In Perpetuity

by starcrossedgirl

Summary

Some stories in life repeat in the same old patterns. Until they change.

Notes

For Snarry-A-Thon 12, prompt #061: Severus has always been a kept man. Now that those people are gone (for whatever reasons), he is left adrift until one day in walks Harry Potter.

Huge thanks to andinocara for the beta and insightful commentary. Special thanks to the prompter for giving me the chance to write a different Snape than I usually write, but one I’ve always wanted explore. And, of course, all the virtual cookies in the world to the mods for organising this fest!

Warnings (highlight to view):

angst, consensual BDSM, implications of past dub-con/non-con/abusive relationships (not in Snarry pairing)

“That’s two galleons, sixteen sickles and twenty-two knuts, please.”
Severus stares at the paltry selection of coins in his hand, suddenly frantic. The clanging noise they make as he set them onto the counter rings impossibly loud; digging through his robes with both hands reveals only one pathetic knut to add to the miniscule pile.

A bit like himself, if he cares to admit it.

“That’s one galleon, fifteen sickles and two knuts,” the shop assistant says, as though he can’t count. “Which items would you like me to take off?”

Not meeting her eyes, Severus stares some more, this time at the equally unimpressive pile of his groceries. Which items? The vodka, nasty swill that it is, drives up the cost most notably, but it is the only damn thing that allows him to sleep anymore these days, the only thing to shut down his thoughts. No, the vodka must stay. Which is more important, toilet paper or apples? Does he really need bread, or milk? Perhaps black tea isn’t quite as disgusting as he remembers. For that matter, perhaps he should just do away with the tea altogether. Or maybe the vodka, after all, except that it also keeps the cold at bay for a short few hours and he really cannot afford to use the heating.

“Sir, you’re holding up the queue. I really have to ask you to choose.”

Choose. It ought not be so bloody difficult; after all, people do it all over the world, every day. All that’s required of him is to make a choice, one simple choice, but the various options seem to dance in front of his vision, mocking. His palms feel clammy, damp with sweat. How the hell do people do it, make choices, day in and day out?

Behind him, some of the customers are starting to mutter. As if he needs the added humiliation, as if he hasn’t enough, knowing that a few short years ago none of this would have been an issue; he made plenty of choices then; he wasn’t completely incapable.

But a few years ago, things were very different. A few years ago, he wasn’t--

“Sir--”

“I’ll get it,” a voice cuts in, sure and familiar as the magic which brushes against him. “Two galleons something, right?” Three golden coins drop onto the counter. “Here, keep the change.”

Severus closes his eyes, a fresh wave shame warring with unbridled relief. By the time he’s opened them again his benefactor has already levitated his groceries into a bag; Severus’s own money flies into his pockets a mere moment later.

He turns and comes face to face with Harry Potter.

The situation would be laughable, if it didn’t throw him so thoroughly off balance -- not that he has a lot of that left, in the first instance. As it is, the thanks he means to utter dies on his lips; when Potter picks up the bag and grasps him lightly by the elbow, he lets himself be led from the shop like a mute puppet on strings.

The comparison is about the height of his intellectual capacity, these days. And they used to call him a genius. Hah.

“You look terrible,” is the first thing Potter says to him, once they’re out in the biting cold.

Severus stares into the street, at the crowds of people passing by. He cannot precisely argue with the truth; he’s always been unimpressive, but with several days worth of stubble and unwashed, barely patched robes he looks beyond dreadful.
Or so he assumes. He doesn’t tend to look in the mirror much, these days.

“You needn’t have done this,” he says, instead. “You left your own shopping--”

“It’s fine. I was just getting some fancy spices to play with. It can wait.”

Severus squirms. His discomfort isn’t allayed any by the fact that people are starting to recognise them, stopping to gape, and in many cases glare. They must make quite the picture, the unassailable hero-turned-Auror and the publicly convicted Death Eater, now stripped of his magic.

He still dreams of the trial, some nights. Paradoxically, he doesn’t so much mind the dreams of his cell; he longs for them, almost. In there, he needed to make no decisions. His basic needs were assured for the duration of his stay.

Azkaban would have been preferable to this hell.

“Look,” Potter says, “do you want to go somewhere a little more quiet? I haven’t got ages, because I’m on lunch, but I’ve got at least a bit of time.”

_No, Severus knows he should say. Go away, or, quite possibly, Fuck yourself, Potter._

Naturally, he accedes.

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Mercifully, Potter takes him to a small Muggle cafe just a couple of streets down from the Leaky Cauldron, disguising Severus’ robes with a subtle glamour. It makes for a nice change from the disapproving stares he is used to, or the odd witch or wizard spitting in his general direction -- the shop assistant was quite the aberration, her accent suggesting a recent move from the continent.

“What would you like?”

“I... whatever you’re having.”

Potter disappears just long enough for Severus to wonder what the hell he is doing. Of course, now that he’s here, he’s not got the option of leaving. The passage through the Leaky Cauldron does require a wand, and he doesn’t hold out for the chance of anybody else being willing to assist him.

Then again, Severus doesn’t know who he’s kidding. As if he would leave, when Potter’s exchanged more words with him than another human being has in weeks. It seems perverse for him to present Severus with a mug of steaming coffee and what looks like a Danish. It seems even more perverse to contemplate eating it, but his stomach growls, and some instincts remain stronger than a sense of propriety.

The pastry is so flaky it practically melts on his tongue; the vanilla explodes over his tastebuds. For five, far too quick bites, even Potter ceases to exist and the world is suspended in bliss.

Then he opens his eyes to see Potter frowning at him and he becomes aware of the picture he paints, how desperate he must look. He swallows, glancing back down.

Potter pushes his own plate across the table. “Have mine, too.”

“No,” Severus says, sounding so weak, always, eternally weak. “You haven’t--”

“Seriously,” Potter says. “I eat too much rubbish as it is; I can stand to lose a couple of pounds.
Hence the spices, you know -- trying to motivate myself to do some actual cooking.”

He takes a sip of his coffee. Severus mirrors him; it’s easier than meeting his gaze and seeing concern. Where the pastry was sweetness incarnate, the coffee holds just the right edge of bitter acidity. Gods, he has missed this.

“What happened?”

Severus shrugs, taking a bite of the Danish to buy himself more time. “You were at my sentencing,” he says eventually. “People aren’t precisely inclined to employ somebody who cannot use magic, let alone someone branded twice over.” He brushes his sleeve upwards, exposing the tracing of runes which circle his wrist. Whoever invented the dampening spell -- now they were a genius.

“But the sentencing stipulated that the Ministry has to pay you an allowance. Enough for you to live on.”

Severus’s mouth twists in something that’s not quite a smile. “Yes. For a given definition of ‘enough’.”

For a long while, they sit in silence. Severus finishes the second Danish, making sure to go more slowly this time, to savour each bite. He doesn’t look up at Potter once.

“This is my fault,” Potter says. “I should’ve fought harder, I should have checked up on how things went for you. But I figured you wouldn’t want me sticking my nose in, and I was so wrapped up in my own stuff, let myself get so busy that I barely had time to think...”

