

Chocolate *and* ASPHODEL



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Snapin Line Volume 1, 2007

Cover art: Summer Interlude by *Karasu Hime*

Back Cover art: Two Dream by *Xterm*

❧ *Acknowledgements* ❧

In some ways, the internet is a boon to fans in that it offers us quick access to all the fanfiction and fan art we could want; it's easy to find, and it's easy to post, making the process a great deal simpler for 21st Century writers, artists, and readers. But in some ways, the internet has diminished the anticipation and specialness of each work of fanfiction and fan art; instead of it being a rare treat, we can mass-consume it, picking and choosing among hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pieces in a single archive.

But that wasn't always the case. Before the internet, 'zines were the only means of sharing fanfiction and fan art. 'Zine is short for "fanzine", which is short for "fan magazine", and the first acknowledged fanzine was published around 1930. They were used primarily as a means of communication at first, produced on mimeograph machines and sent via snail mail, but gradually, 'zines grew to include fanfiction, poetry, filk songs, art, and other expressions of fannish creativity as well. As technology improved, so did the quality of the 'zines, and they continued to be distributed by mail or at conventions. With the rise of the internet and the creation of countless websites, mailing lists, message boards, journal communities, and other forums for communicating with other fans and sharing fanfiction and fan art, 'zines have seen a decline in recent years, although they are still published, and they can be found in stacks or boxes in the dealer's room of many conventions.

As a long-time member of off-line fandom who began reading and collecting 'zines around twenty-five years ago, I'm delighted that our ship has one, albeit in electronic format, and I hope readers will go to the trouble of having it printed and bound, if possible. Downloading from a mailing list, journaling service, or website and printing it out is a nice way of preserving stories and art you know you want to revisit, but it's not quite the same thing as holding a 'zine in your hand, feeling its weight and knowing you're about to delve into the collaborative efforts of other fans who devoted their time and energy to creating it.

And 'zines do take time, energy, and a host of people working behind the scenes to make everything come together, which is why we must stop and thank the contributing writers and artists who created the content and the editors who vetted the submissions and proof-read/-viewed the material that was chosen for inclusion: Arionrhod, busaikko, Cordeliadelayne, Kellanine, Snegurochka Lee, and Xochiquetzl. Special thanks go to lore for organizing the zine and to Karasu Hime for her hard work on the layout. She went above and beyond the call of duty to create something visually special for us all.

The stories and art in this 'zine all pre-date the release of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, but I'm certain that won't curtail anyone's enjoyment of them. It was a labor of love for all involved, and on behalf of the editors and contributors, I hope our readers enjoy the results as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

McKay

2007

First Edition

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I Knew You Would Come by Xterm

↔ Fair Game ↔

by firefly_quill

Severus Snape had an eye for detail. It was what made most students tremble before the ground he walked upon. It was what made him a superb and completely discreet spy. And it was why he was currently regarding the invitation to the Headmistress' office for tea with suspicion.

The request itself was unremarkable. Ever since his re-appointment as Potions Master (the Defense Against the Dark Arts position had lost its appeal with Voldemort's demise, as there was simply no challenge to it anymore), Minerva regularly invited him to such meetings in an attempt to connect with him. Something about helping him let go of old demons and becoming more human. Severus thought this to be a ridiculous idea, but it kept him employed and wasn't the most tedious way to spend a Saturday afternoon, so he acquiesced.

No, the most noteworthy thing about this particular instance was that, aside from the fact that Remus Lupin was also sitting at the table, Minerva had gone to great lengths to procure his favourite blend of Earl Grey, which was followed by a fairly potent cocktail. Alcohol always meant McGonagall was about to ask for something. Severus furrowed his brow and waited.

"How long as it been, again, since Voldemort's defeat?" Minerva asked conversationally, a matronly smile plastered across her face.

"I suppose it's almost been a month." Remus answered after some thought.

"Thirty five days, eleven hours." Severus answered stiffly.

Minerva continued to smile, although it now looked a little strained. Remus was either mildly constipated or was attempting to hold back his laughter. Severus hoped for the former.

"A little precise, don't you think?" Minerva asked dryly.

Severus decided it would be best not to answer at all.

"In any event, I think that it is high time we all moved on." She paused to glare at Severus, who had snorted

and was subsequently choking on his drink. The glare belatedly passed towards Remus, who was coughing as a result. "Albus would have wanted it."

Ahh, so there was the truth of it.

"And what else might Albus have wanted, Minerva?"

Minerva folded her hands in her lap. Now they were getting down to business. "He would have wanted us to put old grudges to rest, which is one of the reasons why I brought the two of you here today."

"One of the reasons?" Severus countered.

"Yes, one," Minerva returned, with just as much force. Severus always did admire the woman for her gall.

"And the other, pray tell?"

"The other, which I was going to mention soon enough, complements the first."

Severus curved his lips slightly, noting the irritation in the Headmistress' voice.

"He requested in his will that a Quidditch tournament be held each year in his honour. Albus always had enjoyed the sport for its ability to bring the most bitter of enemies together in one large, prolonged sweaty-" Minerva hesitated here.

"Orgy of co-operation?" Remus suggested. Severus raised an eyebrow. Remus shrugged. "I was there when they read the will."

"Yes, well, those were his words, not mine," Minerva snapped. "He has also asked for a match between the teachers, and he has singled out the two of you as the team captains."

Had Minerva been one to tell jokes and had Severus been one to laugh at them, he might have done so at this point. Knowing better, however, he settled for a frown. Lupin, on the other hand, seemed to be lost in thought, an enigmatic trace of a smile on his lips.

"I fail to see what such a certain fiasco would accomplish." Severus' frown deepened as he noted the Headmistress' amusement. "But I take it to mean we have no choice in this matter."

Minerva simply smiled. "I'll see you both on the pitch tomorrow."



The next morning found Severus in a particularly foul mood. He stormed towards the pitch at the break of dawn and arrived exactly ten minutes late, looking unconcerned and much like a man who did not frequently arrive exactly on time to all meetings so that he might properly glare at latecomers, which earned him the anticipated scowl from the Headmistress.

"Good, we are finally all here," Minerva continued to glower. "I do believe that I have fully explained the situation to you all."

Severus shifted his gaze abruptly as a rustling of murmurs passed through the ranks of the other staff members. Some of them were smirking; others observed him expectantly. Lupin was entranced by the space just above McGonagall's head. Severus began to wonder whether he had missed a memo.

"Team leaders will draw straws for first pick of teams," The Headmistress continued as if none of this was happening.

When all was said and done, Remus was standing beside Professor Hooch, Sprout, Trelawney, Sinistra, Babbling, and Madam Pomfrey, while Severus and his team, which consisted of Professors Vector, Flitwick, Windermere, Firenze, Madame Pince and Hagrid, eyed each other warily. Minerva promised, icily, to transfigure wings for the centaur after Severus had innocently asked whether he was to be tied to a broom like a roast on a spit.

"The game has been scheduled for the end of the school year, which gives you exactly 27 days. Captains are expected to schedule their own practices. Outside of class time." The fourteen faces peering back at her looked crestfallen. "Good luck."

The small twitch that tugged at the corners of her lips suggested that they'd need it. She turned briskly away and left them to it.

"I hear that you played for Slytherin back in your school days, perferesser?" Hagrid tried amiably after a long and very painful silence.

"Not a bad team, either," Professor Vector added wryly. "Would have had the cup had Gryffindor's Seeker not snatched it away in the final."

"Perhaps you are unfamiliar with my style of leadership," Severus interrupted. "When I desire your opinion, I will ask you for it. If you decide to offer words that are

unsolicited, you might find that your students have spent their last potions block testing unstoppable babbling potions."

Vector scowled severely, but spoke no more.

"Well, I'm sure we both have much to discuss with our teams. I'll yield the pitch to you first," Remus said brightly in an attempt to break the tension.

"Discuss?" Severus raised an eyebrow. "I intend to expend as little time and effort on this charade as possible."

"Oh," Remus' face fell in disappointment.

There was another awkward pause. Severus noticed in passing that the other members of the staff had drawn themselves into a small circle surrounding the captains.

"Oh, what?" He finally answered irritably. Evidently the werewolf was going to let the comment hang until something was said on it.

"I was just hoping for a decent match."

"Decent- what exactly is that to mean?" Severus sputtered.

"Don't get me wrong. I am looking forward to the game," The other man answered quickly. "I had just hoped that it would be evenly matched. But if you aren't going to give it a good go, then--"

"Is that a challenge, Lupin?" All the other players took two steps back at the tone of his voice except for the werewolf.

Remus' eyes widened. "I would never be so presumptuous as to challenge you, Severus."

There was something in his voice, however, that suggested that otherwise.

"I said that I would waste as little time and effort as possible, Lupin, not that we would stand idly by," Severus snarled. "Unlike you, I will make good use of my practices instead of rushing headlong into pointless meetings." Bloody fuck, where had that come from?

"Of course. Sorry I misunderstood you." Remus inclined his head a little. "Would you care for a wager, then?"

Severus' ears perked. A small part of him immediately saw the danger in it, reminding him that he hadn't won a Quidditch bet with a Gryffindor ever since Potter became Seeker. A larger part of him was itching to win again.

"What kind of wager?"

"I'm sure we can set the terms later," Remus replied pleasantly. "But if you don't mind, we have much to work on."

"I don't doubt that." Severus sneered. He turned to his team. "As for the rest of you, practice tonight at 8. Those who are late will supervise my detentions this week. They are cleaning the owlery." With that, Severus spun around and stalked away, unable to shake the feeling that he had just been manipulated.



Two weeks later, Severus was certain he'd never been closer to committing murder (except for that time when he actually did). Firenze, as a Chaser, could barely fly in a straight line. Flitwick, whom he had cast as Seeker due to his swiftness on a broom, evidently neglected to mention that he could not see two feet from his nose. Madam Pince, the self-appointed Keeper, due to her insistence that high-speed flying was impossible for her, kept dodging the Quaffle instead of blocking it. Hagrid refused to hit the ball into anything living and breathing. And every time Severus ran into Lupin, the werewolf had that damned smile plastered on his face.

A particularly dismal practice ended when Professor Windermere enchanted the Quaffle so that it would make a beeline for Severus' head after he commented that Muggle Studies was equally as useless a subject as Curative Arts and marveled that one could be so untalented as to be teaching both. In his defense, she did have it coming. That had been the most atrocious Sloth Grip Roll he'd ever seen.

Severus made his way to the faculty showers much later that evening, so that he might avoid unsolicited conversation. Although the showers in his own chambers were completely spotless, he had too often seen its white walls splattered with blood and dirt to feel completely comfortable in it. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of splattering water. A white towel was lying haphazardly on one of the benches, beside a pile of clothes, which included one grey, moth-bitten cardigan.

Lupin!

Severus' lips curved to form a malicious smile. Oh, this would improve his evening considerably. Not one to forfeit an opportunity to ridicule the opposition, he made for the showers, hoping to catch Remus off guard. There was nothing wrong, after all, with sizing up the competition. Severus didn't expect himself to be quite so accurate. Nor did he expect to find Remus Lupin wanking.

He certainly hadn't hoped to see the werewolf supporting himself against the wall with one and furiously stroking himself with the other while the steaming

water slid down the muscular back in small streams. The showers might have been loud enough to obscure the words that he was murmuring to himself, but they certainly weren't loud enough to cover the choked gasps, nor was the steam thick enough to mask Remus' shudders as he threw his head back, allowing the water to wash across his face.

Severus was in a predicament. Not only were his plans of humiliation diverted, but he was also desperately aroused. He began to reach under his towel when the water suddenly stopped.

Bugger. He couldn't speak the password to unlock the door without Lupin hearing him. It wouldn't do to make his presence known, since the Headmistress suspected that he was behind that unfortunate incident where someone slipped depilatory potion into Lupin's shampoo. Severus smirked to himself. At least it had gotten rid of that horrible moustache for good. Even with what little sense of fashion Lupin possessed, he saw how ridiculous it would have been to go weeks with hair only above his lips and not on his head. Severus suspected it would have itched terribly, kissing a man with a moustache. Not that he thought about such things.

The sound of wet footsteps drew him back to the present. Severus grasped at his towel. It was most unfortunately tented. He looked around frantically for something else to cover himself and hastily grabbed the towel on the bench.

"Severus?"

Severus turned swiftly, disinterested mask intact, thanking Merlin for his lightning fast reflexes. Said responses could not save him from choking just a little bit at seeing Remus emerge completely naked.

"A little late to be showering, Lupin," he managed.

"I could say the same of you." Lupin smiled that irritatingly guileless smile.

"Have you seen my towel? I seem to have misplaced it." Lupin turned and bent to examine his stack of clothes. Before Severus' brain completely shut down, it managed to process that Remus Lupin had a very delectable arse.

"Severus?" Severus blinked. Remus had turned again to face him and was peering at him in concern.

"I'm not your house elf," Severus snapped. "I'm surprised you survived the war at all with a memory like yours."

"As am I." There was that smile again. Bugger. Severus began to worry that two towels might not cut it.

"I only came for more soap. I'll leave you now to your own incompetence," Severus announced.

"Have a good evening." Remus called after him.

It was only when Severus returned to his quarters that he saw the large letters "RL" embroidered on Lupin's towel, likely having been in full view to the other man the entire time.



Severus woke in the morning to a horrible pounding in his head. For a moment, things were looking up, before he realized that the cause of the thumping was not a rare and deadly virus that he had contracted over the course of the night that might indeed incapacitate him for weeks, but in fact someone knocking firmly at his door.

He threw his bed sheets aside and wrapped himself in his dressing gown in one fluid motion, practicing his most poisonous grimace on his bedside mirror before advancing towards the door, wand in hand. Both the mirror and the door might have whimpered just a little.

The door was flung open with an equal ferocity, and Severus would have stuck his wand square in the right eye socket of Remus Lupin, had the man not been so damn graceful.

"Morning, Severus," Remus greeted him brightly. The words had not fully been spoken when the door began to close. Remus reached out to hold it open. "I brought tea."

The pressure that was pushing the door closed lessened for a bit. Then Severus reconsidered. Remus squawked in surprise.

"Earl Grey," He managed to add before being thrown into the hall.

Severus cursed silently and fully released his hold on the door. What business did the werewolf have, knowing his favourite blend of tea? He stalked to the bathroom, motioning vaguely with one hand that Remus should set it down on the small dining table. As he re-entered the room after taking an excessive amount of time to brush and prepare for the day in hopes that the werewolf would be gone by the time he emerged, he passed Lupin's towel, draped neatly beside his, and thought better than to give it back. He tried not to show his dismay at finding the other man comfortably seated in his favourite chair, leaning forward to pour the tea into the two china cups.

"If I've somehow given you the impression that I wish you to stay, I retract it now, Lupin." Severus nevertheless

sat and allowed himself to be served. The man had also brought him toast and eggs.

"I know you better than to expect an invitation, Severus."

"You should know better than to expect to be able to walk out of this room on your own two legs if you do not leave now."

"Really? Will the sex be that good?" Remus asked pleasantly.

Severus was disappointed that his spit-take missed the werewolf entirely. Remus cleaned the spill nonchalantly with a wave of his hand.

"I apologize for the intrusion, but I wanted to know how you were keeping. Hagrid mentioned that you seemed a bit stressed."

"Was that before or after he told you that he is a complete failure as a Beater?"

"Perhaps he is not suited to be one, then," Remus offered mildly.

Severus looked at him as if he were daft. "Have you seen the man recently? He could bench your team in minutes were he to put his brawn to it."

"We are not all who we want to be, Severus, and even less frequently are we what we should be." There was a quiet intensity about these words that Severus found unsettling. It was cleared with another brilliant smile. Not that Severus frequently thought of Lupin's smile as being brilliant.

"So how about a practice?" Remus asked cheerfully. He stood and walked towards the door.

Severus stiffened. "That won't be necessary." He felt a small twinge of hopelessness as Remus continued to grin at him in amusement. "You've already gathered the others, haven't you?"

At least the man had the decency to look a little embarrassed. "They'll be on the pitch in an hour."

"Go to hell, Lupin," Severus snarled.

Remus turned, hand already on the door. "Now, Severus, my company could not have been that painful. I didn't even ask why you so badly needed my towel yesterday evening."

The werewolf just managed to close the door behind him before the cup could strike his head.



An hour into the game confirmed Severus' fears. Lupin's team was leading 140 to 10. Severus' sharp eyes had

been trained on the snitch ever since it was let in the air, and Flitwick always seemed to be going in the opposite direction. Severus was so preoccupied with the lack of progress that he'd even forgotten his promise to smash the other team's captain every opportunity he got. As Hagrid was still refusing to Beat properly and Pince was still dodging the Quaffle with amazing accuracy and agility, it was a surprise to Severus that the points gap weren't any larger. McGonagall, who was refereeing, had to fly behind parapets periodically to hide her laughter.

Severus suddenly snapped to attention as Lupin flew into view, just metres away from the snitch.

"Fuck," Severus gritted his teeth, flew towards the nearest bludger and let him have it. The crisis was averted, only to occur again ten minutes later. Lupin hadn't been particularly talented at seeking just half an hour ago. Severus wondered at the change until he next saw Lupin trailing him from afar, observing him intently. Suspicious, Severus darted his eyes to the left and watched as the werewolf dove in that direction. Severus scowled. Lupin had stopped looking for the snitch and was instead watching Severus' eyes. Evidently the wolf was not completely unintelligent.

Severus was thinking of possible solutions to his dilemma when out of the corner of his eye, he saw the snitch hovering in front of the left boards. Flitwick was bobbing unsteadily in front of it. A whoosh to his right caused Severus to turn abruptly in time to catch Remus racing towards the golden bauble. Fuck again.

Gritting his teeth, Severus flew towards the nearest Bludger and slammed it as hard as he could into Flitwick. The Charms professor gave a squawk as the force of the ball (which as just about his size) sent him flying towards the snitch. He hit the wall with a loud thud. When he slipped off and fell to the floor, the snitch, which had been sandwiched between him and the wall, shook itself off a few times and buzzed off once again. Minerva blew the whistle.

Severus stared at the scoreboard in disbelief. He flew over to the Headmistress, who was glaring he most intimidating glare in his direction.

"This game is over," Severus announced.

"What exactly were you thinking, Severus?" Minerva asked as if she hadn't heard him.

"Flitwick caught the snitch."

"You hit him into it. That hardly conforms to Quidditch rules." Her voice was becoming increasingly shrill.

"He touched the snitch," he returned insistently.

