

How the War Was Won

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How the War Was Won

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Summary

Severus Snape should be dead. Instead, he wakes up after the Battle of Hogwarts to find himself quarantined in a house full of Gryffindors, waiting for Harry bloody Potter to save the world...again. And Severus must be going crazy because he can't seem to stop thinking about Potter. (Or, where Harry needs a distraction, and Severus doesn't refuse.)

Notes

Thank you to the mods for their patience and extensions. Title credit goes to Torino after providing much needed and very last minute assistance and inspiration!

This story takes place in the months following the Battle of Hogwarts; Harry turns 18 shortly after it begins.

Prompt 16: Wartime!fic. The Battle of Hogwarts was a failure. Voldemort is still alive, and survivors take refuge in Hogwarts, Grimmauld Place, etc. Severus is there convalescing (much to his dismay), and Harry soon starts looking to him for help with strategy. Feelings develop.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Severus wakes in an unfamiliar place, in an unfamiliar bed. The deep green canopy, the curtains hung from the sides are reminiscent of those in the Slytherin dormitory. But that's not where he is. Or, at least, he does not think so.

He tries to sit up and immediately wishes he hadn't. The room spins violently and, for a moment, he thinks he'll be sick. He lies back against the pillows again, closing his eyes against the pitch and roil of nausea that rocks his system. His entire body aches and his throat... *Christ* his throat. *Crucio* is worse, but this pain is still agonising. Severus reaches a hand up tentatively, feels the bandages beneath his fingers.

His thoughts are clouded, as though he's been drugged. As though he's surfacing from underwater. He recalls the battle. Being summoned to the shack. And then...

Fuck...

The snake.

The Dark Lord's Horcrux poisoned nightmare of a pet that...

There was so much blood. That part he remembers. Blood that clotted in his mouth, that ran sickly and warm down his throat. And there was the boy.

Of course it had to be Potter. Potter, smelling of smoke and magic and radiating so much bloody power that it was enough to make Severus sick—if he weren't already bleeding out onto the floor, that is.

And there was something else he can't remember, but he was dying...

Dying.

Severus forces himself to sit up again, ignoring the swell of vertigo, the throb of his head, the pain of his throat. His vision blurs, goes white around the edges, and he blinks. Looks around, tries to get his bearings. The room is small. There is a bureau against one wall and a small desk. The furniture is old, worn with age and use, but, like the bed, it is of heavy, stained walnut and was, once, clearly expensive. The brocade-papered walls are littered with faded Quidditch posters. A Slytherin pennant hangs to one side, its edges torn and fraying.

He recognises this room.

Severus rubs at his eyes. Ignores the way the motion sends another agonising jolt down his neck. The rug on the floor is threadbare in places now, and the wood beneath could use a new coat of wax, but everything speaks of money, of taste. Of course, Walburga Black wouldn't have had it any other way.

Severus sighs, lying back against the pillows again. So that's it then. He's died and gone to hell. And isn't it fitting that his own personal hell appears to be some iteration of sodding Grimmauld Place? Sirius Black is no doubt laughing his arse off right now in whatever corner of the after world he landed in.

He hears movement outside the room. His first instinct is to go for his wand, but he doesn't seem to have one. The door opens and Potter is there. Severus would groan if that weren't certain to send another burst of pain down his neck. The boy's dressed casually in a faded Gryffindor Quidditch t-shirt and jeans. His feet are bare and he's got a piece of toast in his mouth. Not exactly what Severus was expecting for his welcoming committee, but he's never been dead before, so who's to say what he should expect?

"What are you doing here?" he asks, throat raw, voice scratchy and rough.

Potter's eyes are wide. He takes the piece of toast out of his mouth. "Fuck. You're awake."

Severus wants to roll his eyes, but doesn't because his head hurts too damned much. This life or next, some things never change. "Eloquent, as always," he manages, each word a rasp.

"You caught me unawares, is all," Potter says, wiping crumbs from his mouth. "Two weeks and no change, so it's not as though I was expecting you to be up."

Two weeks.

"But what are *you* doing here?" he asks again. If he speaks softly, the pain isn't so unbearable.

Potter frowns, but then shrugs, sticking the last bite of toast in his mouth. "It's my house, Snape. My room's just down the hall. Best go get Pomfrey." Before Severus can say anything else, he turns and leaves the room, door shutting behind him with a snick.

Potter returns with the Mediwitch a few minutes later. Poppy's smile when she sees him sitting up in bed is warm and genuine. "Oh Severus, thank goodness. You had us worried for a bit, there."

Potter stands off to the side, arms crossed about his chest, as Poppy looks him over. She places a cool hand against his forehead, then runs her wand down the length of his chest. A string of silver characters appears in the air above him. "Vitals look good," she says. "White blood count still elevated, but that's to be expected. How's your pain?"

Severus shifts, trying to sit up straighter, but the stab of pain that explodes along his nerve endings makes him grimace. "Not good," he admits through clenched teeth, as Poppy positions a pillow behind his back.

She purses her lips, but nods. "No, I imagine it's not. You're due for another pain potion in a quarter hour. I'll bring one up." Her hands move to his throat and he tenses as she removes the bandages there, but her fingers are gentle. "Wound's healing well, all things considered. There will be some scarring, but there's not much I can do about that. Shouldn't affect your vocal cords, though, which is a bloody miracle, if you ask me. You've got Harry to thank for that." She nods to Potter, still leaning against the wall, mouth set, face unreadable. "And in few more days," Poppy continues, "I think I can take you off potions, allow you to eat and

drink normally. Here, lift your chin for me.” Severus does, ignoring the ache as she smooths a fresh bandage over the wound, secures it with a flick of her wand.

“What happened?” Severus asks.

Poppy frowns, taking a step back. “You don’t remember?” There’s an edge of concern to her voice, but she keeps her expression neutral.

Severus closes his eyes. “I remember the battle. He attacked the school. Then the shack. The snake... And you,” he looks at Potter again. “You were there.”

Potter nods, pushing off from the wall. “I was,” he says but does not offer any additional information. Poppy looks between them for a moment, her expression guarded, but then she sighs. “I’ll leave you two to talk. Severus, I’ll be back with a pain potion and to check on you in a bit.”

When they’re alone, Potter sits down in the single straight back chair beside the bed. For a long time, he just looks at Severus, but then he shakes his head. “You fucking bastard. I can’t believe you’re alive.”

Severus should be irate, should call the boy out for his impertinence, his language. But there’s a fondness in his tone Severus does not understand, and... “I’m not dead.” The words sound strange on his tongue. He can’t believe it.

Potter laughs. “And I’m not dead either, Snape. Though,” he flashes a wry smile, “we both should be.”

Something occurs to Severus. Assuming it’s true—that he is alive, that Potter is too... “The Dark Lord?”

At that, Potter’s face hardens. “Also not dead.”

Severus closes his eyes. “You did not—” He feels ill. He still cannot stomach what Albus intended the boy to do, that he expected Potter to sacrifice himself. He will not believe it was the only way. But Potter is shaking his head.

“No. I died, Snape. I let that fucking monster kill me.” He laughs, but there’s no humour there. “Can you believe it? I walked into that forest. I let him cast that fucking Avada Kedavra, and I just stood there. I died. And the Horcrux? It’s gone too. Believe me, I know it is.”

Severus hears the conviction in his voice and he believes him. But still, his eyes flick to the scar on Potter’s forehead, barely visible behind his dark hair. The lightning bolt is pinked, puffy against the golden paleness of his skin, but it is not nearly as red, as raw as it was the last time he saw him. *‘Look at me...’* Severus closes his eyes against the memory and pushes it away. It’s no good to think of that now, and Potter is still talking anyway.

“I destroyed the bloody Horcrux and came back to kill that arsehole once and for all, and you know what he did? He fucking fled.” Potter is shaking his head again. “Neville killed Nagini

—you know that blasted snake that nearly offed you was a goddamned Horcrux too, right?”

Severus’s mouth is open. “I— no.” He didn’t know, but fuck if that doesn’t make sense.

“Yeah. The snake was the sixth one. And Merlin, Snape, I still don’t know how you survived.”

Severus could say the same to Potter. That he willingly allowed the Dark Lord to cast the killing curse on him? “Antivenin,” he says, throat dry, aching. “Every day as a precaution, the last six months.”

Potter nods. “Yeah, I figured as much. Otherwise my healing spells and the little bit of dittany I had would never have been enough.”

“But then you...” He cannot bring himself to say it. *But then you let him kill you...*

“I saw your memories, Snape. I knew what I had to do, so I went into the Forbidden Forest to die.”

Severus exhales. For the longest time he thought Potter in over his head. How could he not? After all, Albus expected a child to fight his war. But now... Now, Severus is not so sure.

He looks at the man sitting before him. Potter hasn’t slept. That much is obvious from the paleness of his skin, the dark circles purpling his eyes. But Potter’s jaw is set, his mouth a grim line, and, even in his exhaustion, he exudes confidence, certainty, and so much bloody power Severus can feel it. Maybe Albus was right in the end. At the very least, he seems to have managed to turn Potter into quite the capable soldier. But yet, here they are, no closer to the end of things.

“Is it truly that unsafe? That people are unable to return to their homes?” In the three days Severus has been awake, he has not ventured farther from his room than the small bath across the hall. But he hears footsteps on the stairs, voices drifting from the floors below, and he knows from Potter that nearly two dozen people are currently living in Grimmauld Place.

Potter shrugs. “Yes and no. For your average wizarding family, it is, perhaps, no more dangerous than it’s been for the past two years. Though we’ve seen a significant uptick of violence in common spaces. Diagon for one. There’s been three attacks this month alone. Businesses are closing their doors. Shoppers don’t feel safe.” He frowns. “Can’t say I blame them. But targeted violence? Not any more than you would expect.”

Severus regards Potter for a moment. Potter’s expression is calm, his face impassive, as he leans forward in his chair. He rests his elbows on his knees, fingers steepled beneath his chin.

“Some people can’t return home, though. Not now, at least. The Burrow was destroyed, you know. Last winter.”

Severus nods. “I thought they were rebuilding.”

“They are. But it’s not finished. With the war there hasn’t been time, and it’s not safe. So Molly and Arthur, Gin, Ron, and George have been staying here.” Potter’s voice catches, and Severus knows he’s thinking of the other twin.

Potter has been hesitant to relay too many details, to relive the battle in his head. The wound is too fresh, still raw and bleeding. But they’ve gone over the names. Who stayed to fight. Who lived. Who died. Potter’s tone is always calm, always clinical and detached—a defensive mechanism, Severus knows, for he doesn’t have to press to feel the emotion, the anguish, the grief there, barely contained beneath the surface of his thoughts.

“Bill and Fleur are safe. Their cottage is heavily warded. And Charlie’s off in Romania, of course. But Percy kept his flat. Things are business as usual at the Ministry, which means it’s mostly a shit show. But we’re slowly weeding out all the Death Eaters and sympathizers who’d infiltrated various departments.” Potter sighs, running a hand through his hair. It’s longer than it was when he was at school; dark curls brush against his cheek when his hand falls away. “Kingsley’s certain the DMLE is firmly under our control again, and with Thicknesse exposed and Voldemort fleeing Hogwarts, they’ve forced through an emergency vote of no confidence.” His mouth twists dangerously. “You’d think after everything it would have been a unanimous decision. But I guess seeing that arsehole on the front lines with the fucking Death Eaters wasn’t enough for some members of the Wizengamot.”

“The Dark Lord had Thicknesse under an Imperius.” Even Severus must admit it was a brilliant move. The subtleties of politics have never been Riddle’s forte, but managing to install a new Minister after murdering his predecessor was quite the impressive manoeuvre.

Potter only shrugs. “So maybe he doesn’t spend the rest of his life rotting in Azkaban. But frankly, I don’t fucking care. What matters is that Kingsley should have enough support to be named Acting Minister in the next few days.”

Severus nods. That is good news. “And his Auror force?”

“Robards is a good man. He’s always been on our side. It goes both ways, though. For every Death Eater exposed during the Battle of Hogwarts, they also know who stayed to fight for the Light. They’ll be targeted. Or their families will.”

Severus knows he is right. There has been random and targeted violence for years now. Death Eaters carrying out the Dark Lord’s agenda or working on their own in hopes of currying favor. And now with a list of who stood against them?

“Hermione’s made sure her parents are safe. Neville, too—his gran’s okay. But it’s not as though they can go home. They’re safe *because* Hermione and Neville aren’t there. It’s the same for Seamus and Dean, Lee Jordan...”

“I’m surrounded by sodding Gryffindors,” Severus says, under his breath.

Potter shrugs. “Not entirely. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley are here. Also Luna. She couldn’t go home—not after what happened to her there.” And Severus knows. Knows how the Lovegood girl was taken forcibly from her house in Ottery St. Catchpole, held for weeks in the dungeons at Malfoy Manor.

“And Xenophilius?”

“Luna says he’s safe. He’s on the continent somewhere.” Potter smiles. “There was new *Quibbler* issue out just last week.”

“And what of Hogwarts?”

Potter frowns, doesn’t say anything for a long time. Then, finally: “We lost it.”

The news hits Severus like a Bludger. His gut, his chest aches as much as the wound at his throat. And for a moment he feels as though he can’t breathe. Though he knows he should have known. After all, why else would they all be here?

The look in Potter’s eyes is haunted and Severus wants to reach out. He wants to touch him. Or, he wants to press his magic against Potter’s and see what he sees, to know what happened, but he doesn’t dare. He is a skilled Legilimens. One of the best in England, and most people cannot tell when he’s skimming their thoughts. But Potter could. He knows this as certainly as he knows anything, so he waits. After a long moment, Potter continues. “We lost so much, Snape. As prepared as we were. As much magic as we had, there were just too many of them. Maybe if I’d killed him, but—” He breaks off, looking down. “But he got away. And I thought, maybe they’d stop.” He pushes his glasses up, pressing his fingers to his eyes. “Some did. Others didn’t. I think they were emboldened. Wanted to do what their master hadn’t. And we had to get people out. There were children, Snape. Fourth and Fifth years stayed to fight.”

Severus doesn’t say that Potter was a child himself because he knows now that’s not the case. But still, the entire thing is horrifying. “And Death Eaters, they are there now?”

“Yes. But we’ll get it back.”

Severus takes a deep breath. “And the professors?”

“Pomfrey is here, obviously. And Minerva. She could go to her sister’s in Glasgow, but she said she’d prefer a houseful of students any day.”

Severus laughs at that. “And Filius?”

“He’s here as well.”

“He’s never kept a residence outside of Hogwarts.” Filius has always been a fixture around the castle, even during summer hols and the occasional weekend off that would send most staff members off to visit family or to spend time in their private homes. More often than not, Severus was there as well, unless one duty or another took him away. While he’s kept his father’s house at Spinner’s End, Severus prefers not spend time there. Too many memories he’d rather forget and, after his mum died, no reason to return. Honestly, he’s not sure why he didn’t sell the place long ago. Perhaps once the war is done he will—if he’s not in prison or dead, of course. “And the others?”

“Don’t know where Sprout or Slughorn are staying, but they’ve turned up at a few strategy meetings. Hagrid’s parlaying with the giants again. He’s hopeful he can still get a few on our side.” He looks away, bites at his lip. “Haven’t seen the others since before the battle. Minerva says Sinistra went to Africa to stay with her mum. Madam Pince is in Germany with family. Don’t know about Hooch, Vector or Trelawney.”

Aurora surprises Severus a tad—not that he blames her, mind, but he would have thought she’d stay to finish the fight. Irma, though, has always been a pacifist, not to mention indisputably neutral, both in the war effort and her Hogwarts allegiances. He has worked with her for nearly two decades, and he still doesn’t know what house she was in. He asked Albus once, but he’d only smiled and said Irma had her reasons for keeping that information private. The others, he’s not sure. He can only hope they’re not dead.

Potter walks to the window, looks out onto the street below. It’s begun to rain; water sheets down the leaded panes. When he turns back to look at Severus, his eyes are narrowed, jaw tight. “We’re going to take the castle back, Snape,” he says after a moment. “I can promise you that.”

“Do you have my wand?”

Severus has no personal effects. After all—aside from his wand—he had nothing on him the night he nearly died, the night he was brought here. He has not seen the clothes he was wearing either, but if Potter or his elf had any sense, they were destroyed. *There was so much blood.*

His wand, though... Its absence he can no longer ignore.

Potter looks away, rubs a hand against the back of his neck. “Yeah, about that...”

Severus feels ill. He has had that wand since he was eleven. It is as much a part of him as his hand, his arm.

“It’s not gone,” Potter adds quickly. “I have it. It’s safe.”

“Then what—” Severus begins, suddenly furious, but Potter stops him.

“It’s just that Kingsley wants to see you first.”

“Severus, you’re looking well, all things considered.” Kingsley stands by the window, his broad shoulders silhouetted by the sunlight streaming through. He’s not wearing his robes. His grey, wool trousers are rumpled, his shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows. He hasn’t shaved; dark stubble lines his jaw. Still, he manages to look entirely put together.

Severus, in contrast, feels as though he’s been run over by a lorry. He desperately wishes he felt well enough for a shower. Cleaning charms only go so far, but—despite his assurances to Potter and Poppy—just making it down the hall for a slash and to clean his teeth is enough to

make him feel weak and shaky. At least Potter's seen fit to provide him with adequate clothing, even if Severus is certain the small selection of shirts, trousers, and jumpers in the bureau once belonged to Sirius Black. He has neither inquired nor complained. Beggars can't be choosers, after all, and Severus fears even Black's old pants are better than the alternative. He shudders to think of the indecencies of Poppy's hospital pyjamas.

"Spare me the niceties," Severus says. "I presume you aren't here for a social visit."

Kingsley steps away from the window. "No. Unfortunately you're right."

"Potter mentioned my wand." Severus tries to keep his voice casual, but he can't help the unease that seeps into his words. He's certain he's about to face some sort of inquisition.

"Yes, about that..." Kingsley slips his hands into his pockets and regards Severus for a long moment. Severus wishes he knew what he was looking for. "Harry has vouched for you and, while I trust his judgement, there are certain precautions I must take. Surely you understand."

"Perfectly," Severus says, voice curt. As far as he knows, Kingsley is not a Legilimens, but he wouldn't put it past him to use Veritaserum. Or worse, presuming he's acting under Auror authority.

"Harry said he is in possession of some of your memories. He assures they are enough to convince me that you are on our side, that you were working with Dumbledore." He pauses, closes his eyes for a moment before continuing. "And that you acted on his direct orders."

Severus exhales, thankful he didn't say the words. It's been nearly a year since the night on the Astronomy Tower. Nearly a year since Albus forced his hand, made him carry out the promise he'd never wanted to make. Severus will miss Albus until the day he dies, but he will always hate him for what he made him do. "Yes."

"Will you give me permission to view the memories?"

Severus frowns, looks to Potter. "You have not given them to him?"

"They're your memories, Snape. I wouldn't do that. Not without your consent." He leans forward, hands clasped together. "But I think you should give it now."

Severus is quiet for a moment. Once again the boy has surprised him. That he would respect his privacy now, in this way is...unexpected. But then again, Potter has proven again and again that his is not what Severus expects. He sighs. "You may give the memories to Shacklebolt."

Potter nods and stands, leaving him alone in the room with Kingsley.

"I must warn you, Severus," Kingsley says, voice low and soft, "that even if these memories show what Harry says they will, there are those that won't believe, that will question why Harry is protecting you, why he is allowing you to stay here."

He looks down, smooths a hand across the worn coverlet. "I know." After all, regardless of circumstances, he made his choices, and while he has spent years trying to atone for past sins,

trying to be a better person, that doesn't change the effects his actions—or sometimes lack thereof—have had on others. The people he's hurt, directly and indirectly, because of his bigotry, his prejudice, his stupidity. His left arm aches, a dull throb that never goes away. He knows not everyone will forgive him his mistakes; he does not blame them. After all, he has not forgiven himself. He will not expect others to do what he cannot.

Potter returns after a few minutes, hands a phial to Kingsley. "There's a Pensieve in the library."

Severus watches Kingsley stride from the room. He thinks he should feel anxious, exposed, but he only feels tired. He's so bloody tired.

"Thank you," he says to Potter, once they are alone. "For asking."

Potter nods. "I'm sorry, you know. For doubting you."

Severus can only laugh, a harsh, self-deprecating sound. "I was a spy, Potter. You weren't supposed to trust me. That was the whole bloody point."

The following afternoon, Potter returns with Severus's wand. Severus takes it from him, holding it gingerly, as though it's not real, as though he'll blink and the wand will be gone again—lost for real this time. "Kingsley has seen them, then?"

Potter nods.

"I assume he was satisfied?"

"Yes." Potter leans against the bedpost, fingers tracing a whirl in the dark wood. He's watching Severus, and his gaze unnerves him. Severus doesn't know what he wants, and that leaves him feeling on edge. He wants to reach out, to let his thoughts skim across the surface of Potter's mind, but he doesn't.

"There are more memories," he says instead. "Albus left a record. They're warded, in a secret compartment in the Headmaster's office."

"They'll be safe then. When we retake the castle, I'll make sure we get them, just in case."

"All right." Severus knows there will be trials, knows one day, despite Potter's—and apparently Kingsley's—support, he will likely have to face the Wizengamot and be judged for his crimes. It makes him feel ill but, at the same time, he gets a perverse sense of satisfaction thinking of it. After all, he'll surely deserve whatever verdict they come to.

"So what happens now?"

"Now we find him, and I kill him."

Severus knows this should not surprise him. Knows Potter will not stop until he's found the Dark Lord and taken down as many Death Eaters as he can along the way. And Severus has

to believe he'll be successful in the end—that or he'll die trying. He nods. He's feeling better today. He's dressed—albeit in a faded long-sleeved Def Leppard t-shirt and Black's dark denim trousers. They're too big, but he found a worn leather belt in Regulus's bureau. He's sitting at the desk by the large window, sunlight glinting through the glass. “And how is that going?” Unfortunately, Severus knows if the Dark Lord doesn't wish to be found, he likely won't be.

Potter's expression turns mulish. “It's not. Not yet at least. But we caught Selwyn in a raid yesterday. Kingsley thinks he can be persuaded to talk.”

Severus grimaces. He's heard enough about the abuse at the hands of the Ministry's finest to know what Potter means by persuasion. And, sadly, he can't say he blames them. Not now. Not with everything at stake. “If he knows anything.”

“True.” Potter twists the edge of the coverlet between his fingers, white fabric wrapped around broad, tanned fingers. “Do you think he does?”

“Selwyn?” Severus drums his fingers on the desk, watches dust motes rise into the air. “Chances are no. He was never one of the Dark Lord's favourites.”

“But you were.”

“I was,” Severus admits. “Until he killed me.”

Potter comes over to the desk, rummages around in a drawer. He pulls out a piece of parchment and an old ballpoint pen. “Do you know any locations—safe houses, boltholes, the like?”

“You've been tracking him?”

“Yes. Kingsley's helping with the detection spells, but it's problematic.”

Severus writes down a few locations, noting Apparition coordinates, and hands the list to Potter. “I know the Dark Lord used each of these locations at one time or another. But I've no idea if he still does, and there were others. Places I never knew about.”