Severus clamps down on the feeling which surges inside him. It’s dangerous. “You’re hardly to blame,” he says, meeting Potter’s eyes just for a flash, long enough to convey sincerity. “Your defence of me was extremely eloquent. Without it...”

He stifles a laugh. Without it, he’d be in Azkaban.

“You’re different,” Potter says.

“Am I?”

Is he, really? Who is he, who has he been, but a pawn? This close, Severus can feel the flickering bounds of Potter’s magic -- the only kind he has left for himself, his gift, more bloody useless than even the Sight. Potter’s aura is stronger than it was when he was young; it feels gold-incandescent, warm, powerful. He gravitates towards it, wants to crawl inside its sphere.

No, he’s not different at all.

“You are,” Potter says. “Hell, three years ago you’d have made me apologise, ripped me into tiny little shreds for even daring to speak to you without being explicitly invited.”

Or perhaps Potter’s right, perhaps he has changed. It’s all so, so hard to tell.

“I’ll fix this. I’ve got contacts at the Ministry, I’ll put in a word. It may take some time, because there’s always red tape, but--”

He’s cut off by a buzzing from inside his robe. The noise turns out to originate from a two-way memo alarm, one of those small notepads bespelled to relay messages, which Severus has only ever heard about as a theoretical, academic abstraction. Apparently the Ministry’s research is proceeding in vast strides.
“I have to get back.” Potter says, cursing under his breath whilst scribbling down a quick return message. Severus, for his part, can’t quite decide whether to curse the alarm or give it his undying gratitude.

Potter leaves him just inside Diagon Alley, but not before shoving a note and a small jar of Floo powder into his hand. “My office at the Ministry,” he says. “If I’m not there, I’m usually at Grimmauld Place. Anything you need whilst I try to get things going, anything at all -- just call me, okay?”

Severus cannot recall if he nods. All he knows is that he blinks, and Potter Apparates, and then he is gone.

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In the wake of human company his flat feels even colder than usual. Severus sidesteps the hole on the threshold out of sheer force of habit, dropping the grocery bags beside the sink. At least he doesn’t have to worry about the milk turning sour; in summer, the dingy attic room transforms into a sweltering stove, the sun beating down on the roof until the only water left is the sweat trickling down the grooves of his spine.

How much he used to take cooling charms for granted.

He should probably eat. Two vanilla pastries and a cup of coffee do not a fit diet make, unexpected luxuries though they may have been. He should eat, and possibly shave; he should read something, play chess against himself. Or maybe he should tidy the place, wash the pile of used cups, plates and cutlery, wash the clothes which lie strewn on the floor. He used to be neat, didn’t he? He can’t seem to remember; perhaps the state of his quarters at Hogwarts was entirely the work of the house-elves.

He could take his unanticipated windfall down to the Twisted Branch, buy a watery pint and find some quiet corner from which to observe the goings on. Few people there are likely to care about a murderer in their midst, but then again, should anyone choose to pick a fight, he doesn’t precisely have the means to defend himself any longer. He should go regardless, make some contacts; he should save the money; he should...

Truth is, he doesn’t know what the fuck he should do.

Outside in Knockturn Alley, somebody starts yelling obscenities as Severus hovers in the centre of his room. He half-listens until the racket dies down, then goes for the obvious choice.

There are no clean glasses, but it makes little difference. The vodka burns his throat, making him cough and it tastes about as pleasant as paint thinner, but that’s okay; it’s as it should be. He closes his eyes and swallows until the quiet feels a little less empty, until the walls only murmur the truth back at him instead of screaming. Then he crawls under threadbare blankets, pulling them over his head, and listens to the faint echo of his own heartbeat, one step removed.

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He dreams of Lily dragging him by the hand through the undergrowth down by the river, brambles hitting them in the face and snagging at their clothes. He dreams of her flames licking over him, red-hot tinged with caramel.

He dreams of his mother, begging him not to go.

He dreams of Lucius pushing him down by the shoulder, sleek fingers cupping the back of his
skull as a mist of ice envelops him, refreshing like the first breath of air on a bright winter 
morning. He dreams of Dumbledore’s fingers in the small of his back, steering him towards his 
first staff meeting.

He dreams of kneeling before the Dark Lord, head bowed and drowning, drowning beneath 
waves of crimson black, feeling safe, cherished, owned. He dreams of kneeling anew, on a cliff, 
damp earth sliding under his hands as white wind whispers through his every pore.

“You disgust me,” Dumbledore says.

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In the morning, the urge to seek Potter out is overwhelming. *Anything you need*, he had said, 
*anything at all*, and Severus needs, he needs, Gods, how he needs. He needs warmth, safety and 
shelter, but most of all he needs something to tie himself to before he risks drifting away, losing his 
already tenuous grasp on the world.

He needs to not make the same mistake, yet again.

For so long he’s been a fool, always trusting completely, too much; never truly trusting at all. His 
life is an endless procession of the same bloody lesson: people provide only so long as you can 
give them they want. They use you, then discard you. In the end, they always, unfailingly, leave.

It’s so simple that surely he should have grasped it by now. And still he cannot help but miss it, 
miss *them*. Lily and her boundless enthusiasm, sweeping him along in her wake. Lucius and his 
flawless diction, helping him to shed the telltale taint which clung to his vowels, early on, guiding 
him through pristine, finely penned letters, later. Dumbledore, reminding him of his purpose when 
he thought it gone, mapping out every last inch of Severus’s life until he was following a script so 
intricate that it left no room for doubt.

He misses even the Dark Lord. Sometimes, he fears he misses him most of all. As only a madman 
would.

No, he cannot allow Potter to join the long line of his errors. He must not. He will not.

The urge sings under his skin. He stuffs his boots as far back into the closet as possible to remove 
the temptation, pacing the room until he’s dizzy from the sharp turn after every fourth step. He rips 
the boots back out, shoves them back in, then out again, and it’s ludicrous; it’s pathetic. He should 
be better than this. He flings the damn things across the room and they bounce off the shelf, books 
spilling to the floor in a flutter of pages.

Now there’s a thought.

Problem is, he’s read every book in his paltry collection from cover to back at least twenty times. 
He tries, regardless, but the words keep drifting away until he’s not even certain what it is that he’s 
reading -- ah, Tolstoy, apparently.

He wonders if Potter has books, as Severus used to. He must do, from what Severus remembers of 
the house, dust-covered shelves creaking under the weight of innumerable tomes. Unless Potter 
 threw them all out, but it seems by far more likely that everything remains as it was, perhaps with 
a few modern publications provided helpfully by Granger for birthdays and Yule. Severus 
wonders if Potter has moved past his adolescent reluctance to read anything longer than--

*War and Peace* joins his boots in the corner with a suitably loud *thump*, and for a moment, it isn’t 
 enough -- he wants to tear the whole room to pieces, and himself, too, just so he won’t have to 
think.
He goes back to bed, listening to the wind hiss through a crack in the window which a brief spell could easily fix.

He is alone, alone, alone. But it’s better; it’s for the best. It is.

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The room is already shrouded in darkness when he is startled out of his lethargy -- barely a doze, certainly not sleep -- by a knock on the door, causing his pulse to ratchet up instantly. There are only two people who ever knock on his door: his probation officer and his landlord, collecting the rent. It’s too late in the day for the former, too early in the month for the latter.