"Actually, he has to have it by his own volition and

without other external momentum." Remus had floated over and was smiling genially at them both. His cheeks were flushed from what Severus suspected had been a grand bout of laughter.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "What if I hit him while his hand is stretched next time?"

"There will be no next time," Minerva was turning quite red herself. "Pull that trick again, Severus Snape, and practice game or not, I'll have you suspended."

"Oh how dreadful," Severus deadpanned, his face completely neutral. "My dreams of playing professionally will be crushed."

"And you can have lunch supervision for the rest of the week."

Severus cringed. "You evil woman."

McGonagall blew her whistle shrilly, causing both captains to back away, covering their ears. Severus flew back to his team and ignored Flitwick's scowl as best he could. As soon as McGonagall sounded the whistle again to begin, Severus flew straight for Lupin. Remus realized what was happening and quickly flew up to avoid collision. He turned to find Severus on his tail again. Severus narrowed his eyes in determination. If he were unable to make Flitwick catch the bloody thing, then he could at least distract the other Seeker so that the Charms professor might accidentally run into the snitch himself, which given his poor sight, would not be completely unlikely. This plan might have been brilliant (or at least it might have made the best out of a bad situation), if only Hooch had not been a professional Beater for the Holyhead Harpies for seven years. Remus turned and his eyes widened.

"Severus, look out!" Was the last thing Severus heard before being struck soundly in the head and falling from his broom. He vaguely recalled Remus swooping towards him, wand raised to cast a cushioning spell, before everything went black.



Severus woke up many hours later, under Poppy's care, bitterly aware that he had become the school's favourite punch-line. He convinced the woman finally that he was well enough to return to his quarters and promptly stormed back to the dungeons to indulge in his age-old tradition of drinking alone. He was almost too far gone to tell that someone was indeed at the door. Scowling, Severus stood slowly, steadying himself on the table before realizing he'd never make it there. He waved his wand, and it flew open, albeit with less force than he

had desired. Remus Lupin stood once again on the other side, looking mildly sympathetic. It would have been better had he arrived to gloat. This current encounter would have been rather short had the spell to slam the door not misfired and hit the cabinet instead.

"I've brought brandy, but I see that you've no need for that." Remus once again took residency in the armchair.

"Lupin, while I am teaching at this school, I will always have a need for brandy." Severus hoped that it hadn't come out too slurred. The smile on the werewolf's face suggested that it did. Remus sat up to pour two glasses and drank to their health. A few more drinks later, Severus was feeling quite a bit better about the whole thing.

"Feeling better?"

Severus blinked. Oh right. Lupin.

"Are you still here?" He sneered.

"You haven't hexed me yet. I couldn't have hoped for more," Was he being teased?

Severus glared, but it might have come across as a squint. "Why are you here, Lupin?"

"Not to offer condolences and certainly not because I was concerned about you," Remus answered lightly.

"Good," Severus slurred. "Just because you have a delectable arse doesn't mean you can just...just..."

"Start caring for you?"

"Exactly!" Severus had the faintest inkling that he just might regret those words tomorrow morning, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why. Lupin simply smiled that infuriating smile at him again.

Severus took another sip. "How'd you do it?" He asked suddenly.

Remus looked amused. "What, keep my arse delectable or care for you?"

"No, dunderhead, Quidditch. Hooch can't possibly carry the whole game."

Remus considered this for a moment. "I simply assigned the positions according to the strength of each player."

"Oh really?" Severus squinted a little more. If he focused his eyes intensely, it looked as though Lupin had two heads. "And what is your particular talent, Lupin?"

Still smiling, the other man reached out and touched both of Severus' shoulders. Severus frowned. Funny he hadn't noticed that he was swaying until he was held still. "Ensnaring the difficult and hard to catch."

Severus strained a little to comprehend, but straightened triumphantly upon hearing a word he recognized.

"I, too, have a talent for ensnaring," he announced.

Remus smiled at him again. "Yes," he replied, equally as softly as before. "You do."

He leaned back in his chair once again. "You must also consider whether they want to take upon the task. Hagrid, for example, will never be your star Beater."

Severus frowned. "I never wanted to take upon many of the tasks I've done."

Remus looked at him questioningly.

"I never wanted to kill him."

Severus couldn't remember the last time Remus had looked so sad. It made him frown even deeper.

"It takes someone of great strength to do what you did, Severus. I will always admire you for it, among other things," Remus said at last.

"You and no one else," Severus answered soberly.

"All the more for me." Remus abruptly leaned forward just a bit, his voice almost a low, predatory growl. He recovered himself equally as quickly, and Severus began to wonder whether he imagined the whole thing.

"I should go." Remus suddenly seemed to be in a great hurry. "And you should be in bed."

When Severus did not make a reply one way or another, Remus realized the problem and sighed. Before Severus could react (which wasn't difficult, for the time being), Remus had divested him of all inessential clothing and tucked firmly under the covers. The last thing he remembered before drifting off was that Remus' hand might have lingered on his shoulder longer than it had to.



For the second time that month, Severus awoke to a horrible pounding in his head. Unfortunately, this one was still not caused by rare and deadly virus that he had contracted over the course of the night that might indeed incapacitate him for weeks, but in fact a horrendously powerful hangover. Groaning, he slowly managed to pull himself up. He wondered briefly at how the head-clearing draught on the table beside his bed had gotten there until he drank it and the memories of the previous evening came back full force.

After the initial urge to destroy miscellaneous objects had subsided, some of Lupin's words and the implications of his own actions began to sink in. After the second round of random possessions were subsequently annihilated as a result, Severus began to wonder whether there might be something to those words

and actions that needed addressing. They would have to wait, he decided grimly. There were, after all, line changes to attend to.



"Welcome, ladies and gents, wizards and witches!" Dennis Creevey's voice echoed exuberantly through the packed stadium, once again proving that size was no indicator of energy level. "To the first annual Albus Dumbledore Memorial Cup!"

An enthusiastic cheer rose even higher out of the chattering voices.

Severus paced swift and anxious just behind the curtains as Creevey rambled on.

"I'd tell you to relax, if only it would help," stated a voice from behind.

"Are you in the habit of encouraging your opponents, Lupin?" Severus snapped back without interrupting his steps.

"No, only friends."

Severus was about to give Lupin a verbal flaying when he realized that his heart wouldn't really have been in it. He settled for silence instead, which seemed to delight Remus.

"We never set the terms for our bet."

Severus narrowed his eyes. So this was what he was about. "What do you want, Lupin?" he asked a little warily.

"You."

Severus froze. The underlying desire in that soft word sent a jolt through his spine.

"I'm sorry?"

Remus took a few steps towards him, eyes set with determination. "I've enjoyed our game, Severus, but the war is over. There is no reason to play it anymore," he said softly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Severus defiantly turned away and began pacing twice as fast as before.

"Just a chance. Dinner with you, with the possibility of dessert." Remus smiled encouragingly. "Surely you could endure an evening with me."

Severus hesitated again. "And if I win?"

"Anything you like."

Severus swallowed. He had risked far greater things without a second thought, so why did this require a third, a fourth even?

"Shall we sign in blood?"

He realized with a bit of disappointment that he was becoming quite fond of the way Remus' entire face lit up brighter than the Great Hall at Christmas when pleased.

"I'll take your word for it." The werewolf extended his hand. "Best of luck to you."

Severus gingerly took it.

"And now, join me in welcoming the competitors of our opening match!" Dennis' voice echoed loudly through the silence that had fallen between the two captains.

"Merlin," Severus muttered. He grabbed his broom and turned to his team, which he found standing immediately behind him in a small cluster. They were mostly looking amused. Vector looked mildly nauseated. Severus silently cursed the small size of the tent.

"We won't let yer down, cap'n." Hagrid was looking glassy-eyed.

"See that you do not." Severus scowled.

"Merlin forbid we do. Can you imagine losing to Trelawney at anything?" Windermere rolled her eyes, and Severus decided that curative arts were not the most hopeless of subjects.



Minutes later, Severus was bobbing restlessly on the pitch, close to the ground, acutely aware of the eyes trained on his figure. Lupin hovered across.

"Line changes?" he asked pleasantly in the manner that one might inquire on the weather. Severus nodded stiffly in response.

Minerva darted towards the pair, eyes reminiscent of the previous Headmaster in their twinkling.

"Good luck, gentlemen." She held out her hand and shot each of them a last wry grin before blowing the silver whistle shrilly. There was a strong whoosh as fourteen brooms dashed towards the sky. The crowd roared.

Severus tore upwards and scanned the pitch meticulously. Pince darted underneath with a squeal, Bludger in tow. He watched, mildly amused as she expertly wove through the other players, swooping down just in time so that the Bludger nearly caught Sinistra in the head.

"Pince is tearing through the pitch!" Creevey crowed in amazement. "I haven't seen her move so fast since the last time I tried to sneak into the Restricted Section in fifth year. She passes to Windermere and — OH, a brilliant Sloth Grip Roll, professor! She passes back to Pince. Pince ducks around Trelawney — who seems to

be predicting the other team's loss with great fervor — towards Keeper Sprout, who dives to stop the shot and — SCORES!"

The crowd roared again. Severus was beginning to think that Muggle Studies might not be the waste of time that he had once thought and was warming to the library considerably.

He tensed again, seeing a gold sparkle just underneath the highest goal post. The sound of a speeding broom to his left told him that Lupin had once again been watching him. Gritting his teeth, Severus willed his broom forward, taking a sharp left to swoop into the other captain's line of sight. He then dove deliberately in the other direction, towards his team's end of the pitch and celebrated silently as Lupin took his lead away from where he had spotted the snitch.

"Heads!" Pomfrey screamed. Severus ducked as she dashed in front to slam the bludger away. She had obviously taken Severus' speech about preventing injury to heart. Firenze was quite a bit farther away, eyes narrowed intently as he calculated the precise trajectory of every nearing bludger and hit it at just the right angle. Severus also realized that the centaur had quite the affinity for hitting things into moving objects.

Half an hour later, Severus' team was leading 90 to 30. Hagrid was doing an admirable job guarding the goals.

Severus had once again taken to the high air, preferring to scan down so that he might keep tabs on his team's progress and the Snitch. Creevey's voice suddenly caught his attention.

"Wait, is Professor Lupin after — yes I do believe it is! GO PROFESSOR!"

Snape squinted to find Lupin's form and dropped closer. Damn that man, he was only meters away from it! Severus would never make it in time, unless — he suddenly had an idea. Taking a deep breath, Severus leaned back into a free-fall.

"Wait a moment — Professor Snape seems to have lost control of his broom! He's falling straight down!"

Evidently hearing this announcement, Remus immediately gave up chase and turned his broom upwards as Severus fell towards him. There was a bit of panic in his eyes as Severus neared him enough to discern this, but he did not have time to think on it, for not long after he leapt back onto his broom and swerved a little to pass Remus, arm stretched. Braking as hard as he could, he cushioned his fall sufficiently as he rolled onto the grass pitch. The raucous cheering suddenly lessened to a dull murmur. Severus raised his arm without standing, too sore to find his legs.

"HE'S GOT THE STITCH!" Dennis Creevey roared, although

he was barely heard through the cheering of the crowd. "Severus Snape wins it for his team!"

Severus felt the air move around him as his teammates landed, hugging each other and gingerly patting their captain on the back.

"Not a dismal effort, by far," was all Severus would say, but the others seemed to take it as a compliment.



Later that evening, Severus set several precedents in his life. Firstly, he found himself carousing with his peers after the game and felt that it wasn't completely reprehensible. Both teams seemed to think Severus' play was brilliant, and he certainly didn't mind that they wanted to toast to his genius.

Secondly, he found himself missing the presence of one who was not there. Remus had slipped out quietly after he had ensured that Snape was in fact alright, and no one had seen him since. Saying that Snape wanted to "celebrate with" Lupin was a little much, but the werewolf's company was not...overly taxing. He endured Severus' snarling and snark and strangely seemed attracted to all about the Potions' Master that drove others away. He had a delectable arse, listened sympathetically, and most astonishing of all, he was not hopelessly unintelligent. Severus reeled their encounters during these past few weeks in his head silently and nearly choked on his firewhisky. Not only was Remus able to pacify him like no other, but it was also very likely that Severus had been manipulated into doing Lupin's will ever since this whole debacle began, up until the very end when Severus had turned Remus' feelings for him to his advantage.

These thoughts led to yet a third precedent for Severus Snape: feelings of guilt.

Deciding that he wasn't very fond of the feeling, Severus took another shot of firewhisky, steeled his resolve, and made for the showers.



He was unsurprised this time to find the water running. Fully undressing, Severus sat on the bench and placed the towel in what he hoped was a provocative place, reclining a little so that his hands were grasping the back of the bench. Remus exited the showers, once again fully naked, but looking a little embarrassed by it this time as he caught sight of the Potions Master. Severus frowned.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting, Severus." Remus sounded a little defeated as well.

"As you should," Severus replied.

"Brilliant play today." Remus quickly grabbed for his towel. "I understand your motivation of course. I apologize for putting my own feelings before your—"

"We set terms to a wager, I believe. I have come to collect," Severus interrupted.

Remus cocked his head a little in confusion. "Of course. What would you like?"

Severus drew in a breath and sat up straight. "Dinner with you. With a definite possibility of dessert."

Yes, he decided that he truly was quite enamored with the way happiness spread across Remus' features.

"Although I would not be averse to having dessert first," he added silkily as he stood.

"Nor would I," Remus smiled deviously and let the towel slip from his waist. Stalking forward, he took Severus' hand and led them back into the showers.

Severus had been pinned against the shower walls for quite awhile, hot water running down his body as Remus pressed forward yet again for another demanding, breath-stealing kiss, when Remus finally spoke again.

"You do realize the game will be an annual occurrence?"

Severus smirked. "Good. That gives me a whole year to think up your punishment for when you lose again."

Remus chuckled. "So you think you won the game we were playing, do you?" He purred into the other man's ear.

Severus moaned as Remus pressed closer. "I'm willing to call it a tie."

Remus swallowed any additional retorts that were coming by claiming Severus' lips yet again, which was indeed the best way to win against them.

Firefly Quill's Bio

Firefly first read Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban to her sister many moons ago, but blames her obsession on a most excellent professor who required Goblet of Fire as a text in her senior years as an English major. She serendipitously found the wonderfully encouraging Snupin fandom, and since then, can hardly ever be seen without her slashy notebook.

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Up To No Good by Isilidurs_Babe

❧ Here, where the world is quiet ❧

by busaikko

Severus' fortieth birthday began in what was euphemistically called a "safe house". He had to be grateful that it was not a cell in Azkaban and that he was not, technically, a criminal, despite the fact that he was not allowed out. Harry Potter had testified to the Wizengamot about Severus' role in Voldemort's defeat, and Severus had allowed his brain to be tipped out into a Pensieve and perused by the curious. At the time, he had simply wanted to avoid execution.

Seven months later, he had taught himself to walk short distances without crutches, learnt to live without pain-killing potions, and redefined his goals. He no longer wanted to be simply alive. He wanted to live. His old world was gone. He must therefore build a new one, and he had one open option.

After he made his decision, he stood in front of the mirror and surveyed his dubious assets. His robes were shabby, but clean. His hair was cut short, still as black as ever. His face was drawn and pale, which made his nose seem twice as large. He had never despaired enough to grow facial hair.

He pulled his shoulders back, conjuring an air of authority as easily as breathing. A teacher was an actor, after

all, and an actor demanded an audience. He limped to the door and jerked it open. The guard outside sloshed coffee all over herself as she jumped to her feet.

He hadn't meant to sneer at the girl again, but she brought out the contempt in him.

"Send word to Shackbolt," Severus said. "Tell him I'll accept his offer."

Two weeks later, Kingsley — now with the new Magical Education Department — Apparated Severus to the end of a narrow, cracking road, in front of a cement building with the pretentious name *Scrimgeour Lycanthrope Academy*. From the street the building appeared to squat, stained and ugly, on the far side of a pitted car park littered with broken glass and surrounded by a rusting chain-link fence. Inside the enchanted gate, Severus found himself on a wide strip of well-kept grass, with pots of geraniums lining the walkway. In the centre of the grass sat a slide and swing set, shiny new.

Kingsley led him through a brief tour of the school. The upstairs had baths and dormitories for boys and girls and tiny bedrooms for staff. Downstairs, Severus was shown the kitchen and modest dining hall, the cupboard-sized library, and the child-sized cell block.



The rooms stank of disinfectant and the walls were uniformly painted an unattractive straw colour, but it would do. He said so to Kingsley, who clapped him on the shoulder, handed him the keys, and left with the two Aurors who had been posted there pending Severus' arrival.

The residential students sat waiting in the northern classroom, obviously trying not to stare at him. He stared back at them, trying to match their faces to the copies of Registry records he had in his trunk.

His new students were so very small, thought Severus Snape, Headmaster. Their feet swung several inches off the floor. The youngest — Liam — was probably six or seven. No one knew, exactly. The Mather brothers, Reginald and Robert, were eight and ten. Morton was pale and slight, also eight. The two girls were Geraldine and Janet: they were both nine. From September first, the ten day-students would join them for lessons, but these six were unwanted by their families and the world.

Severus sympathised with them.

"Hello," he said, not condescending to give them a false smile. "My name is Severus Snape, and I will be Head of this school." He had nothing else to say to them, and he frowned. He needed to sit down, so he Summoned a chair and sat at the head of the table.

One werewolf had been bad enough, Severus thought. Now he had six of his very own.

His mandate was simple: *Provide them with Wolfsbane and daily occupation. Teach them as you see fit. Report any violent outbursts. Keep them away from regular people.* Which meant Wizards, Severus supposed. The school was well-hidden, but the Muggle high street was less than a kilometre away.

Severus glared at Lupin, who had come with the children like a trading card with a chocolate frog. Remus smiled faintly and raised an eyebrow.

"Why don't you tell me about yourselves and what you've been studying?" Severus said finally.

Panicked, babbling chaos erupted, which Remus cut through with a sharp cough. He fixed Severus with a steady, cautioning look and directed the children to answer in turns.

In the next half an hour Severus learnt that Liam did not speak or respond to most outside stimulation, and that Geraldine couldn't hear. He learnt that Robert and Reginald liked Pocket Monsters, that Janet loathed spiders and black pudding, and that Morton suffered from

night terrors. He learnt that the house elf who did all the cooking wore a pink turban and sparkly toe rings and answered to Miss Tiffany, and that Remus had taught the children at least fifty fart jokes in sign language.

