not hear me say that,” Severus adds.

Circe blinks her black eyes at him and then solemnly shakes her head. “Nope. I did not hear you say the adult word.”

“I am so very glad you are a terrible liar,” Severus replies.

“Go to bed, Luna, Jade.” Sirius stands up long enough to fetch Circe from her mother’s lap. “We’ll stay. We can help Viktor keep watch over these two so that you can rest.”

“If the house-elves don’t kidnap the kids the moment our backs are turned,” Remus adds, stretching out his arms to accept Lazuli from Jade. Lazuli doesn’t bother to wake up for the process. Unlike her sister, she is a firm believer in naps.

Severus nods at them. “Thank you.” He is not the best sitter, even when he’s not spent the entire morning stressed out of his mind.

“Yeah, that,” Jade adds. “I’d like to be wi’em more, but when m’house says t’nap, I listen.”

* * * *

When Severus wakes up the next morning, he finds loose clothing suitable for a day spent at home and goes downstairs. As he trudges resentfully down the hallway to the kitchen on a quest for tea, he realizes the television is still on in the parlor. He gets to the caffeine first, wanting fortification before he faces whatever is on that screen.

To his surprise, the parlor is empty of everyone save Harry and three house-elves—Dobby, Gilly, and Winky. “Did you sleep well?” Severus asks, already knowing the answer to that question. Harry is glaring at the television with the particular, narrow-eyed stare he gets when sleep has been lacking.

“Can’t sleep. Too fucking itchy,” Harry says. “News is a bit more accurate today, though.”

Severus sits down on the sofa next to him. Harry sighs and slumps down to rest his head on Severus’s shoulder. “Hope you don’t mind,” he mutters.

“Don’t drool on me,” Severus replies, glancing at the telly. “News?”

“There was a press conference from the MP this morning at eleven. Three tube blasts and one bus bombing. Piccadilly was the worst in terms of destruction, but no one has accurate casualty counts per site,” Harry summarizes the news for him. “The entire Underground is shut down.”

“Next time, please tell me ‘Good morning’ before you announce that things are terrible,” Severus says.

Harry makes an amused noise. “Good morning. Most things are terrible.” He lifts his head just long
enough to peer at the television when the scrolling text changes.

Severus grimaces as he reads the numbers. More than thirty confirmed dead and hundreds of casualties. It’s nothing like the American’s 9/11 from 2001, but it still isn’t pleasant. “For twenty-three years, I’ve managed to keep a disastrous explosion from occurring in the Potions classroom. Finally, one occurs due to the improper mixture of chemicals, and it’s in the wrong damned place.”

“Can’t blame anyone for fucking up. Entirely unfair,” Harry says. “Well, I suppose you can blame them, but they’re already dead. Where’s the fun in that?”

“Slytherin,” Severus accuses him fondly.

“Too tired to be anything but that at the moment.”

Severus doesn’t realize he really is being used as a pillow until Gilly tugs at his trousers and points at Harry. He glances down to find that Harry has finally fallen asleep, though his right hand is twitching in a way that suggests the aforementioned itching is still bothersome.

Explosions between the stations for Liverpool Street and Aldgate, King’s Cross and Russell Square; Edgware Road’s tube station itself, and finally a bus on Upper Woburn Place near the square. Each explosion officially dubbed terror attacks; that, Severus was aware of last night, though he’d been unaware that the rest of London’s mass transit system was shut down along with the Underground.

Harry, Jade, and Luna could have died by being in that damned train car yesterday morning. Twenty-one Muggles are still alive because they were.

Hallowe’en of 1996 was the first time Severus dared to voice the idea, if not the entirety of his belief, that the separation of magical society from Muggle society was utterly stupid. With a war looming, that separation probably saved lives. Voldemort spent his time concentrating on consolidating his power base in Wizarding Britain, not the whole of the UK.

*What about now?* Severus wonders. Could Britain handle the reintroduction of magic after one thousand years without it? Aurors and the Ministry already work with the Muggle government whenever the need arises. That has only resulted in a disaster once—and the incident had been Wizarding Britain’s own fault for sending a bigoted, blood-purist idiot to Downing Street as their magical liaison.