Potter nods, looking at the list. He runs a finger down the parchment. “We've been back to Wiltshire. But the house was closed off. There was nothing there.”

Severus nods. With Lucius fleeing to the continent, he's no doubt the Dark Lord would view the Manor as tainted. “He won't return there. Not only is the location no longer secure, he'll believe Lucius betrayed him. He wouldn't do him the perceived honour of going back.”

“Makes sense,” Potter says, “but it doesn't help us find the bastard.” He leans back, hip propped against the desk. “Narcissa saved my life, you know. She only did it for her son, but...” he shrugs. “I owe her. Or,” he bites his lip. Severus does not look at white teeth pressing into pink flesh. “I would have except I saved Malfoy that night too, so I guess we're even.”

And for that Severus is beyond grateful. For all his faults and mistakes, Draco didn't deserve what the Dark Lord demanded of him, and he certainly didn't deserve to die. Much like Potter, he was pulled into a war by virtue of his birth, and his allegiances were determined by his family name, not his own choosing. Severus is only glad Draco realised his father was on the wrong side, had thrown his lot in with a madman before it was too late, before he'd done something there was no coming back from.

Potter takes the list and pushes away from the desk. "I'll give this to Kingsley. See how it compares to our intel."

Severus walks down the hall towards the stairwell. He feels better, in large part, he knows, thanks to his wand. His magic responds to it—it's facilitating his healing as much as Poppy's potions are. But Severus has showered today and dressed. Black's wool trousers are surprisingly nice. They're loose at the waist and an inch too short, but they're well tailored and soft. The shirts, on the other hand, leave a bit to be desired. Most proclaim the name of some band or another—Muggle and Wizarding alike. A few feature lewd phrases Severus's teenage self would have found amusing. But now, he can't bring himself to put on a shirt with *cock sucker*, *tosser*, or *fuck off* emblazoned on the front, no matter how much he agrees with the sentiment.

Today he's wearing a long-sleeved grey t-shirt with the outline of a large dog printed on the front. Black would have no doubt thought it hilarious. He realises, though, that Potter must have deliberately selected only long-sleeved shirts for him. It's an oddly touching thought and he is grateful.

Severus goes down the stairs slowly, but he's steady now. The library is on the third floor. He hears voices down below, but the landing is empty. He opens the door and then nearly closes it again right away, but he steps into the room. Potter is there alone. He's seated at the circular table by the window, a book open in front of him.

"Snape," he says, looking up.

"I didn't mean to disturb you. I'll go."

"No." Potter's smile is genuine. "Stay. I could use the company."

Severus sits down on the worn Chesterfield sofa. The cushion groans, soft leather creaking beneath his thighs.

"Feeling better?" Potter says.

"A tad." The room is bright. Warm sunlight streams through the diamond paned glass, spills across the faded Aubusson rug. "What are you working on?"

Potter sighs and leans back in his chair, stretches his arms above his head. His faded t-shirt slides up, revealing the swath of smooth skin at his waist. Severus looks away. There is something about this Potter that leaves Severus off balance.

He doesn't like the feeling.

But Potter—in his element, at home here in Grimmauld Place, and so quietly confident and in control—is so unlike the Potter he thought he knew, that Severus has been forced to re-evaluate his assumptions. This Potter is thoughtful and methodical. He is not yet eighteen, but he has a hand in all strategy and planning that's currently underway for the war effort. So much so, that he has the Acting Minister for Magic coming by regularly for consultation.

"I'm trying to figure out how I can further tweak our detection spells. We're tapped into the Ministry's spellwork, and it's good—I've gone over it with Kingsley myself—but it's not precise enough." He runs a hand through his hair; it's even messier than usual. "They're set for dark magic, which you want, of course—or maybe not so much since we're at war. Unforgivables are par for the course now, yeah? So our detection monitors are pinging all over the place." He exhales, drums his fingers on the table. "Hell, we likely cast as many each day as any Death Eater we're looking to find. And more so than Voldemort since he's lying low."

Severus holds his tongue. He knows the ends justify the means, especially in wartime—but the thought still turns his stomach.

Potter leans back again, this time rocking his chair onto two legs. "So yeah, the spells might help us get a lead on one pocket or another of Death Eater activity, which—don't get me wrong—is important, and Robards is dispatching Aurors or we're sending a team every time our spells register dark magic. But there's ways enough of circumventing the detection work." He rocks forward, chair hitting the ground with a thump. "I can do it. So you know Voldemort can." He sighs, then twists to the side until his back cracks with a pop. "Would you like some tea?" He stands. "Because I could really use a cuppa."

Potter goes to the door and calls to his elf. A few moments later, Kreacher appears. He eyes Severus warily, and Severus wonders if he remembers the few times he was here as a boy visiting Regulus. Kreacher always doted on Reg, far more than he did Sirius. "It is good Professor Snape is out of bed, I guess," he says after a moment. "But he should probably be eating. Would you be liking some sandwiches, too?"

Potter smiles. "Yeah, that would be brilliant."

Kreacher tries to look put out, but Severus can sense the affection there, and he's not surprised Potter has managed to win over the crotchety old elf.

"I took care of the Horcrux problem, though," Potter says, once Kreacher has gone.

"Pardon?"

"That was my biggest fear, yeah? That he'd make another bloody Horcrux and then we'd be fucked."

Severus doesn't disagree. The thought is terrifying. It's unfathomable, really, how Potter, Granger, and Weasley managed to somehow find and destroy four of those blasted things before Longbottom dispatched Nagini and Potter sacrificed himself like the bloody martyr he

is. But if the Dark Lord were to create a new Horcrux now? Severus shudders to think. Potter's right: They'd be fucked. "We'd never find it."

"Exactly," Potter says. "I couldn't take that chance. But I remembered the tracing spell Voldemort used a few months back—if anyone said his name, he'd be alerted instantly. Obviously a variation of the Trace the Ministry has always used for underage magic, but far more specific."

Severus nods, impressed. "You were able to tailor Trace magic to Horcrux creation?"

"Hermione helped with the spellwork and I cleared it with Kingsley so the existing Ministry spells don't interfere with my magic, but yeah. It worked." Potter runs his thumb back and forth along the line of stubble on his jaw. "The problem is it will only help us find him if he attempts to make another Horcrux—which is good, of course, because we can't have that. But as long as he's not Horcrux making?" He shrugs. "No Voldemort."

Kreacher pops back into the room then with a platter of sandwiches and tea service. He sets it on the coffee table and disappears again without a word. Potter takes a sandwich. "These are good," he says, mouth full. "Kreacher's chicken salad is the best. You should eat."

Severus does. His appetite is returning and his throat no longer hurts with every swallow. Potter's right. The sandwiches are good. The food at Grimmauld Place has been surprisingly adequate. Since Poppy lifted his dietary restrictions, he's taken three meals a day in his room. He can't imagine how Potter's elf is keeping up with feeding everyone, though he suspects Molly Weasley is helping. She's used to cooking for a full house, after all. He knows he'll eventually need to start eating downstairs but, for now, he'd prefer avoid as many people as possible—aside from Potter, it seems.

Potter finishes his sandwich and takes another. "I've thought about other magic, too," he says, picking out a chunk of chicken with his fingers. "But aside from the Marks..." He looks down at Severus's arm.

The Mark is hidden. Still, Severus must resist the urge to tug at his sleeve, to press his palm to his forearm, but there is no anger in Potter's gaze, no disgust. He only looks thoughtful.

"Does it hurt?" Potter asks.

"Yes," Severus answers honestly. "But it has for years. I am used to it."

Potter nods. "Has he called them yet?"

"No. But he will." Severus is not looking forward to the blindingly dizzying pain that will accompany the summons. And then to ignore the magic, the sickening pull demanding that he Apparate to the Dark Lord's side.

"But you will know?"

"Yes." Severus takes a sip of tea, tries to ignore the way his hand shakes. "There is a way for him to sever a Mark, but..."

“But he thinks you are dead.”

“Yes.”

“I used to know, too. Every time he called you. It was...excruciating.” Potter leans forward, props his chin on his hand. “I don’t feel him anymore, though. The link I had to Voldemort died when he destroyed that piece of his soul inside me.”

When you let him kill you, Severus wants to say. But he does not.

“I’m still not sure how I used to live with the constant headaches, even if it did prove convenient at times.”

Severus remembers how ill Potter looked those last few months before he left Hogwarts. Deathly pale and as though he hadn’t slept in weeks. He likely hadn’t. He can’t imagine how it felt with the Dark Lord in his head, raging and plotting and planning.

“I’ve tried, you know,” Potter says. “Hermione told me not to—said I was a bloody idiot—but I had to know if I could still reach out through the link, if I could still see him. But I can’t. Not anymore. Which is good, of course because that means no more...” he taps his forehead. “But it means we can’t find him that way.” Potter takes a sip of tea. Severus’s eyes are drawn to his forehead, to the scar he knows is there beneath the dark fringe.

“There has to be another way.” Potter looks down at Severus’s arm again. “And you can’t go, Snape. If that’s what you’re thinking.”

“It would work,” Severus says.

“Sure it would. Except for the part that you’d be there with Voldemort surrounded by all his favourite Death Eaters.”

“Yes, well,” Severus admits, “that could prove problematic.”

At that, Potter actually laughs. “I’ll say. And even if you were to bring me with you—hell, even if we brought the entire Order with us—I still wouldn’t like our chances.” Potter picks up the teapot and pours himself another cup, grimacing when he takes a sip. He waves a hand, reheating the tea without a word. Severus feels the subtle burst of power. It tugs at his own magic, his blood. “Anyway,” he says, setting the cup down again, “I realised we couldn’t use the summoning magic because—even if it worked, even if we found him—” he stops, shakes his head. “Well, I’d rather not face him surrounded by fifty of his closest friends. And in a place where we hadn’t the chance to do proper recon.”

“No,” Severus agrees. He’s right.

“But there has to be another way. I know there is. And we’ll get him.”

“Can you brew?”

The question catches him off guard. Severus must be depressed. Though, it's not something he'll admit—not to Potter. Certainly not to Minerva or Poppy. But what other explanation is there? That it's been weeks since he's given more than a passing thought to his lab, his potions?

"I can."

There must be something in his expression, his tone that Potter picks up on because he asks, "Will you?"

Severus nods. "What do you need?"

At that, Potter laughs. "Me? Loads of things, surely. But that's not why I'm asking. Pomfrey needs help."

Oh. Of course she does. Severus feels a brief stab of guilt that he hadn't considered such. They are at war, after all. Potter and his team are in the field most days. In the past two weeks alone, they have engaged in four separate skirmishes and have encountered hostile combatants practically every time they've ventured out. Poppy is running a makeshift infirmary. Severus knows there have been injuries—fatalities too—though Potter won't talk about that. Some days Severus wonders how Potter's holding it together—the man will need a mind healer when this is through.

"I'll need space," he says. "And supplies."

Potter nods. "Space I've got. Off the kitchen, connected to Pomfrey's hospital."

Severus wonders if Potter's magicked it himself. Grimmauld Place has always been made for that sort of thing. As at Hogwarts, the magic here seems to know what is needed, know how to provide. But someone still has to cast the spells, and it would take power to shape the existing magic.

"It's small—not like your labs at Hogwarts—but it should serve."

"And supplies?"

"Are more difficult. Minerva took what she could from the castle. Pomfrey too, when it became clear we'd have to evacuate. But there wasn't much time."

No, Severus doesn't imagine there was. Potter has revealed the events of that night in bits and pieces. Severus remembers the shack. The Dark Lord and the snake. But he hadn't known Potter had followed him and, for a moment, when he realised he was going to die, his fear was eclipsed by shame, by regret that he had not yet told Potter about the final Horcrux. Had not yet told him that devastating news Albus had refused to share.

When the time comes, the boy must die.

But then Potter was there with his healing magic and his dittany.

And afterwards... Potter has told Severus about the forest. About the train station and about coming back. And, how the Dark Lord, sensing his mortality, Apparated away like the fucking coward he's always been.

But the damage was done. There were simply too many of them. Riddle's ranks have swelled over the past years and Potter was fighting with children, with teachers, and those few Order members and Aurors who made it to the castle in time.

So Potter and Minerva, Kingsley, Aberforth, and Filius got out who they could and left Hogwarts to the Death Eaters.

It makes Severus sick. There is no love lost between him and the Death Eaters, but there was a time when he counted a few as friends, and he still cannot believe they attacked the school.

"My private stores?"

"We've been back," Potter says. "At first for supplies. Then twice for reconnaissance. Ron's hopeful we'd be ready to mount a full-scale attack in a week or so—take back the castle. Not that we will, mind. Finding Voldemort takes priority. But Hermione and Gin searched the labs. They knew we're short on potions, yeah? Found a few things, but it'd mostly been picked over."

Severus understands. Potions, dry ingredients are valuable commodities in times like these. "There is a private storeroom off my office. It's warded. Unless you knew what you were looking for, you'd never see it."

Potter nods. "Password?"

Severus tells him.

"I'll go today."

"I take it they've yet to find Aberforth's tunnel?"

Potter's eyes widen. "You knew about that?" Then he shakes his head. "Of course you did." He laughs, mouth twisting cruelly. "Nah. Those fuckers still haven't a clue how we keep getting in. Dumb as rocks, that lot is. Though, I suppose we're lucky the Room of Requirement is still on our side. But, Merlin, Snape, over a bloody year in the school and the Carrows never suspected a thing." He laughs again.

"I doubt that room will switch allegiances," Severus says. "Not now."

Potter bites his lip, considering. "No, likely not. I mean, there was a time when it was neutral. Voldemort certainly used it when he was a student—he hid that blasted diadem there for fuck's sake. But after what Crabbe did..." He takes a sharp breath and closes his eyes. "Fuck."

"What did Crabbe do?" Severus asks, not sure he wants to know.

“Huh?” Potter looks at him, frowning. “Oh, right, you don’t know. Got himself killed, for one.”

Severus is surprised by the viciousness in Potter’s voice. He feels a brief pang of sadness. Yes, Vincent Crabbe was Marked and he could definitely be cruel—he was very much his father’s son in that regard—but he was one of his. Yet another Slytherin Severus failed to protect. “Tell me what happened.”

Potter scrubs a hand across his face, pushing his glasses up to his forehead before they settle back on the bridge of his nose. Severus knows he doesn’t like to talk about it—not the death, the loss, everything this fucking war has cost—but he needs to know. Potter sighs. “During the battle, Ron, Hermione, and I were looking for the final Horcrux...or,” he pauses, “what we thought was the final Horcrux. We’d destroyed the locket, and Ron and Hermione took care of Hufflepuff’s cup while I found the Grey Lady.”

Severus raises an eyebrow, but finds he’s really not surprised that Ravenclaw’s ghost aided the Gryffindor trio on their quest to do the impossible.

Potter merely shrugs. “Anyway, she told me we’d find the diadem in the place things are hidden.”

“The Room of Requirement.”

“Exactly. But Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle caught up to us, followed us in. Crabbe started firing off AK’s.” Potter clenches his jaw, brow furrowed. “I mean, Christ, Snape. I know he was just trying to be a good little Death Eater, but we were still his year mates.”

“How did he die?” Severus feels numb. His head aches, a dull throb behind his temples. He cannot imagine that Potter, Granger, or Weasley would have used deadly force on another student, no matter the circumstance.

“Fiendfyre.”

“What?” Severus can’t keep the horror out of his voice.

“He cast it himself.” Potter shakes his head. “I still can’t imagine what he was thinking. Nearly got us all killed.”

“It’s a wonder you weren’t.”

“Story of my life. But, as it turns out, Fiendfyre destroys Horcruxes, so there’s that.” Potter glances at his watch. “I should go. Best time to hit the castle is dinnertime. Shift change.” He stands, hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I’ll see you later?”

Severus wants to tell Potter not to go. He wants to tell him to be careful. But all he says is, “Yes.”

“So are you ready?” Potter asks the following afternoon. “To go downstairs?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. After all, it doesn’t matter if Severus is ready; he might never be. “Come on.” Potter’s voice is gentle. “I’ll walk with you. Pomfrey can catch you up.”

Severus swallows. He knew it was inevitable, of course. That he would have to leave the confines of his bedroom, the relative isolation of the library. And it will feel good to get back in a lab again—even if he must face a horde of Gryffindors in the process.

“Who knows I’m here?”

“Everyone,” Potter says, and that surprises Severus. It makes him uncomfortable.

There was a time when Severus could honestly say did not care what others thought of him. But walking down the stairs with Potter by his side, he finds he is nervous.

“It’s all right, you know,” Potter says, placing a palm on Severus’s back. “They know what you did. They know you’ve always been on our side.”

Do they? Severus wants to say, but he only nods.

Potter’s hand falls away, and Severus misses the warm point of pressure.

The kitchen is lit by the orange glow of the fire. There are dishes washing in the sink. Minerva and Molly Weasley are sitting at one end of the table, cups of tea set before them. Ronald and George Weasley are a few feet down one of the long benches, a chessboard between them.

Severus pauses in the doorway, keenly aware of Potter beside him. He doesn’t know what he should say, but then Minerva smiles and stands. “Severus,” she says, reaching out to clasp his arm with her hand. “I’m glad to see you well.”

Severus smiles, surprised by the overwhelming sense of relief he feels at Minerva’s acceptance, her friendship. “It’s good to see you too, Minerva. And Molly.” He nods.

Molly’s hair is mussed, her eyes sad. Severus knows she is grieving. He is used to grief. He has lived a life steeped in it. But he cannot fathom the loss of a child. Still, her smile is genuine. “Let me get you some tea, Severus.” She goes to stand, but he shakes his head.

“No, thank you, but not now.”

“Professor,” George Weasley says, raising his hand in a mock salute. He is pale. The circles beneath his eyes look like bruises, and Severus barely has to reach out, barely has to skim his magic against the surface of his thoughts to feel the extraordinary sadness, the emptiness there. But George nods his head at Severus, and he thinks he sees a flicker of a familiar smirk.

Severus can’t help but look at his ear—or the hole where his ear used to be. He remembers that night so clearly. The humid warmth of summer. The breeze in his face as he mounted his broom to fly beside Death Eaters, beside Voldemort. He was terrified for Potter and for the

others he knew were disguised as him. But he was also grateful that Fletcher listened, that he passed on his idea for multiple Potters so at least they had a chance.

And he remembers Rodolphus raising his wand to cast at Lupin. The *Sectumsempra* was off his lips without a thought, but he missed, hitting the boy disguised as Potter instead. Thank Christ the spell only severed his ear. Severus isn't sure he could have borne the alternative.

"No hard feelings, Snape," George says, cocking his head to one side. He taps a finger to his temple. "Mum says I'm still as handsome as ever."

"It's true," Ron says. "She does. Though, mate, you have to be honest. The standard wasn't terribly high to begin with."

"Oi, you fucker," George says, but his voice is fond.

Poppy appears then from a door at the back of the kitchen Severus is certain was not there last time he was at Grimmauld Place. She's not wearing her traditional matron's smock but rather sturdy work trousers and a cream coloured blouse. Her hair is covered with a blue scarf. "Oh Severus," she says. "I told Harry you could use a few more days' rest. Are you sure you're ready to be out of bed?"

"I'm fine, Poppy. Potter said you could use some assistance."

She looks at him for a long moment, eyes assessing, before she apparently determines him fit enough to be put to work. "That I do. Come with me. I'll show you to the lab."

The new doorway leads to a long room of wizard space. The far wall is lined with windows overlooking the back garden. There are six beds, each with a curtain that can be pulled closed for privacy. Thankfully, the beds are empty now. He follows Poppy through another doorway to a smaller workroom. The space is lit by a wide window, and sconces burn brightly on the walls. There is a long worktable, its grey stone surface polished and gleaming. An assortment of knives, stirring rods, and ladles hang from a magnetic strip affixed to the wall. And there are several cauldrons on one of the open shelves. There are rows of ingredients too—not many, but enough for the time being. A desk sits in the corner with an old but comfortable-looking chair that appears to have been brought in from another room in the house, judging from the worn but once clearly expensive upholstery.

"Minerva helped me with the space," Potter says, and Severus turns. He hadn't realised that he'd followed them. Potter leans against the doorjamb, arms folded across his chest. "She knows how you prefer your lab organised. I know it's not as large what you're accustomed to at Hogwarts, but it was as much as the magic would allow."

"This will be more than adequate."

"Good." Potter stands in the doorway for a few more moments, eyes fixed on Severus, as though studying him. Then he turns and leaves the room, walking back through the infirmary towards the main house.

“All right then,” Poppy says, pulling Severus’s thoughts from Potter. “Let’s go over the inventory, shall we?”

Severus works for the better part of the afternoon. He finishes a batch of pain potion, as well as the bases for a blood-replenishing potion and some Skele-Gro. Poppy was dangerously low on dittany, too. But Potter returned from Hogwarts with the contents of his private storeroom, and Severus had enough of the dried herb saved to distil. He decants the liquid into half a dozen glass phials, before setting the rest aside to make into a paste. Poppy likes both variations for wound care.

Afterwards, he carefully cleans each knife and ladle before hanging them up again. Then he wipes down the long stone worktop. He checks the stasis charm on the blood-replenishing potion and places a glass lid atop the cauldron with the Skele-Gro. He will finish them both in the morning.

He spells off the lights and closes the door to the lab behind him. The kitchen is empty, aside from Potter’s elf. He nods gruffly when Severus asks if he may take a sandwich from the fridge, and Severus helps himself to some grapes and a bottle of water as well. He doesn’t see anyone on the stairs, but he hears voices down the hall leading to the second floor sitting room. He considers stopping in the library, wondering if, perhaps, Potter is there. But he thinks better of it, and takes his plate to his room. After he eats, he lies down for a bit. He is feeling better, and it was good to get back in a lab. But it is draining to brew—magically and physically, and he is still not himself.

He must fall asleep, because when he opens his eyes again, the moon is high outside his window, a thin silver slash against the dark sky. He climbs out of bed and heads across the hall for a piss. Potter’s door is open, his room dark. But there is a light coming from the third floor landing, and when Severus opens the door to the library, Potter is there, curled on the end of the sofa. He’s got a book open on his lap and a drink in his hand. The amber coloured liquid looks suspiciously like firewhisky. “I’ll share if you don’t tell Molly,” he says, taking a sip. His mouth is wet when he sets the glass down again.

“All right,” Severus says, and Potter smiles. Severus hates that he likes the curve of Potter’s lips, the flash of white teeth.

The cut crystal glasses on the sideboard are lovely—as are most things in this damned house, and Severus takes the bottle of Ogden’s, pours a generous splash. He can’t remember the last time he had a drink—likely the night before the battle at Hogwarts? The whisky warms his throat, his stomach as he swallows, and he feels Potter’s eyes on him.

“I’d hoped you would have joined us for dinner,” he says.

“I can’t imagine why.”

Potter shrugs. “I’m not sure, Snape. Maybe I just like your company.” He laughs, and for a moment, Severus thinks he must be joking. But when he looks at Potter, there is something in his expression that Severus doesn’t understand, but it twists like warmth in his stomach.