"Glad to see their education is in good hands," Severus said, and Remus signed something at him that must have included the word *fart* because the boys fell over themselves laughing.

After that, Morton wanted to see his wand, and Robert wanted to know why Severus walked with crutches and could he try. While Robert took a turn about the room, Severus told the cautionary tale of the Crumple-Horned Snorkack stampede, and the children were gratifyingly impressed, if giggly. Geraldine asked where he'd lived before, and whether he was a werewolf, and if he were married, and did he have any children. Severus rested a bit while fingers flew, sorting all this information out, and then Janet asked if he'd ever killed anyone.

"Yes," he said, and they all looked — what? Not relieved, not pleased; comforted, perhaps, that they were not alone.

"I'm deaf," Geraldine said solemnly. Her speaking voice was too loud and flat, but Severus thought perhaps she had not been deaf from birth. She pointed at Severus. "You're —"

"Crippled?" he asked dryly.

She made a gesture like the wadding up and binning of an offensive paper.

"Lame," he suggested, and watched as Remus explained.

She nodded at that, and then looked at Remus with a mischievous smile.

The smallest boy — Liam — waved his arms wildly, and Remus buried his head in his arms.

Morton — who had been taking his turn with Severus' crutches — swung over and tugged at Severus' sleeve. "He means Mr Lupin's the only one whose farts don't stink," he translated, and Severus tried very hard to look stern as the room erupted in laughter again.

Much later, after dinner and bathtime and storytime and bedtime, Severus followed Remus down the stairs to the dining hall. Remus waved his hand and Transfigured two of the folding chairs into comfortable reclining chairs.

"Strong drink?" he asked, and Severus groaned an affirmative as he sank into his chair.

"Talk to me," Severus said, sipping at the whisky that appeared on a side table next to him. "How are they academically?"

Remus leant back with a rueful smile. "I managed to teach them some simple reading and sums while I was with Greyback. We didn't have any books or writing materials," he added, and Severus wondered what he'd done: scratched lessons in the dirt with pointed sticks? He wouldn't have put it past the man. "They excel at languages. Geraldine's mother taught us all signing — the children are quite fluent. We had a Romanian and an Italian werewolf, and the kids picked up enough to be able to hold simple conversations."

"The day students arrive on Wednesday," Severus said, frowning. "Do you have a curriculum? How will the classes be divided? Will these children — " he waved upwards with a grimace — "be able to keep up with those who have spent nearly a year recuperating with normal families?"

"It's not a fair comparison," Remus said, speaking softly but looking angry. "The children whose families took them back were the least damaged to begin with. With counselling and outreach support, the lycanthropy is easy to deal with. Easier, at least, than psychological problems or deafness or guilt. Janet and Liam are our only orphans. Sometimes the parents come to visit, but they always say the same thing when they leave. *I just can't.*"

Remus shrugged. "You should have seen the children in the beginning. It's been an uphill job just to get them to eat with forks and to laugh and play. Things like toothbrushes and hairbrushes — they find these baffling. Baths were anathema until we discovered yellow rubber ducks and Bertie Bott's edible bubble bath."

Severus had a deplorable perverse streak; deplorable in the sense that it would make him work far harder than he was required to. The Ministry expected him to be merely a warder of the werewolf children. He therefore made his own goals high in the face of their low expectations.

"I want them all to go on to Hogwarts," Severus said, and watched Remus' eyebrows rise. "Or an equivalent Muggle school. They have nothing but their wits — it would be criminal not to make sure that they are as sharp as possible."

"Minerva already has the three oldest," Remus said, running one hand through his hair. Severus tried not to watch him. He didn't think the silver looked distinguished at all. He certainly didn't think of how those fingers would feel running through his own hair. *Why did it have to be Lupin, of all people?* "They've spent the summer receiving remedial tutoring."

"Good. It's not impossible, merely difficult. You'll be in charge of the curriculum," he said. "You know them best."

"They're behind in everything," Remus said, frowning. "Even Robert can barely read."

Severus fixed him with a look. "Are they so stupid, Lupin, that we needn't bother attempting to educate them? We could just build cages."

"Liam's village kept him in a cage," Remus said, his voice stripped of all emotion, "for years, and fed him nothing but raw meat. Greyback was furious when he found out. He thought he was spreading the *gift* of lycanthropy, not the curse."

"So prove the ignorant bastards wrong," Severus said, and toasted Remus with the remainder of his whisky.



September was chaos. Remus evaluated all the children and placed them in groups based on ability instead of age. Insult was taken, tears were shed, and fierce rivalries took root.

Remus persuaded Severus to double Miss Tiffany's salary and put her in charge of teaching sport and Domestic Charms. Severus had thought it mad to have two to three hours of organised outdoor playtime each day: they were children, and children played naturally, or so he thought. After watching Miss Tiffany spend weeks untying her classes of incompetent rope-skippers, he decided that these were the most unnatural children he'd ever seen.

Remus, who patiently weighed and measured each child every day, was pleased as they started to show signs of growth. Severus brewed the Wolfsbane potion each month, dosages carefully calibrated to tiny body weights, and each full moon the school yard was full of small, sleepy wolves, herded by the great grey one. Severus had never thought of Remus as an alpha type, but he had to admit that Remus played the role well.

The students had a definite taste for red meat prior to the full moons, and Miss Tiffany requested that either her food budget be doubled or the school keep its own cows. She also noted that his charges would outgrow their clothes before the term was out.

Severus made several trips to the Ministry to wring more money out of Kingsley and began to consider soliciting private donations. He saw Tonks once and made the mistake of mentioning it to Remus, biting his tongue two seconds too late to hold the words back.

Remus looked stricken for a moment. He ran one hand through his hair and mustered a small smile that wrenched Severus' heart.

"How's she doing?"

"She's looking well," Severus said. He didn't want Remus

to think about Tonks. "Her hair's back to normal, for her, and she's not so peaky. We didn't talk about you," he added.

"Probably best not to," Remus said. "What's she doing these days?"

"She's still at the Ministry. I think she's going into politics."

Remus grinned. "I can see that. You should cultivate her."

"She said she'd send some things for the children. Plush animals. Roller skates."

"She has a good heart," Remus said, and looked straight at Severus. "So do you, you know."

"Idiot," Severus said, and refused to allow himself to flush.

Besides learning how to behave like children and eating twice their body weights each day, Severus' residents also began to hold their own against the day students. Remus warned Severus against making it seem like a competition, of dividing the students into "us versus them," but Severus couldn't help silently cheering as Janet recited her multiplication tables or Reggie correctly named all the plants in the school's herb garden.

Liam was the only child who made no progress. He enjoyed colouring the pictures that Robbie and Reggie drew for him (Pocket Monsters, of course: Remus thought they had a natural aptitude for Care of Magical Creatures). He sang the alphabet song, the Chudley Cannons fight song, and numerous wireless jingles loudly, replacing all the words with *fart*. As the other children blossomed, Liam became more and more prone to temper tantrums.

It came to a head in early November. Morton had braided pink ribbons into Liam's hair, and Janet had laughed at him when he sat down to supper. The table was thrown over, chairs were kicked aside, and the dining hall window exploded outside in a surge of wild magic. Severus was on his feet and across the room in four angry strides.

He grabbed Liam and spun him around, taking the boy's chin and forcing him to look up at him. He raised his wand. He was partly aware of the other children's horrified gazes, but he was more concerned with keeping the touch of Legilimency as light as possible. He had never seen a mind so disorganised: it made him itch to tidy up, but he controlled himself.

What do you want? he thought as clearly as he could, and he was caught in a wave of cold-sweet-smooth memories.

"Ice cream?" Severus asked, letting Liam go. Liam's face lit. Severus glanced at Remus, busy with the destruction caused by six bowls of curry and rice and the stony panic of five children who thought he was going to beat Liam. "Ice cream day is next week."

Liam's face clouded over again, and he grabbed Severus' hand, slapping it against his chin. *Not stupid*, Severus thought.

"If you help me fix that window," Severus said, "I'll take you with me to the shop to buy the ice cream."

Liam grinned and held out his hand for Severus' wand. Remus looked alarmed as Severus handed it over. Liam pointed the wand at the window, muttered *fart, fart* in a fairly good impersonation of Severus' voice, and handed Severus back his wand as the glass shards flew up and knitted themselves back into place.

"Thank you," Severus said.

"The boy is a natural Slytherin," Severus said that night after the children were in bed.

"Did you ever wonder how the whole farting fixation began?" Remus asked. There was a wicked glint in his eye.

"No," Severus said, and opened a book.

"Liam used to scream it for hours when he was upset. *Far, far, far, far*. I don't recall who made the first fart joke, but it stopped Liam, and eventually he learnt to laugh. I was just grateful that they hadn't chosen a worse bodily function." Remus stopped speaking and put a hand over the page Severus was looking at. "Farfar is Swedish for grandfather," he said, and Severus remembered the sharp insistency of Liam's gaze. He looked up at Remus, who shrugged. "It's my personal theory, of course. I'm likely wrong. But I didn't want you to feel insulted," Remus said.

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Oh, grandfather is better?"

"Touché."

Severus frowned. "He's got the wrong name for a Swede. He should be Leif, or Thor, or Rolf."

"Farfar," Remus said, and snickered.

"Blow it out your arse."

"The children are having a bad effect on you, Severus," Remus said, shaking his head in mock sorrow.

Severus preferred to think that he was having a good effect on *them* — at the very least on Liam. He made the boy his official shopping assistant, in charge of the old push chair that they used to roll groceries up the hill from the high street. Twice a week Liam accompanied him, thin sharp fingers digging into his arm just

above the cuff of the crutch — *not unlike a date with a Grindylow*, Severus thought. Liam hid behind Severus as he spoke to the shopkeepers, only emerging if they offered him sweets or biscuits.

Severus did not use Legilimency on the boy again. It was highly unethical, certainly, but it also promoted laziness. When Liam brought Severus' hand to his chin, Severus asked him to speak.

Liam, of course, said nothing, or *fart*. But once Severus had felt the out-questing of Liam's mind, which he promptly blocked.

Devious Slytherin devil, he thought, and wondered, with a pang, what Albus would have made of the boy.



Winter came suddenly, and with it runny noses and hacking coughs. The Itching Down Witches' Auxiliary donated several boxes of multi-coloured yarns, and Miss Tiffany taught all the students to knit sweaters and mufflers. The glee of midwinter and Christmas came and went, and grey days of rain led to drifting snow and hard ice underfoot.

Severus sneezed into his own muffler (sober black, a present from Kingsley), took one step forward, and found himself lying on his back with spots of bright pain in front of his eyes.

It took several minutes for Severus to get his breath back. "Ow," he said finally to Liam, who was staring down at him with eyes enormous in his thin face. Severus pushed himself up on his elbow to see if anything was broken. "Can you go fetch Lupin?" Severus asked. Liam coughed, spat, looked at Severus, and coughed again, swiping his sweater sleeve across his face and smearing snot up into his hair. "Go on, then," Severus said, and lay back in the snow. The cold was rather restful, actually. After a long moment, Liam turned and began walking unsteadily up the hill.

It was Miss Tiffany who came. She walked out of thin air, waved Severus up with something akin to *Mobilicorpus*, and carried him through a space that was far gentler than the Apparation in-between to his own room, where Remus was waiting.

"No broken bones," Miss Tiffany said in her well-rehearsed BBC 1 English. She handed Severus a frothy glass full of potion, lemony and hot. "Just a nasty tumble." She removed Severus' boots, absently shining them to a high gloss as she crossed to set them in a wardrobe that rustled itself into neatly-pressed splendour the instant she opened the door. "There now — must run, the children are making the supper." She

winked out with a cheeky grin.

"Are you in pain?" Remus asked, with an indefinable look.

"What do you think?" Severus said, fighting the urge to shift. If he didn't move for the next eight hours, everything would be fine.

Remus crossed the room and perched on the edge of the bed. He pressed his hands to either side of Severus' knee, and Severus hissed.

"Does that hurt, or help?"

"A little more up and — yes, there," Severus said. Remus was always freezing — the children teased him about it — but the cold of his hands counteracted the painfully hot swelling. Severus relaxed into the touch. "I see you are useful for some things."

Remus snorted and moved his hands slowly, carefully, over the swelling. Severus watched him with half-lidded eyes.

He had been used to seeing Remus under the dual stresses of war and poverty. Remus' face had been lined with worry, with dark shadows under his eyes, and his mouth had been tight with all the things he couldn't say. He had been whip-thin, his bones too obvious.

Remus seemed almost like a stranger these days. He was relaxed, easy-going and quick to laugh. He looked ten years younger, healthy and strong, enough that it made Severus' heart ache to see him.

Right now he could see both Remuses, the new, handsome one frowning down at his hands with a single-minded concentration reminiscent of the old Remus' intensity during the war.

Severus' body hummed to life in response to being the centre of Remus' attention. His skin prickled, sensitive to Remus' touch, and he missed a breath as Remus' fingers slid up ever so slightly.

No, he thought at his body with fierce futility. *No, this is not fair.*

He tried to think of Tonks, of how everyone still avoided saying Remus' name around her. Tears and awkward silences, that's what thinking of Remus Lupin lead to, and he would not follow the same path. He would not — could not — think of those hands gliding higher across his bare skin, or of the way Remus' hair would fall if he were to bend to relieve the tension in Severus' cock.

He tried to push Remus away, but Remus stepped back the moment he raised his hands, watching him. No, Severus would not read desire in that intense gaze. Self-delusion was an ugly thing.

"Get out," Severus said. "I don't appreciate being pawed, Lupin." His throat burned as he saw hurt and bitter understanding flash over Remus' face.

Bitter *mis*understanding, more likely, but he'd be damned if he would expose himself any further to Remus' repugnant pity.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," Remus said, his voice hoarser than usual.

"Go away *now*," Severus clarified. "Lock the door on your way out."

The moment the door shut behind Remus Severus ripped his trousers — damnable garment — open and began fisting his cock desperately. Shutting his eyes, he let the fantasy take over: Remus' mouth on his nipples, the brush of his hair across Severus' stomach, the warm weight arching over him. He imagined what he would do to Remus, how Remus would beg for his touch, his hair dark with sweat and mouth kiss-swollen.

Severus shouted his orgasm into the pillow; then, to his horror, through the blissful buzz he heard Remus' voice: "Severus — are you — *oh*."

"Fuck," Severus said, grabbing the edge of the duvet and pulling it over to cover his crotch.

"You called me," Remus said, accusatory. "Twice."

Severus narrowed his eyes to glare. "I imagine I did. Out, and this time *stay* out."

Remus' chin rose slightly. "I'll bring you up your supper. While I'm gone you can make yourself decent. We — we need to talk." He was gone before Severus could even protest his lack of appetite.

Severus waited a moment to see if it were possible to die of shame; apparently not. He fumbled his wand off the nightstand and cast a cleaning charm so strong that the whole room whiffed of roses. He pushed his pillow up against the headboard and slid, careful of his leg, to a sitting position. He Summoned a book and stared down at letters that swirled and danced like the snow.

He was conscious of having screwed up, again, and of the sacrifice that would need to be made. The fixation with Lupin was no longer harmless. He would have to let it go. He wondered which talk Remus planned on giving: the *you sick bastard one* or the *I'm flattered that you see me that way, but it really wouldn't work one*.

There was a knock at the door, and Severus said, "Come," and then could have bitten his tongue. He really was becoming a dirty old man. Pathetic.

Remus waved his hand and a tray appeared on the nightstand, soup and toast.

"Is it poisoned?" Severus asked.

"No such luck." Remus crossed his arms and leant back against the door. "I'll assume you forgot the Silencing Charm."

"Just as you forgot to knock before coming through the door."

"I thought you were in pain, you berk," Remus said. Severus felt a small stab of pleasure for Remus' concern, and a matching stab of pain because it didn't — couldn't — mean anything anymore.

"How long have you thought of me that way?" Remus asked, and Severus lowered the mug of soup he'd been thinking of sipping.

"Oh, years. Since you taught at Hogwarts," he said, looking up into Remus' face finally, the disgust he felt for himself leaching into the words. "It was purely physical, I assure you. I'm sure you find it repulsive —"

"I don't," Remus said, and Severus stared at him in disbelief. "I find it frustrating, but not disturbing. If you'd asked me — anything — back then, I'd have said yes, you know."

Severus could hear his own heart race. "You're not — what about Tonks, then?"

Remus laughed, raking his hands through his hair in a familiar gesture of frustration. "Apples and oranges, Severus. Some of us like both."

"Ah. Black, then?"

Remus glared. Severus couldn't help thinking that Remus was really quite incandescent when he was incensed. "We're talking about *you*. When were you planning on telling me? *Were* you planning on telling me? Or do you find the fantasies fulfilment enough?" Remus crossed his arms and ducked his head. "I hope so. Because it's too late now."

"It doesn't have to be," Severus said; one of the stupidest things he had ever said in his life. Remus' eyes, snapping up to his, were wounded. "Why would I have told you? I might have lusted for you, but I hated you."

Remus looked even more pained. "You don't hate me now?"

Severus set the mug of soup down with a sigh. "I don't. It's taken us over twenty years to reach the point of friendship. That's more valuable to me than any infatuation." He shrugged. "Sex — sex can be got anywhere."

"Speak for yourself," Remus muttered.

"I'm not Tonks. You don't need to send me packing just because you're — If you can forgive my... lack of judgement, we can put it behind us."

Remus nodded and slid down the door to sit with his arms wrapped around his legs. He looked like a teenager in the pose, so very young. "You deserve better."

"If you *ever* try and set me up on a date with some man I will hex you stupid." Severus caught Remus' eye. "This is not common knowledge. I am a teacher."

"A damned good one, at that." Remus smiled. "Don't worry — wild dogs couldn't drag it from me." He sighed and deftly changed the subject to Liam's dramatic arrival at the school and the three-ring circus which had ensued as the students were put in charge of the kitchen. Severus let the awkward conversation be buried under the gossip, but he couldn't help but notice that Remus hadn't put him off firmly. Hadn't put him off at all, really. Had said that he wouldn't have said no.

He finished his supper, said good night to Remus, and lay in the dark of his room wondering if it were a good idea — whether it would even be possible — to seduce Remus.

Remus woke him up at half four, rapping sharply on the door and calling his name. Severus stared at the clock, confused. Had Remus given him a sleeping draught? Was it tea-time? But outside the curtains it was icy black.

"Why are you haunting me?" Severus asked, opening his door and yawning at Remus who — damn him — looked as wide-awake as ever. "Begone."