Bificiss pops into the parlor and blocks his view of the telly, which is probably for the best. “Mistress Narcissa is wanting to know if you is being up to visitors.”

Severus regards the Malfoy house-elf for a moment. “Only Narcissa, or Narcissa, Draco, Astoria, and Scorpius?”

“Only the mistress,” Bificiss answers. “She is not being wanting to distress anyone who is still recovering.”

Severus nods. “Then tell her she is welcome. She is also correct. I don’t think any of us could handle Draco’s polite panic.”

Bificiss lets out an undignified giggle before vanishing. A few minutes later, the flames in the fireplace turn green before emitting Narcissa. She stands up, brushes off her gray silk robes, and then stares at him. “Severus?”

Severus holds his finger to his lips. “One of us slept, and one of us did not,” he says quietly. “It’s good to see you this morning.”
“I’m very glad some of you are alive to be seen,” Narcissa counters, but keeps her voice soft. She glances in the direction of the television. “Draco wants to put one of those in the Manor. I think it is less true interest and more a burgeoning desire to cause every portrait in the house to pretend to die of apoplexy, but I’m not opposed. They are useful. Has there been any other news?”

“Nothing more than what the Daily Prophet has likely reported already,” Severus says. “I only woke up about thirty minutes ago, so this was an efficient way to fill in the gaps.” He flicks his finger at the television, pleased when it powers off instead of developing a crack on the plastic facing. Sometimes his aim is a little bit…well, off. Harry is a horrid influence in the manner of puns.

“You have the look of a man who has much on his mind, Severus.”

He nods. “I was wondering if the Statute of Secrecy has finally outlived its usefulness.”

Narcissa gazes at him, polite disbelief writ large on her face. “Severus, the Statute exists for very good reasons!”

“Yes, good reasons…for the seventeenth century. That was over four hundred years ago, Narcissa. How many lives could we have saved yesterday if we didn’t need to concern ourselves with hiding the method and means?”

“Not all of them,” Narcissa says at once. “Perhaps some. Perhaps none. I’m not certain it’s worth that sort of exposure.”

“When wizards figure out how to explore the edges of our solar system, not to mention admit to the proven existence of other galaxies aside from our own, then perhaps I will agree with you,” Severus returns in a sour voice.

“Well, you are using Hogwarts to raise entire generations of wizards and witches to think in terms of combined Muggle-wizard ideologies,” Narcissa observes dryly.

“Hush. A good Slytherin does not reveal the well-conceived schemes of others.”

“Of course not.” Narcissa frowns. “Many will not take it well, even if the children of Hogwarts have adapted nicely to many aspects of Muggle technologies.”

“Then they can happily die off like the useless dinosaurs they are,” Severus retorts, and lowers his voice again when Harry stirs and mutters a complaint about the noise. “I am tired of our society continuing to live like it’s the nineteenth century, Narcissa. It’s been the twenty-first century for five years now. We should all get used to the idea.”

Narcissa graces him with a nod. “If I didn’t agree, I would not still be teaching at Hogwarts.”

“I’m aware, and I’m still thankful.” Severus is; he is grateful for every single teacher who stayed to see through their mad experiments. Every faculty member he had in the year 2000 is still with the school. Every teacher they’ve added to the staff since that time have been those who not only adapted well to life in a half-sentient Scottish castle, but to the ideas inherent in the curriculum as it’s grown and changed when necessities revealed themselves.

Narcissa changes the subject. “Please do tell me you are going to attempt a proper courtship. Your friendship will survive it even if the courtship is a failure.”

Severus resists the urge to roll his eyes. “You assume that isn’t the case already.”

Narcissa grins at him. “I am going to enjoy every single minute of watching the two of you bumble
your way through the process.”

“I absolutely refuse to bumble my way through anything.”