“I can tell when you do that, you know,” Potter says. “When you touch your magic to mine.”

“I’m not—” Severus begins, but he’s not sure what to say.

“I know you’re not reading my mind,” Potter says, tilting his head to one side. “It’s more like you’re reading the room, yeah? Like you’re gauging emotions, or something.”

Severus wants to laugh at Potter’s perceptiveness. It’s not something he does deliberately, this subtle push of awareness. It’s a natural product of neuromancy. When he’s not actively Occluding, his magic is always tinged with a hint of Legilimency. And, of course, Potter would not only be able to feel the nearly indiscernible brush of magic, but also understand what it was.

“I don’t mind, Snape,” Potter says. “I like your magic. And that’s a damned useful party trick you’ve got there.” He smiles. “If I had spent half as much time around Voldie as you did, well...” he shakes his head. “I’d have liked to know if he were feeling particularly murderous at any given moment.”

Severus takes a sip of his drink. He can’t stop looking at Potter. At the curve of his cheek. At the way his dark curls fall forward into his eyes. He wants to brush them away from his face. Severus looks away, clears his throat. “What do your housemates do in the evenings?” he asks. Surely it’s odd that Potter spends his time tucked away in the library alone, when he’s surrounded by friends, by Gryffindors.

Potter shrugs. “They’re around.” He sets his glass down on the end table. “Ron’s off with Hermione. Lee, George, Seamus, and Dean are probably down in the kitchen drinking beer with Minerva and Arthur. Or they’re in the parlour playing chess or Exploding Snap. Justin’s no doubt trying to get into Susan’s pants.” He glances to the window. “Since it’s nice out, Hannah and Neville are probably in the garden. Flitwick too, and Pomfrey—if she hasn’t gone to bed. And I haven’t a clue where Luna and Gin are off to.”

“And you prefer to be alone?”

“It’s not that. Not really.” He sighs. “It’s just things are different now. People have died. Fuck, Snape, *I died*. And my friends, they’re grieving, and they’re angry and they’re scared. And they all expect me to do something about it. Everyone wants something from me—not Hermione and Ron, of course, but they have each other and I’m...” He looks down, wrapping his arms around himself. “I’m tired. Gin wants something from me. And Dumbledore...” He shakes his head. “Dumbledore wanted everything. And now Kingsley. I’m not an Auror—hell, I don’t even have my NEWTs—yet he’s got me planning strategy and running fucking point on missions, and all because of what? Because I’m good at magic and a bloody madman tried to kill me when I was a baby? But you, Snape?” Potter’s looking at him again, and his gaze sends odd prickles across Severus’s skin. “You’ve never given a damn about who I am, and you don’t want a thing from me.” He waves a hand and the bottle of whisky sails neatly into his grasp.

Severus raises an eyebrow but says nothing as Potter pours himself another glass and reaches over to top off Severus’s drink as well. He’s always known Potter was powerful; he’s seen

Potter perform far more extraordinary magic than a wordless, wandless *Accio*, and if he wants to drink in his own house, Severus doesn't blame him.

"We're not that different, Snape, you and I," Potter says after a moment. He shifts, curling long legs beneath him. Potter's feet are bare, his toes pressed against the cushion. Severus looks away, watches the firelight dance upon the ceiling.

"We both know what it's like to be told what to do, to be told where to go and when. We're used to being used, Snape." There's a clink of glass as Potter sets his drink down. And then he's leaning back, resting an arm on the cushion behind Severus.

Severus shifts further away from Potter. He's clutching his glass like a talisman in front of him, but Potter has always had a way of getting under his skin.

"But now," Potter is saying, his gaze ember-hot and far too understanding, "now you don't belong to anyone. Not Dumbledore. Not *him*. And soon, I'm going to kill him, and then I'll be free, too."

"Come to our strategy sessions." Potter leans against the chair, hip propped on the brocade upholstered arm. Severus sets aside the book he's been reading—it's one of the more gruesome texts he's encountered in the Black library, and that's saying something.

"I cannot fathom why you think that'd be a good idea."

"Because you know more about Voldemort than anyone, Snape, and we need you."

"No one trusts me."

Potter sighs, reaching up to brush the hair back from his face. "I do. And that's all that matters really." He stands up. "After all, it's my house, my fucking choice, and, frankly, my goddamned war. So if I say we need you, we need you."

Severus wants to disagree. Potter didn't start the war; it shouldn't be his responsibility. But Potter's a martyr. He always has been, and Severus knows he'll do whatever Potter asks of him. "All right."

"What's his end game?" Potter says. "What's he going to do now?"

They're back in the library. Potter is sitting on the sofa beside Severus. He's closer, perhaps, than he should be. Closer than, perhaps, appropriate, but Severus can't bring himself to care. He's become accustomed to being in Potter's space. To Potter being in his. And he finds it strangely comfortable.

Minerva and Filius are here as well. Minerva stands by the fireplace, arms crossed about her chest, her plum coloured dressing gown pulled tightly around her. Filius sits in one of the two wingback chairs that flank the hearth; a cup of tea hovers beside him.

“He wants power and he wants influence. But he’s lost the Ministry,” Severus says.

“It’s a target, surely,” Potter says. “Kingsley’s aware. And he’s confident the DMLE is ours, so it’d be hard to stage anything from the inside, but I’d damned sure like to find him before he tries anything.”

“And other targets?” Filius asks.

“St. Mungo’s, King’s Cross, Westminster…” Potter checks them off on his fingers. “We’ve got them under surveillance.”

“And what of Hogwarts?” Minerva says.

“We’ll get it back.” Potter speaks simply, matter of fact.

And Severus agrees. They’ve discussed it. “While Hogwarts undoubtedly holds symbolic significance to Voldemort,” he says, “I don’t think he’ll see enough strategic value in keeping it.”

“Not for the manpower and magic it will take to keep us out,” Potter says.

“And are our dear friends Aleto and Amycus still holding the castle?” Minerva asks.

Potter tucks a strand of dark hair behind his ear. Severus watches the movement, the brush of Potter’s fingers against his skin. It makes Severus shiver with something—something he’s not sure he understands, something he’s not comfortable putting a name to yet. He swallows, clears his throat. “Along with Fenrir Greyback and seven other Death Eaters—none of whom rank in the Dark Lord’s inner circle. They are likely hoping their master will repay them when he decides to venture out of hiding.”

“It’s foolish, really,” Potter says with a small smile at Severus. “Voldemort is far more practical than many would like to believe. He attacked the castle because it afforded him an opportunity to strike a devastating blow, not because he desired Hogwarts.”

“The psychological impact alone, was staggering,” Filius agrees. “Not to mention our physical losses.”

Minerva’s mouth is pressed into a thin line, her expression as stern as ever, but Severus can feel her sadness, and he knows she blames herself for every student lost—every child she could not protect. “You’re telling me, he doesn’t want the castle?”

“No,” Severus says, “he wants Potter.”

Potter’s standing by the sink, arms folded across his chest. His shirt is rumpled, and Severus hates how he notices the line of his biceps under the thin fabric. He shouldn’t find him so damned attractive. *Jesus*, this house, this war is getting to him.

“Our surveillance has picked up increased chatter,” Potter raises his chin in indication, eyes fixed on the table, “there and there.”

All heads turn to the map Ron Weasley has spread out there—all but Ginevra’s, that is. Severus has seen how she watches Potter. Her eyes follow him when she thinks he isn’t looking. And Severus wonders if Potter has noticed, if he knows that she wants him.

Severus looks back to the map. Two quadrants are outlined in green ink. Both in the warehouse district. While Severus isn’t terribly familiar with the local, he knows there was a time when Dolohov and Rookwood ran explosives out of the area. He’s told Potter as much. But they are both dead, and Severus can’t think of who might have taken over the operations. Dolohov was always a secretive fucking bastard.

“So we send in a team,” Jordan says. “See what’s going on.”

Granger is nodding. “We’ll coordinate with the DMLE, of course.” She looks to where Kingsley is standing by the doorway. He’s brought Dawlish along and some junior Auror whose name Severus can’t remember.

Kingsley nods. “Just let me know when.” He looks to Dawlish. “I’m sure Gawain can have a team ready by end of day?”

Dawlish runs a hand over his cropped grey hair. “I can get the lads together myself.”

“Perhaps we should reach out to the Unspeakables, as well,” Granger says. “If there’s a chance they’re still working with volatile materials or—”

But Potter cuts her off. “No, I don’t trust Croaker. Not now.” When Granger goes to object, Potter shakes his head. “No Hermione. His is the only department that wouldn’t allow Kingsley to send in an audit team while we were trying to sort out the whole Ministry mess, and he’s never come forward publically on the side of the Light.”

“Saul’s not working with Voldemort, Harry,” Granger says. “It’s just Unspeakable policy to never get involved in political issues or matters of public policy—you know that.”

“I do. And I’m not saying Croaker isn’t a good wizard. But that doesn’t mean I want to loop him in on our manoeuvres. His Unspeakables won’t take orders from us, anyhow.” He leans forward against the table, palms pressed flat to its worn surface. “Besides, he’d just view it as doing us a favour. And we don’t want to owe him anything.” He looks up. “We’ll put Seamus and George on point. If there are any explosives involved, they’ll know how to handle it.”

“Right, mate,” Finnigan says. “No worries there.”

Granger bites her lip, looks as if she might argue, but then she nods. “All right.”

Severus wants to smile. He wouldn’t trust Saul Croaker as far as he could throw him, but Potter’s far more in tune with Ministry politics that he has any right to be. Then again, Kingsley seems to value his insight and opinions over that of both his Head Auror and his head of the DMLE, so perhaps he shouldn’t be surprised.

“I’m inclined to agree with Harry,” Kingsley says. “Now, when do we want to move?”

Potter looks to Weasley. “Ron?”

“Ideally, I’d say nightfall. Cover of darkness and all that rot. But, in this case, I don’t think it wise. It will be difficult enough to navigate the area in broad daylight. And even with our advance recon, I think it’s too big a risk to send teams in there with limited visibility. Especially if we might be dealing with explosives.”

“Daytime increases our chances of civilian or Muggle encounters,” Potter says.

“Noted,” Kingsley says. “I’ll have Obliviators standing by.”

“All right then,” Potter says. “Daybreak it is. If Kingsley and John can have our support team in place?” He looks to where Shackbolt and Dawlish are standing.

“We’ll be ready,” Dawlish assures them.

“You want to duel, Snape?” Potter closes the door to the library behind him, quirks his lips into a smile.

Severus sets his book down, leans back against the sofa cushion. “I take it your raid went well then?”

He bounces up on the balls of his feet. Severus can feel the magic, the pent-up energy coming off him. “Yeah, it did. Caught Travers, Macnair, and Rowle, along with four others—two of them Marked—and, fuck, but they were sitting on a world of explosives.” Potter laughs, eyes bright behind his glasses. His skin is flushed, his forehead, temples damp with sweat. The grey of his t-shirt is darkened at the neckline, his armpits. “Seamus and George are still there with Robards’s bomb squad. You’d think Christmas came early for those two.” Potter snaps his fingers and the lock on the door slides into place.

Severus shudders at the sudden burst of power. “Is that meant to impress me?”

Potter laughs again. “Maybe. Did it work?” He takes his wand from his pocket, casts a few containment spells, followed by a *Muffliato*. With another flick of his wrist, the card table slides to one side of the room, the sofa and coffee table to the other, clearing a small space.

“So,” Potter says, turning to face Severus; he twirls his wand between slender fingers. The movement is practiced, graceful. “Can we duel?”

Severus stands. “I can feel your magic from here, Potter.”

“I know.” He rolls his shoulders, twists side to side; Severus hears his spine crack. “It’s the adrenaline. When it gets like this, I have to do something or else my magic can get a bit wild. Duelling helps. Or sex.” He purses his lips, looks at Severus for a moment. “Though I don’t think that’s on offer.”

“I—” Severus does not like the way the words fluster him. “I’m certain there is someone in this house who would be happy to help you in that regard,” he manages after a moment. “Ms. Weasley, for one.”

“Oh, Gin? Yeah, I’m sure she would. I’m not really interested in that, though, you know?”

“I see,” Severus says. Though he’s not sure he does.

“Don’t tell Kingsley,” Potter says then, “but the longer this war goes on, the more certain I am that I don’t want to be an Auror.”

This surprises Severus. He’s always assumed Potter would go on from his role as Boy Saviour to a lifetime of playing hero for the Ministry. “Oh?”

“I’m tired of death, Snape. And I’m tired of hurting people.” He shakes his head. “But then there are days like today when I get it. Days when I understand the appeal, the thrill of it. And, *fuck*, it feels good. So,” he says, tapping his wand against his palm, “can we fight?”

“I haven’t duelled in over two months,” Severus says. “And you managed to recover from your near death experience far more...gracefully than I have from mine.”

“Yes, well,” Potter laughs. “My death didn’t involve a giant snake, so there’s that.” He smiles. “I’d say I’ll go easy on you, Snape, but I know you wouldn’t have that.”

“No.” Severus looks at Potter for a moment, takes in the colour of his cheeks, the long line of his spine, his muscles tensed and taut and ready to spring.

“Come on, Snape,” Potter says. “You know you want to. Or...” he tilts his head to one side, eyes Severus speculatively, “we could fuck.”

Severus is startled by the words. Their unexpectedness. The sheer, vulgar brashness of them. And perhaps, most of all, their appeal.

Potter can’t be serious. Of course he’s not. But still, saying that at all is suggestive, provocative. Even Potter must be aware of that.

“I’m sorry,” Potter says, ducking his head. “It’s just this magic. It’s intoxicating.” He looks up again. His eyes are so damned green. “When I was at school, I would go for a run, or fly to burn this off.”

“Or fuck.”

Potter’s smile gives nothing away. “Maybe. Now, are you ready?”

Potter casts first. Severus barely has time to sidestep his *Reducto*. The spell sails past, containment spells absorbing it without a sound.

“Nice trick, that,” Severus says, impressed.

“Yeah, well, Kreacher gets terribly miffed when I break things.”

Potter casts again, but this time Severus is ready. His shield snaps in place with satisfying force. Severus loves magic, loves the way it pricks at his fingers and pulses in his blood. And it feels good to use it again in this way.

Severus casts an *Expulso* just as Potter casts an incendiary spell. The magic collides; the impact causes Severus to stagger back several steps, but he maintains his feet.

Potter is grinning. “Come on, Snape. I know you’ve got more.”

Severus is rusty. It’s been too long, and they are confined by the space of the room. Even with the furniture pushed aside, they’re limited to only a dozen or so square feet. But duelling comes naturally to him. It always has, and he’s not going to let Potter win without a fight.

But Potter is powerful—so bloody powerful. Severus understands why he has the whole bloody Auror force answering to him. He feels old in comparison; he is already breathless. His heart is thudding in his chest and his body aches; he’ll be sore tomorrow. “Your skills have improved,” Severus says, as Potter deflects an *Immobulus* with a practised twist of his wand.

Potter laughs, funnels more magic into his shield. “You know what they say about necessity being the best teacher. And when you consider the alternative?” He waves a hand. A chair sails across the room and Severus has to fall to his knees to avoid being hit. It bounces off the containment charm and lands on the floor with a crack, one of the legs snapped in half.

“I thought you didn’t want to break anything.”

“I’ll mend it.” Potter’s wand flashes blue and a freezing hex shatters against Severus’s shield. A shard of magic hits his arm, sending a chill down to his fingertips, but his *Stupefy* connects with Potter’s defences with enough force to knock him back a step.

Severus reaches out with his Legilimency. It’s only a subtle press of magic, but it’s enough for Potter to stop casting long enough to slam a crude Occlumency shield in place. Potter will never be truly skilled at mind magic. His power is too raw, too tied to emotion, but he manages to shut Severus out. Still, it proves enough of a distraction.

Severus’s *Incarcerous* catches Potter cleanly in the chest, thin cords snaking from his wand to wrap tightly around Potter’s torso, binding his arms to his sides.

“Fuck, Snape,” Potter says, voice low, breathless, as he pushes against the ties. “A bit kinkier than I had in mind, but whatever does it for you.”

Severus can’t help but laugh. He’s about to release the spell when Potter takes a deep breath. Severus feels a sudden rush, as though the air has been sucked from the room, and then with a *pop, pop, pop*, the cords round Potter’s body snap free.

“What the—”

But Potter raises his wand and, with a murmured *Expelliarmus*, Severus’s own wand flies neatly out of his grasp and into Potter’s outstretched hand.

“How did you do that?” Severus asks once he’s caught his breath.

“It’s just something I’ve been working on.” He holds out Severus’s wand. “Here.”

Severus takes it. “You shouldn’t be able to break the magic of those bonds unless the caster himself is incapacitated.”

Potter shrugs, runs a hand through his hair; it’s damp with sweat. “Yeah, well, I shouldn’t have been distracted by your fancy Legilimency, either, but here we are.” He waves a hand. The containment and silencing charms he’d cast on the room collapse. With a snap of his fingers, the chair rights itself, its broken leg reattaching with a spark of silver magic. It wobbles slightly when Potter inspects it. “Huh,” He says, tapping his wand against his thigh. “Might have to have Kreacher take a look after all. He’s far better at housekeeping spells than I am.”

Potter sits down on the floor, leaning back to rest his head against the wall. Severus doesn’t look at the long column of his throat, at the rise and fall of his Adam’s apple as he swallows. He sits down beside him, closes his eyes.

“That was fantastic,” Potter says, after a moment. “Better than sex, anyhow.”

Severus laughs, a quick burst of sound. “I might have to disagree.”

“Oh?” Potter turns his head towards him. His green eyes are bright, lips quirked into a smile. He raises an eyebrow. “Perhaps I’m doing it wrong then.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Potter doesn’t say anything else, and Severus tells himself he’s relieved. After all, this conversation is inappropriate at best. Still, he can’t remember when he last enjoyed himself this much. That he’s found some sort of...rapport with Potter now is just a bizarre and rather twisted form of irony. “You’d make a good Auror,” Severus says after a minute.

“I know,” Potter says simply. “But when this is over, I want it to be over.”

Severus understands.

He isn’t sure how it happened, but he knows he’s skirting a dangerous line. The world—narrowed to the single point of Grimmauld Place—has rearranged itself around them, reconstructing itself into something Severus doesn’t recognise. Severus has always been... aware of Potter, ever since he first appeared in the Great Hall some seven years before. Someone had to keep the brat alive, after all. Albus certainly wasn’t going to do it. But now Severus finds thoughts of Potter clouding his perspective, occupying the blank spaces in his mind, and it makes him uneasy.

“I’m tired of all the expectations,” Potter says, standing to walk to the window. “Kill Voldemort, save the world, marry the girl.”

“You will find him,” Severus says slowly. “And you will win.”

“I know. But the rest of it?”

“You are young. You have a lifetime in front of you to find the right partner. For marriage, a family if you like.”

Potter looks at him for a moment, expression unreadable. But then he says, “I like men, Snape, or didn’t you know?”

Ah. So that’s what this is about. Severus nearly laughs. Perhaps he should be more surprised.

“I assure you, Potter, you’re not the only poof in England.”

“Oh, I know that, Snape, but it doesn’t matter. No one would approve.”

“Contrary to what you might believe, I doubt anyone cares about your sexuality.” Severus knows that’s not entirely true. As much as times have progressed, as ‘tolerant’ as wizarding society proclaims itself to be, some prejudices run deep. And Potter’s right; their world wouldn’t be thrilled to find their Saviour prefers cock.

“You know that’s a lie, Snape.”

“So why tell me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Severus wakes with a start. The pain in his left arm is excruciating. He fumbles for his wand and reaches to the bedside table to turn on the light. He doesn’t have to look at the Mark to know what he’ll see. He stands, wincing as another wave of pain washes over him. He reaches out to steady himself. His hands shake as he pulls on his trousers.

When he opens the door to the hallway, Potter’s already there. He’s dressed in faded blue jeans and a hideously orange t-shirt; its Chudley Cannons logo cracked and peeling. He’s holding a scuffed pair of grey trainers.

“Fuck,” he says, when he sees Severus. “You look like shit.” Severus sees the moment he understands. Potter pales. “Your Mark?”

“Yes.” Severus holds out his arm, pushes up his sleeve to reveal the snake sliding through the ghastly skull.

“Fuck,” Potter says again. “He’s called you then?”

“No. But someone has cast the Morsmordre.”

Potter exhales sharply. “That explains what’s triggered my detection spells then.” He reaches out, brushes a finger along the inky lines on Severus’s forearm. Severus shivers at the touch, cool against the feverish warmth of his skin.

“I’ve got the coordinates,” he says after a moment, hand falling away. “I’ll send a Patronus to Robards. I’m sure as hell not dealing with this alone.”

“What the fuck happened with those memories, Snape? Because ever since I dove into that Pensieve, I’ve felt...different.” It’s half eight in the morning, and Potter hasn’t slept. He returned just after dawn. Now he’s sitting on the floor of Severus’s room, his back against the bed, long legs stretched out before him. Severus takes in Potter’s tousled dark hair, the broadness in his shoulders and swell of muscles beneath the soft fabric of his t-shirt. There’s a scrape along his cheek, some dried blood at his temple, but the injuries are only superficial.

Potter’s detection spells led them to Canonbury. They found two dead. A group of Death Eaters forcing entry into Muggle residences. With the help of Robards’s team, Potter and Weasley, Granger, Abbott and Jordan apprehended six assailants. All Marked. Jordan was hit with a nasty hex, but Poppy’s tending to him. He’ll be fine in a day or two. Otherwise there were no casualties.

“What on earth do you mean?” Severus is standing by Regulus’s old desk. It’s raining outside; the sky overcast and grey.

“I’ve been in memories before. They haven’t affected me like this.” Potter’s eyes are closed. He’s got his glasses off; they’re balanced on his knee.

Severus thinks he looks older without them. Or younger. He’s not sure.

“They haven’t *lasted* like this.”

“I don’t understand.” Severus moves to the end of the bed, looking down at Potter.

“That’s just it,” Potter says, opening his eyes. “I don’t either. But there’s something going on, and I think it started with your memories.”

“Neuromancy can leave echoes. Connections. It’s a risk every Legilimens takes. The reason subtlety is essential to effective mind magic. Every good Legilimens knows the risks of pushing your magic too far into another’s mind, the risk that you leave too much of yourself behind.”

“What does that have to do with memories?”

“The premise is the same. If the memories are...unstable, you risk residual effects.” Without thinking he raises a hand, runs a finger down his scar-ribboned neck. Poppy removed the bandages a few days before. It’s oddly sensitive, the raised, twisted slickness of newly healed skin. “I was dying,” Severus says quietly. “I’m not even sure what all I showed you. It wasn’t controlled.” He frowns, suddenly uneasy. “There shouldn’t be any compulsion though.” Severus knows a great deal about mind magic and he’s never heard of a case where Pensieve memories—regardless of circumstances—resulted in any type of coercive effect.

“No, no,” Potter says quickly. “It’s not that at all. I’m resistant to compulsion magic anyway—*Imperius*, *Compulso*, *Confundus* charms.”

Severus thinks this should startle him, but it does not.