"Have you had Mage Fire?" Remus asked. "Or the potion for immunisation?"

Severus summoned his robe. "Who's got it?"

Remus held out his arm and stood firm. "It can be deadly. Are you immune?"

"All the Hogwarts teachers are. I brewed the potion myself." Severus summoned his box of emergency potions and his copy of *Mother Merrilee's Grimoire of Kids' Complaints*.

Remus relaxed. "I've Floo'ed St Mungo's. They're sending over a mediwitch as soon as they can. But it seems to be every child save Geraldine. Her mother may have given her the potion."

"Why didn't we think of it?" Severus said.

"How could anyone *not* protect their children?" Remus said bitterly, and Severus wanted to say, *It's not your fault. You kept them from the wolves, the dogs, the Ministry, hunger, cold, and madness — who would have thought?*

Who, indeed. The blame, to be fair, was his. All the early warning signs had been there: the cold-like symptoms,

the rosy slapped-cheeks glow, the hyperactivity. A deadly secret, hiding in plain sight.

The door to the boys' dorm was labelled *Quarantine*, and Janet's bed had been moved in. The windows stood open; even so, the children burned as the flame-like rash spread from torsos out to extremities and up to cover their faces.

Robbie was wide-eyed with delirium, and Remus went straight to him, saying soothing things, stroking his forehead, and holding his hands when they flailed up at invisible assailants. Miss Tiffany cradled Liam's head as he vomited up thin yellow fluid. Morton slept with his mouth open to pant for breath, and Janet and Reggie shifted irritably, thin hands and feet, laced with red and striking out against the air. Severus backed out into the hallway. He took a deep breath for fortitude and went to Floo the parents of the day students and Kingsley and open the door for the mediwitch, who had arrived via broombulance.

Taking the mediwitch's advice on dosages and the tolerances of small children, Severus brewed a potion that brought the fever down from dangerous to merely enervating. There were other potions that could be used once the fever was down ("No Pepperup," the mediwitch cautioned, "as it can lead to brain inflation." Severus wondered if she realised she was quoting his own lecture back at him). Geraldine had refused to leave the school, and she proved very clever in the lab, with a good grasp of potions theory and a refreshing lack of cheery babble. Remus and Tiffany forced Severus to sleep, insisting that all would still be well five hours later.

Which was why, on the fourth morning, his heart sank like lead when Remus woke him up in the predawn grey.

"It's Liam," Remus said, and Severus was by the boy's bedside before he'd even properly opened his eyes. Liam's breathing was laboured; he coughed in his sleep and turned an alarming blue before Remus could get him settled. His eyes were sunken, his skin the colour of old parchment, and he was nearly as thin as he'd been when he was rescued.

Severus shook his head. "Was it the potion? Was the dosage wrong? He's so small." He reached out without thinking and set his hand on Liam's head, the shining brown curls looking inappropriate on a body so still.

"Don't blame yourself," Remus said sharply. "Blame Greyback, if you must blame someone."

"Oh, there's not a day goes by that I don't wish a slow and painful death on that monster," Severus said, and then looked at Remus in chagrin. Remus raised one

eyebrow. *Is it good or bad that he's so familiar with me putting my foot in my mouth that he takes it in his stride?* Severus thought.

"Slow and painful deaths are overrated," Remus said, and smiled, baring his canines. "But he *is* going to suffer in the afterlife for what he did to the children."

"It won't help."

"No. It won't." Remus reached out in apology. "I know you love him, Severus. But it may be too little, too late."

Severus let his lip curl and blinked hard, batting away Remus' hand. "Are you going to tell me he'll be better off? Going to a better place?"

"That would be hypocritical of me, don't you think? I believe in fighting to survive, you know that. But — all we can do is make the best of what we are given. You were given sixteen tragedies. No one knows better than I how hard you've worked to overcome the children's pasts." Remus caught Severus' gaze and held it. "Liam loved it here, Severus. He smiled and laughed, he had friends — almost family. He'd never been happy before. You gave him refuge and freedom. You gave him his childhood back. He loved you. I won't hear you say you did anything wrong."

"Do not," Severus said, cutting each word off viciously, "talk about him as if he's dead."

They fell into silence at that. Severus sat in the hard chair by Liam's bed and held his hand. Remus stood close by, occasionally wandering off to check on the other students. Severus must have dozed off at some point. He woke when a rush of cold passed through him and didn't even need to open his eyes to know that Liam had died.

"I'm so sorry," Remus said, voice hoarse and low. "I'll go wake the others."

The children gathered around, sleepy faces pinched and bare feet curled on the icy floorboards. *Slippers*, Severus thought. *Who thought we'd be good at this?*

Remus spoke to each child, quietly, and the questions they asked made Severus tired and angry and blindly sad.

Will we all die?

Where did Liam go?

Do we have to feed him to the dogs now?

Is he going to be a ghost?

Remus said he hoped that all of them would stay healthy, that Liam was in a better place (Severus gritted his teeth), that Liam would be buried, that Liam didn't need to haunt anyone: his work here was finished.

Janet twisted her hands in her nightgown and asked, "Will Liam get a rock?"

"A gravestone?" Remus asked, and met Severus' eyes. Severus tipped his head, and they took that for a yes.

Geraldine waved for attention, her face scrunched up to hold the tears back: *We don't know the right name or birthdate to put on. How will God find him?*

Remus squatted down to look her in the eyes and signed as he spoke. "God already found him, love. The gravestone's for us, so we can have a place to talk to Liam."

Reggie coughed and wiped his mouth. "All the dumb kid ever said was *fart*."

There was a small pause, empty of Liam's croaking voice, and then, finally, the children began to cry.



The funeral was small, as was the grave. Liam was buried near the rosebushes behind the building. Every so often Severus spotted a small form sneaking back to the play yard; later, he would find acorns, snowballs, smooth round rocks placed carefully around the gravestone.

"It's rather pagan," Remus said, examining a twig that stood like a three-legged horse by the grave, "but it's good for them. They've never really had a chance to mourn before."

When the ground softened they put in borders of flowers. Even Severus found that he could talk, sometimes, about Liam as if he'd been a boy who died, instead of *Liam, gone forever*.

"You *will* see him again," Remus said, when in the middle of a reminiscence Severus' voice went dry. "It's what they say, isn't it? That all loves are reunited on the other side."

"Not much comfort when all your loves are dead, now is it, Lupin," Severus said.

"I suppose it wouldn't be a comfort to tell you that I've come to love you back," Remus said, his eyes sharp and bright, and Severus felt the universe swing into an alignment perfect and forever unreachable. "Cruel even to say so, considering."

"I wish — " Severus said, and stopped, biting his lip in frustration. "I would like to touch you," he said finally. Remus got up from the chair by the fire and crossed the room with his slow, careful, silent steps. He stopped in front of Severus and cocked his head, smiling wistfully.

"I wish you could, too," Remus said.

"Can you feel desire?" Severus asked, and Remus laughed.

"All I feel is desire," he said. "That's what a ghost is, a triumph of desire over death."

"Touch me," Severus said. Remus' face wavered like the illusion of water on a hot road in summer. He stretched out one hand, cupping Severus' cheek. "You're always so cold," Severus said, and reached up to cover Remus' hand with his own. His fingers slipped easily into the hungry chill of Remus' hand.

"Cold as the grave," Remus said, and pulled his hand back. "I don't want to give you frostbite."

"I wanted to visit your grave," Severus said.

Remus shrugged. "There wasn't really anything left to bury. You know what's under these robes. Or rather, what's not."

Severus shivered, and he saw Remus' hands twitch, then clench. "I saw you die," he said, and Remus' eyes snapped to his.

"I should offer my condolences, then. It was a spectacularly ugly death, I think."

"It was," Severus said. He'd only recognised Remus by the sky-blue patch on the elbow of his robes. He'd wanted to kill Remus himself when he'd realised the body the dogs were devouring was still alive.

"Don't remember that," Remus said, and this time he did reach out, pressing the tip of one finger against Severus' forehead.

"You said — " Severus whispered, and Remus leant down to catch the words. "You stayed here for the children." He swallowed. "The children are going to be fine. But — I —"

Remus looked agonised. "I can't stay for you. When I died — Merlin, I didn't even know I *had* died — all I could think of was keeping the children safe. When they are all safe, I think I'll fade away like an outgrown imaginary friend. I'm theirs, as much as I'd like to be yours." He cocked an eyebrow as he looked down at Severus. "I'll be glad to die completely. But until I do —"

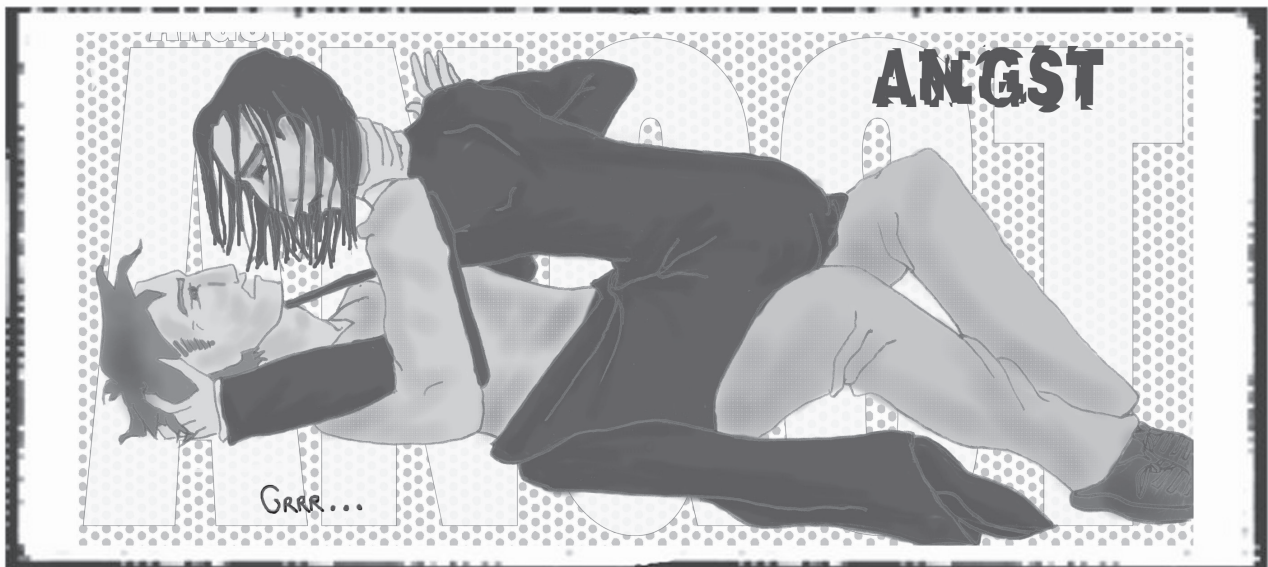
Remus leant closer and covered Severus' mouth with his own. Severus kissed back and pretended that it wasn't like kissing the wind.

♥ busaikko's bio ♥

It is not unusual for busaikko to have several cages of beetles and caterpillars at the top of her futon. In RL she is a teacher, translator, and proof-reader, and she sleeps with Auntie Marion's naked rugby player whenever she feels like it. She loves poetry, romantic walks along the beach at sunset, and vegetables fresh from the garden, and she is too sexy for her hat. The title for this story is from Algernon's *The Garden of Proserpine*.

curtseys

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Budding Romance
by Karasu Hime

Things To Do With the Rest of Your Life When You Haven't Been Killed by the Dark Lord

by McKay

“Ever notice that ‘what the hell’ is always the right decision?” ~ Marilyn Monroe

To say that Severus Snape was surprised to find the war over and himself alive was something of an understatement. He had fully expected to be pushing up the daisies, gruesomely slain by one side or the other before it was all over. He had resigned himself to it, actually, to the point of imagining his martyr's death when he couldn't sleep at night, drawing up his will, and making discreet arrangements with Kaskett & Toombe for the kind of funeral he wanted, which included professional mourners and a message to be included in his obituary that said, in a nutshell, “Bugger the lot of you.”

After his arrest, he still expected to be murdered “mysteriously” while in prison or sentenced to death for treason, thus his stunned amazement continued when he found himself ushered into a small room where Moody, Shackbolt, and a drab little Ministry drone were waiting not to sentence or execute him, but to exonerate him. He was told about the evidence brought forth that proved he had taken an Unbreakable Vow of loyalty to Dumbledore in 1981 and that Dumbledore's murder had been a staged event, partly assisted suicide because Dumbledore was dying of a curse and partly a ruse. The Headmaster's plan had been to secure Severus' position within the Dark Lord's ranks so he could smuggle information back to the Order by indirect means as well as chip away at the Dark Lord's power base from within — and it had worked.

They offered him a deal: testify against all captured Death Eaters and be pardoned, receiving only a slap on the wrist for casting an Unforgivable Curse.

Bemused, Severus agreed. He drifted through the following weeks as if in a dream. He was kept in protective custody while the trials were on-going, but he had little faith in the Ministry's ability to keep him alive, and he waited for the penny to drop — namely for some shadowy figure to assassinate him while he was being

escorted to or from the Ministry trials. But it kept not happening, and he kept waking up every morning and living through another day until the trials were over, the Dark Lord's loyal followers were all dead or in prison, and he was *still* alive.

It was enough to solidify his opinion that Fate was a fickle bitch who delighted in making humans scratch their heads and wonder what had just happened.

On a warm, sunny day in late July, Severus walked out of the Ministry a free man. His home, bank vault, and miscellaneous belongings left behind at Hogwarts had been confiscated, but now they were his again. He didn't have a job, true, and it was unlikely he would be allowed to return to teaching at Hogwarts even if he wanted to, but he had a sizable nest egg saved up, which meant he had time to consider his options.

The problem was, he didn't know what he wanted to do. He had spent so long bracing himself for death that he didn't know how to approach the long and healthy life stretching out before him. He had prepared for every eventuality except that one.

But Severus was both a pragmatist and an orderly soul, thus he sat down at his kitchen table one morning with a quill and parchment and prepared to make a list: “Things To Do With the Rest of My Life”. He sat for a good fifteen minutes with his quill poised over the parchment and not a single word written.

What did he want? Money?

Not really. He wanted enough to live comfortably, but he wasn't unfamiliar with a life of frugality, and he could make do as long as he had enough to pay his bills and splurge on dinner out once in a while.

Sex?

Oh, that was good. He nodded and wrote down “sex” at the top of the list.

Another fifteen minutes later, he hadn't come up with anything to add to it except “eat really good curry when-

ever possible”, and he scratched it out, wadded up the parchment, and threw it in the rubbish bin.

The problem was, there wasn’t anything he really wanted to do with his life anymore, because he had already done it. He had spent the last couple of decades opposing the Dark Lord and trying to cram knowledge into the thick skulls of the lazy brats who passed through his classroom so they would be able to defend themselves when the time came. Now the thing that had shaped every aspect of his life since he was seventeen years old was gone. Over. Finished. His job was done, and he was obsolete. He had no goals, no motivation, no purpose.

For the first time in twenty years, he was utterly free and could do whatever he damned well pleased, and when that realization sank in — *really* sank in — it was as if something had fallen into place. He *was* free. The shackles of obligation and servitude that had bound him for so long were now gone. He could do whatever he wanted with the rest of his life, because there was no one controlling him or placing expectations on him, and it didn’t matter what he did.

“What the hell,” he said to the empty air, and with that, his new life philosophy was born.

He started by putting his house at Spinner’s End up for rent. He considered selling it, but it wasn’t exactly a prime location, and he knew he wouldn’t get much. If he rented, on the other hand, he could probably get someone in quickly, and it would be steady income he could count on each month until he found a job.

The next thing he did was find himself a small but cozy flat in a town further south within easy traveling distance to the sea without being so close that it was overrun by tourists. It was a Muggle town, but that didn’t bother him; he had grown up among Muggles, after all, and he knew how to fit in. Indeed, considering the fact that a large portion of the Wizarding World was treating him like a pariah in spite of his pardon and cooperation in convicting the captured Death Eaters, he was more inclined to invest his time in the Muggle world. What the hell — he didn’t care about living or working in the Wizarding world anymore anyway.

The next thing he did was buy some new clothes. Muggle clothes, no less, including jeans and a heather grey jumper rather than a black one, because what the hell. He had worn black for decades, and it was time for a change.

He manufactured Muggle identification documents and certification, and he found a job teaching maths at a boy’s school, which was enough like teaching at Hogwarts to feel comfortable. By the time October rolled

around, he had his life settled enough to be content and to feel as if he had a purpose again, although he was still making his decisions based on the “what the hell” principle.

Which was why he decided to sabotage the Tonks-Lupin wedding.

He still subscribed to *The Daily Prophet* just to keep an eye on things, and he noticed the wedding announcement in the society section with the headline, “Auror to Wed Werewolf!” There was a photograph of the couple; in it, Tonks clutched Lupin’s arm and beamed, but Lupin’s placid smile didn’t quite reach his eyes. To Severus, he looked lost, and the longer Severus stared at the photograph, the more he thought, “What the hell”. Sex had been at the top of his To Do list, after all, and Lupin was a prime candidate for a Discrete Arrangement between Gentlemen. They were the same age, they shared a history, and Lupin was intelligent enough that Severus would be able to tolerate his company outside of bed, unlike the young idiots who frequented the clubs. The club boys were foolish, naive, and lacked proper appreciation of punk, which diminished them to little more than unwashed heathens in Severus’ opinion. At least he could be certain Lupin didn’t think the history of music began with Cher and bloody ABBA.

It didn’t take much effort to find out where Lupin was living. In preparation for his visit, Severus tied his hair in a ponytail and dressed in a pair of jeans; a navy blue, long-sleeved tee shirt with the logo of some Muggle clothing company on the front; and trainers. What the hell — he wasn’t worried about impressing or intimidating anyone anymore. He had no need for it now, and besides, the look on Lupin’s face when he saw Severus was worth it.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Lupin asked once he had stopped gaping. “I can’t imagine this is a social call, but I can’t imagine what business we would have to discuss either.”

“Let me in, and I’ll tell you,” Severus replied.

Lupin studied him in silence for a moment, and then he nodded and stood aside to let Severus in his tiny flat. “Would you care for some tea?” he asked politely.

“No.” Severus prowled toward him, a predatory gleam in his eyes. “I’d rather have a good shag instead.”

“What?!”

For the first time since they had known each other, Severus had managed to fluster Remus Lupin and reduce him to red-faced stuttering, which Severus considered a personal triumph. If he could coax Lupin into bed as well, this might go down as the best day of his life.