With shaking fingers he eventually manages to light a match, the candle sputtering into life. The floorboards leech warmth from the soles of his feet as he walks to the door; it creaks on its hinges, opening.

“Hey,” Potter says, with half a smile.

Severus should never have opened the door. It’s not like he didn’t know.

“I don’t mean to intrude,” Potter says. “But I didn’t feel great just running off like that, yesterday, so I thought I’d drop by.” He runs a hand through tousled, black hair. “Can I come in?”

Severus should slam the door in his face. He should not give Potter the chance to see the state of the place; after all, he has some pride left somewhere, stashed behind layers of dust beneath his bed. If he lets Potter in he’ll only expose himself to more ridicule, or, worse, pity.

But Potter’s magic glows like a sun in the dark and Severus has always been weak. He steps aside.

When Potter flicks his wand and two spheres of light rise into the air he closes his eyes. Fool, fool, fool, that’s what he is, thrice damned, never learning.

Long moments slide past, until Severus is forced to steel himself, to assess the damage done. Contrary to his expectations, Potter’s expression isn’t filled with pity but tightly controlled. His features have sharpened since Severus taught him, his cheekbones more pronounced, the line of his jaw more angular. It suits him.

“It’s freezing in here. You don’t have heating?”

“It rather requires funds. Or--”

“Magic,” Potter says with a harsh laugh, and Severus senses the hum a moment before his magic flares, like burning ropes lashing outwards. “Fuck this, you’re coming with me. I’ve got more empty rooms than I know what to do with, and all of them are warm. It’s disgraceful that you should be forced to live like this, when they should’ve given you a damn Order of Merlin for everything that you did. If I’d known sooner...”

Severus doesn’t bother to correct him. He’s trying too hard to push away the relief, to hold it at bay. Potter turns to look at him, green eyes flashing behind glass and perhaps the conflict inside Severus shows, because the line of Potter’s mouth softens visibly. “I mean, you are welcome to come with me. If you want.”

Severus shouldn’t. But it’s impossible, all of a sudden, to remember the reasons that kept him from finding Potter earlier in the day, so he clings to the first logical objection he can find. “I cannot
imagine that your -- Miss Weasley would be amenable to such an arrangement.”

For a moment, Potter blinks at him owlishly, much like he used to whenever Severus asked him a question in class that he didn’t know how to answer. Then he laughs, and this time it’s not a harsh sound at all but melodious, far, far too compelling.

“Sorry,” Potter says. “I suppose you don’t read the papers? I can’t believe that you managed to miss -- never mind. There’s no Ginny; it’s not an issue. There’s only me. Which--” his lip quirks wryly-- “might be enough to put you off, I realise, but there you go.”

All the signs spell out danger, but Severus reassures himself that so long as Potter doesn’t know the truth... perhaps he’ll be safe.

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Grimmauld Place looks much as it did during the war with one notable change: Potter appears to have successfully banished the screeching portrait from the hallway, much to Severus’s relief. Not quite the only change, he discovers, as he follows Potter up the stairs -- the grotesque house-elf heads mounted on plaques, too, have disappeared.

“Sorry about the dustbunnies and clutter,” Potter says. “I’ve been meaning to fix up the place for ages, but I never seem to have enough time.”

Severus can’t bring himself to mind. The bedroom is larger than the entirety of his flat and it’s warm; warmer still when Potter sets the fire in the grate dancing.

“Have you had dinner?”

Severus hasn’t. Nor, he recalls, has he had lunch or breakfast, which would go some way towards explaining the fine tremor in his hands he can’t seem to rid himself of. He shakes his head.

“Right,” Potter says. “Why don’t you go have a bath whilst I pop round the corner and pick something up?”

It isn’t an order as such, but Severus leaps at the implied directive regardless, dismissing the cautious voice to the back of his mind. The hot water nearly sends him to sleep, chasing the pervasive chill from his bones that he almost thought natural; it takes far more effort than it should to convince himself to leave it.

He doesn’t look that much better, but at least he feels clean.

“Deary me,” the mirror says. “In dire need of a shave, aren’t we?”

*Shut up,* Severus thinks, and reaches for the razor. His shaking hands don’t aid the process, although mercifully the blade is equipped with a safety charm, preventing cuts which would otherwise be inevitable. The angles of bone which emerge under each passing sweep don’t suit him nearly as well as Potter. They only accentuate the hollowness of his cheeks, make him look ill.

He’s still debating whether a dressing gown or dirty robes are more suitable attire, when he returns to his room to find his clothes set out on the bed, smelling faintly of a standard freshening charm. It should probably rankle, Potter going through his possessions like this, but the relief of not having to *ask* tips the scales.

He finds Potter in the kitchen, setting seemingly endless tinfoil boxes onto the table. “I didn’t know what you liked,” he says, “so I got a whole range.”
Severus takes something of everything; to do otherwise would be rude. They eat mostly in silence, and he doesn’t ask the question which hangs in the room like a spectre -- why Potter is doing this, what he wants in return.

He’ll figure it out, soon enough. He always has, before.

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One thing Potter does want he is already aware of, so he sets to it with relish the following day, as soon as Potter’s departed for work. Cleaning up a whole house is harder work without magic of course, any progress much slowed, but it gives him something to fill the day with, something to do. Not too long ago he’d have sneered at the mere suggestion that housework should fill him with purpose, but now it is true: for the first time in years, he feels *useful*.

Potter seems surprised and gratified when he returns in the evening, even more gratified when presented with dinner, and somewhere inside Severus another knot loosens, letting him breathe.

This time, conversation flows freely, Severus asking questions whilst Potter relates stories about his day.

Or rants, as the case may be.

“I just can’t believe it, sometimes. I’m the one who’s supposed to be the junior, he’s supposed to teach *me*, and yet I have to explain the value of nonverbal spells to him? And the thing is they really did push that in training, so it makes absolutely zero sense.”

“Experience makes for sloppy execution, if one becomes overconfident. I’d wager that the vast history of the Aurory’s incompetence can be distilled down to that very simple fact. It’s a relief that so little has changed -- at least they’re consistent in their rank inconsistence.”

Potter laughs. “There you are. I was wondering if you’d permanently mislaid your sarcasm.” He lays down his fork, propping his chin up on a closed hand. “Five years ago, you’d have been the first one to call me overconfident and incompetent, you know.”

Severus stares down at his plate. “Five years ago, things were very different,” he hedges.

Five years ago, there had been Dumbledore. Five years ago, Potter’s magic had felt erratic at best, a testament to fake bravado; his limbs had been gangly still, those of a newborn colt. Five years ago, Potter had not been...

Careful, there.

“I guess so,” Potter says. “Anyway, thanks for listening. It’s cheered me right up.”

“I cannot imagine that you of all people would find yourself in want of people willing to lend you their ear.”

“Well, no. I mean, I do see Ron most days, but he’s reporting directly to Kingsley with all the tactical assignments he gets, so he’s pretty wired already. Still can’t believe he’s back to being Head Auror -- Kingsley, not Ron, obviously. I was so sure that it’d only be a formality to make him permanent Minister for Magic, and instead the public goes and elects some bloody no-name who’s come out of nowhere. What the hell were they thinking?”