“But I feel as though you’re in my head. I can’t stop thinking about you.” Potter pauses, looks up at Severus, “And I don’t want to stop.”

Severus doesn’t know what to say, so he says, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Potter smiles. “I don’t mind. And we’re so bloody similar, Snape. I know you don’t want to see it, but I think there could be something between us if you’d let there be.”

“I—” Part of Severus wants to ask what Potter saw—what memories spilled over into the ones he *had* to share with Potter before it was too late—but he doesn’t think he wants to know. “I’m not sure what you’re looking for,” he says after a moment, “but some things shouldn’t be found.”

“No,” Potter agrees. “But the world’s gone a bit mad these days.” He tilts his head, green eyes slightly unfocussed without his glasses. “And you and I? It’s not the craziest of things, yeah?”

Sometimes Severus thinks he’s going insane. Trapped in this house. Thinking about Potter.

The war rages on outside, and he knows he is lucky. After all, he is safe. He is no longer on the front lines, no longer at the beck and call of a madman. At least he can brew. And he spends hours in the lab Potter made for him. He helps Poppy, too. As a Potions Master he has basic medical training. And there are days when Potter’s Aurors, Potter’s soldiers, Potter’s friends come home needing more help than one Mediwitch can give.

But there are times when Severus would give anything to get away...to go beyond the brick walled confines of Grimmauld Place’s garden. War is not easy. And Severus has never cared for battle, but sometimes he thinks it would be preferable to quarantine.

It’s not healthy—not the way his thoughts are always on Potter. Severus tells himself it’s because of the memories. That and an aftereffect of their extensive history with Occlumency. But he knows there’s something more to it. Potter is in his head and in his dreams, and he’s not sure what to do about it.

Some nights, Potter leaves. Not very often—or at least Severus doesn’t think so. But there have been a few times when Severus has heard him slip from his room once everyone has turned in for the night. He has watched Potter from the crack of his open door as he moves silently down the hall, avoiding with practiced ease the floorboards that creak to disappear down the stairs. A few moments later, he feels the press of Potter’s magic as he Apparates away.

He doesn't know where he goes—or if anyone else even knows he's gone. But Severus doesn't think it's reconnaissance or any type of official operation—informal or otherwise—because Potter is so insistent on safety and procedure. He never sends anyone out without careful preparation, a plan for what to do should the mission go tits up, and *never* without the support of a team.

Severus knows Potter's got a saviour complex, knows he always prioritizes the safety of others above himself, but he's reasonably sure he's not following down a lead or tracking Death Eaters on these excursions, no matter how intensely...*Potter* such a thing would be. Still, it wouldn't do to have the Boy Wonder turn up dead in an alley one night. As powerful, as capable as Potter might be, he's always had a knack for getting into trouble. So Severus watches.

Tonight, it's half two when Potter returns. Severus hears his footsteps on the landing, hears the bathroom door open and close. He listens to the flush of the toilet, the rush of water in the sink, and then the door opens again.

Severus steps out in the hallway. Potter stops short, standing a few feet from him. He sways slightly and, even in the dim light, Severus can see that he's flushed. "You're awake." He's dressed in jeans and a close fitting dark t-shirt. Instead of his usual trainers, he's wearing a pair of brown boots; they're well worn but fashionable. Severus can smell the hint of stale beer and cigarettes.

"So that's where you've been."

He shrugs. "Why do you care?"

"We're all quarantined here, Potter. You know that. No one leaves without plan and purpose. And no one leaves alone."

"Yeah, well, nine times out of ten, I'm the one that makes those plans and determines the fucking purpose, so if I want to break my own rules every now and then?" He narrows his eyes, looks at Severus defiantly.

"How would your friends, your housemates feel if they knew you were out drinking in—Where were you?"

Potter scowls, but answers. "A club in Soho. And no one will know."

"You're taking an unnecessary risk."

"It was a *Muggle* club, Snape," Potter says. "And I had my wand."

"It's still dangerous." It's not only wizards and Unforgivables Potter needs to be worried about. The world isn't overly fond of queers. They say it doesn't matter, but it does. And Severus knows it only takes looking at the wrong person the wrong way. He doesn't want to think of Potter on the floor of a filthy loo while some homophobic arsehole slams fists and boots into his stomach, his chest, his sides.

Potter sighs and leans back against the wall. He rubs at his eyes, pushing his glasses up to his forehead. "It's just... I'm going crazy here, Snape. Sometimes I feel if I don't get away for a bit, I'll explode."

"And you think you're the only one?" Severus's voice is harsher than he intends, but Potter's being foolish and more than a little selfish.

"No, of course not. War is hard, Snape. It's really fucking hard, and I don't want to devalue anyone else's experiences because I know everyone here has been through hell. But I'm..." He stops, chews on his lip. "It's different for me."

"How so?"

"My friends—everyone here—they have each other. George and Ron, Hermione, Gin, and Luna, Neville and Hannah, Lee, Dean, Seamus, all of them. They can relax. We go days, sometimes, where nothing happens. And they can get pissed and play games and just hang about together. But me..." He closes his eyes and for a moment Severus almost feels sorry for him. Almost. "But whenever I come into the room, it's as though they suddenly think they need to be on best behaviour—like I'm their sodding keeper or something. It's as though they think I'm going to yell at them for drinking or shagging or not being fucking bent over a goddamned map every spare moment we have. They're my friends, Snape. They always will be. But they don't think of me the same way any more. And I don't really blame them. I came back from the dead. And now Kingsley and Gawain Robards are coming to me when they don't know what the fuck to do. Everyone expects something from me. And that's okay. I've come to terms with it. But I don't think anyone has really stopped to think about exactly what they're asking." He pushes off the wall again. Steps in front of Severus. He can feel the warmth of his skin, smell the alcohol on his breath. He doesn't step away. "Except you, Snape. No one else understands, but I think you might."

Severus is surprised by the rush of Potter's magic, the press of an image into Severus's mind. He sees Potter on the dance floor of a club, eyes closed, face turned upward towards the flashing blue and green lights. It glints off his glasses, sparkles around him. His skin is sheened with sweat, his body pressed against another man's as he moves to the beat of the music. Severus watches the memory unfold. He can't see the other person; his head is ducked, face pressed to the crook of Potter's neck. He knows his mouth is moving along the tendons there; Potter shivers at the slide of lips along heated skin. The man's hand is at Potter's waist, just above the curve of his arse, holding him close. And he's grinding against Potter slowly. He feels the undercurrent of arousal. It's subdued—overshadowed by the throb of the music, the buzz of alcohol in Potter's veins—but it's there.

Severus rips himself away from the memory. He's angry, but he knows he has no right to be. Potter's looking at him curiously, as though waiting to gauge his reaction.

"Why did you show me this?"

"You asked where I went."

"Did you let him touch you?" Severus's voice is steely, and he hates the jealousy there, but he can't help it. "Did he make you come?"

Potter glares and, for a moment, Severus doesn't think he's going to answer. But then he says, "No, I didn't. I thought about it. He wanted to. But nothing happened."

Severus wants to say something cutting, something cruel, but he can't find the words.

"You know why? Why I didn't let him get me off?" Potter steps towards him, mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile. "Because I couldn't stop thinking about you."

The words surprise Severus.

Potter is watching him. His eyes are so damned green. There's a shadow of stubble on the sharp angle of his jaw. Severus wants to run a finger along it. And then Potter is there, standing before him. He smells of smoke and alcohol and the faintest hint of something else. Bergamot, perhaps, Severus thinks, or patchouli. He tries not to breathe him in, and fails, hating the way he *wants* Potter.

And then Potter is leaning forward, cupping his face in his palms. Potter's lips are chapped and dry, but his mouth is soft as he opens it against Severus's. Severus does not pull away. His hands fall to Potter's waist, fingers brushing against the soft fabric of his t-shirt, and Potter runs his tongue across his lips.

He lets his mind skim gently across the surface of Potter's emotions, careful not to push too deep, but Potter only smiles, lips curving against Severus's, and then he's kissing him again. Harder this time, and Severus feels the want there, the genuine desire. It's unexpected and... arousing.

"This is what you wanted?" Severus asks against Potter's cheek, and his voice is not his voice; it's too rough, too breathless.

"I'd think that's obvious," Potter says, his mouth against Severus's jaw. Potter rocks his hips forward and Severus feels the swell of Potter's cock, hard against him.

"Shit," he says, and Potter laughs. His lips brush against the scars on Severus's neck, feather-light, and Severus shivers at the sensation. It's strangely erotic to be touched there, that reminder of his mortality, his vulnerability. Then Potter takes his hand in his, pulls it down to his crotch.

"See what you do to me?" Potter presses Severus's palm against his erection, and Severus can feel the size, the shape of him beneath the fabric of his jeans. It makes Potter gasp, shudder against him. "That's right," Potter says. "Touch me. I'll come." He pushes his hips forward again, a slow, steady press of his cock against Severus's palm, that nearly takes Severus's breath away.

His own prick is so hard it aches. Severus knows they have crossed a line. He's not sure how they got here, but he knows he should stop. There's no going back after this. But he can't think clearly with Potter's mouth on his and his hand pressed against Potter's cock.

"Stop, Potter." Severus pulls back, places a hand gently on Potter's chest. "We can't."

Potter blinks up at him, eyes dark, pupils blown. His cheeks are pinked, glasses fogged.
“Why not?”

“You’re drunk.”

“Not really. I took a sobering potion.”

“Still, it’s not right. You were my... I’m your...”

“So help me, Snape, if you say you’re my fucking professor, I’ll—”

Potter’s right. There are too many reasons why this is wrong. Why he has no bloody business kissing Harry Potter, but he is no longer his teacher; he has not been for over a year now.

“You’re young. Whatever this...attachment is will soon pass. You will realise there are far more suitable objects towards whom to direct your attention.” *And I don’t want you to wake up tomorrow and regret...*

“Stop.” Potter’s voice is low but sharp. “I’ll be eighteen in less than two weeks, Snape. Believe me. I’ve lived enough to know what I want.” Potter’s eyes fall to Severus’s crotch. He’s certain Potter can tell how hard he is. “And I think you know you want this too.”

Severus closes his eyes, exhales. “I do.”

“Then come to bed with me.”

It’s startling to Severus how much he wants that. But he forces himself to take another deep breath and say, “I can’t.”

Before Potter can object, Severus reaches out, brushes a finger against his cheek. He realises how uncharacteristic the gesture is for him, but he doesn’t stop to think about it. Instead he says, “Not now. Not tonight,” and slips past him down the hall to his room.

Potter finds him in the lab. Severus is finishing another batch of blood-replenishing potion. He’s also working on the base for a coagulant, and some more pain potion. The house seems to go through Severus’s pain draughts like water but, when he suggested Poppy have the elf pick up some paracetamol instead, she was not pleased. He has enough ingredients left to get them through the month, but after that, he’ll need to replenish his stores.

“How’s it going?”

“Fine,” Severus says, turning the heat down on his coagulant base. It will need to simmer for another three hours. He bends down to the cabinet beneath his worktop, counting out two-dozen phials. When Potter hasn’t said anything else, he turns to him. “Here, make yourself useful. Help me decant this.”

Potter stands beside him, carefully filling each slender container with jewel-coloured liquid. “Your pain potion’s the best, you know,” he says after a moment, flashing Severus a wide grin. “Never had any better.”

Severus refuses to smile; instead, he turns back to his other cauldron. He takes it off the flame and selects a silver stirring rod from the assortment on the counter. “So glad you approve.” He swirls the rod seven times in a figure eight motion, before whispering the appropriate incantation. Then he pours the potion into a large beaker, covers it with a watch glass. Poppy will decant it as she sees fit; her dosing varies by case.

Potter watches as he spells the cauldron clean, sets it back on the shelf. Then he wipes down the work surface.

“If you’re done,” Potter says, “come upstairs with me?”

They climb the stairs to the third floor. Potter opens the door to the library and Severus follows him in, closing it behind them.

Potter takes two glasses and pours a generous splash of firewhisky into each. “Here.” He hands one to Severus. Potter drains his own glass in one swallow.

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Rough day?”

“You could say that.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” Severus asks after a few minutes when Potter hasn’t said anything else. He takes a slow sip of his whisky. It burns his throat, his stomach when he swallows. Potter unsettles him, but it doesn’t appear that he wants to talk about what happened the other night, so Severus relaxes some.

Potter sets the glass down on the sideboard. He traces a finger along its crystal lip. “It’s Hogwarts.”

“Ah.” Their recent strategy sessions have centred on retaking the castle. They can do it. Everyone agrees they can, but the timing has been cause for argument.

A rather large contingent—notably Jordan, Thomas, Finnigan, George Weasley and Finch-Fletchley—have been increasingly vocal about moving on Hogwarts now. While Kingsley and Robards have remained noncommittal, Dawlish, Jacobson, and several other Aurors agree.

But Potter has been vehement that they wait. There is no rush. No one is in danger and focussing on the castle now only diverts attention and resources from where they need it most—finding Voldemort.

Minerva, Filius, and Poppy have, for the most part, kept out of the discussion. They are biased, after all.

But Minerva agrees on one thing: When they retake the castle—be it tomorrow or in a month’s time—will have no effect on start of term. What will affect whether students return and classes resume come fall is Voldemort. The war has already hit home. Minerva will not put her children at risk, will not let Hogwarts become a target once again. She will not reopen

the school while the Dark Lord is alive and free—even as the thought of keeping the castle closed to students this September makes her ill.

Severus desperately hopes it doesn't come to that. The Wizarding world needs Hogwarts. But he understands. A month ago, he would have given anything to get back to his dungeon rooms, but now he knows Potter is right.

Ron Weasley agrees with Potter as well. Severus isn't surprised. Weasley's head for strategy is as good as anyone Severus has ever encountered. If Robards doesn't take him on as head of one of his tactical divisions when this is all over, he's a fool.

Severus sits down on the sofa, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He cradles his glass between his hands. "This is an emotional issue," he says. "It can be difficult to remain objective."

Potter sighs. "I get it, Snape, I really do. Hogwarts means so much to all of us—that's the crux of it, yeah? That and the belief that taking it back will set things right again." Potter sits down beside Severus. He's toed off his trainers. The leather of the cushion creaks as he tucks his legs beneath him. His knee presses against Severus's hip, but he does not pull away. "That wound is still so raw, and I think that we're all clinging to a bit of hope—that once we retake the castle we can start to heal. That the world might go back to normal. But you know as well as I do that nothing will be right until I kill him. That's why we have to find him."

Severus nods. He wants to reach out, to place a hand on Potter's back, to feel the warmth of his skin underneath his palm, but he doesn't. He takes a sip of his drink, stares down at the pale blue and cream swirls on the rug.

"Hey," Potter says, after a few moments. He reaches over to take Severus's drink from his hands. He puts it on the coffee table and sits back again, looking at Severus. Then he takes his hand in his. "Are you all right?"

"I..." This is madness. The way Potter makes him feel, what he wants to *do* to him. "What are we doing?"

"Not nearly enough, if you ask me." Potter's mouth curves in a half smile. "You were right about the other night. I *was* a tad drunk. But it doesn't change anything. I meant everything I said."

Severus wants to drag his thumb across his lips. He wants to kiss Potter until he's breathless and shaking. "We can't."

Potter traces a line on the back of Severus's knuckles with his fingertip. "Of course we can."

"This isn't what you want."

"Don't tell me what I do or don't want." Potter laughs, but there's no humour there. "I'll likely be dead by end of summer and, even though it's taken me a while to see it, I think I've been attracted to you for longer than I'm going to admit." He tilts his head to one side, looks at Severus appraisingly. "Even when I hated you, I felt something there."

“The Occlumency...” Albus never should have required that of him. It was inappropriate at best—to practice on a student—reprehensible at worst.

“Doesn’t matter,” Potter says. “It was still there.”

Potter’s birthday arrives.

Severus tells himself it doesn’t matter. After all, one day makes no difference. Potter is the same at eighteen as he was at seventeen. Rationally, Severus knows this. He also knows that Potter has not been a child for years.

And he’s not going to touch him again anyway.

Still, his mind is treacherous.

That he acknowledges the date at all is...troubling. That he can’t silence the little voice inside his head that says *at least now he is eighteen...*

At least now it wouldn’t be a crime.

Severus will not deny that he wants Potter. And he is used to the pervasive sense of guilt, of shame that comes with wanting what he cannot have, what he should not want at all. Depravity churns like nausea in his stomach. Yet he knows that, in marking Potter’s birthday, he is seeking justification, some reason—tenuous as it may be—as to why he shouldn’t be damned for thinking about the way the man would look spread out beneath him in his bed.

That evening there is cake. Molly insists. So after the soup and sandwiches the elf prepares, they sing. Everyone is tired. They’ve been fighting for the last three days. Even now, Kingsley’s team has not returned. There was a Patronus just after sunset. Finally a lead on a location. Another Death Eater hideout, this time in Wapping.

Potter wanted to rush back out immediately.

But Kingsley assured they had everything under control. They were only going to get the tracking spells in place. They would not engage and everyone would be back before midnight. And Potter agreed. After all, while headstrong, he is not stupid. Nothing can be gained tonight that cannot wait until tomorrow. And they cannot afford to take unnecessary risks.

Severus knows it has been more than twenty-four hours since Potter has slept. He can see the exhaustion in the set of his shoulders, the bruises beneath his eyes. Still, Potter smiles when Molly sets the cake down in front of him, lights the candles with a flick of her wand. And he does not resist when Ginevra produces a party hat from Merlin knows where, sets it atop his head. Severus notices how her hands linger for a moment longer than necessary, how she trails her fingers along his shoulder before stepping away again. He knows that Potter knows what’s on offer. He knows how much the girl wants him, is not blind to her advances. And

Severus hates that just the thought of them together makes his stomach churn. Still, Potter has done nothing to encourage the girl's affections.

Severus knows this.

And Severus also knows that Potter is watching him.

He stands off to the side, teacup clutched between his hands, and refuses to think about the way Potter's gaze burns hot like a brand against his skin.

Molly cuts the cake.

Severus shakes his head when he's offered a piece. He's never cared much for sweets. Instead he watches Potter eat. Watches his mouth, his throat as he swallows. Potter sets his fork down, his lips curving in just the hint of a smile. Severus feels his cheeks heat and looks down, but not before he sees Ginevra. She is also watching Potter, but now her gaze follows his to where Severus is standing by the counter. She frowns. Severus turns to the sink, rinses his cup out.

Be careful, Potter, he thinks. And even as he does, he realises that's ridiculous. After all, there is nothing between them. Nothing is going to happen.

Severus is the first to leave the kitchen. Granger and the Lovegood girl are helping with the dishes. And Weasley has pulled out the map of the warehouse district to update his notes with Kingsley's coordinates. Ron will never be Severus's favourite person, but all prejudice aside, he must admit that he is a superb strategist and a more than capable soldier.

Severus should wash up and go to bed. It's getting late and everyone will be retiring soon. They are at war. It is necessary to sleep when you can. And tomorrow will be another long day.

He closes the door to the library.

The fire burns low in the grate, casts warm shadows on the scuffed wood floor, on the rows upon rows of books lining the walls. He walks to the sideboard, pours a splash of whisky into one of the crystal glasses there. They are lovely—as is everything in this blasted house. And Severus, once again, feels a perverse sense of satisfaction at what Walburga and Orion would no doubt think of the current state of their ancestral home. While Severus has no love lost for Sirius Black, he is pleased the man had the foresight to secure Potter as his legal heir before his death. Otherwise—he shudders to think—the place would have likely gone to Narcissa or, God forbid, Rodolfus Lestrage.

The door opens. Severus takes the last long swallow of his drink before turning. Potter is there, but he knew he would be. The door shuts behind him.

“You're here,” Potter says, and there is something in his voice that makes Severus's stomach tighten.

“And you.” Severus sets his glass down. “You're set for tomorrow?”

“Yes. The coordinates are good, and I’ll get a read on the magic tonight once Kingsley returns. We’ll be ready.”

Severus knows he’s right; still, he can’t quiet the sense of unease that curls in his belly. He doesn’t say anything else. Potter is looking at him, and Severus does not think he will ever be used to the way that makes him feel. Severus’s mouth goes dry; his skin is warm.

“You came to my party.”

“That hardly constituted a party.”

Potter shrugs. “No. But you didn’t need to be there.” Then: “Will you come to bed with me?”

Severus swallows. Swallows again.

“I know you want to, you know.” Potter cocks his head. He’s still looking at Severus. “The question is, will you?”

It would be so easy... Severus only needs to nod his head. Force his mouth to form one word. *Yes*. But he won’t do it. “No.”

“Why?” Severus hears the familiar defiance in Potter’s voice, but rather than angering him, now it only turns him on. “I’m eighteen. I want you. Besides,” he reaches out, brushes a hand against Severus’s cheek, “we’re at war. I think we deserve something good.”

Severus looks down. Potter doesn’t say anything else. He doesn’t need to. “I...” Severus doesn’t know what to say, but Potter is standing in front of him, and he reaches up, places a hand on Severus’s chest.

“At least kiss me.”

Before Severus can even manage the words to refuse, Potter’s mouth is on his.

Severus wants to pull Potter tight against him, wants to run his hand down his spine to the curve of his perfect arse. He wants to know what it would feel like to rock his hips against Potter’s until they are both hard and aching.

Instead Severus steps back, shaken by the sheer amount of *want* he has for Potter.

Potter frowns. “*Fuck*, Snape.” But then he purses his lips, looks at Severus speculatively. “If you won’t touch me, perhaps you’d like to watch?”

Potter is reaching for his zip before Severus can stop him. He *should* stop him, of course. This is a terrible idea, and it’s wrong—so bloody wrong. But instead Severus says, “Lock the door,” and Potter smiles.

“Good thinking, that.” He snaps his fingers and the bolt slides into place.

Merlin, but Severus hates what Potter can do to him. How he can turn his entire world on its side with a quirk of his lip and one sodding burst of magic.

Severus feels the edge of the bookshelf digging into his back. He should go back to his room. He should sleep. But he finds he's rooted to the spot, watching as Potter reaches into his trousers, pulls his cock from his pants.

Potter's half hard already. And, *fuck*, but his cock is gorgeous, swelling against his palm as he strokes his thumb down his shaft to the soft fold of foreskin and back up again.

"Oh..." He has never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

Potter's laugh is soft. "Yeah?"

Potter pushes his trousers, his pants down past his hips. His fingers slide around his cock. Slowly, up and down. He's barely touching himself, but with each slide of his hand, he hardens further. And Severus wants *more*. He wants Potter to gasp and shake and come undone before him.

Severus has to bite back a groan. His own cock is hard now, and it's all he can do to stop from touching himself. Or, worse, from stepping forward, from taking Potter's prick in his own hand.

Potter leans back against the arm of the sofa. He groans as his thumb slides over the slick curve of cockhead.

Severus can't believe he's doing this, standing here watching Potter stroke himself off in the library at Grimmauld Place. He should be horrified, but he can't make himself look away.

Potter is flushed. The pink of his cheeks spreads down his throat to the neckline of his t-shirt, and Severus can't help but imagine what he'd look like—what he'd *feel* like—spread out naked in his bed.