"You heard me."

"Yes, I heard you." Lupin smoothed his hands down the front of his tatty old cardigan and drew in a deep breath, his composure returning as his usual mask of placid calm settled back into place. "I simply don't believe you. You don't like me, and I can't imagine you would want to touch me."

Severus inclined his head to acknowledge the point. "I think you're a spineless rug who needs a good shaking and a good shagging, not necessarily in that order. You've lived your life according to what others want too long, Lupin, and it needs to stop before you make the biggest mistake of your sorry existence."

"I assume you mean my marriage." Lupin folded his arms across his chest and fixed Severus with an even stare.

"I do." Severus matched him stare for stare. "Either you call it off, or I announce to the entire congregation that you're as gay as a picnic basket."

Lupin's eyes grew wide as saucers, and Severus could tell it took effort not to let his jaw drop. "You wouldn't!" he gasped, and then he caught himself and shook his head. "I mean — I'm not!"

"Oh, please." Severus gave him a look of pure disbelief. "I know what you and Regulus got up to behind greenhouse number three."

"I was curious, that's all." Lupin tightened his folded arms and hunched his shoulders, and he slanted a suspicious look at Severus. "Why do you care anyway? If you hate me so much and think I'm nothing more than a spineless rug, what does it matter to you what I do?"

"I hated Potter and Black," Severus corrected, holding up one finger. "I never hated you. I simply didn't respect you."

"Oh, that's comforting." Lupin rolled his eyes.

"I *could* respect you, however," Severus continued as if Lupin hadn't spoken. "But it will all depend on whether you have the nerve to take your life into your own hands for once."

"And if I don't, you'll out me again?" There was an edge of bitterness in Lupin's voice, and his lips twitched into a hard moue of annoyance.

"No, I retract that statement," Severus said. "If you actually go through with that wedding, you'll deserve whatever you get, up to and including a passel of pink-haired brats, and besides, I don't care to have you using me as a convenient scapegoat." Smirking, he advanced and poked Lupin's shoulder with his forefinger. "This is your last chance to take control of your life, and it is all up to you."

Lupin stepped back out of poking range and stared at him, his features creased in puzzled lines. "I still don't understand. Why now? Why me?"

"Because I've embraced a new philosophy, and when I saw your sad-eyed face in the newspaper, I decided you were the one most in need of it."

"And this new philosophy is...?"

"What the hell."

Lupin stared at him again. "That's it?"

Severus shrugged and spread his hands. "What more do you need? Every time a decision needs to be made, say to yourself, 'what the hell', and it will always be right."

"But that seems so selfish," Lupin said, frowning.

"So? Of all people, you and I are due for a little selfishness. You've been poor and persecuted, I've been used, we're both Dark enough to make normal people nervous. We deserve some self-indulgence."

"But—" The frown line between Lupin's brows deepened, and Severus rolled his eyes.

Talking wasn't getting him anywhere, so perhaps it was time to take action. What the hell.

Closing the distance between them, he captured Lupin's face between his hands and hauled him into a kiss, swallowing his soft squawk of protest and coaxing his lips apart until he relaxed at last. Lupin's mouth was warm and tasted of tea, and Severus enjoyed exploring at his leisure. It had been too long since he had indulged in the needs of the flesh, and the feel of Lupin's lips, soft and yielding, beneath his was enough to make long-banked need flare to life once more. He caressed Lupin's face with his thumbs, forgetting about Lupin's spinelessness, Tonks, the wedding — all of it — as he stroked Lupin's cheeks, palate, and tongue with his tongue. He didn't know if the quiet moans were coming from himself or Lupin, and he didn't care; all that mattered was that Lupin was kissing him back with mounting desperation that fueled his own hunger.

The kiss shifted from a slow exploration to an explosion of lust, both of them biting, slurping, sucking, their hands frantically yanking at buttons and hems, louder moans echoing off the walls as they sought and found bare skin. Severus herded Lupin to the nearest wall, bumping into furniture and stumbling along the way but not wanting to break the endless stream of kisses just to see where he was going, not when Lupin's mouth tasted better than anything Honeyduke's had to offer. He fumbled with the fastenings of Lupin's trousers and pushed them down, his groan muffled by Lupin's tongue

when he shoved his hand down Lupin's underpants and found a hard cock waiting for him.

His own cock was aching, straining against the confines of his jeans, but he didn't want to let go of Lupin's cock long enough to free it; Lupin was rocking his hips, soft, desperate noises escaping him as Severus stroked him, fisting him roughly and brushing his thumb across the tip to capture the leaking fluid. Suddenly, Lupin began tugging at the buttons on his fly; it seemed to take an eternity before Lupin had managed to unfasten them all and yank Severus' jeans down, letting his cock bob free, unfettered by underpants. Severus had had high hopes for this encounter, after all, and he hadn't been disappointed.

Severus broke away from the kiss at last, panting, the sound of their labored breathing filling his ears, and he buried his face against Lupin's neck, breathing in the rich, musky scent of skin and sweat, and he pumped his fist harder and faster, wanting Lupin's gasps to turn into staccato cries and reveling when they did. Lupin's body went taut, and he bucked his hips against Severus' hand, his eyes closed and mouth agape as he came, and Severus smirked, knowing this was far more persuasive an argument than his words could ever be.

But Lupin's fingers were wicked and clever, working Severus with a skill that made him wonder how much experience Lupin had had with other men, and in no time, he was thrusting mindlessly against Lupin and coming hard, the blinding pleasure of release wrenching a harsh shout from his throat. Gasping, he sagged against Lupin, letting both the wall and Lupin support him, and he felt Lupin's ragged breath puffing hot against his cheek, stirring his hair.

"Good God, Remus," he murmured when he had caught his breath enough to speak at last, and he could feel his heart returning to its normal pace. "How long has it been since you've been with a man?"

Lupin gave him an odd, searching look, and then he smiled slightly. "Not since Regulus, actually." His smile turned rueful. "I seem to have a particular fondness for dark haired Slytherins."

"Then what the hell are you doing marrying Nymphadora Tonks when you and I could be doing this on a regular basis?" Severus demanded.

"I'm not clear on exactly what it is you're offering, Severus." Lupin nudged him back, and Severus obliged, giving him room to draw his wand and clean them both up with a simple charm. "I find it difficult to believe you want to share your life with me and have a relationship."

"A relationship?" Severus backed away further and hastily began fastening and rearranging his clothes. "Are you mad? I have no intention of being tied down by you or anyone else. I have had quite enough of that for one lifetime, thank you very much. I had in mind something of a mutually convenient agreement."

"Is that part of your new philosophy?" Lupin's expression was carefully blank as he too began to dress.

"No." Severus folded his arms, growing wary of the direction this conversation was taking. "Part of my desire not to be under anyone else's control again."

"You think that is what a relationship means?" Lupin shook his head, giving Severus a sympathetic look.

"Isn't it?" Severus retorted. "Look at your own relationship. How did it begin? Not by your instigation. Who has been the one to steer the course of your relationship, hmm?"

A flush rose in Lupin's cheeks. "Mine is not the best example of a conventional relationship."

"A gay man in a relationship with an overeager, overwrought girl, guided by a nosy, controlling, middle-aged housewife? I should say not."

"Look." Lupin pinched the bridge of his nose, suddenly looking older and tired. "I want someone to come home to, a home that isn't falling down around my ears, a solid relationship, and perhaps a dog."

"And a white picket fence?"

"Optional," Lupin replied, not rising to the bait. "After two wars and too many losses, I just want a normal life."

"Which I suppose you think you couldn't have with a Slytherin who is a former Death Eater, a spy, and male." Severus didn't quite manage to keep the bitterness out of his voice, and even he was surprised at how deeply it ran.

"You just said you weren't looking for a relationship," Lupin pointed out. "I want something stable, not casual sex when the need arises. I'm past that point in my life. I don't want to tie anyone down or control them. I simply want to share my life with someone and feel like there is somewhere I belong for once."

"You are making a tremendous mistake," Severus said for lack of anything else better to say. He certainly couldn't offer what Lupin wanted... could he?

One corner of Lupin's mouth lifted in a wry smile. "Perhaps it isn't the best choice, but at least I will be getting what I want out of it too."

"Except fulfilling sex." Severus' lip curled in a sneer. "You cannot tell me Miss Tonks makes you feel the way I just did."

Lupin lifted one hand to scrub his face, his expression crumpling into melancholy. "No," he said softly. "I won't insult your intelligence by lying. You wouldn't believe me anyway, and you would be right not to. This was wonderful, but it cannot happen again."

A ball of ice formed in the pit of Severus' stomach at that pronouncement, and he felt as if he had just lost something vital, something that would leave an aching hole in his life if he didn't have it. Which was ridiculous, because he wasn't in love with Lupin! He wanted sex, nothing more.

Although the image of a house and someone to come home to and perhaps a dog was far more appealing than he ever thought it could be. There was no one else he wanted, really. He wanted someone his own age who understood what he had been through; Muggle boys could not satisfy him outside of bed, and most of the Wizarding world shunned him. Lupin, though... Lupin had been a spy too and understood him and the darkness within him in ways most people could not. Not that a werewolf and an ex-Death Eater turned spy could ever have a normal life, but perhaps... Perhaps they could have something close to it?

"I have a flat, not a house," he said quietly, his breath freezing in his lungs and making it that much harder for him to spit out the dangerous words. "I find dogs tolerable. The choice is yours. Grow a spine and choose what *you* want for a change, even if it is not me."

With that, he whirled and stalked out. The effect wasn't quite as good as it would have been had he been wearing his robes that allowed a dramatic billow in his wake, but he felt he got his point across nonetheless.

The Tonks-Lupin nuptials were scheduled for late November, which gave Lupin about a month to make up his mind. In the meantime, Severus was determined not to brood or wonder or fret. It wouldn't be the end of the world if Lupin chose Tonks over him. Good riddance if he did! Severus would be fine on his own; he always had been, after all, and he could find ways to satisfy his needs when necessary, even if it was only with some empty-headed club tart whose primary goal in life was to be a famous Barbra Streisand impersonator.

Severus didn't delude himself that he was a prime catch for anyone, but he couldn't quite stop a tiny kernel of hope from blooming within him, and it prompted him to start making a few changes. He bought a second chair to place by the fireplace in the lounge, and he began adding homey touches to the flat, such as art for the walls, photographs for the mantle, rugs for the floor, and throw pillows for wherever it was that throw pillows went. He assumed the sofa, but he put one in a chair too, just to be on the safe side.

He even bought a dog. Purebred dogs were too expensive, but he found one that was half-poodle and half-cocker spaniel. It had wavy fur that was the color of milk chocolate, and the breeder promised it wouldn't grow very big, which made it a better choice for a pet that would be living in a flat. The color and texture of its fur tempted him to name it "Cockroach Cluster," but he doubted Remus would like it, especially if he shortened it to "Roach".

Then again, it was his damned dog. What the hell.

After a week with the new puppy, Severus learned two things. One, puppies had more energy than an entire House full of hormonally charged adolescents, and two, it really was rather nice having something to come home to, even if it was a dog rather than a person. It didn't matter whether he was gone for two minutes or two hours; Roach always greeted him with an enthusiasm he had never received from any other living being before in his life. He would never admit it aloud, of course, but there was something about seeing Roach's entire backside wiggling with the force of his tail-wagging that made Severus feel warm and — yes — a little content.

With his days filled with work, house-training, and walks around the neighborhood, Severus found the time passed quickly. All too soon, it was Remus' wedding day, and Severus hadn't heard a single word from him in weeks. It was disappointing, but perhaps not as keen a rejection as it might have been had Severus not had Roach. For that, he supposed he owed Remus thanks. He had another living being that cared for him and needed him, which was quite satisfying, and he took amusement in the fact that people who had previously ignored his presence now stopped to coo over Roach and ended up talking to him as well. He didn't know if Remus would ever find a place where he felt he truly belonged, but Severus was finding his now.

Although he didn't want to call what he was doing "waiting for Remus," Severus drifted around the flat on the day Remus was to be married, tidying up and then tidying up again even though there wasn't a speck of dust or an item out of place to be found anywhere. He had bought a bottle of wine which he refused to acknowledge was for celebratory purposes if Remus did show up, but as the hours passed and no one knocked on his door, he decided he would have a drink or two or six himself after dinner.

By five o'clock, he decided Remus must be married and at the reception, perhaps even off on his honeymoon by now, and so he clipped a leash to Roach's collar and set off on their late afternoon walk, Roach bounding joyously ahead of him. He let Roach determine their path

this time, shoving his free hand into the pocket of his jacket and letting his mind wander. He was in a quiet mood, more disappointed than he cared to admit. He had thought perhaps Remus might find the strength to take a risk, even if it was at the last minute, and he had entertained thoughts of what their life might be like together. But Remus had made the safe choice, much good may it do him, and Severus had Roach, so things weren't that bad for either of them. He just thought things could be even better if they were together.

When Roach began to tire at last, Severus turned their steps toward home. Lost in thought, he didn't notice anyone loitering outside the building until Roach began to yap an alarm; he glanced up, peering suspiciously through the gathering twilight, and he prepared to draw his wand as the person turned — and there was Remus, smiling hesitantly at him.

"You weren't home," Remus said after they stared blankly at each other for a few moments. "I thought I would wait."

"I thought you were married," Severus replied, blurting out the first thing that came to mind.

"No. Almost." Remus gestured at himself, and Severus realized he was wearing dress robes. "But I couldn't go through with it. Suffice to say, there are people who are very unhappy with me right now."

"What about you?" Severus raised a questioning eyebrow, and Roach strained the limits of his leash, trying to smell Remus' shoes.

"I am not unhappy." Remus knelt and extended his hand to Roach, who sniffed it and then set about licking it, clearly embracing Remus as a beloved new friend. "Relieved, actually. I think I could be happy." He glanced up at Severus even as he reached out to scratch behind Roach's ears. "If it isn't too late and you've given me up in favor of a more furry and cuddly companion."

"A flat, a hyperactive puppy, and I will suffice?" Severus asked, his disappointment cautiously giving way to hope. "There is no picket fence, you know."

"I know." Remus gave Roach one last scratch and rose to his feet, closing the distance between himself and Severus. Smiling, he slid his arms around Severus' waist. "What the hell."

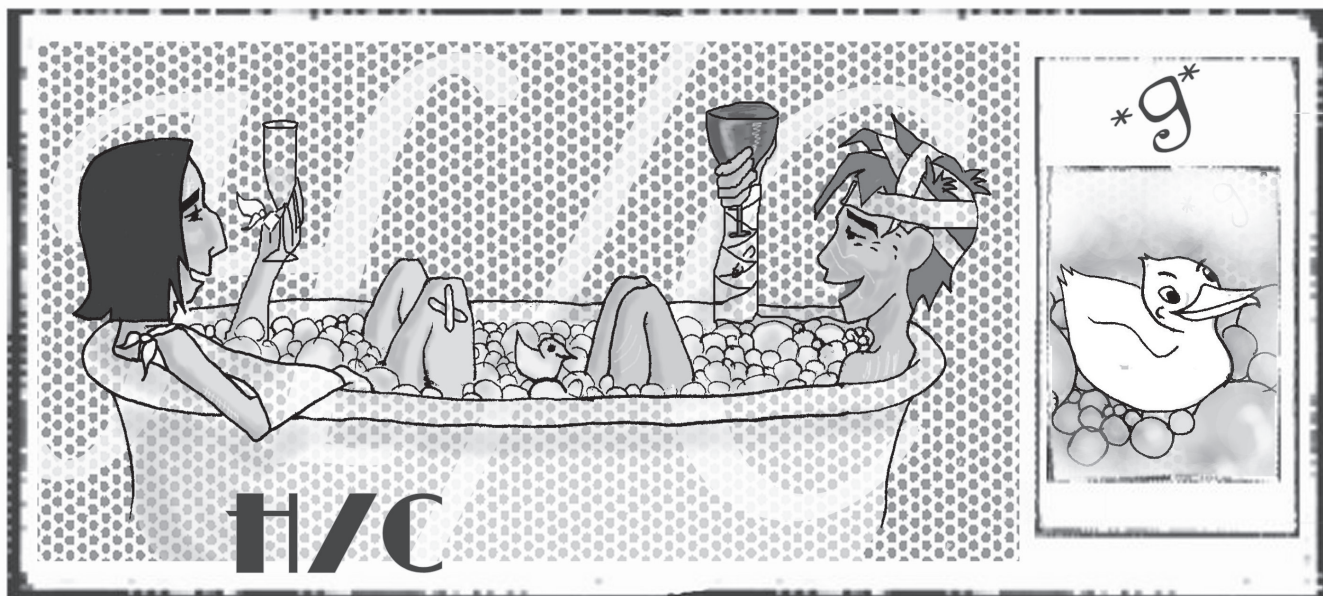
Severus nodded and wound his free arm around Remus in return while Roach ran in circles and wrapped his leash around their legs. "I suppose I should be cross with you for making me wait so long."

"I'm sorry." Remus offered an apologetic smile. "It's just that I didn't realize what I was getting myself into until I was right there, poised on the brink of a future I didn't want."

"But you do want a future with me?"

"As I said, I seem to have a fondness for dark-haired Slytherins."

"In that case..." Severus bent his head and murmured the words against Remus' lips, ready to make the future a reality. "What the hell."





The Parlour at Grimmauld Place
by Hill

↔ *D'accord, d'accord* ↔

by Mechaieh (known also as "Bronze Ribbons")

*Et ça continue encore et encore
C'est que le début d'accord, d'accord...*

And it goes on, again and again,
That which starts out, "All right, okay"...

- Francis Cabrel

Prologue

Near the end of the Second War, Severus Snape was declared a casualty of Lyolbrake Plain, a small but horrific skirmish from which only two individuals had emerged with their minds and bodies intact: Remus J. Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks. The other two surviving witnesses had become permanent residents of a closed ward at St. Mungo's. Thanks to the overabundance of pyro-amplified spells cast that day, there had been no identifiable corpses on the plain at the end of the battle — merely a grotesque mess of charred remains that no one had had the time, inclination, or stomach to sift through or preserve for forensic analysis. It was enough that Lupin testified to having gotten his hands on Snape to good effect ("and good riddance!"); as far as both the Ministry and the Wizarding public were concerned, the saga of Severus Snape was now closed.