“That Stark would push for harsher sentencing,” Severus says quietly.

“I know,” Potter says, bitterness ringing through every note. “I just thought we were better than
His gaze falls to Severus’s wrist, where edges of black ink peek past the line of his robes, and rests there, uncomfortably.

Severus draws back his arm, shaking his sleeve to cover his hand. “I am certain Shacklebolt would be more than willing to reassign you, if you were to ask him.”

Potter, mercifully, allows the redirection. “Oh, so am I. But how is that going to look? Most of my colleagues are fine when it’s a drink down the pub, but even then, this--” he gestures towards his scar-- “it’s always clear that it’s right there, with me. If he ever gets dangerous, I’ll report him, mind, but until that point, I refuse to play the Chosen One asking for favours. It’s what they expect, but it’s not me.”

And yet, Severus reflects, Potter seemed only too ready to use his influence but two short days ago. He tries not to read too much into that.

“It’s not that I’ve got no one who’ll listen to me,” Potter says, finding Severus’s eyes and holding them steady, in green. “It’s not like I’m lonely, exactly -- at the very least, I’ll always have Ron and Hermione. But they’ve got each other to come back to, and sometimes I just miss the chance to get home and... offload some of this stuff. So thank you, really.”

Try as he might, Severus can’t quite seem to stop the traitorous fluttering of his own heart.

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He’s mostly successful at banishing stray thoughts of Potter over the following days, “mostly” being the operative word. Throwing himself into physical labour goes some way towards quieting his mind, but it’s harder at night, when the silence turns his room into an echoing cavern, too large, just like the bed he rests in. The temptation to knock himself out with the aid of the alcohol cupboard -- freshly dusted and reorganised -- becomes overwhelming during such times, an invisible force that weighs down his bones, sets his fingers drumming against the mattress. He suspects, though, that Potter would not approve, and the thought is motivation enough to keep him horizontal, tossing and turning until sleep at last finds him.

He comes across the article by accident, whilst clearing out the study on the second floor. He might have missed it entirely, were it not for the fact that the pile of old Daily Prophet is balanced rather precariously, falling apart and spilling onto the floor the moment he brushes against it.

Boy Who Lived Twice Bats for the Other Team! screams the scarlet headline and Severus freezes like the doe he cannot conjure any longer.

He should ignore it, carry on tidying. He should, he should, and he knows this, even as he sinks to his knees and reaches for the paper with trembling fingers. He reads the front page and the column and the detailed exposé; he sifts through all the adjoining issues and reads every last inch of coverage on the topic, every last letter to the Editor bemoaning the loss to witchkind everywhere.

Then he sits, surrounded by tabloid monstrosities, cursing himself a billion times a fool. That Potter is gay is irrelevant; Severus is just as delusional as the witches lamenting lost chances they never possessed in the first instance. If Potter were to find him right now, Severus would be out of the door sooner than he could blink, of that he has no doubt. Charity does not equal affection, and it most certainly does not signify acceptance of pathetic, near stalkerish displays of obsession.

Severus discards of the evidence in the fireplace, watching each paper curl under the flames, turn red-hot and burn.
Potter does find him, in fact, though it is much later, when Severus is taking a short break from cataloguing the library. He strolls into the parlour and Severus rises to his feet immediately, setting his book aside.

“Did you require something?”

“No,” Potter says. “Look, you don’t have to— jump every time I’m around. I didn’t bring you here to force you to cater to my every whim.”

“Of course not,” Severus says, to vanish the frown from Potter’s face. Ironically enough, it works like a charm, Potter sprawling himself all over the couch as Severus sits back down.

“I was just looking for company, really,” he says, prodding the book with a curious finger.

“Needed a break from all that bloody paperwork. What are you reading?”

“A Tale of Two Cities.” Severus had been surprised to find Dickens among a collection still bearing all the hallmarks of the Black family name, although the stiff, unbroken spine quickly revealed the book as a recent addition.

“I’ve been meaning to read that since Hermione gave it to me for Christmas,” Potter says, then laughs. “And here we are in late January -- so much for New Year’s resolutions.” He tilts his head slightly. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be into Muggle fiction.”

“I have found little that rivals the classics on Wizarding terms,” Severus says, running his fingers over the open page. For years he denied this very same truth, hiding volumes under concealment spells as others would hide tomes bursting with Dark Magic. Later, Albus encouraged his foible; it seems equally safe to reveal it to Potter. “I’ve often wondered whether there is something in magic that stifles true creativity. Or perhaps some Muggles possess latent magic, but can only express it by channelling it into words.”

It’s a fanciful notion at best, and for a moment, before Potter responds, Severus’s blood trickles with unease. Then Potter smiles, throwing an arm over the back of the sofa. “You’ve sold me. If you don’t mind, do you think you could... read some to me?”

Severus should mind. This close, Potter’s magic covers him whole, soothing and unsettling in equal parts, much like the knowledge that Potter’s hand is mere inches away from his neck.

He picks up the book and flips to the first page. “It was the best of times,” he reads, “it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.”

If his voice feels not quite as steady as it ought to, Potter betrays no signs of noticing it.

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He’s in Potter’s bed before the end of the week.

It’s not that Severus aims for it. It isn’t. He doesn’t devise some sort of masterful plan, and he certainly doesn’t lie awake at night dreaming up scenarios in which he seduces Potter. The mere idea is preposterous -- seduction has never been one of his talents, because it rather requires belief in one’s assets. Even now, he cannot conceive of what prompted Lucius to become involved with him, knows only the myriad things it could not have been: his grotesquely disproportionate limbs and equally grotesque proboscis, his chalk-pasty skin, his hair -- perpetually lanky, no matter how frequently he washes it. It could not have been his complete lack of social graces, how he swerves
between wild inability to meet somebody’s eyes and staring them down, with no room in between. At brief points in the past he fancied it might have been his mind, but that doesn’t make sense, either; Lucius was always dismissive of those smarter than he.

The truth is... he knows the true reason. He simply doesn’t care to remember.

It is fallacious in this situation, regardless, cannot possibly apply. Potter is not like Lucius Malfoy, the Dark Lord or Albus Dumbledore. Potter is too kind at heart to want the one thing Severus truly has to offer: submission.

Perhaps that’s how it happens. Perhaps Severus convinces himself too well that he’s not in any danger and lets down his guard. Perhaps it is merely that the last years have left him so starved of human contact that he couldn’t stop it if he tried: the not casual-enough way he keeps brushing against Potter when they happen across each other in the hallways, the way Severus’s fingers insist on lingering whenever Potter hands him a plate or a cup.

Why Potter permits it, Severus cannot comprehend. Unlike him, Potter is -- he can no longer pretend not to notice -- attractive to the point of perfection. Even in the winter months, his skin seems burnished with gold, vibrant, alive. The tousled black of his hair only highlights the colour of his eyes -- not Lily’s after all, when one looks closely, but a shade darker. His movements are sure and relaxed where they used to be hasty and jerky; he’s quieter, now, as a rule, but it speaks of someone who’s found his centre, his calm.

Perhaps it came with owning the last of his secrets. Severus wouldn’t know; he never had the gall.