"All right there?" Potter asks, voice rough. His tongue darts out across his bottom lip.

Severus can only nod, though he knows he's already lost control—if he had any to begin with.

"Good." Potter plays with his foreskin, tugging it over his glans before wrapping his hand around his shaft again. His breaths are coming more quickly now; Severus watches the heave of his chest as he tugs at his prick. His knees are bent, legs spread as far as his trousers will allow.

Severus wonders how many people have seen Potter like this, open and exposed and so bloody aroused. Potter pumps his fist faster, thrusting his hips forward with each rough stroke, and Severus knows he's close. Potter's stomach is tense, thighs shaking, but his eyes are on Severus as he cries out, fingers clenching around his cock as comes, spunk splattering onto the floor at his feet.

And it's all Severus can do not to press his palm to his own erection, to rub his hand against his prick until he's coming into his trousers. He will never be able to get this image out of his head. He takes a deep breath.

“Wow,” Potter says after a moment, shoulders slumping as he sits back against the arm of the sofa. “That was...” He shakes his head, laughing softly, “wow.” He waves a hand, wincing as the cleaning charm rasps over his skin. He tucks his softening prick back into his pants and does up his flies. Potter pushes up off the arm of the sofa and then he’s standing in front of Severus. He’s so close, Severus can smell the spunk, the hint of sweat.

“Want me to help you with that?” Potter’s breath is warm against his cheek as he leans forward. His fingertips brush lightly against the placket of his trousers. Severus shivers.

“No,” he manages, though he thinks it costs him something. “Not tonight.”

“If you’re sure.”

Severus nods, reaching down to adjust himself. Potter follows the movement with his eyes, lips quirked in a small smile. “Suit yourself then.” He looks away then, as though listening to something. “Kingsley’s back. I should get down there. Hear what they have to report.”

“All right.”

When he gets to the door, he stops, hand on the knob, and turns back to Severus. “Thanks for that, Snape.” He smiles again, a slow curve of pink lips. Severus sees a flash of bright teeth. “Quite the end to my birthday.” And with that, he leaves the room, door shutting behind him with a click. Severus listens to his footsteps disappear down the stairs. Then he walks to the sideboard and pours himself another glass of whisky.

They leave at daybreak the following morning. Potter leading a team of nine, Dawlish seven. With the tracking spells in place, Severus knows the coordinates are good. And Potter will be able to get a read on the magic, to assess the danger, before they are in harm’s way.

It will be all right. And every Death Eater they bring in gets them one step closer to ending things. Still, he can’t help the feeling of unease that settles in his stomach like lead. And Severus knows how foolishly attached to Potter he has become.

They have spent hours compiling lists of known Death Eaters and their whereabouts. If a physical body was not recovered after the battle at Hogwarts or the person is not currently in Auror custody, they’re presumed alive and a threat. Luckily their list is growing smaller by the day.

Unfortunately, though, raids have increasingly been turning up Death Eaters Severus doesn’t know. The Dark Lord is Marking new followers.

But Severus knows the Dark Lord’s tendencies. While new followers are dangerous in their desire to prove themselves, Severus knows that once the remainder of his inner circle, as well as those other older, trusted supporters are eliminated, those new recruits will no longer prove much of a threat.

Severus has just set his cauldron to boil and prepared the workspace to begin a new batch of Dreamless Sleep when he hears the shouts.

“Poppy! *Fuck*, Poppy, where are you? We need help. *Now!*”

Severus cuts the flame with a flick of his wand and hurries from his lab through the infirmary. He arrives in the kitchen just behind Poppy. Potter is there, with Arthur and Kingsley. They’re holding Dean Thomas between them. He’s in bad shape. His eyes are closed, face bruised and bloodied. Blood is caked at his temple, matted in his dark hair. His clothes are torn, blackened and singed, his skin mottled and discoloured beneath.

“A blasting curse,” Potter says, as Poppy rushes over. She’s got her wand out and she’s checking Thomas’s vitals. “It was rigged to go off when we took the building. Caught Dean full in the chest. He was thrown back. Hit his head against the wall.”

“His pulse is erratic,” Poppy says. “And he’s lost too much blood. Likely internal bleeding. Help me get him to a bed.”

Arthur and Kingsley carry Thomas into Poppy’s hospital room and lay him on the bed nearest the door. Poppy strips off his shirt. Arthur gasps when he sees his chest. It’s blistered and burned, the skin oozing and red, outlined by a ring of charred tissue.

“Broken ribs,” Poppy is saying, as she runs her wand over his injuries. “I don’t think they’ve punctured his lung, but I can’t be sure yet. Severus, let’s start him on blood replenishers while I find the bleeding, get it stopped. Then we’ll take care of the burns. I’ll need some dittany salve and a sedative. Pain potion too.”

He heads to the supply cabinet while Poppy shoos everyone else from the room.

They work on Thomas for nearly an hour. The trauma of the blast caused bleeding into his abdomen, but Poppy is able to pinpoint the source and staunch the blood loss before too much damage is done. He has three broken ribs. Thomas will need at least two more doses of Skele-Gro before morning, but his lungs are okay. A concussion, but no brain bleeding or swelling. The burns are another matter. Second and third degree over much of his chest and torso. Even with Severus’s salves and Poppy’s magic, he will need time to heal. And he was already in shock. Still, he will be all right.

Poppy will keep Thomas sedated for the next twenty-four hours, but they were lucky.

Severus finds Potter seated at the kitchen table, a cup of tea cradled between his palms. His shirt is bloodied—Thomas’s most likely. A nasty bruise blooms his cheek. He looks up when Severus sits beside him. “We got Rodolphus LeStrange.”

“That’s good. Rodolphus is dangerous. And while the Dark Lord always preferred Bella to her husband, this will still come as a blow.” He touches Potter’s cheek; the bruise fades.

“Thank you,” Potter says, pressing a finger to the now yellowing skin.

“There’s a chance he could know something of Voldemort’s whereabouts,” Severus says.

“Do you think he’ll talk?”

“Perhaps. I’ve no doubt Kingsley’s interrogators can be...persuasive.”

Potter nods. “Is Dean okay?”

“He will be.”

“Good.” Potter takes a sip of tea. Severus notices his hands shake as he sets the mug down again. “I should have known,” he says softly. “I should have felt that fucking spell before it went off, but we’d already secured the building. Dawlish and his boys were taking them in. If I’d only...”

“No.” Severus places a hand on his arm. “It was not your fault. And you cannot take personal responsibility for every injury that occurs out there. Besides, Thomas will be fine. Thanks, in part, to your stasis spell. Poppy said it kept blood loss from reaching a critical level and delayed the onset of shock.”

Before Potter can protest, Severus stands. “Come. You should shower. Put on some clean clothes.”

“Yeah,” Potter rubs a hand across the back of his neck, scrunching his nose in distaste. “Should do.” When he stands, he grimaces, hand coming to press against his shoulder. When he lowers it again, his palm is pinked with blood.

Severus frowns. “You are injured.”

“No. Not really. Just caught the edge of a cutting hex off Ron’s *Protego*. It’s no big deal.”

Severus comes beside Potter, pulls back the neckline of his t-shirt to see the skin below. “You should have Poppy take a look.”

“No.” Potter steps away to set his mug in the sink. “She’s got enough on her plate right now. Besides, I stopped the bleeding.”

Judging from the amount of blood that has seeped through the fabric of his shirt, Severus isn’t so sure of that. “At least let me put something on it.”

“Okay. I’ve got some dittany in the bathroom.”

Once upstairs, Severus shuts the door to the small washroom and watches as Potter pulls off his shirt. He winces as he eases his arm through the sleeve. The gash extends from his collarbone across his shoulder; the surrounding skin is smeared with dried blood.

The wound’s been hastily healed. Severus can see where the skin had begun to knit back together, but the magic isn’t holding. The cut was deep, and it’s already starting to ooze again. He places his palm over the gash, covers Potter’s healing magic with his own. His skin pulses faintly and Potter shivers.

“Thanks.”

Severus runs a flannel under warm water and gently cleans Potter's shoulder, his chest where the blood has dried. Then he finds the jar of dittany in the cupboard and smears the salve along the length of the cut. It's absorbed almost instantly, and Severus watches as wound closes, jagged and raw edges smoothing into shiny, pink scar tissue.

He puts the jar of dittany back on the shelf. "You'll be sore for a few days."

Potter rolls his shoulder, wincing a bit at the pain. "I'll be fine."

Severus looks at Potter then. At the broad expanse of his shoulders, the muscles of his chest, the flat planes of his belly. The man's skin is breathtaking. Golden pale, marked by old curse scars, and absolutely stunning. Severus wants to map it with his hands, trace it with his tongue. He wants to roll Potter's brown nipples between his thumb and forefinger until they pebble under his touch. He looks away; his throat's gone dry. He feels lacking and muted in comparison.

"Like what you see?" There's a lilt to Potter's voice that makes Severus's breath hitch.

"Yes." It would be absurd to deny it, after all.

"Perhaps you should stay." When Severus looks up again, Potter is smiling. "In case I get lightheaded or something."

Severus swallows and nods.

Potter turns the water on and faces Severus again.

Severus watches his hands as he undoes his belt, pulls open his flies. Potter favours his right arm as he pushes his jeans down over the sharp jut of his hipbones, but then he's standing there in only grey y-fronts. Potter's eyes meet Severus's and he licks his lip, hooks his fingers in the waistband of his pants. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," Severus manages, voice raw.

"Good." And then the y-fronts are sliding down and Potter's in front of him, naked and beautiful. It's all Severus can do to stand there, to not move forward and press his hands against the flatness of Harry's stomach, to feel the soft warmth of his skin.

And Severus finds himself wondering once again who else has seen Potter like this—so open and comfortable in his body in a way that Severus could never be.

The water's hot now, the glass of the door fogged, the small room filling with steam. Potter takes his glasses off, sets them atop his towel.

Severus leans back against the sink as Potter steps into the narrow shower stall, turns his face under the spray. Severus allows himself to enjoy the slickness of Potter's perfect skin as water sheets down over him to puddle at his feet. Potter ducks his head under the stream, runs his fingers through his hair, wetting it down. He soaps his head a bit awkwardly, using his left arm. Severus watches the play of muscle under Potter's skin as he lathers his chest, his

stomach. He wonders what that skin would feel like under his own palms—hot from the shower, slick with soap.

Severus knows it's wrong. He should feel dirty and ashamed, standing here watching Potter like this. But the man looks like a fucking painting—his golden skin gorgeous against the stark white of the shower tiles. And he can't tear his eyes away.

Severus's prick is swelling in his trousers. He takes a deep breath, folds his arms across his chest to keep himself from reaching down, from pressing a hand between his legs. Potter's cock is half-hard, stiffened just enough to stand out from his thigh.

He turns under the water, letting the spray hit his back. Then he closes his eyes and tilts his face up, as the water washes the shampoo from his hair. He runs a soapy hand over his chest, thumbnail scraping across a nipple, and then his hand drifts lower. Severus holds his breath as Potter's fingers brush over the dark hair at the base of his cock. His other hand cups his bollocks, and he turns back to the spray, letting the water spill down his stomach and between his legs.

"I'd wank for you, Snape," he says, fingers trailing down his cock. They slip along the shaft, barely touching it. "But my shoulder hurts like hell." He laughs, softly, stroking himself once more. He's fully hard now, lovely prick curving up towards his belly. "I think I need one of your pain potions."

"Another time, then," Severus says, embarrassed by how ragged his voice sounds.

"Yeah?" Potter turns to look at him through the shower door. "I'll hold you to that."

Severus knows he has always been attracted to the forbidden, has often wanted what he should not have. But this is beyond madness. He must be out of his bloody mind.

Severus feels claustrophobic. His skin itches, and he wants desperately to *do* something, to get away from the confines of Regulus Black's childhood room, or, when he does venture into the house proper, from the press of too many people filling the endlessly accommodating spaces of Grimmauld Place.

"I could be of use to you," he tells Potter one evening. "While our opinions may differ on whether I am fully healed—" he glares at Potter and the man has the grace to look down—"my magic, my particular abilities and knowledge are..."

"I know," Potter says looking at him again. "Invaluable."

They're in the library. Potter's in the window seat, sitting cross-legged. It is quiet here and they are alone. Others use the room, surely—Kingsley when he is here, Minerva and Poppy, Granger and the Lovegood chit—but unlike the parlour on the ground floor, the drawing room on the first, and the common living space that appeared off the ever expanding row of guest beds on the second floor—the third and fourth floors, with their library and Sirius and

Regulus's old rooms, are largely off limits. It is Potter's house, after all, and that affords him some privacy.

Severus wonders at Potter's decision to put him in Reg's room—the only other on the floor. But, as loath he is to admit, it makes some sense. Potter has always been a protective fucking bastard, and he would have wanted Severus where he could keep an eye on him while he recovered, both for Severus's safety and his own.

Severus knows there are those, even in their own ranks, who will always distrust him, who do not feel they should be harbouring former Death Eaters, who no doubt believe they'd be better off had Severus died that night of the battle.

"You should let me fight," Severus says, when Potter has said nothing, and he hates that it sounds like pleading. He could talk to Kingsley, to Arthur, but he knows, despite Kingsley's title and rank, despite the age and experience other wizards have on Potter, that he is in control.

"Perhaps," Potter says then, voice soft, green eyes fixed on Severus. "But you are safe here. Everyone thinks you're dead—*He* thinks you're dead. Let me finish this, and then..."

And then...

Now there's the rub, isn't it?

"And then what?" Severus was not supposed to survive the Battle of Hogwarts. He is not supposed to survive the war. The thought of...after is both unimaginable and terrifying. For a moment, he wonders if there would be a place for him and Potter in a post-war world. The thought is so absurd he can't help but laugh.

"What?" Potter asks, unfolding his legs. He leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees.

"I was only wondering if you'd let me out then. You can't keep me locked up in here forever."

Severus hears voices when he reaches the landing and he stands for a moment, debating whether to turn around and return to his room. It's half ten in the evening and, though he'd never admit it, he hoped to find Potter alone in the library.

"I'm sorry, Gin," Severus hears Potter say, and his voice is too loud, too sharp. "I can't."

"What do you mean, Harry?" Ginevra is angry; Severus can hear the shrillness in her tone. "Because I really don't understand."

"I'm just not..."

Severus steps closer to the door.

“For fuck’s sake, Gin, we’re at war. And if you haven’t noticed, everyone thinks I’m bloody in charge here. I haven’t exactly got time for a relationship, now, have I?”

A relationship...

Something cold settles in Severus’s stomach at the words, and he wants to walk away but he can’t seem to make his feet move.

But Ginevra laughs, a harsh sound even muffled by the door. “A relationship? I don’t need a relationship. Not now. I just want to spend some time with you. Our friends are all off shagging every night. We’ve been here for months, and I can’t even remember the last time we had a proper snog.”

“Ginny, I...”

“Come on, Harry.” Ginevra’s voice softens. “I know you’re stressed. I think it’s ridiculous what Kingsley’s asking of you, what he expects you to do. He’s got an entire department of Aurors at his disposal, for Circe’s sake, but you shouldn’t shut me out. I can help.” She’s pleading now, and Severus wonders if she’s touching him. If her hand is on his arm, his cheek. The thought makes him feel sick, though he knows that’s ridiculous. “Please, Harry...” she says after a moment. She sounds fragile, as though she could break. Severus is not sure he’s ever heard Ginevra Weasley like that before. “I know we’re at war, and everyone needs you to be the hero. But you don’t have to be on all the time, and I’m going crazy. You’re up here alone every night and we could—”

“No, Gin,” he cuts her off. His voice is gentle but firm. “I’m sorry. Now’s just not a good time, I—”

“Then tell me when it *will* be a good time,” Ginevra shouts. “Because we could be good together, and I think you know that. But I’m getting tired of waiting.”

“That’s not my fault. You know I never promised you anything.”

They’re quiet after that, and Severus thinks he hears crying. He’s just about to turn away when the door opens. Ginevra steps out, nearly bumping into him in the hallway. “Oh. Sorry, Professor,” she says, brushing past. Her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy.

Severus lets his mind brush against hers, and he feels the anger, the confusion, the roil of emotion. Yet her magic is still cool and tightly controlled—where Potter’s so often flares hot—and she looks beautiful. He cannot imagine Potter not wanting her, and the thought sends an unwanted coil of jealousy twisting in his gut. He should go to his room, get some rest, but he can’t bring himself to do so.

Instead he goes into the library, finds Potter on the floor with his back against the couch. He’s got his knees drawn up, hugging them to his chest. He looks up when Severus closes the door. He sighs and Severus can hear the exhaustion there. The resignation.

“How much did you hear, then?”

“Enough.”

He nods, stretching one leg out in front of him. He leans his head back against the worn leather of the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. Severus does not look at the long, pale column of his throat. “I’m tired of everyone expecting us to get together.” He laughs, a harsh sound in the empty room. “Everyone’s coupled up and me and Gin, well...” He shakes his head.

Potter’s right. Close quarters and the endless stresses of war make it natural to look for comfort, for an outlet in someone else’s arms or bed. And Potter and the girl...

“You have been with her before?” Severus is not sure why he asks, yet he needs to know.

“Yeah, I guess. Sixth year. And then a few times my would-be seventh. But never anything serious.”

“And have you considered that it would likely save you both some anguish if you told her...” Severus trails off, though, because he realises he’s not exactly sure *what* he believes Potter should tell the girl.

Potter laughs. “What? That I’m not interested in shagging her because I’m too damned busy trying to get my ex-Potions Master to fuck me? Right. That’d go over bloody well, wouldn’t it?”

Severus feels his skin warm. Despite everything, Potter’s crass words turn him on. And while, rationally, he knows Potter must want...something from him, it’s hard to believe that’s actually true. “No,” he manages, “best not. I only meant your...preferences—”

“Oh.” Potter’s shoulders slump. “Tell her I’m a fucking poof, you mean.” He shrugs. “That might make it better, but I don’t think I’m ready for the world to know just yet. I’m not ashamed, you know,” he adds, as though sensing Severus’s discomfort.

But Severus thinks he understands. He has always been a private person and, while he’s never hidden his sexuality, he hasn’t made it publicly known either.

“As I said, everyone expects something from me, yeah? Play the hero, save the world, marry the girl.” Potter picks at a frayed hole in the knee of his jeans. “Sometimes I feel as though my entire life is just for the benefit of others. But this...” he reaches out, places his hand on top of Severus’s. “This I think I’d like to keep for myself.”

Severus knows Potter is in there, knows it as surely as he knows Potter knows he is standing here outside the door. He has always been able to feel the man’s magic. He could sense it in the castle and on the battlefield those times they fought against (beside) each other. But now Severus feels Potter’s magic even more strongly still. A product, surely, of the close quarters of Grimmauld Place and no doubt amplified by the magic of this place, by his growing connection to the man. Severus is powerful—he can parse magical signatures as easily as he can sort ingredients in his lab. And he knows he has only become more aware of Potter in the last days and weeks. He has taken to reaching out and feeling for him when they’re not

together. That he knows Potter does the same does little to assuage the shame Severus feels for allowing himself to become so...attached to Potter.

Still, Potter's magic is intoxicating. And someone needs to be looking out for him. Severus tells himself it's this—not the ever-present thread of want—that keeps his thoughts on Potter, when he's working in his makeshift lab, helping Poppy in her equally makeshift infirmary, or tucked away in the library researching spells and waiting *waiting* for Potter to return home safely.

The water shuts off and a few moments later Severus hears, "It's okay, you know. You can come in."

Severus does.

Potter is standing at the sink, towel knotted about his waist. The small room is warm. Steam from Potter's shower fogs the mirror, hangs heavy in the air.

Severus stands, back against the door, and, for a moment, he just looks. Potter's lovely skin is scrubbed pink, his face flushed. Droplets of water cling to his hair, his chest. Severus wants to drag his tongue along his collarbone, down the line of his sternum. He wants to run his hands across slick skin.

"You could have joined me," Potter says, and the look he gives Severus takes his breath away.

"I...I know." He does know. But that doesn't make *this* any less surreal. He looks at Potter's lips, at the line of his jaw, his neck. He looks at Potter's broad chest, the flat planes of his stomach. His eyes fall to the towel at Potter's waist. "Have you—are you—?"

"No. Not yet." There is something suggestive in Potter's eyes that makes Severus's stomach clench.

Severus watches Potter's hands as he tugs at the tucked in corner of the towel, lets it fall to the floor. He's hard, perfect cock swollen, pointing upwards toward his stomach.

Severus exhales sharply.

Potter laughs. "Is this what you want? To watch me?" He curls his hand around his prick, stroking lightly. Once. Twice. He's already leaking. He slides his thumb over the slick curve of cockhead, pushing the foreskin back just enough to press against the slit. Severus wants desperately to touch him.

"Yes."

"You like it when I come."

Severus's own prick is aching. He shifts, wants to press a hand between his thighs, but he does not. Still, he knows Potter knows how hard he is. "Yes."

"Shit, Snape. I never knew how much this would turn me on..."

Severus watches Potter's hand, watches his cock slide through the loop of his thumb and forefinger. Potter's breath is shallow now. The pink that stains his cheeks has spread down his throat, his chest.

"This is not something you've..." Severus's mouth is dry. He can hardly form the words.

"Something I've done before?" Potter laughs. "No, I can't say I've ever jerked off in front of anyone—aside from you, of course."

"Jesus."

"I know, right?" His voice is low, rough. He's already close and that Severus *knows* what Harry Potter sounds like when he's about to come is absurd. It's as though he's in a dream, some alternate reality where he gets to see Potter touch himself.

They shouldn't be doing this. He wants Potter too much and it's wrong. But he can't stop watching, and he can't help but thrill at the dangerous line they're walking. They've pushed so far past acceptability that Severus must be out of his bloody mind. But there's something forbidden and erotic and so damned appealing about being here with Potter like this—about knowing anyone could be standing outside the door.

Potter's breath catches. His eyes are closed, cock hard against his palm as he moves his hand faster. He's gasping now, and he spreads his feet wider, bends his knees.

"Good," Severus hears himself say. "That's it."

"Christ, Snape..."

"Yes, come on..." Severus's voice is raw, wrecked. His own skin feels tight. He can feel his pulse pounding in his ears.

And then Potter is coming, stomach muscles clenching as spunk streaks through his fingers and onto the floor. He laughs softly, shaking his head. "Fuck." His eyes are bright, unfocussed without his glasses.

He's absolutely gorgeous, and Severus feels strung out, wire taut. He wants to touch Potter, to suck his fingers into his mouth, taste him on his tongue. He closes his eyes, forces himself to take a steadying breath.

Potter takes the towel, wipes his hand, his stomach—not the floor, Severus's mind supplies—but then Potter is crowding too close. Severus's back is against the door. There is nowhere to go (as if he would). He can smell the clean scent of Potter's soap, his skin, but also the smell of sex, of come. The room is cramped, the air humid from the shower, and suddenly Severus feels too warm.

"I'm going to kiss you now," Potter says, and Severus can only nod.