Narcissa departs not long afterward, promising to inflict Draco, Astoria, and young Scorpius on them tomorrow. Severus sends her off with polite words, but is quietly grateful that Scorpius will have immediate distractions in the form of Lazuli, Circe, and baby Rose. He’d forgotten how hyperactive Draco had been as a child until Scorpius became a blatant reminder.


Harry nods without bothering to open his eyes. “People are happier. Wizards are falling in love with the Internet and mobile phones. N.E.W.T. Potions students are graduating Hogwarts, getting their A-levels, and then attending uni for molecular biology and chemical engineering to bring those ideas right back to the wizarding world. It won’t be long before all of these things are going to be obvious to everyone except your aforementioned dinosaurs.”

“Is that approval I hear?”

Harry nods. “I’ve been throwing chemistry books at students. Yes, I approve. Also, you shouldn’t take advantage of national disasters to fuck with Narcissa.”

Severus smiles. “Harry, such chances rarely present themselves. I’m not going to ignore the opportunity, especially when she was the one to so kindly imply it.”

“Pretend dating best come with real food,” Harry says. “But not until Terry gets this damned thing off of my arm. Dobby! Find Terry and drag him out of Saint Mungo's for me, would you?”

"Trapped between two slabs of concrete?" Severus finally dares to ask.

Harry nods. "Right at the elbow. They couldn't get me out without using a Port Key, for which I'm grateful. I mean, I'm really attached to my arm."

Severus glares at him. "That pun was utterly uncalled for."

Terry is shown in about ten minutes later; he scowls down at Harry. “It’s a day too soon.”

“I will destroy it by bashing it against the stone walls outside, Terry,” Harry replies, scowling. “I mean it. My joints need to flex, or I’m going to hurt when this stupid thing comes off tomorrow. Do a wand diagnostic if you don’t believe me.”

“I’d be doing that anyway,” Terry mutters, getting out his wand. After a moment, his eyebrows rise. “Did you perform any healing spells?”

“No. It’s magic embedded in the house,” Harry says. “Physical and mental ailments heal faster.”

Terry stares at them. “Please someone tell me how the magic in this house works for healing. Adding that to the hospital would be bloody amazing.”

“Come back and talk to the portraits next week, after things have calmed down again,” Harry says, and then holds out his arm. “Now, Terry. I’m not above trying to beat you to death with this thing.”

Terry grins. “Please. You never managed it with a Quaffle,” he says, but he does remove the magic
that kept the bindings in place. “Now show me how well your hand’s working.”

Harry shakes his head, retrieves his wand from his right shirtsleeve with his left hand, and then transfers it to his right. His grip on his wand is decent, if not quite solid. Terry tilts his head, performs another diagnostic spell, and then nods. “All right. I’ll clear you, though I’m still going to have to figure out how to explain ‘magic healing house’ to senior staff.”

“It’s the bloody Peverell House. If they can’t get the idea through their thick skulls, then they’re hopeless,” Severus says.

Terry shrugs. “Yes, but they’re the ones who make sure I get paid. See you two next week,” he says, and lets Dobby escort him from the parlor.

The house-elves are kind enough to bring them breakfast on tea trays. Severus is grateful; he’s not up to excited toddler activity yet. Jade and Luna join them a few minutes later, looking much better than they had yesterday. Jade isn’t limping at all, but she is complaining about the loss of her hat.

“She’ll be intolerable until it’s replaced,” Harry says after Jade and Luna go into the kitchen to find their offspring. “We’ll have to find one. At least there is an actual hat millinery in Diagon Alley now.”

“Not brocade. If she liked the style, she’d have purchased one on her own. Winky?”

Winky pops back into the room. “Yes, Master Severus?”

“Would you please go to Diagon Alley on my behalf? I need you to find out if there is a hat in any of the alley shops that is an exact match for Jade’s lost top hat. If you find one, please purchase it. The sizing doesn’t matter; I can adjust that myself. It’s the appearance that is important.”

“Even if it’s not exact, we can probably Transfigure the alterations, but it still should be as close as possible,” Harry adds.