The only theory Severus can construct is that Potter was lying when he said he wasn’t lonely. Apart from one Friday evening, he hasn’t left the house except to go to work, nor has he received visitors, and Severus cannot imagine a man of Potter’s age finding true contentment in such a limited existence. By all rights Potter should be out on the town every night, trawling reputable and less reputable establishments alike to find the company of equally successful, attractive young men. That Potter chooses not to perplexes Severus to no end, but not nearly as much as Potter choosing his company instead, curling up on the sofa each evening to listen to Severus read.

For all the overlong glances Severus steals at Potter throughout the week, for all the touches he robs him of, Severus does not anticipate the change between them at all. In the end, Muggle literature is to blame.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done,” he reads, late on a Saturday evening, “it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

For once, he is not caught up in Potter’s presence, too entranced by the words to register anything beyond a faint awareness of increasingly familiar magic. He smudges his thumb across each letter, slowly, and a surge of longing wells up inside him; when Potter shifts, he startles as though caught at something dreadful, suddenly exposed.

Potter’s loose-limbed beside him, head tilted back against the sofa, gazing straight at him. Severus cannot read the expression on his face, some strange amalgam of sadness and something else, something more, but he cannot escape it, either. For a long while, Potter just looks at him, his finger trailing the rim of his wineglass; then he brings it to his lips and drains it dry, sets it aside.

“I’m absurdly glad that wasn’t the end of your story, you know. Even if it’s selfish, knowing the price you had to pay.”

His fingers trail over the brand at Severus’s wrist, sparking his pulse to a roar and Severus’s breath hitches, his eyes falling towards the painted bow of Potter’s mouth without his volition for a mere
instant. Which of these three Potter notices is anybody’s guess -- if indeed he perceives them at all; his actions could just as well be prompted by the wine. But his fingers retrace their path, more slowly, now, and then Severus’s reactions don’t require guessing at all, because the book slides from his hand, only to be replaced by Potter’s fingers. When Potter leans in, brushing the thumb of his free hand over the pulse in his throat, Severus closes his eyes.

“I’m not asking for this as payment,” Potter says. “I mean, you do-- you want this, right?”

“Yes,” Severus says, “Please,” and Potter’s lips cover his own.

Potter is nothing like Lucius Malfoy. Lucius would never have asked. Lucius, too, often tasted of wine, but it’s sweeter on Potter’s lips, somehow, almost to the point of being cloying. For a brief moment Severus fears that it’s been too long, that he has forgotten how to do this, but he need not have worried; Potter takes his mouth slowly, in stages, with long, leisurely sweeps of his tongue, until Severus is thrumming and breathless, hard against the line of Potter’s thigh between his legs.

Potter withdraws then, breathing heavily, green blown to black behind smudged lenses. “Bed,” he says, and Severus follows him up the stairs, led by the hand.

It would feel like a dream, were it not for the sheer level of detail: the crackle of logs as the fire in Potter’s room springs to light, the shifting dance of shadows on Potter’s face and across his chest after he’s pulled his jumper over his head, the soft thud of cloth hitting the ground. It would feel like a dream, were it not for the thundering of Severus’s own heart, the trembling of his hands which he can’t put down to simple arousal. Stupid though the anxiety is, it still roots him to the spot, helpless to do anything but watch as Potter undresses, revealing reams of unblemished skin. It seems like a travesty that Severus should be allowed to touch it, and for a moment he considers fleeing just to avoid this heinous crime. Then Potter kisses him again and something inside him shifts, anxiety blending with a new surge of arousal until he can no longer tell one from the other. Potter’s mouth trails over his jaw, into the hollow of his neck, and Severus gives himself up to the feeling, eyes closing as fingers slip open his buttons, one by one, far, far too slowly. By the time Potter’s finished, he’s stopped wondering if the shadows will hide him from view, too caught up in wanting, aching for more. A faint press of Potter’s hand to his chest and he’s sinking onto the bed, thighs spreading of their own accord, and then Potter is atop him, Severus staring up, heart beating wild.

Potter’s eyes are even greener without the glass in the way. He’s beautiful, beautiful and Severus couldn’t possibly ever look his fill -- looking isn’t nearly enough, so he reaches out, fingertips sliding up the smooth skin of Potter’s back, over the soft velvet of his neck, into the liquid silk of his hair. Potter bites his lip and surges down, his cock burning a line of fire against Severus’s own, forcing his lips open on a moan.

He loses track from that point onwards. For a while, they’re caught in a rhythmic sway, hip to hip and mouth to mouth; before long and the rhythm’s forgotten, as Potter licks a path into the centre of his chest, fingers trailing over Severus’s ribs and lower, skirting his cock to run over the inside of his thigh. He’s gentle, from the tongue flickering against Severus’s nipple down to the thumb nudging his balls. He’s too gentle, and Severus doesn’t know what to do with it, except to writhe, shiver, spread wider, in the desperate hope that Potter will catch on.

He does, eventually. Severus doesn’t know where the lube comes from, knows only that the pace at which Potter’s fingers find him inside is torturous; where he’s used to the burn, here it is lacking. But perhaps that’s all right -- if Potter wants it like this, it has to be, surely. Perhaps it’s just right that Potter should unlock him like this, with deliberate, toe-curling shocks to his prostate, unravelling him into a mass of incoherent sounds.
It shouldn’t possibly hurt, when Potter at long last slides home. It doesn’t, not physically; Potter flows into him like ink into paper, one hand cupping Severus’s jaw. And still it’s too much, the frictionless glide cutting him harsher than any knife, and it does hurt, it hurts, pure pain balanced on pleasure. Severus gasps and clings to Potter’s shoulders with both hands, clings to the song of his magic until he loses himself and it seems to sing through him, too, until he’s sobbing under bright, unadulterated sensation.

He’s not certain he ever finds his way back. In the aftermath, lying against Potter’s chest, his breath seems his own, but his heart follows Potter’s, pitter-pat, pitter-pat.

Potter’s fingers run through his hair, in a gesture Severus can’t fathom. “It’s funny,” he says. “I never imagined you’d be like this, in bed.”

Even with his eyes open, Severus sees the memory bright as day: Lucius’s perfect hair, his perfect teeth flashing in a perfect smile, a perfect laugh. “Good heavens, but you’re easy.”

I’m sorry, Severus wants to say. “You imagined me like this,” he says, instead.

“God, yes.” Potter’s chest vibrates beneath Severus’s cheek. “I always thought you’d be-- never mind, it doesn’t matter. I like you fine, just as you are.”

I like you fine, just as you are, Severus thinks, closing his eyes.

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For a while, things are perfect. If a part of Severus remains on edge, he puts that down to just how different Harry is to everyone who has come before him, necessitating a shift in familiar patterns. Insisting that Severus call him by his given name is the only clear directive he voices, and even then it is phrased as a request. Harry’s vocabulary features no shoulds, musts or imperative turns of phrases and Severus finds it bewildering, like being thrown into a foreign country with no concept of its language or dictionary at hand.

Severus translates as best as he can. I love your voice turns into You must read to me every evening. The hint of a frown when Harry’s fingers skim over his ribs becomes You should eat more. Would you like new robes? transforms into You need to get rid of those tattered ones and, later, during the shopping trip You’d look good in green into Get these.