Potter's lips are soft as they open against his. Severus's hands are at Potter's waist; he smooths a palm up the line of his spine. Potter's skin is warm, still damp from the shower. Severus has seen him naked before, but he has never touched him like this, never felt his skin

beneath his fingertips. Potter is still kissing him. Severus's thumb circles his hipbone, and Potter groans, moves impossibly closer, slotting himself perfectly in the space between Severus's thighs. Severus is excruciatingly hard, and he knows Potter can feel him, the way they're pressed together, but Potter just came and he's halfway there again already, so Severus thinks it's all right.

Potter pulls his mouth from Severus's, ducks his head to lick a line down his throat. Severus shivers as his tongue runs over the ropy scars there. "I want to touch you," Potter says against the curve of his jaw. He pushes his hips against Severus—against his prick—and Severus must bite the inside of his cheek, close his eyes against the sensation. Keep himself from coming all over himself at the slightest bit of pressure.

"Yes," he says, surprised he's found the word. "Yes."

"Oh thank God," Potter says, rocking against him again. "Because there's only so many times I can wank in front of you without getting anything in return before I start to think you don't want me after all."

"I want you," Severus says, and his voice is not his, but surely Potter knows this—knows how desperately he *wants*. He's fully hard, trousers stretched tightly across his cock, and when Potter's palm presses against him, Severus nearly comes undone. Then Potter is kissing him again, mouth open and wet and gasping as he tugs Severus's trousers open and shoves his hand inside. His fingertips brush the base of Severus's cock, and then his hand is curling around him. Severus can't remember ever being this hard. "*Fuck*," he groans.

Potter laughs, breath warm against Severus's jaw. "I'd like that, you know. You to fuck me."

Severus can't object, can't say what he should say—that he will not, *cannot* do that (could he?)—because Potter is stroking him, hand moving in quick, sure tugs. Severus thrusts into Potter's fist and bites back a moan. Potter is staring down between them, watching his hand on Severus's cock.

"That's so fucking hot, Snape," he says. "I've wanted to do this for so long. See what you felt like, what you look like when you come."

His orgasm takes him by surprise. Severus just has to look down at Potter's hand on his prick, and he comes so hard that all he can do is cry out, his body shaking, his come on Potter's fingers, his stomach and his thigh.

"Wow," Potter says, "that was..." He breathes out, shakes his head. "That was brilliant." He steps back, hand falling to his own prick. He's hard again. Severus wants to push him back against the sink and suck him off. He wants to take him down the hall to his room, and put his mouth on him, see what his gorgeous skin would feel like beneath his hands.

But then there's a knock on the door startling him from his thoughts.

Potter tenses and Severus realises he's holding his breath.

"Harry, mate? You in there? We're about to start."

Potter's whispered spell is just in time, securing the door as Weasley tries the handle.

"Yeah," Potter says. "Just taking a slash. I'll be down in a minute."

"Okay."

Severus stands perfectly still, listens to Weasley's steps as he retreats down the hall. Potter laughs nervously, runs a hand through damp hair. "Er, that was close."

"Yes." Because Potter is naked and they smell of sex and sweat and come, and there is no way to explain that away. And, although Potter is now eighteen, no one in their right mind would ever approve of...whatever this is they're doing.

Potter turns on the tap, rinses Severus's spunk from his hand.

Severus tucks his prick back in his pants, does up his trousers, while Potter dresses. He watches as he pulls on his jeans, tugs a grey t-shirt over his head.

"What?" Potter asks, moving close to Severus again. He can feel the heat from the man's skin.

"I like to watch you."

"Yeah, I think I've figured that out by now." He puts his glasses on, looks at Severus. "You know I like it, right? That you like to watch me."

Potter leans in, presses a kiss to Severus's cheek. "I'll see you later, okay?"

Severus nods and Potter steps past him, door closing behind him as he leaves the room.

Severus tells himself he's taken to coming down for meals more frequently to hear the day's news, the updates on the war, any plans for coming attacks. Sometimes he has useful insight to share, and it's necessary to touch base with Poppy. But even so, he knows this is not entirely accurate. Rather, he knows he wants to see Potter.

"No," Severus says, "he hasn't called his followers to him since the night of the battle."

"You are sure of this?" Kingsley scratches at his chin, fingernails rasping over the stubble there.

Severus meets Potter's eyes for a brief moment. Potter's standing off to one side, arms folded across his chest. His white button-down is rumpled, sleeves rolled to the elbow. On the surface, he appears uninterested, disengaged. But Severus knows this is not accurate, knows Potter does this often. He listens, he observes, and he gathers as much information as he can.

For so long, Severus believed Potter reckless—believed him one to rush right in, to act first and think later. But he knows now this isn't true—or, at least, he amends, thinking of the way

Potter's hand looked tugging at his cock—not reckless in all things. And, untoward as it is, Severus will not criticise Potter for *that* particular lapse in judgment.

“Yes,” he says.

“There isn't a chance he has called them and you didn't know?”

Severus shakes his head. He has been over this with Potter. And Potter understands the magic involved, understands that—as long as he has the Mark on his arm—he will feel the Dark Lord's summons. Kingsley, however? Severus takes a deep breath. Forces himself to remain patient, calm. “No.”

“Well, surely this is good,” Arthur offers. “We've scared the bastard. He's gone into hiding. We have time to find him. To end things on our terms.”

“I do not believe that's a wise assumption,” Severus says. “Rest assured, the Dark Lord is planning something. We would be fools to think otherwise.”

“See that?” Dawlish says. “He knows something. We're the fools for trusting—”

“Stop,” Potter says, voice firm, commanding. “That's enough, John. We are where we are today because Severus has done more for our cause than you will likely ever do. And I'd appreciate it if you didn't question one of our team again.”

Dawlish looks down. Severus nearly laughs at how Potter manages make a senior Auror appear sheepish. “Yes, of course, Harry. I'm sorry.”

“Right,” Potter says, “so here are the facts. Voldemort is out there. He might be weakened, but he is still stronger than any wizard any of us have ever faced. And he's planning something. So our priority now is finding him. We've got our detection spells in place, and our Trace is top notch. But it hasn't been enough. So if any of you have any ideas. Any thoughts on spellwork we should look into or new avenues to explore, you let me or Kingsley know straight away, all right?”

There's a general murmur of affirmation from the room. Ron Weasley claps his hands once and says, “That's right.”

And Potter nods. “Good. Let's have a drink. I think we all deserve one.”

That directive is met by a more enthusiastic round of cheers. Weasley opens the fridge, begins passing around beers.

Severus looks at Potter once more, finds the man already watching him. Even though he is the Legilimens here—knows Potter could not read his thoughts if his life depended on it—he fears everything is written plainly on his face. *Fuck* but he's falling for Harry bloody Potter.

Potter uncrosses his arms and leans back against the doorjamb. He sticks his hands in his pockets, the fabric of his trousers pulling taut across his groin. Severus can see the outline of his prick beneath the faded khaki. Potter rocks his hips forward ever so slightly and smiles.

Severus's breath catches. The man knows damned well the movement accentuates the swell of his cock.

Fuck, this is going to end badly. Spectacularly so. Severus knows this, but he can't bring himself to care. He wants Potter more than he's ever wanted anything. It's terrifying and humiliating and so bloody wrong. But he has spent his entire life doing what others demanded of him. Now that he's found something he wants, he finds he's not eager to give it up, despite how utterly insane it might be.

"I need more ingredients," Severus tells Potter the following evening.

"Okay, I'll make it happen."

Severus knows it's not that easy. The shops in Diagon are closed and Owl order is an impossibility—too much risk; their location could be compromised. But he knows Potter will figure something out.

Dinner is finished. They'd eaten in shifts, as they do most nights when everyone is home. Potter and Severus, Granger and Ron Weasley, along with Jordan, Finnigan, Abbott, Lovegood, and Finch-Fletchley had taken last meal. The dishes are in the sink, and Weasley, Jordan, and Finnigan are bent over Weasley's maps again. Hogsmeade this time, and the forest and surrounding grounds.

Though Potter has managed to convince them that it's best to delay any tactical assault against Hogwarts for the time being, talks of storming the castle still dominate many an evening conversation.

Finnigan is laughing. "How is it the passage from the village to the shack is still open? I mean, Voldie knows about that place."

Weasley smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. Severus knows he and Granger were there during the battle, knows they were with Potter when Nagini nearly ripped his throat out. He closes his eyes against the memory, but can't suppress the shudder that goes through him.

"Hey," Potter says gently, moving closer to his side. "You all right?" They're standing at the worktop. No one is looking at them. The boys are absorbed in the map and Granger and Abbott stepped outside to check on Longbottom and the garden. Potter's set the dishes to washing in the sink and Severus watches the suds foam over the copper pots and cutlery. His fingers clench at his mug; he sets it down when he realises his hands are shaking.

"Hey," he says again, placing a palm on the small of Severus's back. The warm point of pressure is soothing and Severus wants to lean into the touch, wants to pull Potter into his arms, wants to drag him upstairs to his bed—secrets and decorum be damned—but instead he steps away, folds his arms across his chest.

"I'm fine," he says.

He knows Potter isn't convinced, but he doesn't try to press the issue, doesn't touch him again. Potter only strokes a finger along his stubbled jaw and looks at Severus—eyes bright behind his glasses and too bloody assessing. “Okay. It'll be good, though,” he says after a moment, “to use the shack when we do move on the castle. The passage from Hogsmeade can serve as a staging point accessible by means other than Apparition.”

Severus nods. He's right, of course. The amount of magic required to Apparate assault teams to strategic points beyond the castle's wards will surely trigger alarms. And while Kingsley authorises Portkeys, there are still departments in the Ministry that are compromised, and you never know whose desk such an order will cross—even if it's coming direct from the Acting Minister. Potter could do the spellwork—hell, he or even Granger could likely manage as well. But Portkeys are complex magic and, even with Minerva and Filius's guidance, it would be difficult to negotiate the surrounding terrain—not to mention the wards—with precision enough to get an army in unnoticed. Severus knows they cannot risk being ambushed. So the less magic the better. And a tunnel that can shield a ground approach from the village is a valuable asset.

He's just glad he won't be part of the assault team staging in that bloody shack.

“So ingredients...” Potter says, and Severus is glad for a change of subject.

“I need things we can't grow, to start. Dragonfly wings, horned viper scales, salamander too, newt's eye, some adder venom if we can find it.” He runs through his list. “A few dry ingredients, as well, that we cannot harvest until first frost.” He's dangerously low on the thickening agent he uses for Poppy's blood coagulants and he exhausted his valerian store with the last batch of Dreamless Sleep.

Potter nods. “All right.”

“Some mushrooms, too. Death caps and scarlet cups. Collared earthstars. I usually collect them myself.”

“I know,” Potter says. “But we're not in the Highlands, and you can't access the Forbidden Forest right now.”

“No,” Severus says, not surprised that Potter understands. “Among other places.”

Severus walks to the window and Potter follows. Outside, the full moon shines bright, its silver light illuminating Grimmauld Place's gardens. Longbottom has done a fine job, Severus admits. Pomona was right. The boy is a natural at herbology.

Longbottom and Abbott are on their knees between the rows of immaculately manicured herbs. Granger sits off to the side on a low stone bench, watching them work. “The flax weed needs to be harvested tonight, and hellebore. The asphodel root, too, if the plant's mature enough.”

Potter merely nods. He's standing too close; Severus can feel Potter's warmth against his side, can smell the almond scent of his soap. He should step away. Someone could notice, but no one is paying them any attention.

“I’ll go out later,” Severus says. “Help with the collection.”

“Good. What about Cornwall or Dorset?” Potter says then. “Surrey or Kent? There are wizarding towns in the West Country, the south, that haven’t been affected by the war. Surely there are potions shops.”

“Yes,” Severus says. “In Falmouth and Tutshill. Wimbourne, too.”

“Falmouth, then. If you give me a list, I’ll get everything you need.”

“No, I’ll go with you.”

Potter frowns.

“Many of these ingredients are particularly sensitive. It’s best if I select them personally.”

Potter chews on his lip and Severus worries he’s going to refuse. But then he nods, one quick bob of his head. “Okay, we’ll go tomorrow.”

The Apparition point is near the water, but then everything is in Falmouth. The air smells of salt and fish, but it’s crisp and clean. Nothing like the stink of the putrid river that runs through Cokeworth, or even the oily brininess of the Thames. Severus hears the soft roar of the surf beneath the clamour of the docks. A gull cries out, its shadow passing across the footpath as it soars overhead.

Potter puts his hands in his pockets and heads towards the town. It should be safe here. There has been no fighting, no reports of Death Eater sightings or activity, but Severus knows Potter has his fingers curled around his wand. He can feel the press of his magic as he searches for the faintest hint of anything dark. Severus lets his mind skim gently over the crowd of people here. He has to be careful. Legilimency, while subtle, doesn’t always go unnoticed.

“Steady there,” Potter says. He does not look at him, does not give anything away. After all, the last thing they want is to draw attention to themselves. “Getting anything?” Potter’s words are soft, spoken under his breath.

“No.”

“Keep looking.”

Tourists in khaki trousers and boat shoes, in brightly coloured dresses and oversized sunglasses mill about, watching as boats make port. They pass a docker reclining against a shipping crate. His shirt’s off, bronzed muscles glistening in the sun. He takes a long pull from the bottle of water in his hand and winks at Potter, a lazy smile tugging at his lips. Potter holds the man’s gaze for a moment before looking away.

Severus reaches out a tendril of his magic, feels the interest, the arousal there before Potter pushes him away, forces his defences back in place. He’s scanning the area too. Not with Legilimency—Potter’s mind magic has always been deplorable. But with subtle detection

spells. Wandless, wordless, and some of the best fucking magic Severus has ever felt. Merlin, if Albus could see his protégé now.

Celtic Lore is on the edge of town, sandwiched between a café and a kitschy maritime clothing boutique. It caters to Muggles and wizards alike. On its surface, it looks like a modest homeopathic apothecary and chemist shop, but Severus knows the proprietor has been specialising in potions and rare ingredients since the shop opened three decades before.

As a seaside town, Falmouth enjoys access to many ingredients hard to come by in the Highlands. It is also home to several gardens. Notably Glendurgan and Trebah. Both are spectacular, as they cascade down the valley towards the Helford River, and known for housing an array of tropical plants. Celtic Lore benefits greatly from a relationship with local herbologists.

Potter stands guard outside while Severus goes in. He's fairly sure nothing will happen—no one knows they are here and they've detected no unusual magic. But Potter is a soldier and they are at war. Severus brushes a hand against the back of Potter's as he leaves him propped against the storefront.

The shop is quiet. A girl—witch, Severus notes—sits behind the till, a magazine spread out on the counter in front of her. She barely looks up as Severus enters, walks between the aisles towards the warded area at the back of the store. Muggles will only see a door marked *'Employees Only.'* Severus, however, passes through a tattered purple curtain to the rows of ingredients in the room beyond.

"Did you get everything you need?" Potter asks when he emerges some fifteen minutes later.

He nods. "Yes."

"Good." Potter pushes off the wall he's been leaning against and looks around briefly. "Drink?"

The Silver Stars is adjacent to the moor. They take two seats at the end of the bar. Severus feels the strong push of Potter's magic and then the man relaxes beside him. "It's fine," Potter says. "We're fine. There's nothing here."

Severus skims the room quickly but feels nothing.

"Told you so," Potter says, mouth curving into an easy smile. He stretches his arms above his head. His t-shirt rides up, revealing a stretch of smooth skin. Severus sees the dark trail of hair disappearing under the waistband of his trousers. He looks away again.

"It's okay," Potter says, voice low and measured. "Here it's okay. Here you can look all you want."

Severus swallows thickly.

The barkeep arrives, saving him from responding. Potter orders a beer; he asks for whisky. When their drinks arrive, Potter slides a few bills across the marred surface of the bar top. He

looks at Severus, raising his bottle up to him before taking a long swallow. He sets it down again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

The pub is quiet at this hour. An older man sits at the opposite end of the bar, nursing a pint, and a couple is sat at one of the small round tables, a plate of chips and an open bottle of wine between them.

“This is nice,” Potter says, foot bouncing on the rung of his stool, “to just be...out and not fighting.”

Severus understands. “If you recall, I haven’t even gotten that much of a...respite. A good skirmish would feel positively delightful after all the time I’ve spent locked away in that bloody house.”

Potter laughs. “I hear you.” He chews on his lip. “But it will all be over soon, yeah? And things can go back to normal.”

Normal.

Severus isn’t sure he even knows what that means anymore.

“Have you ever thought about just running away?” Potter’s staring straight ahead at the rows of liquor lining the shelves behind the bar. He turns his beer bottle around between his palms. “Because I have. God, Snape, I can’t tell you how many nights I’ve fantasised about Apparating the hell away from here and never looking back.”

“So that’s what the great Harry Potter dreams about while lying in his bed at night.”

Potter laughs softly. “Among other things.” He shifts, pressing his knee against Severus’s thigh.

Severus breathes out unsteadily.

“But tell me I’m not alone in this. That I’m not the only one who thinks about getting away.”

“No, Potter. I can’t imagine why you’d think someone like me would *ever* want to simply disappear.”

Potter laughs again, leaning over to bump his shoulder against Severus’s. “Of course not.” He takes a swig of his beer. His lip is wet when he sets the bottle down again. Severus wants to drag his thumb across it, to press his mouth to his and kiss him until he’s shaking. *Fuck*, what Potter can do to him. “We could do it, you know,” Potter says then, words barely a whisper. “You and I...we could leave. Apparate to the Continent. Find some little Muggle town and just...”

The barkeep comes back over and Potter stops talking. Severus gets the sense the man’s been watching them. Potter doesn’t seem to care; he smiles and shakes his head when the man asks if they’d like another round. Severus lets his magic brush against his thoughts just for a moment. He feels the curiosity, the interest there. The man finds Potter attractive, but of course he bloody well does. He wonders what Potter’s doing here with Severus, thinks they

couldn't possibly be together, but then again... Severus pulls back from his mind, frowning into his glass. He wants to wrap a possessive arm around Potter's waist, but he doesn't. He's not sure if he can. Not sure it's his place.

"And what do you think would happen if we were to disappear?"

Potter slides his thumb down the side of his beer bottle, nail scraping against the label.

"Hermione would have a team out looking for us by nightfall. But her tracking spells aren't as good as mine, and you're a fucking spy, so I think we'd make it a few weeks before they found us." He grins, drains his beer. "You've got to admit, it would be nice—to be together where no one expects anything from us. Even if it's only for a little while."

"Together... You'd like that?" He speaks slowly, carefully. The words sound absurd.

"I'd like a lot of things, Snape. But yeah, if we were to go to the trouble, I think there's quite a few things we could do together to pass the time." Potter's thigh is pressed against his. Severus suddenly feels quite warm.

He takes another sip of his drink, sets his glass down.

Potter turns his head as a young couple comes up to the bar. The woman's breasts are on full display as she leans against the counter, elbows propped on the bar top. Potter tilts his head, admiring the view before turning back to Severus. "I wanked last night," he says. He licks his lips, eyes fixed on Severus. "Thinking of you."

Severus's stomach clenches; his skin feels too tight. He can see Potter standing before him, fingers curled around that pretty cock of his. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath. He knows the barkeep is watching them again, and he wonders how far gone he looks, if the man can tell how desperately he wants Potter.

Potter's fingers brush along the inside of his thigh. "Does that turn you on?"

"You know it does."

"I'm going to the loo," Potter says, leaning too close. His breath is warm against Severus's ear. "In case you'd like to do something about that before we head back."

Severus does not turn to watch him go. Instead, he forces himself to take the last swallow of his drink. He sucks a piece of ice into his mouth, crunches it between his back teeth.

This is madness. Severus knows it's wrong. Potter is barely eighteen, and Severus is old enough to be his father. He is jagged and broken and already in well over his head. He's drowning and, if he's not careful, he'll drag Potter right down with him. Yet he can't seem to think straight when Potter is involved. Severus pushes his glass away and stands, taking his parcel from Celtic Lore, as he weaves his way through the maze of tables towards the corridor leading to the restrooms.

Potter's leaning against the wall in the narrow hallway outside the loo. It smells of piss and sweat and stale beer, overlaid with the cloying scent of disinfectant. A single light flickers

overhead, casting long shadows on Potter's skin. "Hey." The look in his eye makes Severus's breath catch.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Severus says, even as he crowds close to Potter.

"No." But Potter reaches up to cup Severus's face between his palms. He tilts his head back, pulls Severus towards him, hand slipping around to the back of Severus's skull, guiding his mouth to his neck. Severus sucks at the tendon there, before licking along the line of Potter's jaw; he feels the rasp of stubble, the flutter of Potter's pulse beneath his lips. Potter gasps as Severus's teeth scrape against his skin.

There's a hole at the neckline of Potter's shirt; Severus reaches up to slip his fingers down Potter's throat. Potter's skin is warm beneath his touch, as he traces the indentation below his collarbone. He presses his mouth to the soft skin there, sucking until Potter is squirming against him. It will leave a mark; he'll have to spell the bruises away. Though, knowing Potter, he likely won't give a damn if anyone can see. The thought makes Severus's stomach twist with want.

Potter rocks forward, and Severus can feel the hard swell of his cock against him. "Oh..." he breathes out, as Potter rubs against him once more. "*Fuck.*"

Potter's laugh is soft. "I know." He lifts his head, kissing him.

Severus's hand slips into Potter's hair, fingers tangling in his dark curls. Potter's mouth opens against his; his tongue sweeps along Severus's bottom lip. He pulls back slightly between breaths before leaning in to kiss him again. It's astounding how easy this is. How perfectly they fit together. How readily his body responds to Potter's touch, to the soft sounds Potter makes.

Severus shifts closer, catching Potter's hands in his. He pulls them above his head, pinning Potter's wrists against the wall.

"Fuck, Snape," Potter arches against him. "You have no idea what you do to me." He thrusts his hips forward, and the briefest bit of friction is enough to make Severus groan. He presses his body against Potter's, letting him rub against him as he pushes his back against the wall. "I'll let you tie me up sometime," Potter says, voice rough, breathless. "If you want."

Severus's own prick throbs at the thought. He catches Potter's mouth with his again roughly.

"Like that, do you?" Potter says, breath warm against Severus's lips.

Severus's other hand finds Potter's hip. He holds him in place as he rocks against him, shifting so his cock pushes against Potter's, a slow, steady press of his prick.

Potter exhales, shuddering. "That's...*shit*, just don't stop."

Severus laughs, biting along Potter's neck. He moves gently, pressing Potter back into the wall. With each measured drag of his hips, Potter's breath quickens.

"Is this what you want? To feel my cock against yours?"

Potter doesn't answer. He pulls his arms from Severus's grasp and arches his back. His hands grip Severus's arms, holding him close, as his hips push and push. And then Potter is gasping and shuddering and clinging to Severus.

"*Fuck.*" Potter slumps against him.

Severus looks down at him. "Did you just?"

Potter's breathing hard. "Yeah."

Severus is aching hard now. His hand slips over the front of Potter's trousers, fingers trailing over the wetness seeping through the soft fabric.

"You love that, don't you," Potter says. "That you made me come all over myself." He shakes his head. "*Shit*, I haven't done that since Hogwarts. Fifth year, maybe sixth."