Tonks herself had passed away soon after the end of formal hostilities. The circumstances suggested that her personal demons had gotten the better of her, given the extremely private memorial service and the reluctance of her parents or her lover to discuss the specifics of her death. Although the Dark Lord had fallen, the Order had not managed to vanquish his supporters: free of Voldemort's reign of terror, the Wizarding populace had elected totalitarian charisma over egalitarian earnestness, and the Order's veterans and sympathisers had found themselves repeatedly targeted for government-sponsored "reeducation."

Remus Lupin's disappearance two years later was a non-event, as almost all of his friends and allies had fled the country by then. The Rookwood regime had seen no need to devote its resources to eradicating werewolves, given how much the general population despised and feared them, and given their short life expectancies. When he vanished, Remus Lupin had had neither a landlord nor employer nor other regular point

of contact. No one had been paying attention to the fact that he was alive, and no one noticed when he ceased to be present.

D'abord (First)

Severus Snape had expected to die on Lyolbrake Plain. He had been on the run and in too many ambushes by then, and both his reflexes and nerves were shot. He had believed it would be only a matter of time before his instincts and training failed him in front of one Unforgivable too many. Instead of immobilising or killing him on sight, however, Lupin had inexplicably dodged and deflected a half-dozen curses in order to slap a portkey against Snape's ankle, one which had whirled him away to a secret enclave in Sussex — a private laboratory directed by a great-great-great-niece of a well-known consulting detective.

Dr. Doren turned out to be frighteningly well-versed not only in the politics and practice of Muggle science, but also in the art of impersonation, and Snape had used the following four years to acquire PhD-level fluency in conventional chemistry as well as a fondness for folk music. Prior to his arrival, Snape had never heard of Dr. Doren or her sanctuary. It had taken him the better part of a year to believe he hadn't succumbed to an extended hallucination, or that the lab wasn't part of an elaborate trap; he'd retired to bed each night wondering if he'd enjoyed his last day of unfamiliar, unexpected happiness. Instead of disintegrating, however, his reprieve had extended into a fellowship in western Illinois, one that allowed him to devote two full years to analyses of apian and poacean compounds and to refine his ability to pass as "Russell Napier," a garden-variety researcher.

His reserved, awkward demeanour was hardly a recessive trait among his peers, and on the occasions he joined them for pizza and beer, he was not required to contribute anything beyond than his share of the bill and the appearance of interest in their gossip. His co-workers knew only that he had fled an executive position at a big, bad corporation after belatedly realising his true calling. Most of his lab-mates were far from thrilled about their collective dependence on corporate and federal funding, and Snape's reluctance to

discuss ill-advised professional decisions came across to them as wholly natural.

Moreover, they hardly lacked for juicier mysteries and scandals to chew over. One of the associate professors had served time for statutory rape, the undergraduate biology chair had abducted her own son while waging a nasty child custody battle, and at least four of the doctoral students had merited investigation by the FBI. Snape found himself unwillingly fascinated by the alcohol-extended debates over whether having an FBI file was something to be flaunted or minimised in one's self-presentation.

It was during one such conversation that he realised he no longer *cared* about being fully in the know, be it about his Muggle colleagues or his fellow Wizarding emigrés. In the past, he would have been greedy for such details, voraciously prowling through every periodical and database available to him, but he had already reached burnout before the first fireball arced through the sky above Lyolbrake. It was not a condition from which he saw a need to recover: his murder of Albus Dumbledore was not a crime in the eyes of the Rookwood regime, but his other activities on behalf of the Order of the Phoenix had become common knowledge at the end of the War. The revelations had effectively rendered him *memoria non grata* on both sides; were he to re-emerge in Wizarding society, neither faction was likely to welcome his services or expertise, and Snape could see no benefit to reviving his old dreams of power, glory, and other ever-elusive rewards.

Better to lose himself in his research and his Jethro Tull records, and to leave any strategising against Rookwood's imperial ambitions to those too idealistic to cut their losses. During his rare perusals of American Wizarding newspapers, he sometimes spotted hints of cross-continental resistance activity in their accounts of burglarised offices and other acts of sabotage. Some of the acts of vandalism sounded suspiciously like mayhem masterminded by one of the Weasley twins, and Snape had been especially entertained by the swarm of attack flamingoes that had disrupted one of the Minister's recent appearances in the States. More often, however, the signs were more ominous: every time he purchased a newspaper, no matter how much time had elapsed since his last indulgence, it contained the obituary of a younger wizard notable for her or his antipathy to the Rookwood regime and its collaborators.

Snape invariably banished the paper before he finished reading it; the coverage of *The Boy Who Now Lived* in New England was both as relentless and banal as it had been back in Britain, and Snape was damned if he'd squander any more of his time or energy on

Potters past, present, or future. Let the rest of the expatriate community debate and dither over how to counter Rookwood's reach; Russell Napier was going to keep his own counsel and stay the hell out of the way.

Snape's situation at the university lab had seemed almost ideal, but as his fellowship approached its close, he found himself yearning to move to a city with a credible public transportation system — one where he wouldn't need to a car to maintain his Muggle-based routines. One with enough commercial traffic to support true specialty stores, where he could inspect the goods and wares firsthand before handing over his cash. One where both dim sum palaces and hot chicken shacks were but a short walk or a subway ride away.

Snape had not informed Dr. Doren of his applications to several facilities in Chicago until she had asked him directly about his plans for the future. After his acceptance to Peacock Hall, a small lab on the south side of the city, he was unsurprised to discover that, while the institution itself was Muggle in organisation and culture, his new supervisor had been a Ravenclaw prefect a generation before him, and had co-authored several papers with Dr. Doren.

A part of him wanted to reject the gift, but it wasn't as though he had *asked* her for help, he sternly reminded himself. Therefore, it wasn't as if he owed her any new favours, since he hadn't requested one in the first place. It also wasn't as though he could ever repay her for the generosity she'd extended to him right after the end of the War. In his new apartment on 53rd Street, Snape adjusted his windowblinds and sighed. *What in the world made me dream I would ever be free of my debts? What does it matter, that there's now one more?*

Chaque bruit de portière (Each noise at the door)

Five months later, Snape reminded himself he had wanted to settle in Chicago. It was a miserable, blustery morning, and by the time he reached his office, his left foot was damp from some snow that had crept through a crack in his boot and soaked through his sock. The bagel he'd gnawed upon for breakfast was disagreeing with his digestion, a situation exacerbated by his infernally cheerful, perpetually snacking Japanese-American officemate: J. Noguchi "Gooch" Smith was devouring a carton of eggplant stewed in a spicy, pungent brown sauce while skimming the morning *Tribune*.

Gooch was a fellow wizard, albeit one on duty as an adjunct professor at the University of Chicago on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Gooch was also quietly but fiercely allergic to religious and political proselytising of any stripe, a trait wholly compatible

with Snape's own desire to avoid inquisitions into his beliefs and commitments. While most of their colleagues respected such boundaries as a matter of course, Snape had resorted to discreet hexes or outright rudeness to discourage the nosiest of the twits. Gooch was equally quick with jinxes in Wizard-only settings, but among Muggles, his vexation tended to become visible only in the way his smile grew a bit too bright and brittle.

Closing their door firmly, Snape muttered a series of curt charms, making short work of drying his foot and repairing the offending boot. He then sat down at his desk and plugged an ethernet cable into his laptop.

As Snape began reading his e-mails, Gooch set down the food, folded up the newspaper, and slipped his own wand out of his sleeve, waiting.

Five minutes later, Snape violently swore and slammed down the lid of the laptop. He glared at Gooch, who gazed back at him calmly but warily, wand still at the ready.

"Oh, put that down," Snape finally said, irritated. "It's *not* your fault that I have to redo the whole bloody batch."

Gooch relaxed his guard, but his laugh was cynical. "Two years ago, a student *shot* at me after he flunked my seminar. Something not being my fault doesn't mean I won't get blamed for it."

"Comparing me with those dunderheads? Gooch, how *dare* you."

Gooch's smile was sharp. "It *is* insulting, now that I think about it." He reached for the carton of eggplant again as he added, "You wouldn't have missed."

Snape stared at Gooch. "Was *that* supposed to be a compliment?"

Gooch responded with a mock salute, disposable chopsticks still in hand. "Depends. Are you going to hex me when you get to my follow-up note? There's an intensive course on reading in French starting up next week; I sent you the link to the registration info."

"I don't have —" Snape stopped himself. The most innovative work in his current area of interest was currently being produced by a pair of chemists who published almost exclusively in French, and the results so far had been both sufficiently obscure and not yet commercial enough to merit republication in English. The Peacock Hall budget included an allowance for translations, but only for major papers relating directly to its contracted projects; Snape conducted his side investigations into poisonous Daucofragaerian compounds at the lab with his supervisor's blessing, but without the support of formal funding.

When it came to scientific papers and forums, so-called translation charms were as exasperatingly unreliable and off-target as their computer equivalents. Gooch happened to be fluent in French, but lacked the time to provide more than an occasional off-the-cuff summary. Snape had employed his wizard's Latin in tandem with Babelfish to glean what he could from Croisset and Cheylard's articles, but he had been all too aware that his inability to decipher their conclusions with precision would eventually cost him. He had received the latest dispatch from Montréal a week ago; although he had recognised its importance from its diagrams — enough to appeal to Gooch, who had assigned it to a bilingual student in need of extra credit — he hadn't expected it to scotch a key postulate he had used to define his parameters.

Snape *didn't* want to make time to learn French. The language reminded him of Malfoys and Lestranges and other people he would have preferred to forget, there was nothing about its literature that appealed to him, and he dreaded how stupid and out of place he was going to feel sitting in a classroom being drilled on elementary verb conjugations with people half his age. He also would have liked to forget, however, that he had just invested too many hours in a series of experiments he now felt obligated to restructure and resume from scratch.

Snape narrowed his eyes at Gooch. It wasn't on, hexing the messenger, but he wanted to *hex* something. He aimed his wand at the carton, transfiguring the remaining slices of eggplant into a swarm of squirming, dark brown mice.

"*Putain!*" Gooch exclaimed, dropping the carton. After a moment, though, he burst into laughter. Two wand-flicks later, the carton had become a cage, the mice neatly corralled inside.

"You should take them to Zuke's," Snape drily suggested, naming a bar popular with their colleagues. "They can't taste any worse than last week's barbecue sandwiches."

Gooch snorted, but before he could reply, a young man pushed open their office door and stepped inside. "Mr. Smith?" he said to Snape.

"I'm Dr. Napier." Snape tilted his head toward Gooch. "He's Dr. Smith."

The young man regarded Gooch sceptically. "You don't *look* like a Smith," he said.

"Appearances lie," Gooch said blandly, taking the packet addressed to "J. N. Smith." His tone of voice still pleasant, he added, "You don't look like an idiot."

Their visitor gaped at Gooch as the insult registered. He

then looked at Snape as if to ask, *You put up with this every day?*

Snape curled his lip. He sneered, "He's being polite to you. I think you're a blithering idiot."

The young man's expression changed from bewilderment into hostility, and he left in haste. Not looking up from the packet, Gooch quietly said, "I don't think that helped matters, but I appreciate the backup."

Snape leaned against the corner of his desk. "What just happened? Imbeciles like that don't usually get to you."

"They do, actually, but I'd rather get along with people." The frown lines that had appeared at the corners of Gooch's mouth made him look much older than usual. "Sometimes I just get tired of having to play teacher *all* the time. Especially to the unrepentantly clueless."

Snape shifted his gaze to the mice. One of them was gnawing at a section of wire, as if to create an opening in the cage.

"I don't miss teaching," he said.

"Lucky you," Gooch said bitterly, tossing his chopsticks into the wastebasket. "Must be nice, having a name and a face that doesn't scream 'half-blood' every damn day."

Snape was speechless, his head suddenly crowded with the echoes of old taunts and feeble fantasies. *He doesn't know*, he reminded himself. *He's had better things to do—*

Gooch aimed his wand at the mice and turned them into a heap of feathery brown quills. A second flick of the wand Transfigured the cage into a coffee mug.

Snape found his voice at last. "Where do you think we are, a Wizarding library?" He aimed his own wand at the plumes and altered them into a cluster of mechanical pencils.

Gooch rolled his eyes. "You're hopeless! Where's the romance in your soul, man?"

Snape said, "You want flowers for your girlfriend, *you* take care of it."

Gooch's mouth tightened. "Not her style. And not my girlfriend, as of two days ago."

Damnation. How was I supposed to know—? "I'm sorry," Snape mumbled.

"Wasn't your business," Gooch said. "Not yours to apologize for."

One of the very few — Snape cut off the thought before it materialised on his tongue. Instead, he paused in the doorway. "Coffee?" he asked.

"Sure," Gooch said. He Summoned the mug and dumped the pencils onto his desk. "Here, use this."

Le vent se déchaîne (The raging wind)

On the following Monday, the first night of the French class, Snape was truly in a good mood as he walked the six blocks from the bus stop to Cobb Hall. His supervisor had commended him that morning both on his diligence and inventiveness. The reconfigured side experiments had generated a plethora of fresh, intriguing mysteries to investigate. The pad Thai he'd ordered for lunch had been excellent.

And, the wind was blowing hard. Although Snape disliked dealing with rain and snow, he actually enjoyed the bitter cold and the breath-stealing forcefulness of Chicago's legendary gales. He liked leaning into them, savouring how they tugged on his clothes and scoured his face, and it pleased him how the same winds sent lesser mortals scurrying indoors, freeing up the pavements from their conversation-paced dawdlings. He relished how ruthless the winds were with anything overly trivial or insufficiently grounded: they ripped through photocopied flyers and glossy posters without mercy, and impudently snatched away unknotted scarves and half-read newspapers. The only thing he disliked about the wind was how it rattled the branches of the trees: the noise reminded him of too many nights on watch, straining to distinguish the hints of approaching danger from the ordinary rustle and creak of his surroundings.

When he arrived at the classroom, there were already a dozen students seated around its tables, which had been arranged into a large rectangle. Snape was pleased to see the format, since it meant he would not be forced to sit with his back to anyone. He selected a seat opposite the blackboard, which provided him with an unobstructed view both of the windows and the doorway as well as the front of the classroom.

Several of the students were reading newspapers. One was munching a hot dog, and another appeared to be playing a game on her cell phone. Two were dozing, half-slumped in their chairs. A pair of women were exchanging opinionated notes about a seminar concerning novels written in reaction to fascist regimes. The dark-skinned man to his left was sketching one of the cat-nappers. A woman with messy hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and stooped shoulders was browsing ahead in the textbook; Snape instantly pegged her as the pupil most likely to attempt monopolising the teacher. He had loathed dealing with that type of student during his Hogwarts days; their lack of subtlety had offended his sensibilities, and their unslakable thirst for special treatment invariably increased his already unmanageable workload.

However, Snape mused, he might do better to view the woman as a potential ally. If she was keen to become the star of the class, it would improve his own odds of remaining in the background. He was all too aware that, in spite of his new *modus operandi*, he had never fully conquered his own craving for recognition. Maintaining a low profile was a small price to pay for remaining alive, but it was so contrary to his core personality that the effort often left him feeling utterly wrecked, even though the thought of returning to active duty remained both unpalatable and unlikely. *Remember, no one wants you. They'll only want what they can get from you...*

He sometimes caught himself wondering whether any of it was worth the exertion — why he was going to such lengths to live a life no one would remember. The most he could expect from his current career was his name appearing in other people's bibliographies for a generation or two, and even those traces would eventually evaporate. The journals would become obsolete, becoming of interest only to historians of science, and there would be no room in their annals for an obscure, journeyman chemist —

Snape mentally shook his head at himself. The yearning for immortality hadn't done anyone any good, ever. Given his history, it was a lesson he ought to have mastered long ago. The difficulty, of course, was that recognising what needed to be done wasn't at all the same as actually being able or willing to do it.

Even for a chore as trivial as learning to read French. *As if rank even matters here!* He forced himself not to glare at the woman, even though he was now thoroughly irritated at how her presence had nudged his mind toward such unwelcome reflections. *Could I have picked a more utterly useless way to squander the past five minutes? I could have been reading ahead myself—* Snape squelched that thought. He had no desire to appear the swot to his new classmates. As someone ten to twenty years older than most of them, his mere presence was peculiar enough, and it was likely he would be older than the instructor, too; introductory language classes were the province of graduate students, not tenured professors.

The dark-skinned man had extricated a rubber eraser from his backpack, apparently dissatisfied with his attempt to render his model's baseball cap. More students had arrived, some engrossed in conversation with their companions. Others deliberately surveyed the remaining spaces around the table before deciding which spots would best suit them. The rising level of chatter in the room was accompanied by the soft noise-clutter of the students shedding, shuffling, and arranging parkas, hats, scarves, bookbags, and other accoutrements.

Snape twisted around in his own seat, momentarily wishing he had been the first to arrive; it was aggravating, how impossible it was to keep a coat neatly draped on the back of a classroom chair *sans* sticking charm. Snape scowled at the grimy floor before turning back around, schooling his features back into a neutral expression.

It was 6:59 p.m. — one minute left before the start of class. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was something important he'd failed to address — something he ought to have concentrated upon instead of allowing himself to indulge in self-pity. He couldn't think of what it might be, however, and he had no desire to dwell upon his earlier reflections, so he amused himself by observing the other occupants of the room more closely. Territorial mini-negotiations were taking place as the classroom filled: on the tables, with notebooks, pens, and purses automatically shifted for some neighbours but not others. There were also different degrees of intensity and intimacy among the various conversations in progress, and Snape couldn't help curling his lip at a couple who were showing off: their entire dialogue about Samuel Beckett radiated self-aware sophistication, and their postures declared the exclusivity of their connection — they were not interested in anyone else's potential contributions to their "discussion." *Read-Ahead Girl is going to have competition*, Snape concluded. *Perhaps I should bring popcorn.*

Then the instructor walked in, and Snape's scattered thoughts coalesced into a sudden, stunned flare of disbelief.

It isn't him. It can't be him.

"Bonsoir," the instructor said. "*Bienvenu. Je m'appelle Jean Lupin.*" The man wrote his name on the blackboard as he spoke. To Snape's untutored ear, it sounded like *Shaun Lu-pan*. The man underlined the second syllable of his surname and continued, "The vowel in *pin* is the same one in *vin, plein, thym, and prince*, but lucky for you, this isn't a class on pronunciation. I'm not going to mind if you call me *Lu-pin*."