The brand new material flows over his limbs like gossamer silk, and Severus doesn’t recognise himself in the mirror. But that is more than all right, because in return Harry furnishes him with a wealth of affection which fills Severus to overflowing, drowning out everything else. Even if Severus possessed the capacity to be suspicious of it -- which he relinquished the moment he fell into Harry’s arms -- he could not possibly maintain it. Harry gives it all so unselfconsciously, the smiles, the lingering kisses, the warm curl of his fingers through Severus’s when they are walking in public through London’s streets, washing away any stray seeds of doubt before they can begin to take root.

Severus calls it perfect, but the truth is that once again his vocabulary fails him. He has no yardstick against which to measure Harry’s behaviour. Compared to Lucius and most certainly the Dark Lord, he had thought Dumbledore affectionate, but any gestures of goodwill from him had been erratic, always longed for and never expected. With Harry, they flow in a constant stream; the closest memories they evoke are of his early, summer-soaked days with Lily.

Clasped inside Harry’s embrace at night, he wonders if his Patronus has changed shape, whether now it would burn like a seven bright suns. He wonders if this is what normal people have, swearing to never take it for granted.
Sometimes, Severus needs to translate not only subtle requests, but the unspoken. When Weasley and Granger visit, Harry reveals precisely nothing other than this fact. It stands to reason, however, that he values harmony, and so Severus prepares dinner and treats them with all the courtesy Lucius once instructed him in. Granger turns out to be a surprisingly stimulating conversationalist, relating her efforts to reform Wizarding Law, and Weasley...

Severus still cannot grasp what Harry sees in him, although at least the feeling is clearly mutual, Weasley staring at him for most of the evening as though Severus has grown an accessory head.

He does not know whether Harry shares Severus’s newfound place in his life with them, once they have moved to the drawing room and he is busy clearing away the remains of dinner. It does not matter, he tells himself.

It does not. It does not matter for another visit and twelve more perfect days, which Severus soaks up like the roots of a gnarled oak. It does not matter until Severus wakes up on a Sunday morning and heads down to the kitchen, only to be stopped outside the door by the voice which echoes from within.

“...you to be happy,” Granger says. “But don’t you think this is all a bit fast?”

Harry’s response is too low to make out, a smudged rumble of syllables.

“Yes, I know,” Granger says. “Trust me, I know; we went over it often enough over the last few years. But from his side, he-- do you even know what he wants, for himself? It’s like he’s not even there, like he’s fitting himself into the spaces you leave behind, and that can’t be healthy. I mean, correct me if I’m wrong. Maybe it’s different, when I’m not there.”

Severus does not wait for Harry’s answer, retreating to the bathroom. The tiled walls refuse to contain his sinking feeling of dread, because he knows the answer already, knows that Harry will, too, even if he’s not thought it through before. The worst part is that he cannot even fault Granger: after all, she’s only speaking the truth. It’s his own nature which damns him, continually wresting away what he needs most. Each time he winds himself deeper in fiction to avoid seeing what shall come to pass.

Every time it has happened, it has been hell, a sickening freefall into the mouth of an abyss. Bizarrely, given how short a time it has been, the prospect of losing Harry seems worse than all those combined: not an abyss but as though someone has sliced an edge off the disc of the world.

Perhaps because he knows that, this time, he will hit the ground.

When the dismissal isn’t immediate, when Harry welcomes him to breakfast as usual save the small, pensive line to his mouth, Severus goes into overdrive. It’s laughable, really, because this is the problem, but he cannot help it, he cannot, watching himself speak and act from a distance, through a blurred pane of glass. He tidies and cleans, cooks ever more elaborate meals and presents them wearing green robes; he observes Harry for the slightest sign of his needs -- if he’s thirsty or hungry, tense or tired -- and he fills them all. He answers every unasked question, every single one but that which is painted into Harry’s deepening frown: are you a person?

On the first night, they have spine-tingling, slow sex. On the second, Harry says he is tired, and Severus feigns sleep until the breaths beside him have evened. Then he stays awake through the night, watching Harry’s eyelids shiver in sleep and the curve of his mouth, too frightened to touch.

On the third night, Harry Floos home from work and, ignoring the soufflé and white wine on the table, speaks the words Severus has been dreading: “We need to talk.”
No, Severus wants to say. He wants to beg, to sink to his knees and plead, to promise everything, everything for one last chance. The humiliation seems worth it, until he remembers the lick of Cruciatus, the snapped cord as the light extinguished in Dumbledore’s eyes.

He stares at the kettle, polished so clean it reflects his face back at him, distorted. “It is not necessary,” he hears himself say. “I will go pack my belongings.”

Harr--Potter’s hand catches his arm as he turns. “Pack. Bloody-- I’m not turfing you out!”

Of course not. Potter could no more leave a stray dog by the side of the road than he could cut off his own arm, no matter how pathetic it is. Go, he should go, leave, regardless, because staying will mean death in a thousand different ways, worse than exposure or snakebites; he should not cling to Potter’s charity like...

“I will move them from your room, in that case.”

“I’m not breaking up with you, either,” Potter says, his hand moving down to grasp Severus’s own, which are shaking so hard the tremor is clearly visible. “Hey. Hey, sit down, would you; you’re white as a sheet.”

Severus sinks into the chair, splaying his fingers against the wooden tabletop; they continue to tremble with the unspoken not yet.

“Why would you think that?” says Pott--Harr--blast it!

He presses his palms down until his knuckles turn white. It puts a stop to the humiliating display but doesn’t loosen the steel cage surrounding his ribs.

“Please look at me.” Two fingers at his jaw tilt his head to the side. “Why would you think that?”

Meeting Harry’s gaze is excruciating, more excruciating for the sadness Severus sees there. He closes his eyes, but he’s seen enough. “Because any sane person would.”

“Well, it’s been long known that I’m missing some twigs in my broom. You told me so years ago.”

Severus barks out a laugh and another; the final one comes suspiciously close to a sob. He presses sweat-damp palms to his face, rubbing his eyes. “You would do well to heed Granger’s advice. You’d be far better off without me.”

A muttered curse later and Harry’s hands brush over his own, gently guiding them down.

“Listen,” he says, “I don’t know how much you heard, and I’m sorry you did in the first place. And I won’t lie, it’s true that it got me thinking, but not in the way you imagine. The thing is, she had one thing down to rights, and that is that I don’t... I haven’t the first clue what you want, out of life, out of a relationship. I’m not even sure I’d be able to tell if you want one--”


“And I believed you,” Harry says, clapping his hands, “I believe you now, too. But try to see it from my side -- over the past few weeks you haven’t disagreed with me a single time. You’ve practically waited on me hand and foot, without ever expressing a need of your own. For all I know, when I take you to bed I could be doing a billion things which make you uncomfortable, but you’d never tell me. And that’s... unconscionable.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”
“What you think. What you want, what would make you happy -- beyond making sure that I am.”

Anger surges inside him out of nowhere, hot and all-consuming. He rips his fingers from Harry’s grasp. “What I think? That I will never be able to give you what you want, because this is who I am. I always have been, always will be, a pawn. I obey; I bend myself to suit my master, whoever that may be, at the time. I am too weak and too spineless to possess needs and wants of my own.”