Winky nods. “I’s be doin’ that right now!” she exclaims, and vanishes again.

Harry smiles. “That was a good idea.”

“You’re the one who rightly pointed out that Jade will be intolerable without it,” Severus replies.

Harry stands up, wobbling on his feet for a moment before steadying himself. “I’m going back to bed. Now that the stupid brace is off, I might be able to sleep for more than five minutes at a time.” He hesitates, lips pressed together in a rare display of nervousness. “I can’t, uh—I really can’t be alone right now.”

Severus stands up, nodding. Damned PTSD. Harry doesn’t get struck by it often, but yesterday might leave them all a mess for months. He can definitely provide company, but he’s going to be reading, not sleeping through morning and afternoon both.

Severus glances at the bed’s position pressed against the wall in Harry's bedroom, notices the expression on Harry’s face, and uses his wand to slide it out far enough so that there is an wide path between wall and bed where no space had been before. Harry falls asleep almost before Severus can open his book. He is still trying to get through *The Silmarillion* without wanting to strangle a dead Professor of English.

Severus wakes up with the book folded at his side, but he’s alone in the room. That doesn’t leave him panicked; he can feel by the magic in the house that everyone is fine and where they should be.
Severus gets up, changes clothes for the second blasted time that day after sleeping in what he was wearing, and wanders out into the hallway.

“Lip-reading doesn’t help, you daft shit! I don’t speak Common Brittonic!”

Severus tilts his head, listening through a silent pause.

“I don’t speak Cumbric, either!”

Amused, Severus tracks the sound of Harry’s voice into the opposite wing fronted by Cadmus’s portrait. The man has gotten a bit less dour in the past few years, but it’s so little improvement one literally has to live in the Peverell House to know there was improvement at all.

Severus finds Harry sitting on the hall carpet runner, regarding a portrait that he’s taken down and placed against the wall in front of him. Severus recognizes Myrddin by his dark hair and eyes, still very much a Gaul at a time when many natives of Britain had intermarried with the redheads and blonds from the north.

Harry glances up at Severus. “Do you speak Welsh?”

“No,” Severus replies. “I value my sanity too much. What are you doing?”

“Woke up with a mad inclination towards trying to figure out if a painting’s magic really is locked to the original artist,” Harry says. “I should possibly have tried to start with someone who speaks Middle English, but I also thought if anyone would be the most likely to know how, it’s probably going to be this arsehole.”

“Insulting Merlin probably will not gain you much progress,” Severus notes, smiling. He does also admire that Harry’s reaction towards regarded impossibility is to tell impossibility to sod off—and that was before Ollivander handed him an ebony wand wrapped in silver lime wood.

Harry scowls. “He started it. The cranky prick has just enough vocabulary in Old English to know how to insult someone. All I asked was if he knew how to read lips, but apparently that meant something different fifteen hundred years ago.”

“You do realize that if you succeed, he might never shut up.”

“I don’t sleep in this wing of the house. Besides, he has to either learn English or stop pretending he’s stupid before talking is even remotely a concern.” Harry then grins like a fiend. “Oh! Hey, someone did not like their intelligence being insulted,” he says while Myrddin glares at him. “What’s it going to be? Are you going to assist me, and oh, maybe get to talk to people, or are you going to wander off and sulk in Arthwys’s portrait again?”

Myrddin looks to be gnashing his teeth before he crosses his arms and turn away from them. Severus rolls his eyes and helps Harry to re-hang the portrait. “Ignatus might have been told by Salazar that Merlin was a grumpy bastard, but I think Salazar was simply unaware that it was a life-long habit.” Severus is still miffed that Ignatus had to identify one of the upper hall portraits as Salazar Slytherin, who had been perhaps forty years of age at the time of its painting and far more pleasant of expression than any portrait of the man within Hogwarts’ walls.

“Yeah, I’m getting that impression, too.” Harry shakes his head. “I tried asking Salazar directly. Spanish is a lot easier to lip-read than literal dead languages. He doesn’t know how the speech aspect is added to a portrait. We have a house full of great magic workers, and most of them are mute.”