Snape stared at the man, transfixed. Had that been aimed at him, the word "prince"? *It can't be you, but who else would know... and is this insurance, in case I slip up?*

Lupin stood at the head of the table, unlaced an interdepartmental delivery envelope, and drew out the copies of the class syllabus. He divided the stack in two and passed the halves to the students on either side of him. He resumed speaking. "Let's get right down to business." *Midwestern American accent. Has he been living in Chicago all this time?* "You're here because you have some sort of language requirement. For most of you,

the future includes an open-dictionary exam. I'm here to help you pass it. This class will focus *only* on reading. If you've any interest in speaking or writing in French, you should register for a standard class instead." He paused, as if to allow such students their opportunity to leave.

"*D'accord*. Let's begin, then. Please turn to page ten of your books..."

Snape obediently opened his own copy of *Les Connexions*, but his mind was not on the charts of pronouns and verbs Lupin had begun to explain to the class. Instead, it was insisting on sifting through his memories of his post-War studies — of all the times he had wondered about Lupin's role in his rescue. At times, he had even wondered if he'd dreamed it — if, in place of whatever had actually happened, his subconscious had substituted his secret, shameful fantasy of Lupin coming to his aid as a gesture of unspoken love. It was an absurd and pathetic little vignette — one that had germinated with his crush on Lupin during their fifth year at Hogwarts — but it had stubbornly refused to be dislodged from his psyche over the decades, even as his feelings for Lupin repeatedly ricocheted among revulsion, disdain, frustration, and attraction.

Even when he hadn't wanted Lupin, he had wanted to *matter* to Lupin. Lupin's cool gratitude and cordial indifference toward him during their work for the Order had been maddening, reassuring, and tantalizing, especially after the evening Snape overheard Lupin defending Dumbledore's trust in him to one of the Aurors. It had the tinge of a speech Lupin had delivered before; there was an odd, glib quality to Lupin's intonation as he insisted, "I neither like nor dislike Severus..." to his companion.

Being trusted was not at all the same as being loved, of course, but the knowledge that Lupin was willing to argue on his behalf had sustained Snape for weeks. It was too much to hope that Lupin's faith would outlive Dumbledore, but Snape had believed he would never have cause or opportunity to interact with Lupin again, except at wandpoint; what harm, then, to allow himself the fantasy of a Lupin who knew the truth?

"*Je suis, tu es, il est, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont*. I am, you are, he is, we are, you are, they are..."

Even if his memory of Lupin's involvement was true, it proved nothing: Lupin might not have known the function of the portkey. There had been not a single allusion to Lupin at the lab, and Snape's guarded inquiries had not yielded any results. Moreover, it wasn't as though Snape could *do* anything with the information. Even if it was indeed Lupin who had saved his life, and even if Lupin had done so on purpose, what could Snape do to repay him? Except, Lupin was now *here* —

"Jean" Lupin had moved back to the blackboard, writing out more conjugations as he spoke. "Now, *falloir* is a funny one. It's known as an 'impersonal' verb and you'll only see it in third person, but you'll see it all the time, since it means 'something that has to be done.' So, roughly speaking, *il faut* means 'it must' or 'one must,' *il fallait* means 'it had to be,' *il faudra* means 'it'll have to be,' and *il faudrait* means 'it would have to be. Donc, '*il faut faire attention en classe*' translates to 'It's important to pay attention in class.' If you want to pass your exams, anyway..."

There was a faint wave of nervous laughter in response. Snape was intrigued by the undercurrent of mockery in the instructor's delivery: the Lupin he remembered from Hogwarts had taken far more pains to appear friendly and patient. Then again, these were graduate students, none of them in the classroom willingly, and Jean's resemblance to Remus was notably different in a number of respects. Remus had been clean-shaven; Jean wore a neatly trimmed moustache. Remus's hair had been shoulder-length and streaked with grey, whereas Jean's was closely cropped and uniformly brown. Remus's robes and jumpers had been shabby, faded, and threadbare; Jean wore a crisp white shirt, a silk waistcoat, and impeccably pressed black trousers. He had arrived coatless and unruffled — presumably his office was in the same building.

All things considered, it was possible Jean was a different person entirely, but the more Snape studied the instructor, the harder it became for him to breathe. Was it only coincidence that Jean looked as though he too was in his forties? That made him older than a typical graduate student, but not unheard of, particularly among those individuals trapped in All But Dissertation purgatory. Jean was gaunt, and his voice was hoarse, and the way he held the chalk — *This class is going to be impossible. Even if he isn't Lupin, it's too damned distracting, and I do have alternatives. I'll find something at Loyola, or one of those "Teach Yourself" books...*

"...and that's enough for tonight, I think. So, first two chapters for Wednesday, and I'll see you then." Snape remained in his seat as the students around him gathered up their belongings and put on their coats, pretending to look up words in the textbook's glossary while the messy-haired woman (*Ha! I knew it!*) walked up to Lupin and asked him several questions about the syllabus. By the time he finished answering them (a process during which Lupin appeared to scribble several recommendations into the woman's notebook), the classroom was empty except for Snape.

After Read-Ahead Girl finally left, Lupin began to collect the handouts left behind. As Snape looked up, Lupin acknowledged him with a tentative, interrogative smile.

"Mr. Lupin," Snape began.

"Just 'Lupin' will do," the man responded. "I believe we're about the same age."

"Lupin, then," Snape said. "You...you remind me of someone I used to know."

"Funny, that. I could say the same about you." Lupin paused. "He died about seven years ago."

Is that how this game will be played? "Did he? I don't know what happened to the man you remind me of."

Lupin seated himself on top of a corner of the table-square, a few feet away from Snape. "That could be a shame. Or not. Depending on your memories."

Snape glanced at the series of conjugations on the blackboard. *Je tombe, tu tombes, il tombe. I fall, you fall, it falls.* "It could be both," he said. "Depending on which memories."

"True," Lupin acknowledged. "My memories of Severus Snape are very mixed indeed."

The room was utterly still as Snape and Lupin stared at each other. As Snape began to slide into Lupin's mind, Lupin leaned forward and placed a hand on Snape's wrist.

"Don't," he whispered. "Let the dead stay dead."

Snape caught his breath at the sudden contact. Lupin's hand was warm. *What would it take— Focus!* "Wise advice," he said. "But what should I do with my memories of Remus Lupin?"

Lupin drew back, his expression sardonic. "You haven't heard from him in seven years? Then what good are those memories to you?"

Nous tombons, vous tombez, ils tombent. We fall, you fall, they fall. Snape reached forward and clasped Lupin's ankle. "'Good' is irrelevant. What matters is honouring Severus Snape's debts."

Lupin shook his foot loose from Snape's hand and stood up. "Those people no longer exist," he said, his voice cool. "There is no debt."

Snape stood up as well, his eyes flashing. "Do not mock me, Lupin. To do the right thing—"

Lupin held up a hand. "I do not mock you, *Napier*," he said, lightly stressing the name.

I hadn't told you my name, Snape thought, his heart racing. *How much do you know about me?*

Lupin continued, "We are not those people. I do not want us to be." He stepped up close to Snape — so close that their bodies were almost touching. "I will admit to an interest," he murmured, "in becoming better acquainted

with *Dr. Napier*. I'd propose dinner — but not if you will see it only as a chore."

Snape felt dizzy, both from Lupin's proximity and from the suggestion that they restart their acquaintance as strangers. *Can it be this simple and easy? Can...* "How often do you ask your students on dates, Mr. Lupin?"

Lupin showed his teeth. "I don't. You're no student."

"And *you* are?" Snape gritted his teeth. *It's Lupin. No such thing as 'simple' with him.* "What are you *really* doing here, Lupin? And how much should it worry me?"

Lupin frowned at Snape for an instant, then walked to the classroom door and yanked it shut. He whisked out his wand, and the remaining handouts flew back into the folders and envelopes he'd brought with him.

Task accomplished, he folded his arms and looked directly at Snape once more.

"Do you really need to learn French, Dr. Napier? Or do you just need access to a competent translator? If it's the latter, I would be happy to assist you. The investment would be simpler and faster than forcing yourself to endure this class, and the returns will be more accurate. No matter how hard or how diligently you might practice, your proficiency isn't going to match mine within eleven weeks, and I'm certain you would rather spend your time in your lab rather than hunched over a dictionary."

Snape said slowly, "What would be your price?"

Lupin's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Wolfsbane."

Snape said, "Have you done without, all these years?"

"Hardly. There's a master brewer right here in Chicago."

Snape raised his eyes. "His formula doesn't work as well?"

Lupin shrugged. "It works fine, but it tastes even worse than yours. The natives call it buffalo piss."

Snape couldn't help himself. "I'd like to know how they can tell."

Lupin bestowed on him a small but genuine grin. "I haven't dared to ask. Some things I just don't need to find out." His expression became self-deprecating. "A lesson I've never really learned, but sometimes the boundaries are obvious."

Lupin looked at directly at Snape and continued, "If nothing else, understand this. Translations for Wolfsbane? That's an offer, not an order. I don't need you and you don't need me."

Snape stared at Lupin, taken aback at the other man's intensity. After a moment, he murmured, "There being a difference between *need* and *want*?"

Lupin nodded, as if relieved to be understood. *"Exactement."* He gathered up the files and stepped toward the door. "That was something I liked very much about Severus, by the way. Very, very swift on the uptake. Something that made me wish again and again we could have been friends."

His hand was on the knob when Snape finally managed to speak again. "Lupin? Yes."

"To dinner, or the translations?"

"Both."

The way Lupin's eyes were suddenly alight — *did I do that? Is such power mine to have?* Lupin said, "You know how to reach me — my information's on the syllabus. Send me what you want converted into English, or stop by."

"And dinner?"

"How about Greek?"

"Greek's fine with me."

"I'm fond of The Parthenon, downtown. After next class, perhaps? It's open late."

"Why not somewhere nearby?"

"I teach here. Do you really want to appear in the rumours about my love life?"

That would depend on whether you — "A dinner isn't always a date," Snape pointed out.

"No," Lupin agreed, a hint of uncertainty dimming his smile. "But there will be speculation no matter what. And... should we end up discussing some people we used to know, best intentions notwithstanding, I'd rather we not be overheard by my students."

"Fair enough," Snape conceded. "The Parthenon, then. I do like baklava."

"So do I," Lupin said, turning to go. He opened the door and he stepped into the hall, but before he walked away, he glanced at Snape one last time. "I have a weakness for many-layered pleasures."

Des couples qui se défont (Of couples breaking up)

When Snape arrived at his office on Wednesday morning, he found a stack of 1980s-era CDs on his desk. He raised his eyebrows at Gooch, who had just bitten into a turnip cake.

Gooch gestured apologetically at his mouth, chewing and swallowing rapidly. When he was able to speak, he said, "Broadening your cultural horizons."

Snape peered at the CD on top. "What kind of group names themselves 'Air Supply'? Recovering tin-whistle players?"

Gooch grinned. "Be grateful you're getting only the mainstream discs." He pointed to his outbox, where he'd stacked several thick interdepartmental envelopes. "If you want soul-scarring cheesiness, you can't beat the Claudian Turtles."

"Who's getting *those*?"

"Diana's ex. They probably belonged to him in the first place, now that I think about it."

The Claudian Turtles... Snape's mind jerked backwards to a conversation about music he'd overheard years before, between Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks. He'd never met Diana White, but he'd seen her photograph on Gooch's desk during happier times. If one were to subtract the glasses and change the hair from silver to brown — or, Salazar help him, *pink*—

He tried to appear casual as he leaned in close enough to peer at the top packet. The words "J. Lupin, Romance Lang/Lit" were clearly legible in Gooch's neat handwriting.

He cleared his throat. "An ex-boyfriends' club?"

"Not exactly. Lupin wasn't exactly broken up about *their* breakup." There was a touch of sheepishness in Gooch's grimace. "Diana moved here a couple years before he did. He didn't seem surprised that she and I had, ah, become close. Even helped with our move, actually — should've made him take his CDs then." He poked at the turnip cake with his chopsticks, sketching a sigil of sorts on its surface.

Snape said, "You don't seem overly traumatised yourself."

Gooch squeezed the ends of the chopsticks around another bite of cake. "Have a heart, Napier. Moping over women never brought them back."

"Nor does giving their things away. Aren't you moving a shade too fast here?"

The bite of cake fell onto Gooch's desk. He swore, flicked it into his wastebasket, and muttered a quick charm to erase the smear of grease it had left. "She won't be back," he said. "She left to move in with her new man. If I had to guess, she started up with him three months ago. All this—" he gestured to the CDs and the outbox—"is the stuff she left behind. The stuff not important enough to take with her."

Snape tapped the jewel-case of the top CD. "Put *that* way... what makes you think I want your ex-girlfriend's leftovers?"

Gooch shrugged. "It's up to you. They're a gift, not an obligation." Snape frowned at the echo of Lupin's words. Gooch, in turn, bestowed upon Snape a look of genial exasperation. "Stop that. You're as bad as my mother's relatives. All that crap about who owes what to whom — take the damn CDs and use them for coasters or target practice, or to scare crows away from the garbage. I swear you'll be doing me a favor."

Snape pushed the CDs to the side and pulled out his laptop. "Put that way..."

Gooch squinted at the remaining bits of turnip cake. "Amazing how much work it is, framing the problem properly..."

So what do I do about Remus Lupin? Aloud, Snape said, "I take it Jean will know what you're about?"

Gooch looked up. "You know Jean? Why haven't you — oh, the French class! He's teaching it? What a waste." At Snape's look of enquiry, he explained, "If life were fair, Lupin would be tenured already. Massively popular with the students. His seminars on François Villon have waitlists. He doesn't publish, though. Chicago only hired him because they wanted to keep Di."

Which means... what? "So you think he'll be moving on?"

Gooch looked thoughtful. "Their breakup was years ago. Now that you mention it, it's weird he's still here — but maybe he just likes the city." His eyes flickered over to the packets, and a hint of cynicism crept into his expression. "More likely, though, he just can't be bothered to move, until someone makes him. Which ties in to the not-publishing, too. He's definitely the passive type — has to be pushed to *care*."

Gooch's smile was grim as he added, "It drove Diana nuts. She got tired of trying to make him say or take what he wanted."

It was all Snape could do not to roll his eyes. Instead, he fiddled with the paper hand-guard on his coffee cup, pretending only mild interest in Gooch's revelations. He tried to find something neutral to say, and settled upon, "I would think that hasn't been a problem for you."

Gooch's laugh was as bitter as his smile had been. "You'd think. I'm too damn Japanese for my own good, though. We hint and we strategize, but we don't come right out and *ask*. We want people to care enough to *know* what we want."

"So she left you because of that?"

Gooch tossed the cake container into the wastebasket. "No, she left because I haven't been around. Some things are just basic." He grimaced again. "It's for the best, though. I never did have time for her political work, and that's heated up this term."

He stood up and summoned his backpack. "You're seeing Lupin tonight, yes?"

Snape merely nodded. He had dropped the class, but Gooch didn't need to know about his dinner plans.

Gooch nodded at the packets in his outbox. "You could take those with you, then? They'll get to him in better shape..." He smiled once more, his cheerful mask back in place. "Tell him he gets one 'I told you so.' Just one."

Ne plus penser à ça (No longer thinking about that)

That night, Snape arrived at Lupin's office a few minutes after 7:30 p.m., having estimated that it would take Lupin at least five minutes to handle post-class questions. Lupin's office was three buildings away from the classroom; Snape had assumed he had Apparated between the two. When Lupin walked through a door at the end of the hallway — sans overcoat, as he had the first night — Snape realised that the four buildings were likely physically connected through hidden hallways or tunnels.

He was unreasonably annoyed with himself for not having deduced this earlier, and even more irked to see that Lupin was not alone: Read-Ahead Girl was with him, talking very rapidly in oddly urgent tones. When she caught sight of Snape, she looked every bit as vexed at his presence as he was by hers.

Lupin, in turn, seemed mildly amused, but he merely said, "Ah, Napier," and unlocked the door to his office. "Come on in, this will take just a minute." Snape almost laughed out loud at the look of chagrin on Read-Ahead's face. *Wanted him to yourself, did you? You're going to have to try harder.*

Lupin crouched down in front of a bookcase, restacking its front row of books to his left in order to access the back of the shelf. He pulled out two battered paperbacks and extended them to the messy-haired woman. "These should do it," he said. "Let me know if you need more help."

Merci beaucoup. Read-Ahead accepted the books, looking as though she was trying to think of something else to say.

À bientôt, mademoiselle, Lupin said. His tone was kind but the note of dismissal was unmistakable.

Bonne nuit, Professor. The woman scowled at Snape once more but took her leave. After her footsteps receded down the corridor, Lupin shut the door and leaned against it, sighing.

"You really shouldn't encourage them," Snape said.

"You really shouldn't think that's funny," Lupin retorted, but his lips were twitching. "This teaching is a very serious business."

Snape lightly tapped the stack of comic books on Lupin's desk. "A *very* serious business indeed."

Lupin feigned a look of outrage. "Heathen! *Astérix and Cleopatra* is *vital* to the transmission of knowledge." His lips twisted. "Especially when most of the class resents having to be there in the first place."

"It gives you a job, Lupin."

"True, true." Lupin pushed himself away from the door and suddenly flung it open. Snape heard a squawk and then a yelp as Lupin hauled the messy-haired woman into the office and slammed the door.

For a moment, there was no sound except for the whirr of the heater and the wail of a siren in the distance. Then, in a very small voice, the woman began, "Sir—"

Lupin's voice was glacial. "If you can't eavesdrop any more competently than *that*, Enid, you need to retire."

Her chin lifted a notch. "I wasn't really trying, sir. I just wanted to know—"

"Enid." Lupin's voice had dropped another degree. "Have I not given you enough for what you *need* to know?"

Read-Ahead's expression remained defiant. "What's so *wrong* about *wanting* to know more?" She pointed to the school seal on one of Lupin's papers. "*Crescat scientia vita*—"

"Don't give me that," Lupin snarled, his face hard. "What you know *can* kill you. What others *think* you know can kill you, and other people, too. My bloody *job* is to keep you lot from getting yourselves killed any sooner than you'll manage it on your own."

Read-Ahead jerked her head towards Snape. "He one of us? At least tell me that, Jean. That's all I *need* to know."

Lupin didn't hesitate. "Yes," he snapped. "And that's *more* than you need to know. And more than he needed to know about you *or* me."

It was as if Lupin had flipped a light switch: Snape could see the instant Read-Ahead suddenly *got* the concept. "Hell," she said, contrite. "I do make your job harder, don't I? I'm sorry, Jean—"

Lupin folded his arms. "I don't want 'sorry,' Enid. I want you to do your job and to fucking stay alive. Not getting *me* killed would be a lovely bonus."