Harry’s gaze is solemn, weighing on Severus like a stone. “I don’t believe that’s true,” he says. “But if you do, that must feel fucking horrible.”

Just like that, the anger evaporates. Severus slumps back into his chair.

“Did Dumbledore write your lesson plans?”

“There were guidelines.”

“Which you interpreted. For that matter, did Dumbledore tell you to come down on me so hard and so often? Somehow, I don’t think so.”

“Is that what you’d prefer, then? Are you asking for me to cut you down to--”

“No,” Harry says, with a brief smile which quickly dies. “Not unless, deep down, you still do feel that way about me. And in that case...”

Severus shakes his head. He reaches out, laying his hand over Harry’s heart where the magic emanates most strongly, feeling it pulse over his fingers. “No,” he says. “You were... intensely aggravating, then. You have changed.”

“Then there’s no reason why you can’t do the same. I think you were already well on your way during the war. You just didn’t notice it, what with everything that went on.”

Severus’s laugh is hollow, disbelieving. “I killed him. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but he ordered me to, and I complied.”

“I know,” Harry says. “And you can tell me that everything that came after was all part of his plan, too, but the thing is, if you were weak and spineless, it wouldn’t have mattered, because he was gone. If you were half as bad as you say you are, you’d have gone straight back to Voldemort, and we’d all have been fucked. Some of that... at least some of that was you.”

His fingers run along the side of Severus’s face, and Severus leans into the touch, helpless.

“Come on,” Harry says. “There must have been something I’ve done or said which has been annoying. Something you haven’t liked. Anything, no matter how small.”

It takes entirely too long to come up with an answer, even longer to convince himself that it’s acceptable for it to make it past his lips. “I despise wearing coloured robes.”

Harry smiles. “There you go,” he says, drawing Severus into his arms. “That’s a start. You’ll figure the rest of it out.”

Severus draws a deep breath, shuddering on the exhale. “I don’t know how,” he whispers, and the admission cuts deeper than any physical wound, hurts more than fangs ripping into his neck.

Startling, that he’s managed to utter the words at all.

“I reckon it’s a little like learning to fly,” Harry says. “Learning anything, really. Keep trying, lots
of false starts, practise until something clicks.”

Staring at the sunken soufflés past Harry’s shoulder, Severus can’t help but feel as though he’s trading a familiar abyss for a new kind of chasm, all told.

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Likening the process to flying is a most apt description, because Severus could never quite get the hang of that, either. For someone to whom magic came naturally in all other arenas, balancing on a broomstick should surely not have been such a trial, and yet filling in for Hooch to referee the occasional Quidditch match belongs to the worst duties he had to perform as a teacher.

Which probably means sport’s off the cards.

He often wonders if... finding out what you enjoy, as Harry calls it, would not be an immeasurably easier task with magic an option. But all the familiar tracks -- weaving new spells, perfecting some potion -- are barred by the brands on his wrists, leaving him with the endless list of activities Harry drew up the day after their conversation. It has columns on the right side: loved it, liked it, disliked it, hate it and don’t know.

Each morning, Severus is tempted to tear it to pieces, but he’s given an implicit promise and he wants to... he does want to... to try. He goes for walks and attends concerts, visits coffee shops, galleries and a plethora of bewildering shops. His main conclusion is that Muggles, as a whole, are completely insane.

Each evening, he relates his experiences to Harry who listens, but refuses to offer an opinion on the subject at hand. The first time Severus gets so frustrated with it all that he throws down his napkin and calls Harry a twit who’s as much use as a chocolate teapot, Harry grins back at him in apparent delight.

Ironically enough, the first notable change finds Severus where he least expects it, right in the environment where he’s always, always felt most out of his depth. They’re both naked, lying side by side, Harry’s fingers trailing lightly across Severus’s side and the words rise to his lips, “You don’t...always have to be quite so gentle.”

Harry’s fingers still on his ribs. “I don’t mind.”

It would be easier, far easier, to let it slide. “What I mean,” he says, “is that I would prefer it if you weren’t. I enjoy it much more when I’m not--”

“In control?” Harry says, and Severus closes his eyes.

“You will tell me that this is part of the problem,” he says, defeated.

Harry stays silent for a long while. “I don’t think it has to be. So long as we’re clear that it’ll stay here, and so long as I know that you trust me enough to say if I cross a line and it’s not enjoyable any longer.”

Severus opens his eyes. “Am I not doing so, now?”

“I don’t know,” Harry says. “Are you?”

Severus knows a test when he sees one. “Yes,” he decides, heart fluttering inside his ribcage. “Not that I’ve found our past encounters terrible, you must understand. But sometimes, it’s too much without that... that anchor. Sometimes it hurts because it doesn’t.” He draws a deep, steadying breath. “I cannot believe I just told you this.”
“I’m glad that you did.”

“Of course, if you find the concept distasteful–”


“Just here,” Severus agrees, voice gone rough with desire. He doesn’t need the narrowing of Harry’s eyes to guess his reaction when Severus sucks his thumb into his mouth; the feel of his magic has shifted, liquid flames of amber licking over his skin.

“Just so we’re clear,” Harry says. “You want me to...”

“Have me. Hurt me. Possess me.”

It’s thrilling, somehow, to say it aloud, the fluttering of his heart no longer driven solely by fear. Strange, too, but fulfilling to reveal what everyone before Harry took for granted, what they ruthlessly extracted from between his lines.

Is this what it’s like to own a secret?

Harry’s lips brush his ear. “Snitch,” he says. “In case you might like to say no, but not mean it. Any hard limits I need to know about?”

Severus shivers at the faint memories of nights he prefers not to recall. “No knives, no breaking skin. And no—” he swallows—“no humiliation.”

In the next heartbeat Harry flips him onto his back, pinning his arms down over his head. “You should know me better than that by now,” he says, licking his lips. “I take care of what’s mine.”

Severus shivers again, this time in anticipation. Then Harry takes his mouth and the shiver turns into a shudder under the force of the kiss, gentle exploration replaced by deep strokes of tongue, delicate nips to his lips by the sting of teeth. By the time Harry releases him to suck a bruise into the soft skin of his neck Severus feels faint and lightheaded, half-swallowing his moans in gasping for breath. Harry’s fingers find a nipple, twisting sharply and Severus arches, moans crescendoing into a cry, wrists twisting under the hand which holds him securely.

Harry withdraws. The bruise at Severus’s neck tingles and throbs with the rhythm of his pulse; his lips feel swollen and parched. He runs his tongue over them and Harry’s eyes track the gesture, impossibly dark.

“God, look at you,” he says, putting more of his weight on the hand pinning Severus down, until his wrists sink into the mattress beneath. His right hand skims down Severus’s stomach to his cock; he rubs his thumb up the underside in tight circles. It jerks against the pressure, then jerks harder when Harry digs a nail into his frenulum.

“You love this,” Harry says over Severus’s whimper, repeating the motion. “You’re all wet—” and again—“I could make you come, just like this. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” Severus gasps. “Please.” The pain is exquisite, and for a moment Severus thinks this will be it, because he’s already too close; one second longer under the rhythmic push and flick of a nail and Harry will make him come apart with a single finger.

The hand disappears.