“There is a reason why many of Hogwarts portraits are either empty, hold sleeping subjects, or their
subjects seem to be constantly inebriated,” Severus says. “I imagine being unable to speak for hundreds of years would be frustrating.”

“You’d then think that a certain idiot would be far more helpful, considering it would remove that frustration.” Harry rolls his eyes and shoves his wand back into his sleeve. “Want to see if there is food downstairs?”

“You hadn’t done that already?”

Harry seems puzzled by that. “Well, no. Inspiration, portrait magic, yelling at a useless daft famous shit.” Myrddin looks over his shoulder long enough to glower at Harry before he goes back to pretending to ignore their existence. “And what’s that look for?”

Severus realizes he’s smiling. “Apparently, it is reserved for the man who puts solving ancient magical problems above concepts such as dinner.”

Winky pops into existence when they’re halfway down the stairs. “You’s might be wantin’ to be warned—you’s be havin’ company,” the house-elf whispers, and disappears again.

“I’d actually be surprised if we didn’t,” Harry says, and Severus nods. He’s glad for both the warning and the fact that he bothered with real clothing.

“Everyone ginger,” Severus notes the moment the full extent of those gathered in the back courtyard becomes clear. “Of course.”

“Everyone ginger, everyone’s ginger children, and everyone we don’t want dead on a regular basis,” Harry adds, pushing the kitchen door open. The day is still warm, even if the sun is about to drop below the trees in the west. Furril is wandering around, glaring at torches until they light up in a satisfying burst of flame.

“I’m still trying to figure out how my list of those I do not want dead has expanded to such an extent,” Severus confesses in a low voice. Then Scorpius collides with his leg, wraps his arms around Severus’s shin, and demands attention.

“That’s how. Breeding.” Harry pulls Theodorea off of a torch post before she can stick her hand into the fire. “That bites, kiddo.”

“Nu uh!” Theodorea insists, but allows Harry to take her back to Oliver. Circe and Luna are chasing down young Fabian and Gideon, who are older but most certainly wise enough to know when to retreat. Perhaps it took a lack of twinship before the lesson drove itself home among three sets of gingers bearing those particular names.

Severus hoists Scorpius up into his arms. “There are much better ways to greet someone.”

Scorpius’s expression twists up as if Severus told him something exceptionally foolish. “Not as effective!”

“If you get Sorted into Gryffindor, I am going to laugh at your father for seven straight years.”

“I did tell him to please not run directly into people, but he just takes it as a challenge.” Astoria takes Scorpius from his arms. “Everyone is all right, yes? The house-elves insist you are, but it’s Harry who slept the longest.”

“I am not hiding in the library, and neither is Harry. That should be proof enough,” Severus replies, and Astoria smiles in acknowledgement.
The house-elves seat everyone informally at round tables and chairs that otherwise remain hidden in the basement. The last time they emerged from storage, Hermione and Viktor’s wedding reception was being hosted in the back garden. There are a truly horrendous amount of people present, but none of them want Severus to do ridiculous things beyond making sure the occasional small child does not set themselves on fire.

“So! Inquiring minds want to know,” William finally says, grinning at Severus from two tables away. Victoire gives her father a suspicious look, which is a fair match to the one his wife is giving him.

Severus glares at William. He learned not to trust that expression years ago. “Want to know what?”

“They’re trying to marry us off,” Harry says dryly, pretending to ignore everyone by helping Rose to braid daisies into a chain. It’s a pathetic attempt, given that neither of them are skilled at braiding anything.

“William!” Fleur elbows her husband. “That was not subtle at all!”

“We still want to know.” Minerva is grinning like a cat. Her Animagus form has never seemed more appropriate.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Would you all mind being patient enough to let me attempt to actually date the man first?” Narcissa might kill him for this, but he is going to enjoy leading everyone in merry circles after six fucking years of non-stop gossip.

“How has that not happened yet?” Ginevra asks, snagging baby Arthur by the collar before he can escape off into the trees.

“I told you they already thought we were dating,” Harry says.