Severus exhales shakily. He hopes Potter doesn't notice. But Potter reaches down and cups his erection with his hand, flexing his fingers, and Severus groans.

"Come on." Potter pushes off the wall. Takes Severus's hand in his and leads him to the men's toilet.

The fluorescent light of the room is a stark contrast to the dim, yellowed light of the hall. Potter's skin is flushed, his temples damp with sweat. Severus looks down at the wet spot darkening the front of his jeans. "Knew you liked it," Potter says with a smile. He waves his hand and the stain disappears. He winces, reaching down to adjust himself.

"We should be getting back," Severus says. His cock is hard, straining against his zip, but this has already gone too far.

"Yes," Potter says. "But this isn't going to take long." He opens the door to the last stall and drags Severus inside, turning to slide the latch and then warding the door with a snap of his fingers. The cubicle is narrow; there's barely enough room for both of them to stand together. Severus shifts, his shoulder blades pressed against the dividing wall.

He can't remember the last time he felt like this, so strung out from wanting. Potter leans close and kisses him, mouth warm and wet against his lips. Then he presses his hand against the swell of Severus's prick, stroking his thumb down his shaft, sliding Severus's trousers with each movement of his hand. "Do you want me to come in my trousers, too?"

"No," Potter says, "I'd rather you come in my mouth."

The words alone are nearly enough to send Severus over the edge. He should refuse. There are myriad reasons why he shouldn't let Harry Potter suck him off in the loo of some Muggle pub in Falmouth. But Severus finds he doesn't care. Not with his cock aching and Potter looking at him like that.

And then Potter's kissing him again as he pushes Severus's against the wall. He tugs at Severus's belt, his flies and pushes his hand inside his trousers, past the waistband of his pants. Potter lets a finger trail along the base of Severus's cock before he pulls it out, curling

his hand around him. "I love what you feel like, Snape," he says, mouth ghosting over the scars on Severus's neck, "when you're so hard for me. Been wanting to know what you'd taste like."

"*Fuck*," Severus's voice seems to echo in the quiet room.

"Good?" Potter's teeth nip at Severus's jaw. He rolls his palm over the wet head of his cock. He's already leaking, and Severus hisses when Potter presses his thumb against the slit. "God, you're so close already," he says, pulling gently at Severus's foreskin, before sliding his fingers down his shaft.

Then Potter is on his knees, looking up at Severus. He licks his lips, taking his glasses off and slipping them into his pocket. He's ridiculously gorgeous like this. Green eyes unfocussed, pink lips parted slightly. He breathes out, warm air gusting over the head of Severus's cock, making him shiver. And then Potter's tongue is swirling around the tip, dipping into the slit, as his lips press against his foreskin. Severus's hands find his shoulders, as Potter takes him into his mouth, sucking all the way down until Severus's cock hits the back of his throat. Potter's tongue presses to the underside of Severus's prick, lips sliding slickly as he pulls back again.

"God, Potter," Severus says, "you should see yourself. The way you look with your pretty mouth on my cock."

Potter sits back on his heels, Severus's cock sliding out with a pop. His lips are wet with spit as he smiles, fingers curling loosely as his hand slips down the length of Severus's shaft, then up again. It's exquisite and it's not nearly enough.

"Come on," he says, voice tight. "You said you wanted to get me off. Do it."

Potter sucks him in again, mouth following his hand down the length of his cock. Severus's rocks his hips forward; he wants to thrust into Potter's mouth, but Potter's other hand is at his hip, holding him still. He bobs his head, faster now, and Severus watches his throat work as he sucks harder.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" Severus asks, both jealous and aroused at the thought of Potter on his knees before some other man. But Potter only *hmm*s around his prick, pulling back again to lick around the curve of his cockhead. His hand speeds up, quick, firm tugs that are enough to drive Severus mad. His legs feel weak, stomach muscles tense.

"Potter, if you don't..."

But Potter swallows him down again, lips hard against his prick, and Severus is crying out, coming into Potter's perfect mouth. Spunk spills from the corners of his lips as he sucks. Severus slumps back against the wall, strung out and spent. "Shit," he says, as Potter sits back, fingers trailing down Severus's softening cock once more. There's come on his cheek, a smear of white that makes him look positively debauched. It's nearly enough to make Severus's prick twitch again. "*Shit*," he says again, and Potter laughs.

“Yeah.” Potter stands, leaning in to kiss Severus, sliding his tongue into his mouth so Severus can taste himself on him before he steps back again.

Potter’s hard again, the swell of his erection tenting his trousers. But he only reaches down to shift himself before taking Severus’s hand in his. “Come on,” he says, “we should probably be getting back.”

“This isn’t about my mother, is it?”

Severus looks up from the page on tracing spells he’s re-reading for the half-dozenth time. He’s got it practically memorised by now. “I’m sorry?”

“This.” Potter gestures vaguely between them. “Whatever *this* is. It’s not just because you loved my mum, right? Because, while I’ll admit that what we have is a bit fucked up—no offense—”

Severus raises an eyebrow and Potter shrugs.

“You know what I mean. But if this were because of some residual feelings you have for my mum? Well, that *would* be fucked.”

“Potter,” Severus says, closing the text and setting it aside. “That is, perhaps, the most disturbing thing I have ever heard. And,” he adds, “I’ve heard my share of truly disturbing things.”

Potter laughs, holding up his hands in apology. “Point taken.”

“Good. Now please assure me you’ll never suggest such a thing ever again.”

“All right.” He’s quiet for a minute, just watching Severus. And Severus, once again, feels out of his depth, as though he’s been set adrift in an ill-made boat he can’t stop from taking on water.

“They’ll hate you for it, you know,” Severus says. “Your friends, the Ministry, *The Prophet*.” The words hurt to say, sharp thorns lodging deep in his skin, but he knows it’s true. “They won’t tolerate their Saviour with someone like me.”

“My friends will get over it,” Potter says. “And, frankly, I don’t give a fuck about what the rest the world thinks.” He chews at his thumbnail: a habit, Severus has noticed, when he’s frustrated or stressed. “I’m not the sodding poster-boy they want me to be, Snape.”

Severus lets himself smile. “No, you’re not. But while I might prefer it that way, they won’t make it easy for you.”

“I don’t care.” Potter takes Severus’s hand in his, turns it over to trace the lines on his palm.

“And after it ends?” Severus speaks slowly, carefully. “You can’t keep me hidden away here forever. There will be trials. The Ministry will not overlook the things I’ve done.”

“We both know there’s more than enough evidence proving your innocence.” Potter’s words are fierce. “And if I win this fucking war for them, I’ll be damned sure if I let the bloody Wizengamot do anything to you.”

Severus can’t help but believe him. He relaxes a bit, leaning back against the sofa. “All right.”

“We’re running out of time, Snape. I feel it.”

Potter’s right. It’s been too long.

“He’s planning something. I don’t know what it is, but if we don’t find him soon…” Potter turns back towards the bookcase, staring at the shelves, though Severus knows he’s not really seeing the texts.

“With your spells in place, we know he’s not making another Horcrux. We have that, at least.” Severus stands, walks to the bookshelf beside Potter. “Perhaps he’s still feeling the residual effects of the loss of those parts of his soul. You know how much power Horcrux magic requires. It could be that he is just not strong enough yet, that he is biding his time until he’s fully recovered.”

Though Severus isn’t convinced that’s the case, it *is* possible. And that he has not been routinely summoning his Death Eaters to his side is encouraging.

“I know,” Potter says. “That, or we’re missing something—or he’s found another way.” Potter paces back and forth from the sofa to the window and back again. Severus is used to his energy now, his constant need to move.

“Fuck!” Potter says after a moment. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Severus’s lip twitches. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a dirty mouth?”

Potter’s skin pinks a bit at that and, for a moment, Severus thinks he might apologise. After all, he was once the man’s professor, and such language would be inappropriate in another setting. But instead Potter just laughs, a deep sound that rumbles along Severus’s spine. He quirks an eyebrow. “Maybe once or twice.”

And is Severus imagining it or is there some implication there? Severus hates that it makes him think about the types of things Potter might say in bed, and he hates himself for being jealous of whomever’s gotten to hear those things before. He closes his eyes, forces the idea away. After all, it is so bloody far beyond the pale that it turns his stomach even as it arouses him.

“What are you thinking, Snape?” And Potter is there before him, hands resting on Severus’s hips, pulling him closer. Severus glances to the open door, but it is late, and no one else should be up here tonight. “Because I think,” Potter continues, leaning in so his lips brush against Severus’s ear, “you like my dirty mouth.”

“It’s nearly midnight,” Severus manages, throat suddenly dry. He steps back. “We should go to bed. We’re not going to solve anything tonight.”

“No,” Potter agrees. He looks at Severus. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“Potter...”

“Just sleep, if that’s what you want, but I’m tired of being alone.”

Severus swallows. They have already gone too far; Severus has taken too much. “We shouldn’t. Someone will find out. It’s not a good idea.”

“Likely not, but I’m tired of caring.”

They clean their teeth standing side by side in the small bathroom. It’s oddly intimate, Severus thinks, sharing the sink as Potter swishes, spits. Then Severus is watching as he pulls his shirt over his head; it leaves his hair standing on end.

Severus drags his thumb across the scar on Potter’s shoulder. Potter shivers under his touch. “It’s healed well.”

“Yes.”

He traces another scar. A thick, raised ridge on his opposite arm.

“The basilisk,” Potter says. “Second year.” And *Christ*, but that’s yet another story Severus needs to hear some day.

A silver streak arcs around his side. “And this one?”

“Another cutting hex. Dolohov, I think. Tottenham Court Road.”

“These?” Severus presses his mouth to the cluster of puckered scars on Potter’s chest.

“Crucio,” he breathes out. “Bellatrix.”

“And this one?” Severus says softly, pressing his hand to Potter’s sternum, though, of course he already knows.

“Avada Kedavra.”

Potter’s heart pounds beneath his palm.

They’re standing too close; Severus can feel the warmth of Potter’s skin, the thrum of his magic. And then Potter kisses him, mouth moving slowly against his. Severus’s hand is at his waist, thumb stroking back and forth along his hipbone.

Potter’s already hard, his cock pushing against the soft cotton of his joggers. He slips his hand inside the waistband to curl his fingers around it, stroking gently. Severus watches his fist move as he tugs himself, his knuckles, his prick shifting beneath the loose, grey fabric.

“What would you like, Snape?” Potter asks, and the breathlessness in his voice makes Severus ache. “Do you want me to wank for you again? Though maybe,” he adds, hand still moving beneath his joggers, “this time you’ll let me come on you.”

Good God. “Yes.” Somehow his mouth forms the word.

“Yeah?” There’s a dark patch spreading on the front of Potter’s joggers where his cock is pressed against them. Severus wants to put his mouth on it, to suck him through the wet fabric. He swallows.

“Come on,” Potter says, leading the way down the hallway to Severus’s bedroom.

Once inside, Potter closes the door behind them and walks Severus towards the bed. He sits down, back against the pillows as Potter straddles him, knees pressed to his thighs. Potter leans forward, mouthing at the space between Severus’s jaw and neck. Gooseflesh rises on his arms, as Potter’s tongue sweeps across the scar at his throat. And then Potter’s hands are slipping beneath Severus’s shirt, pushing it up his chest. Potter’s palms smooth over his stomach, fingers brushing against the waistband of his trousers. Severus’s cock is straining against his flies, the buttons pulling, and when Potter slides his thumb down the length of it, Severus groans.

“You’re teasing me,” he says.

“Maybe.”

Then Potter is leaning in again, kissing him as he tugs Severus’s trousers open and pushes his hand inside. Potter’s fingers curl around his cock as he pulls it out. Severus hisses as cool air hits sensitive skin, and Potter leans back, looking down at Severus.

Severus feels awkward and on display, with his shirt ruched up under his armpits and his trousers gaping, cock jutting forward and so bloody hard. He doesn’t want to touch himself yet; he’s afraid he’ll come if he does, and he wants to watch Potter first.

“Gorgeous,” Potter says, voice so low Severus isn’t sure he heard correctly. Potter’s own cock is tenting his joggers, pulling them away from his stomach. He tugs the waistband down over his prick, letting it bob free.

Severus will never tire of the sight of Potter’s cock. Ruddy and thick and framed by a thatch of dark curls.

Potter slips his fingers up and down his shaft, his gaze fixed on Severus’s face, as he tugs his foreskin forward. Then he starts to stroke himself, up and down, hand moving slowly, joggers scrunched beneath his bollocks. He rubs his palm over the slick head, and he gasps.

“That’s it,” Severus says. He lets his finger trail across his chest, scraping over a nipple. Potter watches him, lip caught between his teeth, as he runs his thumb along the vein on the underside of his cock, pausing to roll his bollocks in his hand. Then he starts stroking his prick again, hand moving faster now in quick, sure tugs. He rocks his hips forward, cock sliding through his fist with every thrust.

Severus has never seen anything more beautiful. His own cock throbs as he watches Potter above him, his pale gold skin damp with sweat, brown nipples tight and hard, and his prick sliding through his clenched fist. Slickness wells from the tip, and Severus wants to taste it, wants to pull Potter towards him and suck his gorgeous cock into his mouth.

Potter breathes out sharply, as he throws his head back. His cheeks are flushed, breath ragged. "Shit, Snape," he says. "I'm close."

"Yes," Severus says, pressing the palm of his hand to his own erection before pulling it away again. "Come for me."

The flush has spread down to Potter's chest, and he's gasping now, soft noises coming with each stroke of his hand. He looks incredible like this, his fist pumping hard and fast, his other hand cupping his bollocks. And then Potter's crying out, fingers tightening around his shaft as he comes, spunk spurting onto Severus's stomach, his prick in thick, white strands.

It's all Severus can do not to come right then.

Potter exhales, his chest heaving. And then he leans down over Severus, licking at the come that's splattered over his belly before pressing his lips to the head of Severus's cock.

"Oh..." Severus groans, fingers threading through his dark hair, as Potter drags his tongue down the length of his erection, then up again to swirl around the head. He watches as Potter takes him all the way into his mouth, head bobbing, lips stretched wide around his prick. He pulls back, the head of Severus's cock pressed to the inside of his cheek, before Potter lets it slip from his mouth.

Then Potter is sliding down the bed, settling between Severus's thighs. He takes Severus's cock in his hand, holding it tightly as he sucks him into his mouth, throat working as his head moves up and down.

"I'll come," Severus says. His voice is not his. It's too high, too rough.

"Good," Potter says around his cock. "That's the idea."

Severus's stomach muscles are clenched, his hands fisting the sheets. He doesn't deserve this, doesn't deserve Harry Potter's mouth around his prick, and yet...

"*Fuck...*" His body shakes with his orgasm, Potter swallowing around him. He smiles as he sits up, wiping a finger across his lips. He comes back up beside Severus, pressing a kiss to his shoulder, his temple. Severus catches his face in his hands, pulls Potter's mouth to his, groaning as he tastes himself on Potter's lips, his tongue.

Potter is asleep in minutes. He's shucked off his joggers and lies curled naked by Severus's side. Severus watches the rise and fall of his chest, listens to the steady sound of his breathing.

He knows this isn't healthy, knows it's Potter's distraction—the way he copes with the overwhelming stresses and responsibility each day brings. Everyone asks so much of him.

He's only eighteen; he'd barely be out of Hogwarts if he'd had the luxury of finishing properly in the first place. Yet they expect him to be the Saviour once again.

Severus knows this won't last. Knows that Saviours of the world don't belong with people like him. But if they can be happy for a little while—tucked away in this house, biding their time, waiting for the war to end—then Severus is going to take everything he can get.

Days and then a week goes by. Potter does not go back to sleeping in his own room. Most nights they just sleep, Potter at Severus's side. Potter sleeps like a jellyfish, limbs spread wide. Severus is surprised at how easily he has slipped into this routine. How quickly he has become comfortable sleeping with Potter's warm weight beside him, Potter's arm thrown across his chest, his leg pressed against his. When you are asleep you are vulnerable, yet he does not feel that way with Potter. Severus has taken very few lovers over the years. But even so, he can count on one hand the times he allowed someone to stay the night, the times he slept in another's bed. More often than not, his sexual encounters have been quick fumbleings in pub toilets or the occasional one-off in a motel room where Severus can slip out nearly as soon as he's got his trousers done up again.

Once again, Potter has turned everything Severus thought he knew on its head.

But Potter doesn't sleep well. Severus understands. It's the curse of a soldier, always plagued by nightmares. There are nights when Severus wakes up with Potter's mouth on his prick, sucking him slowly to hardness. Or nights he wakes to Potter gently, steadily rocking against him, cock hard and pressed to Severus's side. And when Potter realises Severus is awake, he reaches a hand across Severus's stomach to curl warm fingers around his prick. They move together, Potter grinding against him, Severus thrusting into Potter's fist until they're both breathless and coming over the sheets.

Severus used to go from sleeping to wide-awake in a fraction of a second. He would be pulled to alertness instantly, the moment his detection spells went off. After all, he was Headmaster; he had to protect his students, and with the Dark Lord lurking in his subconscious and the Carrows roaming the hallways, he wasn't afforded the luxury of restful sleep.

Tonight, though, Severus rolls over, wakefulness tugging at his mind slowly. He senses Potter beside him, warm and languid, but awake, and it pulls Severus's eyes open. He blinks, turning to his side to see Potter above him, the man's pale skin illuminated in the grey light of the moon.

"Hey," Potter says with a lazy smile, looking down at him. He's propped on one elbow, cheek resting on the palm of his hand. The sheets are down around his waist, and Severus can see his erection tenting them.

"You cannot sleep?" Severus asks.

"Apparently not," Potter says, rolling his hips once, a subtle thrust under the blankets.

“I take it you’d like help with that,” he says, shifting towards him, hand sliding down to take his prick in his hand. He loves the feel of Potter’s cock, hard and velvety smooth against his palm. He twists his hand, drags his thumb over the slick curve of Potter’s cockhead. Potter moans and arches into him.

“Yeah, but I think you should fuck me.”

Severus stills, fingers still wrapped around Potter’s prick. “Oh?”

They’ve been moving towards this for a while now. And while Severus knows he should still refuse, should not give in to this final temptation, he cannot. He set himself on this inevitable course weeks ago, really. And now that he knows what it feels like to come against Potter, he’s not going to give it up—not as long as Potter will have him.

“Yes,” Potter says, mouth against Severus’s throat. “I’ve been thinking it for days. And tomorrow I want to be able to sit at our strategy session while Kingsley and Dawlish blather on and on and think about your cock in my arse.”

Severus shivers. He’s hard now; Potter’s words have gone straight to his prick.

Potter chuckles. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you—knowing I was feeling you again, every time I move.”

“Yes.” There’s no use denying it; Potter would know it was a lie.

“Say you’ll fuck me.” Potter’s voice is muffled, face against Severus’s neck, but he’s breathing hard. Severus can feel the rise and fall of his chest, the warmth of his breath on his skin.

“Okay.” Severus tightens his hand around Potter’s cock, strokes him up and down, smearing slickness along his length,

“No,” Potter gasps, pushing his hips forward. “Not until you’re in me.”

“Patience,” he says, hand moving faster. “I can always make you come again.”

“Shit,” Potter says, and then he’s rolling his hips, thrusting into Severus’s grasp. “Do it then. Get me off.”

Potter comes with a quiet gasp, body tensed beside him, fingernails biting into Severus’s shoulders.

He lies there beside Severus, body limp, breaths ragged. “Fuck, what you do to me, Snape...” he says after a moment, shaking his head. He drags his fingers through the spunk that’s splattered on his belly, that’s dripping down his softening prick. Then he bends his knees, feet planted on the bed, and cants his hips, sliding his come-slick finger down his crease.

Severus’s breath catches. It feels as though someone’s cast a warming charm in the room.

“So,” Potter says, lifting his hips, pressing a fingertip against his hole. “Are you going to fuck me now?”

Severus finds the small jar of lube in the drawer at his bedside. It had been in his private stores that Potter collected from Hogwarts; he’d taken it from the storage bin before it made its way into Poppy’s supplies. His hands shake as he unscrews the lid, but Potter lets his legs fall open, guides Severus’s hand between them.

“Hold on a sec,” he says, as Severus draws a line of slick between his arse cheeks, over the pucker of his hole. Potter whispers a quick preparation spell, shivering at the magic. “That’s better,” he says, lifting his hips, pushing against Severus’s fingers.

“Yeah?”

Potter shrugs. “I’ve done this a few times before. Now get me ready.”

Severus nods. He’s surmised as much from things Potter has said, his easy confidence when they’re in bed together. He slips one finger inside, crooking his knuckle, feeling the warmth of Potter’s body around him. “Fuck, you’re tight, you know.” Severus’s cock throbs. He wants to flip Potter over and pound him into the mattress. It’s all he can do to go slow, to work one finger inside of him and then two, sliding them in and out carefully as he stretches him. Potter winces when Severus adds a third finger, but Severus stills, and Potter takes a deep breath, shifts his hips and relaxes around the intrusion. For a moment, Severus thinks he might come from just this, watching his fingers slide in and out of Potter’s arse. He strokes his thumb across the soft skin between Potter’s bollocks and hole. Potter shivers.

“Okay,” he says, “I’m ready.”

“How do you want to do this?”

Potter takes a pillow, positions it under his hips, tilting his arse up in the air. “This is good.”

Severus’s breath catches, and he nods, pushing up onto his knees. He dips his fingers back in the lube and slicks his own prick. Potter’s eyes follow the movement.

“Fuck, you look good like that, Snape,” he says. “So hard for me.”

The mattress dips beneath them as he positions himself between Potter’s legs. “You are sure?” he asks, leaning over, elbows on either side of Potter’s chest. He presses a line of kisses down Potter’s throat, and Potter tilts his head back, groans as Severus sucks at his collarbone.

“Yeah.” His voice is barely a rough whisper.

Severus reaches down between them, lining his prick up with Potter’s entrance. He drags the head of his cock over the slick hole, and Potter shivers, lifting his hips, pushing against him. “Steady,” Severus says. “Almost there.” He holds Potter’s hip with his other hand and begins to press into him. Potter breathes out, spreads his legs wider, as Severus’s prick slides in bit by bit.

He's so tight. Severus has to bite the inside of his cheek, close his eyes against the sensation. It takes everything he has to go slow. To not slam into him in one sure thrust. Instead he holds himself still, lets Potter rock his hips up. The slow stretch of Potter's body around his cock is excruciating. But then he's fully seated, hips resting against Potter's perfect arse, Potter's breaths ragged beneath him.

"All right?" he asks, and Potter laughs.

"So help me Snape, if you don't fucking move, I'm going to..." He breaks off with a groan as Severus pulls out—leaving only the head of his cock inside—and thrusts in again in one smooth movement.

It's better than he could have imagined.

Potter swears, then hooks a heel around Severus's thigh, forces him to move his hips harder, faster. "Yeah," Potter says, voice raw, breathless. "Yeah, just like that."

They move together, Potter rocking his hips in time with each of Severus's thrusts. Potter's cock is caught between them, swollen and fully hard again, pressed against Severus's stomach.