“I don’t think so,” says Harry and delivers a stinging blow to the side of his arse, letting go of his
arms. “Turn over. Hands and knees.”

His limbs tremble as he moves to obey, continue to tremble all through the muted sounds of Harry slicking himself. Harry’s hands stroke down his spine and spread him apart; for a brief moment he feels the blunt pressure of Harry positioning himself and then there is only the bright knife of his cock, pushing inside. His arms give out on the second thrust, but that’s all right, because Harry’s nails are digging crescents into his hips and he’s talking, murmuring filth between staccato breaths, things like *fuck, you’re so tight and this what you wanted?*

Severus answers in choked sounds and in cries, answers by pushing back until Harry seems to decide it’s no longer sufficient, pausing just long enough to haul Severus up into a seating position, into his lap, impaling him deeper. He lets his head fall back against Harry’s shoulder, spine curving with each killing thrust and it hurts perfectly, perfectly, and he never wants it to stop.

“Any -- time -- that -- you -- like,” Harry rasps into his ear, punctuating each word with a stab to Severus’s prostate. “Want to see you.” His mouth moulds itself to the mark on Severus’s neck, his thumb brushing over the head of his cock, dipping into the slit and at the first hint of suction, of pressure, Severus is gone, coming so hard that the world greys around the edges.

“You all right?” Harry asks later, after he’s cleaned them both up and they’re lying entwined beneath the duvet. Severus nods, knowing that words cannot do justice to what he’s feeling -- or at least none but those three which rise darkly inside his body, refusing to resolve into sound in his throat.

He mouths them against Harry’s skin in silent syllables instead, hoping he’ll understand.

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Harry’s concern that their dynamic might bleed over from the bedroom turns out to be unfounded. On the contrary, having it there does seem to function very much like an anchor, making it easier for Severus to deal with the free-floating anxiety that the process of finding himself outside those four walls provokes.

He starts tackling the less safe options on his list, those which he balked at, considered preposterous flights of fancy. He writes to Minerva and starts meeting with her for regular games of chess and quiet conversation, an experience which borders on pleasant. He takes life-drawing classes and finds that whilst he possesses some skill, the activity bores him to death. He even goes riding, but discovers that horses are not an improvement on brooms.

He tries so many things that sometimes his head is spinning with them. Some of them are better than others, but none of them -- none of them ever *click.*

He isn’t certain what prompts him to sit down at the desk, one afternoon. It’s a Sunday, and Harry’s away visiting Teddy and Andromeda, leaving him free to decide what to do with his time.

Perhaps it’s the blankness of the parchment, when, for no logical reason, he knows it should be full. He reaches for the quill, dips it into the inkwell and for an exceedingly long time, just stares at the paper. The first word comes slowly, black treacle seeping into white snow; the next feels much the same, and the next, and the next.

In fact, the whole first line is a failure. He crosses it out, begins again.

He makes slow progress initially, working in fits and starts. But before long finding the right sentences becomes easier as he makes the quill dance across paper, filling the first sheet and then
another, and a third. Sometimes the flow gets disrupted, grinds to a halt, but that’s all right, because he can rearrange words if necessary, reflect on better ways to fill in the blanks.

He utterly loses track of time. There’s only the writing, the words, the ink and the paper. He forgets the world outside the room and everything which comes with it, forgets even about Harry, when normally he times his activities to finish well before he’s due home.

He forgets him so completely that he startles when a sound from the door disrupts his concentration, many hours later. For a moment, he’s so flabbergasted by the forgetting that he can only stare at Harry in his best imitation of a stranded fish.

“Hey,” Harry says, from where he’s leaning against the doorframe. “Having fun?”

“I--” Severus says, setting his quill down.

“I wouldn’t have disturbed you, except that I figured you might be hungry.”

And Severus remembers that it’s his day for fixing dinner, based on the alternating schedule they agreed some time ago. “I’m sorry,” he says, rising to his feet so sharply he nearly knocks over the chair. “I shouldn’t have forgotten--”

“It’s fine.” Harry walks over to him and runs a hand down his arm, soothingly. “That’s not what the schedule was for, and you know it.”

True. They drew it up with the express purpose of preventing Severus from slipping and taking over all chores.

“I can fix us some sandwiches easily enough. You’re welcome to come if you want, but I really don’t mind if you’d prefer to write some more.”

Severus stares at the parchment, then back at Harry. He feels oddly torn; it’s the strangest sensation. Though not nearly as bizarre as when he makes the decision to sit back down.

He does lean into the brief kiss Harry gives him, however. “Thank you,” he says, as soon as they’re done, and Harry smiles.

He’s so absorbed in the passage he’s writing that he doesn’t even glance up when Harry drops off the sandwiches, that he doesn’t react beyond a mumbled acknowledgement. Harry presses a quick kiss to his hair and disappears, and somehow all of it is okay, comes close enough to feeling comfortable.

He writes long into the night, so that by the time he comes to bed Harry’s already asleep. A faint stab of guilt does sink into him, then, but it vanishes as soon as Harry stirs, waking up just enough to mumble two syllables into Severus’s ear whilst pulling him close.

Severus lies awake for a long while, caught in the throes of a giddiness he cannot name.

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Stories in life don’t have clear endings. Too often, they run in cycles, repeating familiar patterns in perpetuity. Severus thought breaking them was impossible -- or at the very least requiring some drastic upheaval to force a u-turn. In truth, change is more subtle: a single world altered in a script morphing -- much further down -- into a new line.

To all intents and purposes, he’s still the kept man he always has been.
But he’s also Severus Snape, made up of a billion seemingly inconsequential details. He’s tried all the newfangled concoctions which call themselves coffee and still believes they don’t deserve the name; coffee should be black and bitter, not sweetened with cloying syrups and adulterated with milk. He likes eggs with the yolk still running, but not hard-boiled. He neither hates nor loves Marmite, but has bacon on top of marmalade toast, no matter how much Harry has come to protest this. He loves wine and hates gin; he will never, ever consume vodka again.

He despises young children and teenagers alike, but nothing is worse than holding a baby; their wide eyes terrify him. He cannot stand wearing coloured robes though he loves them on Harry, but black ones with green trims are a more than acceptable compromise. He thinks all sport is excessive, except walking the streets of a metropolis just to observe, and that there are few things more delightful than rampaging through an atrocious book with a red pen.

He’s shackled by bonds beyond his control. Perhaps they will remain there forever, or perhaps Granger will end up besting the windmill; for the time being, he’s accepted them. He sees, tastes, hears and feels magic in a way that very few wizards can and one day he might write a book on the topic, if only to correct the misapprehension that Muggles lack any trace of it. He can finally admit sensing it, after so many years of deluding himself, of quashing the knowledge at the back of his mind. Yes, the magic is there, just a lot quieter. Less overwhelming, by far.

He’s made up of fragments, like any mosaic. He remembers them now, when he kneels.

The first rays of sunshine have brought the Muggles out in force, but he came early, knowing they would do. He takes a sip of his coffee, watching the light reflect off the murky grey waters of the Thames, listening to the faint hum of magic beneath chattering voices.

Then he sets his pen against paper, and he writes and he writes, writes until he’s written himself beyond his familiar lines.

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