“And I told this lot to stop rushin’ it!” Pomona laughs at the others. “Rolonda and I lived together a full twenty years before we ever gave a thought to dating, but no! Don’t listen to the two old lady queers on the matter!”

“Yes, please, actually do listen to them.” Severus is not happy that most of his blasted faculty is still plotting a wedding behind his back. Not surprised, either, but not happy. He glances over at Sirius, who is ignoring the entire conversation while Remus smiles down at his plate. One would think that the response of the Marauders would tip off everyone else.

“I’d just like to say that I don’t want to be hearing about any of this,” Ron says, watching as Dudley hops up to go retrieve his children from the upper window ledge before they can get any higher in their climbing efforts.

Harry looks up at him. “Okay.” He holds out his wand and casts a nonverbal spell before returning his attention to mutilated daisy-braiding.

Severus glances over to see Ron prodding at his own ears before he glares at Harry. “One day, Ron is going to remember to pay more attention to what he’s asking for.”

“Harry, I need this man properly vocal later,” Parvati complains.

“It’ll wear off in about an hour.” Harry smiles. “In the meantime, Ron got his wish. Didn’t he, baby Rose?”

Rose nods. “No.”
“Exactly.” Harry holds up the results of their work. “Well, that’s not right. Elisa, I have no idea how you do this.”

Dudley’s wife gives the mauled flowers a look of sympathy. “You didn’t grow up with three sisters, Harry. Do we have any daisies left, or have the kids picked the yard clean?”

“West field?” Jade suggests.

“No, those all bite, for some reason,” Harry says. “Maybe we should leave the flowers alone and just start off with string.”

“You can’t wear string!” Ted says indignantly. Severus thinks no one should be taking fashion advice from a child who has turned his entire head of hair into daisy blossoms.

“Trust me, if wizarding life has taught me anything in th’ last five year? It’s that wizards can an’ will wear anything,” Jade tells him. “An’ baby boy, I do mean anything.”

* * * *

Severus and Harry go back into London alone the next Thursday, a full week after the bombings. The entire city still feels like its holding its breath, as if the summer’s drama is not yet complete. Businesses are opening again as people try to go back to their daily lives; Harry has made the decision that he is going to have a curry and no one is stopping him.

The restaurant is exactly where Severus remembers it being in 1996, though the name is different. When he points out the change, Harry shrugs. “Same owners. It’s just that back in 1996, no one thought to tell them that Indian Portion could also be a horrible joke about sex—which is something I’m also really glad I didn’t know at the time.”

“I never wanted to know that at all,” Severus mutters. “I would have preferred to remain ignorant of that fact for the rest of my life.”

The Muffliato charm kills eight different mobile phone conversations. Serves them right for being rude at a dining table.

Severus knows he’s going to regret it, but curiosity wins out. “How did you discover that interesting fact of the restaurant’s previous name?” he asks after they’ve been shown to a table. They’re still seated against a wall, but on the opposite side of the restaurant, away from the noise of the kitchen. Half of the restaurant is empty, but at least people don’t look frightened out of their wits.

“For the twins’ nineteenth birthday, Ron was looking for places with decent Indian food, found this one, and brought Padma and Parvati here. He said they spent the entire night scarlet in the face. Ron had no idea why, and they didn’t know how to tell him without everyone simply exploding from embarrassment.”

Harry waits until they have tea before he gives Severus an inquiring look. “Are you regretting coming out with me tonight? You didn’t have to. I’m sure there are much more entertaining ways to try and get revenge against Narcissa.”

“Regret?” Severus considers his teacup. “Not at all. I was just realizing that the last time I was in this establishment, I didn’t expect to survive Voldemort’s war. Then, when I finally get used to the idea
that I might actually outlive my parents, someone twenty years my junior nearly died in the blasted Underground.”

“Well, neither happened,” Harry says. “One is now impossible, and the other…”

“What?” Severus asks, concerned when Harry trails off into discomfited silence.

“I’d rather not say. It’s really not good dinner conversation.”