Read-Ahead held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Enough. No need to twist the knife — I may be slow, but I'm not dense once I get it." She shoved the books that had tumbled out of her bag back into it, and then she looked at Snape.

"My apologies, sir," she said. "Being over-suspicious is my job, but that's no excuse." She looked at Lupin. "My sincere best wishes for a boring evening, Jean." Without waiting for his reply, she Apparated out.

Lupin remained where he stood, watching Snape warily. Snape let the silence between them thicken until the room felt clogged with it. Then he said, "If you're even thinking of telling me I don't need to know..."

Lupin shrugged and dropped into his desk chair, scrubbing at his face with his knuckles. He looked as though he had a headache the size of the Sears Tower. "Can't help what I think, I'm afraid. But I'll tell you what I can, if you insist."

When he didn't continue, Snape glared at him. "So help me Salazar—"

Lupin snorted. "Did you find him all that useful, last time around? 'Cause I sure could use all the help I can get." His eyes glittered as he added, "And before you start asking your questions, *Napier*, may I advise you to be absolutely clear on your boundaries? No matter what you've believed about me before, I *don't* actually want to hurt or use you."

Snape slowly said, "I take it that's a part of your *real* job?"

Lupin snapped a rubber band at a map of the Paris Metro mounted on the wall. "If you're enjoying your life as it is, *Napier*, you might consider holding your questions. Indefinitely. Read some *Astérix* instead, or *Arsène Lupin*, or — hell, I've always thought you might like *Villon*." Lupin pushed himself out of his chair and leaned his head against one of the taller bookshelves.

Snape said, cautious, "Why are *you* attracted to him?"

Lupin looked sidewise at Snape and then reached up, pulling a grey-and-white paperback from an upper shelf. Its spine was labelled "*François Villon*, by D.B. Wyndham Lewis" in slanted type. Lupin thumbed it open to a middle section and read aloud:

He was a very great sinner... During his hunted life he had twice, possibly three times, lain under sentence of death, had been half a dozen times punished by the Question, twice banished voluntarily, once by the State. He had committed homicide at twenty-four and burglary and sacrilege at twenty-five, and his unrecorded thefts, stabbings, cheats, and brawlings are probably innumerable. He was poor and stung by strong passions, and his miserable life alternated between the tavern, the brothel, and the prison. He was a very bad character indeed... In his nature the fine and the gross were inextricably mingled.

Snape softly said, "You are overly enamoured of trouble, Lupin."

Lupin answered, "Not for its own sake, Napier." He shut the book and set it aside. "Villon also happens to write well." He stared out of the window as he recited a verse from memory:

Je meurs de seuf auprès de la fontaine,
Chault comme feu et tremble dent a dent;
En mon país suis en terre loingtaine;
Lez ung brasier frisonne tout ardent.

He then turned to face Snape once more. "*I die of thirst by the fountainside, / hot as fire and trembling to the teeth,*" he translated. "*My own country's foreign to me, and by the fire, I'm shivering.*"

After a moment, Snape said, "You're right, I do like it. But I also think you're stalling."

Lupin shrugged and stood up. "Let's go get some food."

Snape remained seated. "Now I *know* you're stalling."

Lupin Summoned his coat. "It won't kill you to have some *mezedes* first." He paused. "That is, I'm assuming you're still interested in dinner."

"It's not a bad idea," Snape agreed. "Especially since I doubt your answers are short."

"I *could* make them short, but you wouldn't find them satisfactory," Lupin said.

"So, food first," Snape said. The act of lifting up his backpack reminded him of the favour Gooch had requested. He set the backpack down, pulled out the two packets, and placed them on Lupin's desk.

Lupin's eyes widened at the packets' size. "Going to make me sweat for that Wolfsbane, I see. Not that I mind at all," he added hastily.

"What? Oh. No, these are CDs. Gooch Smith sent them along."

Lupin blinked. "Gooch? Johann Noguchi Smith?"

It was Snape's turn to be startled. "*Johann?* I didn't know that. No wonder he uses only the 'J.'"

Lupin grinned. "Nope, no mystery there. His mother worshiped Bach on the wrong side of idolatry." His expression turned rueful as he regarded the packets. "No mystery here, either. I spotted Diana at the Medici last week, and she was having a very good time with her new man."

In spite of himself, Snape felt compelled to ask, "You see her often?"

Lupin said, "Only professionally. Count yourself lucky you work safely away from the quad — she's ten times

as lethal on a ten-speed. Every day I thank my stars she's stayed away from motorbikes." He opened the first packet and grimaced at its contents. "How's Herr Gooch doing?"

"He said you get one 'I-told-you-so,' but only one."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Lupin declared. "Glass broomsticks, as the saying goes." He unlocked his briefcase and put the packets inside. "Just tell me he's not playing Carla Bruni over and over, though. If he is, I'll feel morally obligated to swing by and kick his ass."

"I'll kick his *arse* myself if I need to," Snape said, deploying his poshest accent.

"I don't use silencing charms on this room," Lupin drawled. "Too suspicious. Best I can do is a Garbling spell, and it don't hide accents nohow."

"Stop that," Snape growled. "You're making my ears bleed."

"Can't be worse than maudlin melodies about roses and sorrowful secrets."

"He's spared me so far. Wonderful device, headphones." Snape allowed a gleam of pure evil to appear into his eyes. "I did catch him singing along to Judy Collins one afternoon, but I'm saving *that* for something blackmail-worthy."

"No ragging on Judy Collins," Lupin ordered, locking his briefcase. "I wore out my first copy of *Wildflowers* long ago."

Snape made a face. "Let me guess. 'Both Sides Now'?"

Lupin's response was almost a sneer. "Please. Give me *some* credit. I got sick of that song before the *first* War was over." Snape was surprised to see a hint of trepidation flicker across Lupin's features as he admitted, "My song is 'Albatross.'"

He could look it up later, but as long as Lupin was talking... "I don't recall that one."

Lupin opened the door and gestured for Snape to step through. He doused the lights and locked up the office before he spoke again.

"*Many people wander up the hills from all around you / Making up your memories and thinking they have found you.*"

Snape stopped at the water fountain to ease the sudden dryness in his throat. Even so, his voice sounded to his own ears like a croak when he turned again to Remus. "What do you want of me, *Jean*? What is this dinner really about?"

Lupin's voice was deliberately, maddeningly light. "It's about *pastitsio* and *moussaka* and bottles of Mythos.

That's all it should be." He rested his hand on the push-bar of the building door. "If there's anything more to it, that's up to you to choose."

Snape heard the faint but unmistakable warning in the word *choose*. He said, "I'm going to tell Gooch he was right. You are the most passive-aggressive son of a—"

The foyer was so narrow that it took only one step for Lupin to crowd Snape against the wall. Lupin's breath was as warm as his eyes were icy.

"*Entends-toi*, Napier. This *is* a choice. I'm pretending as best I can that I don't care that I'm a danger to you."

"Remus Lupin was good at that," Snape hissed back. "What makes Jean Lu-*pan* different?"

Lupin leaned in even closer, so that he spoke against Snape's cheek. His voice was raw with regret and barely suppressed anguish. "Remus Lupin wanted his friends to stay his friends. Remus Lupin didn't have the guts or the wherewithal to stop other people from using you."

Snape scoffed, "As if it could have been all up to you, Lupin. You flatter yourself."

"No doubt." A flash of humour lit Lupin's eyes, but his voice remained urgent. "*Severus*. After all these years, the least I can do — the least I *must* do — is to keep giving you the choice to steer clear. I shouldn't even have suggested dinner." He stepped back, and Snape instinctively stepped forward, his body already protesting the loss of contact.

He placed his hand on top of Lupin's before the other man could push open the door. "Then, why did you?" he demanded.

"Because I'm bloody tired of buffalo-flavoured Wolfsbane."

Snape wrapped his fingers around Lupin's. "Try again. Why?"

It was mesmerising how swiftly Lupin's eyes flashed from ice to fire. "Sheer fucking curiosity. And I've actually missed the sound of your voice. It should go well with the beer."

Snape tightened his hold. "If you're lying, about this, I swear I'll hex your balls to Scotland and back."

Lupin pushed both their hands against the bar. "It's my job to tell lies, Napier," he said bluntly. "But you're not my job, and you won't be. Not unless you truly want to be back in harness."

The wind was still high and icy, and both men sucked in their breaths as its bitterness crashed against them in full force. Lupin shook his hand out of Snape's clasp, seized the loose ends of his scarf, and muttered, "*Que les*

loups se vivent de vent..."

"What?" Snape demanded.

"Villon," Lupin said, rewrapping the muffler more securely around his neck. "This is '*a wind that feeds the wolves*.'"

Quelque chose vient de tomber (Something's just fallen)

They hurried across the street to the rear of the college bookstore, and Apparated from its deserted loading dock to the restaurant. They spent the subsequent hours talking about books and music and parks and funding. Between the stuffed squid and the lamb sweetbreads, Snape decided to heed Lupin's warning and save his questions for some other time. He was out of practice where such games were concerned, and he had little desire to spend more time with Read-Ahead Girl and her ilk unless he had no choice.

Choices. Lupin wanted to give him *choices*. That in itself offered so much possibility that Snape found the next several days impossibly short and full and dazzling as they flew past. On Friday, he emailed to Lupin some articles to be translated, and on Monday, they met again after class, discussing the translations and other matters over coffee and honey-drenched sweets at the Parthenon until 1 a.m. Too revved and caffeinated to sleep, they walked over to Buckingham Fountain, having argued over whether its bronze sea horses shared certain genetic endowments with mer-creatures they'd encountered in the past.

It being winter, the fountain was dry, save for a tiny puddle where someone had spilled a soft drink on its edge. Having satisfied himself that he had been right about seahorse musculature, Snape turned to Lupin, inexplicably seized with an urge to tease the other man. "The other night — what was that poem? Dying of thirst by the fountainside?"

Lupin acknowledged Snape's smirk with a self-deprecating smile. "Nothing like well-aged self-pity, is there? *Science tiens a soudain accident, / Je gagne tout et demeure perdent.*"

When he didn't immediately translate, Snape demanded, "Share."

Lupin's rasp was nearly inaudible. "*All my knowledge comes by accident. / Even when I win, I lose.*"

Snape didn't stop to analyse the sudden surge of fury Lupin's words provoked. Instead, he simply crushed his mouth against the other man's, trapping them both into a kiss so harsh and deep they were both gasping when they broke apart for air.

"Don't call this an accident," Snape ordered.

"D'accord," Lupin said, but his voice was laced with irony. "I'm glad *you* aren't worried about oncoming trains."

Snape nipped at Lupin's ear. "I'm giving myself a holiday in Ignorance. Its restaurants serve fantastic desserts."

Lupin ducked his head in response, his lips grazing Snape's jaw. "I've been there myself," he said. "Nice scenery."

Snape pushed his head forward, forcing Lupin to bring his head back up so that their eyes met. "Understand, Lupin. It's just a visit," he said.

Lupin nodded. "Understood." He looked as if he wanted to say more, but after a moment, he simply leaned into Snape for another hard kiss.

Tu comptes les chances qu'il te reste (You count your remaining chances)

On Wednesday morning, Snape thought the city had never looked so beautiful. There was no wind, but the day was so clear and crisp that even the dingy warehouses on his route looked picture-postcard worthy. His experiments were humming along, and he was eager to commence his next tête-à-tête with Lupin. They hadn't gone further than the kissing on Monday, but it had been so intense in itself that Snape was glad they hadn't rushed ahead to the sex. Whenever they finally made love — and Snape was already certain it would be a matter of when — Snape wanted to it to be after the kissing had stopped being enough. For now, the kissing was so new and so all-devouring in itself that Snape found himself compulsively retracing its sensations every moment he could mentally steal away from his work. The feel of Lupin's mouth on his throat, the strength of Lupin's fingers twined with his... Snape couldn't remember the last time he had felt so *alive*.

Arriving at the lab, he poured himself a cup of coffee in the breakroom and carried it toward his office. When he pushed open the door, he was stunned by the wreckage that greeted him: Ripped-up papers. Broken pencils. A shattered ceramic mug. The overturned furniture. The clumps of rice and shreds of spinach scattered across the tiles.

And Gooch's body on the floor, his face bruised and his throat slashed.

This isn't real, Snape's mind protested. Researchers don't get killed in their offices.

Could've been a student. Maybe another vengeful clod he flunked?

Student, my arse. He wasn't ordinary. Neither are you.

Neither was his ex. Twenty Galleons says this has to do with her.

You're not being fair. Just because you don't like her..

"...never did have time for her political work, and that's heated up this term."

If I were a hired assassin, would I believe that Gooch knew nothing? Would I care?

I don't want to care. It's not my job to care. It's not my job to care that other people care.

You don't have a choice here. Your only choice is whether you're going to make it your choice.

As his mind zoomed between its questions and answers and guesses, Snape unconsciously crushed the paper cup in his fist, scalding himself with the hot liquid it had contained. His supervisor walked up as he hastily muttered an *Evanesco*.

The old man took in the scene within a single heartbeat. He said to Snape, "Go. I'll have to call the officials in a few minutes."

"I didn't do it," Snape choked out.

"Of course you didn't," the man said gruffly. "I don't hire imbeciles. Don't prove me wrong by just standing there."

He worked with Dr. Doren. Don't let them down now. With a glance of gratitude, Snape stepped behind the door and Apparated into Lupin's office.

Lupin turned from the window at the sound of Snape's arrival. His voice unnaturally calm, he observed, "You *are* out of practice. What if I had been in conference with a Muggle student?"

Snape sagged against the wall behind him, barely registering the presence of two other people seated in front of Lupin's desk. "So much for goddamned *choices*, Lupin. I can't not know, now. Did you know this would happen?"

"Did I *know*? No. Am I surprised? No." Lupin's face was bleak. "People get killed on my watch all the time, Napier. Even people who have nothing to do with my job." He turned to Read-Ahead Girl. "You may recall, Enid, how I told you what people *think* you know can kill you? This is a textbook case."

Before Enid could respond, the silver-haired woman next to her viciously kicked Lupin's desk and stood up. "So bloody *clinical*—"

"It's my *job* to be," Lupin repeated, exasperation leaking into his expression. "I'd ask what you want from me, but God knows I never could give it to you."

"No, you didn't," the woman said bitterly. "God knows I asked you often enough." She turned toward Snape, her jaw suddenly pure Black and her hair crimson. "'Napier,' now, is it? You look like hell, and you deserve each other. Come on, Enid." Nymphadora Tonks morphed back into Diana White and stalked out of the office.

Read-Ahead Girl hastily gathered up her belongings, but turned to Lupin before she left, confusion and desperation writ large across her face. At Lupin's nod of reassurance, she managed a trembling smile for both him and Snape before she scurried out.

Snape kicked the door shut and advanced toward Lupin. "I just found his body. When did *you* find out?"

Lupin pointed to a Wizarding photograph on his desk. "Rookwood's minions love to gloat. Diana received this an hour ago."

Snape forced himself to look at the photograph. *Oh, Gooch...* He tore his eyes away from the image of Gooch's contorted, terrified face and demanded, "The bint blames you?"

"She'll pull herself together," Lupin quietly said. "She has to yell at *someone* when shit like this goes down, and I can take it. Better than her wasting time blaming herself." Lupin's gaze had returned toward the quad outside his window, through which he could look down upon other students and professors travelling to and from their classrooms. "She tried so hard to keep him out of harm's way."

Snape inhaled sharply. "Even to the extent of leaving him?"

Lupin sighed. "I don't know if any of that was actual selflessness. She *does* want someone always there for her."

Snape sneered. "She'll never find that. No one can. It's not humanly possible."

"No," Lupin said, turning away from the window. "There's only knowing what you can bear, and bearing what you know."

Snape stepped toward Lupin, gripped his hands, and said, "I choose to know you. Do not decide for me how much I can bear."

Lupin shut his eyes for a long, heartstopping moment, as if Snape's declaration had been a last straw — somehow a something too much for *him* to bear. But just as Snape was about to drop their hands, Lupin pulled him close. Their mouths met in a kiss as fiery as the ones they had shared by the fountain.

"*D'accord*," Lupin finally said. "So be it." Not letting go of Snape, he Transfigured his desk chair into a pouffe — one just wide enough to accommodate two closely entwined men. As they sank down onto the cushion,

Lupin aimed his wand at the map of the Metro and murmured, "*Les oiseaux s'envolent*." It shimmered into a map of Chicago's streets and tunnels, with numerous figure-specks scattered throughout its grids, some stationary and some moving.

"The birds fly away," Lupin translated.

"Very romantic," Snape observed.

"I suppose. Not why I picked it. I wanted something not too long, not too close to a spell, and not so common someone would say it in here by accident."

"Not unlike a safeword," Snape murmured. He was amused both by the startled glance that Lupin shot him and the considering look that replaced it.

"Really? Well. We'll save that for later." Snape allowed himself a smirk as Lupin shifted against him, trying to get comfortable. Lupin brushed his lips against Snape's cheek and then said, "Any questions before I continue?"

"Just one," Snape said. "You say 'dah-core' a lot. What exactly does it mean?"

Lupin pressed another kiss against Snape's forehead. "It means, 'Okay.' Literally, it means 'of agreement.' *De* and *accord* contract to *d'accord*."

Snape couldn't resist another smirk. "Yes, Professor," he said, infusing his tone with mock docility.

Lupin flushed, but simply said, "There is so much I want — need — to share with you."

Snape brought Lupin's hand to his lips and pressed a kiss against the worn knuckles. "*D'accord*," he repeated, striving to emulate Lupin's pronunciation more precisely. "*D'accord*."

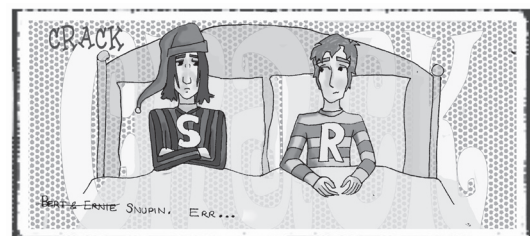
"*D'accord*," Lupin said. "Let us begin, then."

♥ Mechaieh's bio ♥

Mechaieh is the author of "A Face of Faith," "Placet," "The Collar," and other Snape/Lupin stories. She fangirls the Whomping Willow to a rather inordinate degree, and her favorite foods include hazelnut sake and deep-fried avocados.

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