Potter's fingers clutch at Severus's shoulders, nails digging into his skin, and Severus looks down at him. Potter's eyes are dilated, pupils blown, and his dark hair mussed against the white of the pillow, his lovely skin flushed and sheened with sweat. He's gorgeous, and Severus knows he could never get enough of this feeling. Of thrusting into Potter, his hole clenching around his prick.

"Is it good, then?" Severus asks, each word a rasp as he pumps into Potter again and again. "My cock in your perfect arse? Is this what you've been wanting?"

Potter arches up beneath him. His hands are now up over his head, palms braced against the headboard as he lifts his hips into Severus's thrusts. "*God yes*, you bastard. I've wanted you to fuck me for weeks. Knew it would be like this..." The words are cut off with a moan. "Oh..." Potter exhales, words warm and soft. "Yeah. Right there."

The bed is shaking beneath them, thumping against the wall; Severus is glad they're on the fourth floor, isolated from the rest of the house. He's close, waves of delicious sensation rolling over his body, and it's almost too much. "Fuck, but you're gorgeous, aren't you?" Severus says. It's all he can do to keep from coming. To forestall the maddening rush of pleasure that's barrelling towards him. He leans over, hair swinging forward, catching on his damp cheeks.

"Harder," Potter cries, voice loud in the small room.

"*Fuck*." Severus can't take his eyes off Potter, can't stop the roll of his hips, the press of his cock inside his arse. "I can't..."

"Don't stop," Potter says. "In me. I want you to come in me."

That's all it takes. He cries out as he comes, body taut and shuddering as his spunk fills Potter's arse. Severus can't remember ever feeling like this before—he's not sure he could ever feel this good again.

He collapses against Potter, breathing heavily, heart pounding wildly in his chest. He presses a kiss to Potter's shoulder, to the cluster of scars on his chest.

Potter strokes a hand through his hair, trails it down his spine, and shifts beneath him, stretching his legs out, lifting his hips up beneath him. Severus feels the still-hard length of Potter's prick drag against his stomach.

Somehow he manages to slide down the bed between Potter's thighs.

Potter curses loudly as Severus slides two fingers into his arse. His hole is stretched and loose, sticky and wet with his come. When Severus takes Potter's cock in his mouth, sucking him in deeply, it only takes a moment before Potter is shaking, fingers twisting in Severus's hair so hard it hurts.

"*Holy fuck*, Snape, I'm—" and Potter is coming, spunk warm and bitter as it coats his tongue. He swallows around him, sucking until Potter hisses, and pushes him away. Severus lets his softening cock slip from his mouth.

Afterward, they lie together, sweat cooling on their skin. Severus's heart, his breathing has slowed again, but he still feels strung out, shaking, and so bloody high he's not sure he'll ever come down.

Potter leans over and kisses him, slow and easy. "I'd like you to call me Harry," he says then.

Severus *hmm*s, fingers in Potter's hair.

"You've had your cock in my arse. I think it's a fair request."

Severus never imagined them to be the 'Harry' and 'Severus' type of people. But here, curled next to Harry, sated and spent and so utterly at ease, he can't help but think it the most natural thing in the world.

"You're telling me that, since we started tracking him, You-Know-Who has called his fucking Death Eaters on *two* separate occasions and this bastard did nothing?"

Severus thinks John Dawlish looks rather like a tomato when he's angry. It's not a good look.

"He did nothing on my *direct* orders, John. So think very carefully about what you say next, unless you want to call me a traitor too." Harry's words are deadly calm, but Severus feels his magic flaring just beneath his skin. If Harry, if Dawlish isn't careful, the cookware's liable to start exploding.

"But he knew!" Spittle flies from his lips, as Dawlish points an accusatory finger at Severus. "He knew! We could have fucking ended this."

Severus takes a calming breath. He will not let him bait him; John Dawlish isn't worth it. He's seated on one of the long benches in the kitchen, hands clasped on the tabletop before him, while Harry stares down a senior Auror. The rest of the room seems to be holding their breath.

"And tell me, how do you suppose we could have done that?" Harry asks quietly.

Dawlish sputters, but soldiers on. "He could have gone to the bloody meeting. Reported back the location. We could have had him."

"Right," Harry says. "And what part of Voldemort *trying to murder* Severus the last time he saw him makes you think he could just waltz into that meeting like nothing ever happened?" He speaks slowly, as though he's talking to a particularly slow first year, but the sconce lights on the wall flicker, and Severus knows Harry's barely maintaining his composure.

Dawlish frowns, looks uncertain, but then he says, "He could have Apparated out again as soon as he got a fix on their location. We could have set him up with a tracking spell and..."

Severus can't help it; he laughs out loud. But Harry places a warning hand on his shoulder, and he says nothing.

"That you believe Voldemort would allow Severus—or anyone for that matter—to simply come and go as he pleases shows how little you know about him."

Dawlish crosses his arms over his chest, juts out his chin. "Well, we all have to make sacrifices in times like these, if Snape is truly on our side then—"

"Don't you dare speak to me about *sacrifices*," Harry raises his voice for the first time. "You don't know a goddamned thing about sacrifice. But I do. And Severus? Severus has already sacrificed more for this fucking war than you could ever even imagine."

Dawlish opens his mouth as though to respond, though Severus can't imagine him being foolish enough to challenge Harry. But Kingsley is already putting a hand on Dawlish's arm, pulling him back. "John, why don't you take the lads back to the Ministry, finish up those intel reports we were talking about earlier."

For a moment, he just stares at Potter, but then he exhales, looks to Kingsley. "I...yeah. Yeah, you're right. Those reports aren't going to write themselves, now are they? Jacobson, Williams?" The other two Aurors nod and follow Dawlish out of the kitchen. A moment later they hear the whoosh of the Floo.

Harry is furious. Severus can tell by the set of his shoulders, the way he clenches and unclenches his jaw. He walks to the fridge and takes two beers. "I'm going upstairs. I've got more research. Severus?" With that he strides from the room.

Severus follows. No one knows they're fucking. Or, at least, he doesn't think so. But by now, it's clear they...mean something to one another. But he has always protected Harry, and Harry has always had a saviour complex—Severus lets his magic brush across the kitchen as he stands to follow Harry. For now, that seems to be enough of an explanation, but Severus

knows, sooner or later, someone will find out. And he can only wonder how Harry will feel when that happens.

Late that night, Harry and Severus lie in bed together. Harry rests his head on Severus's shoulder, Severus cards his fingers through Harry's hair. He is happy here. And isn't that the strangest thing?

Earlier, they'd had sex, Harry on top of Severus, riding his cock until they both came, shaking and sweating and clinging to one another in the moonlit darkness of Severus's room.

Now Harry takes his hand in his. He lifts his arm up, traces a finger along the black lines of Severus's Mark. He has to resist the urge to rip his arm away, to tuck it beneath his body. But he lets Harry press his mouth to the inky lines instead. He wonders if his Mark will ever stop hurting, if the constant burn and ache will finally fade away when Voldemort is dead.

Suddenly Harry sits up straight, sheets pooling around his waist. "Magic always demands a balance."

"Yes..." Severus says, not sure what he's talking about.

"Of course! And the world doesn't allow for exceptionally dark magic without a way to counteract that magic." Harry's voice is low, but Severus hears the excitement there. "What if we've been thinking about this the wrong way? Rather than believing that our only way to Voldemort is through his summons, what if we were to reverse that magic?"

Severus understands. "If we could reverse the summoning magic..."

Harry is climbing out of bed and pulling on the pair of joggers he'd tossed in the corner earlier that night. "It could work. I know it could work."

Severus pulls on a pair of trousers and tugs a shirt over his head. He follows Harry down the stairs to the library.

"Oh," Harry says, stopping short, as he opens the door. "I didn't know you were here."

Weasley and Granger are sitting at the card table, a large book open between them. Their chairs are pushed close together; Severus doesn't miss how Weasley's thigh is pressed to Granger's.

"We're just reviewing the charm work behind the personal warding Flitwick suggested. You're right, I think," Granger says. "We could tweak it. Key one ward to someone else's."

Harry nods. He's still standing in the doorway. For a moment, Severus considers turning around, going back to his room. He doesn't want to deal with Granger and Weasley right now. But that would look bloody suspicious, now, wouldn't it?

"That would make me feel a hell of a lot more comfortable sending smaller teams out on reconnaissance missions," Harry says.

Severus agrees. They've talked about this; they're already spread too thin, and despite the combat experience everyone here has, it doesn't change the fact that a significant number of their force is made up of students barely out of Hogwarts, and students who would still *be* at Hogwarts were they not at war.

Granger leans back in her chair, rubs her hand across her face, fingers massaging her temples. A green scarf is knotted around her head, pulling her hair back. She's tired. They all are.

"We tried to find you, mate," Weasley says, and there's an edge to his voice that makes Severus uneasy. "You said you wanted to look into this with us, but you weren't in your room." He's watching Severus, eyes narrowed, jaw set.

"I—" Harry shoves his hands in his pockets and looks away.

Christ, could he be any more obvious.

"I saw you, you know. Last night." Weasley rocks back in his chair, fold his arms over his broad chest. "Going into his room." He raises his chin, eyes fixed on Severus.

Granger looks from Weasley to Harry to Severus, confusion lining her face. So Weasley hadn't told her, then. "You were in Professor Snape's room last night?" she asks carefully.

"Researching," Harry says. "We were researching."

"It was half two, mate. And you didn't even bother to turn on the light."

Harry is anxious, but he's also defensive. Severus feels the emotions rolling off him and he wants to tell him to be careful. He wants to reach out—to place a hand on his shoulder, to touch him with his mind—but he doesn't dare.

"Harry," Granger says again, "what are you doing?"

Harry looks up, face carefully blank. Still, he's projecting. Severus can hear his thoughts loud and clear. *That's where we fuck*. Severus puts a warning hand on the small of his back. He knows Weasley notices by the way his jaw tightens, but it doesn't matter. Not if Harry says what he's about to say. He shakes his head, the movement almost imperceptible, but he knows Harry sees.

"That's where we sleep. We were sleeping."

Severus nearly sighs. While neither as crass or as crude as the rather explicit thoughts circling about in his head, that explanation is not exactly ideal. After all, in what scenario is it all right, is it acceptable for Harry Potter to be sleeping—even if they were *just* sleeping—in bed with Severus Snape.

Weasley is looking at them, and Severus sees the disbelief, the disgust barely disguised there. Harry sees it too, and Severus knows by the way he shifts his stance—feet spread wide, shoulders back—that he's expecting a row. Severus recognises that defiance, that refusal to back down, and *Christ* if it didn't used to make him furious. But now...now he respects it.

Respects Harry, even if he knows the man bloody well needs to control his emotions, his magic in situations like these.

“Not now, Ron,” Harry bites out. “Not here.”

And Weasley doesn't lose his temper. He doesn't say anything at all. He merely curls his lip as though he's smelled something foul and nods.

Harry stares at him for a long moment and then relaxes. Still Severus feels his magic crackling in the air between them like electricity. Sometimes he's surprised he doesn't set the room aflame.

And, all the while, Granger's just watching them, her face calm, unreadable. Severus thinks she'll make a fine Unspeakable one day. She has the look of a spook—that unflappable air of inscrutability—and for a moment, Severus doesn't envy Weasley. Life with an Unspeakable is hard. The secrets, the inability to trust, to ever confide the details of your day. Severus would know. After two decades of playing the spy, he wouldn't wish such a thing on anyone. And he learned long ago that it's easier to live that type of life alone.

Severus doesn't reach out and brush the surface of her mind. He's certain she'd notice, and he's also certain he'd rather not know what she's thinking.

Harry closes the door behind them and casts a *Muffliato*, but he doesn't move to sit down. Instead, he remains beside Severus. They are not touching, but Harry stands closer than, perhaps, necessary. And Severus knows he's making a statement. He's crossing a line here and dragging Severus with him. Granger recognises this too. She's watching them curiously, head cocked to one side, and she says nothing else.

“I've been dreaming,” Harry says. “We've been worried about the link to Voldemort.”

While not entirely a lie, it doesn't explain Harry in his bed, either.

Granger isn't convinced, but she bites her lip, forehead creased in thought. “But Harry, the link is gone.” Then she looks at Severus and he knows she's wondering what he knows. What Harry has told him.

“The Horcrux is gone,” he says. “We're sure of that.”

Weasley's eyes widen, but Granger merely nods. If she's surprised that he knows Harry was once harbouring a piece of the Dark Lord's soul, she doesn't let on.

“But Snape said once a Legilimens's link is established, it's always there. Even if the original means of connection is gone.”

“So you think Voldemort might still have access to your thoughts?” Granger asks.

“It's possible,” Severus admits—though he's told Harry he doesn't think they need to worry about that. Still, it's as good an excuse as they're likely to find as to why Harry's been in bed with him.

“And what, mate,” Weasley says, “is Snape Occluding for you? Or is he distracting you—keeping your thoughts on something else?”

Severus doesn't like the subtle drawl to his speech, the hint of something beneath the surface. He has never wanted to Apparate away from a conversation so badly. Instead he turns to Harry. “The book?”

“Right.” Harry moves past Granger and Weasley to one of the bookcases. “This one I think,” he says, pulling a slim text from the upper shelf. He hands it to Severus. It's old, the leather cover worn and smooth. He feels the magic woven here, layered between the pages.

“You have read this?” Severus asks, turning the book over in his hands.

Harry shrugs. “I've read lots of things over the last year—anything that seemed remotely useful for understanding or destroying the Horcruxes.” He motions to the book Severus is holding, “This one had a lot of information on bonding magic. Some of it pretty fucking dark.”

Granger's eyes widen at his choice of words, and Severus nearly laughs. If she only knew.

“Here,” Harry says, taking the book back from Severus. He opens to a page, sets the open text down on the table across from Granger and Weasley.

Severus reads. “This could work.”

“What is it Harry?” Granger asks. “What are you looking for?”

“I'm not sure why I didn't think of it sooner,” Harry says. “But I'd already ruled out Severus's Mark as a practical means of tracing Voldemort. It just didn't occur to me to explore other avenues of using that magic.”

“That magic?” Granger is frowning down at the open book, reading the page upside down. Harry turns it towards her.

“Summoning magic,” Severus says. “Despite the one-sided nature of the Dark Lord's Marks, all summoning magic adheres to the same basic principle.”

“Two points of contact,” Granger says catching on quickly.

“Exactly,” Harry says. “And while we can't call Voldemort to us...”

“Small favour that,” Weasley says with a laugh.

Harry smiles, “We can use Severus's Mark to trace the summoning spell imbued there back to its point of origin.”

Granger nods. “So even if Voldemort is not actively casting through his Marks, you think you can open the link long enough to trace his location?”

“*Preferably* when he's not casting through the Marks,” Severus amends.

“Right, of course.”

“Won’t he know?” Weasley asks, brow furrowed. He leans forward, rests his elbows on his knees. “That you’re tapping into the magic? It won’t do us any good if he Apparates away the moment you’ve got a fix on where he is. Or...” he chew on his lip, “if he summons his army of Death Eaters to be there waiting for us.”

“In theory, no, he shouldn’t,” Severus says. “Although summoning magic requires an origin point and a target, the spellwork isn’t designed to flow both ways.”

“It’s not a closed circuit,” Harry says. “So theoretically, Voldemort won’t be able to sense what we’re doing.”

“This spell is complicated, Harry,” Granger says, eyes still fixed on the book before her.

“I can cast it.”

“I know, but not without risk.”

“There’s always risk,” Harry says. “And this is our best shot of getting to Voldemort, short of sending Severus on a bloody suicide mission like that wanker Dawlish was trying to suggest earlier or waiting until he stages another full-scale attack.”

“The power required won’t be a problem,” Granger says. “You’ve got that in spades. But you’ll have to tread delicately. There’s a fine balance between maintaining an open connection long enough to find the point of origin and stressing the link so much that it collapses.”

“I know.”

“And what would happen then?” Weasley asks.

“Either Severus’s magic would bleed out through the link or the unstable magic would sever his Mark.”

“And that would kill him, Ron,” Granger says. “Those Marks, they can’t be cut by anyone other than the person who created them.”

“Okay,” Weasley says. “So Harry has to be bloody careful. You can do it?”

“He can,” Severus says. And Harry smiles up at him, places a hand on Severus’s back. It’s possessive in a way that makes Severus’s chest ache.

“So when do we move?”

“I’ll talk to Kingsley in the morning. See when he can get a team together to back us up.”

Killing Voldemort is easy.

It shouldn't be. After everything. But then, nothing ever turns out the way you'd expect.

The spellwork involved, however, is some of the most complex Severus has ever seen. And, despite Harry's initial hopes, it had taken another two weeks after they'd found the spell to be ready to perform the magic.

Every bit of Harry's raw power is needed. And Granger's creativity. If she hasn't already secured an invitation to join the Unspeakables, she will after the magic is reviewed.

And it will be reviewed. The Ministry won't let such an...occurrence go unevaluated.

In the end, Severus has to cast the spell, with Harry at his side, anchoring the magic.

His Mark throbs and then bursts into pain. But Harry is there. Grounding him. Finding Voldemort, pulling his location out of the link.

They Apparate together, hand in hand, and find Voldemort alone in a townhouse in Kensington. Of course, the bastard would be hiding out in comfort. But he is unprotected and they catch him unawares.

Harry casts the spell. Avada Kedavra is a sickly green, no matter the target. And then Kingsley and the Aurors are there.

Granger had set a Trace on Harry's person. So even though only the two of them could follow the pull of the Mark, it took less than four minutes for her magic to find them, to send in the cavalry. But by then, the Dark Lord was already dead.

Dinner is a celebration. Even Kreacher, forever sullen and unenthused, seems pleased. There is champagne—bottles pulled from the Black family cellars—and party crackers. Molly's found time to make a cake, and the elf supplies the treacle pudding Harry is so fond of. Even Kingsley joins them. He'll have to check in at the Ministry later. As the Acting Minister for Magic, he'll have statements to prepare, a press conference to navigate. They'll expect Harry too, and his lieutenants. Even though there is still some work to be done—not all Death Eaters have been accounted for, after all—this still feels like an ending. And Severus thinks it's bloody well about time.

Afterwards, once the plates have been cleared, and the champagne all drunk, Severus follows Harry upstairs. Whatever else is he supposed to do? There are, perhaps, half a dozen people here who would gladly take the Saviour to bed tonight. That Harry has chosen him? Well, that will likely never cease to amaze Severus, but it's been weeks now since he's had any desire to resist.

Sometimes Severus thinks he was mad for doing so at all.

The noise, the celebratory clamour quieted briefly as Harry stood, raised his glass with a final nod and drained it. Then he looked to where Severus was standing off to one side, and turned towards the staircase. There was nothing to say, of course. People suspect something by now. They haven't been discreet.

'What's the point?' Potter had said. *'I'll likely be dead soon anyway.'*

'No,' Severus insisted. *'You'll be the hero once again, and then...'* He hadn't wanted to consider the aftermath. The fact that he still couldn't believe Harry would choose to remain with him after everything was all said and done.

But yet, here they are.

"I could ride you like this," Harry says, mouth against Severus's throat.

They sit facing one another, Harry on Severus's lap, his legs around his waist.

"I know how much you like that, me on top of you, your cock splitting me open."

"Fuck."

"I know, yeah? That's rather the point."

Harry ends up on his hands and knees, arse in the air as Severus thrusts into him again and again until they're both coming, Harry's perfect prick spurting all over the sheets.

"What will you do now?" Harry asks, once they're curled together under the blankets. Harry had cast a cleaning charm. Severus pulled on a pair of pyjama pants. Harry prefers to sleep naked.

"I'd like to get some sleep," he says, "though, with your incessant prattle, that's sometimes difficult."

Harry laughs softly, bumps his shoulder against Severus. "That's not what I meant, you pillock. I mean now that he's gone. Now that we've ended it."

Severus is quiet for a long moment. He was never meant to survive the war. There was a time, even, when wasn't even sure he wanted to—after all, what place could there be in a post-war world for a man like him?

But now...

"I think I'll return to Hogwarts," he says finally. They will move to retake the castle soon. The plans have been ready for weeks now and, with Voldemort's followers now in disarray, they shouldn't face much resistance. "Merlin knows Minerva will need help getting things up and running again, and someone will have to teach the brats Potions. We both know Horace won't do it, and she'll never find someone else on such short notice." Despite the exasperation he injects into the words, he finds he's actually looking forward to it. To be able to just teach without the constant threat of war, of the Dark Lord looming over them.

"They're not all brats," Harry says with a smile.

"No." Severus kisses his temple, rests his hand on the curve of Harry's waist. "But there are always a few each year who make up for that."

“Bastard,” Harry says, but his voice is fond. “We can’t all be teacher’s pets like Hermione and Malfoy.”

“I don’t suppose you can.” He sighs. He is tired but also incredibly content. It’s an odd feeling. “And you, you are certain you do not want to be an Auror?”

“Yeah, tonight pretty much confirmed that,” Harry says. “I’m done, Severus. I’m tired of saving people and I’m not going to kill for anyone ever again.”

Severus understands. He strokes his hand across Harry’s hair, waits for him to continue.

“I think I’d like to just take some time. Do nothing for a little while. No expectations. No responsibilities.”

“You’ve earned as much,” Severus says.

“I’ll sit for my NEWTs when they’re offered next spring. Maybe by then I’ll have an idea as to what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

“You’ll find something,” Severus says. “And I’m sure, if nothing else, *Witch Weekly* would be happy to put you on retainer as their permanent cover wizard.”

Potter’s laugh is warm and deep. “You’d like that, though, wouldn’t you. Fucking *Witch Weekly*’s pin-up boy.”

“Enough,” Severus says, shutting him up with a kiss. Potter groans, slips his tongue into Severus’s mouth.

“I might need a tutor, you know,” he says after a moment, pulling back. “For my NEWTs, since I never finished school properly. Good thing I’m shagging a bit of an expert.” He kisses him again, just a brush of his mouth against Severus’s. “What do you think, Professor Snape?”

Severus props himself up on his elbow, looks down the end of his nose at Harry. “I might agree to help you prepare for your exams,” he says. “But only if you promise me you will never call me ‘Professor Snape’ again.”

“Doesn’t do it for you, huh?” Harry quirks his eyebrow. “Pity.” But then Harry is laughing. “I promise,” he says, pulling him down, kissing him again. “Do your rooms at Hogwarts have a Floo,” he asks after a moment, lying down, arranging Severus’s arm about his waist, tucking his head against Severus’s chest.

“Yes.”

“Good. You know how I hate to sleep alone.”

As Severus listens to the steady sounds of Harry’s breathing, he realises with a start that his arm doesn’t hurt. That ever-present undercurrent of pain that had become as much a part of him as the blood, the magic flowing through his veins is just...gone.

He brushes the fringe back from Harry's forehead, smooths his thumb over the lightning bolt scar there, the skin slick and smooth.

Harry opens one eye. "Everything okay?"

"Yes."

Harry smiles up at him, closes his eyes once more.

Yes. For the first time in nearly twenty years, Severus can honestly say it is.

End Notes

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