“It’s too damned late for that. You brought it up,” Severus retorts. “What?”

Harry waits until their server stops by, discussing their orders, before leaving again. “You outlive me.”

Severus freeze in the middle of reaching out to reclaim his tea. The word emerges as a shocked rasp. “What?”

“You outlive me,” Harry repeats, meeting Severus’s eyes. “Maybe I die tomorrow, next week, next year—I’m not going to, by the way. Please do not break that teacup,” he adds.

Severus forces himself to loosen his grip. “When?”

“It doesn’t work that way. I’m not in a rush to die, Sev, even if last Thursday might’ve looked otherwise. I’ve just told you all I know for certain. I might have had a conversation with Death, but that’s literally the only real question I asked them.”

“That—that doesn’t actually make me feel any better,” Severus whispers.

“I did say it wasn’t a good conversation to have over dinner,” Harry replies.

“Then why mention it at all?”

Harry sighs. “Because you’ve been worried about it, especially after last week. Maybe you need one less thing to concern yourself with. Maybe it’ll never matter. Jade and Hermione bear the responsibility for repopulating our bloodlines—and better them than us, to be honest. Maybe it’s just because you shared things with me when you didn’t have to, and I wanted to return the favor.”

Honesty. Severus grants him a rueful nod. “On Friday evening, I spent a few minutes wondering what it would be like if you…were not here. I almost had a fucking panic attack.”

“I did have one,” Harry says, “when you had your encounter with Bottled Dementor. Poppy was nice enough not to say anything.”

“She has always been the epitome of discretion.” Severus hesitates for a moment. “If you already knew I outlived you, then why—”

“That would be something else I was told, but I didn’t ask for this one.” Harry smiles. “Nothing is set in stone until those events have already come to pass.”

They find an alleyway and Apparate back to the field in front of the Peverell House, walking through ankle-high grass to go around to the rear courtyard. Winky is thrilled to go pick a wine from the cellar, the first time in years one has been retrieved for reasons other than Hogwarts.

“This fake dating. What are we going to do if it somehow progresses to fake wedding?” Severus asks, enjoying the quiet hush of the back garden at night.
Harry lowers his wine glass and gives Severus an odd look. “For starters, I’d like to think that if we ever made it to wedding, it wouldn’t be a fake one.”

Severus tilts his head. “Good point. There is also the cessation of that annoying, ‘When will you wed and breed?’ that I’m heartily sick of.”

“Trust me; I hear it far more often than you do,” Harry says dryly.

“Are there any other pleasant bonuses to this plot aside from the joy of fucking with Narcissa Black in a vengeful manner?” Severus asks.

Harry smiles. "Well, if there's a wedding, then there are presents and free cake. If you’re going Slytherin levels of vengeance against another Slytherin, you might as well enjoy all of the benefits.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for taking this amazing ride with me. <3

End Notes

*I'm not using the underage tag because these are kids in school and if ANY of them are up to things they shouldn't be, it is happening off-screen, because myself and the POV character don't even want to know. At all. No.

*The canon Quidditch schedule is stupid and I ignore it in favor of things that make more sense.

*For my own nefarious purposes, Hogwarts is located south of Loch Glass in northern Scotland, northeast of Garbat.

*JKR said in an interview once that there is only a single Head Boy and Head Girl for the entire school. This is ludicrous and also something I happily ignore. Which brings me to this point:
Dear Everyone Who Has Ever Attended An English Boarding School: Swung by Serafim is a fanfic. Hogwarts is not a real school. Your fellow students at your real large boarding schools you attended were not all armed with weapons that could literally be used to kill anyone they liked, at any time, on the merest whim. You don’t need the Killing Curse to make someone dead with a wand. I can have more than one Head Boy and Head Girl if I bloody well want to in order to preserve some sense of safety in this understaffed school…BECAUSE IT IS FANFIC.

****DESpite what the tags say, this is not a series. Ao3 will not let me correct this error. Sorry about that!****

Works inspired by this one

Unicorn hair by Imoshen
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