

# 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

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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 let 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-skipper, 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 —"

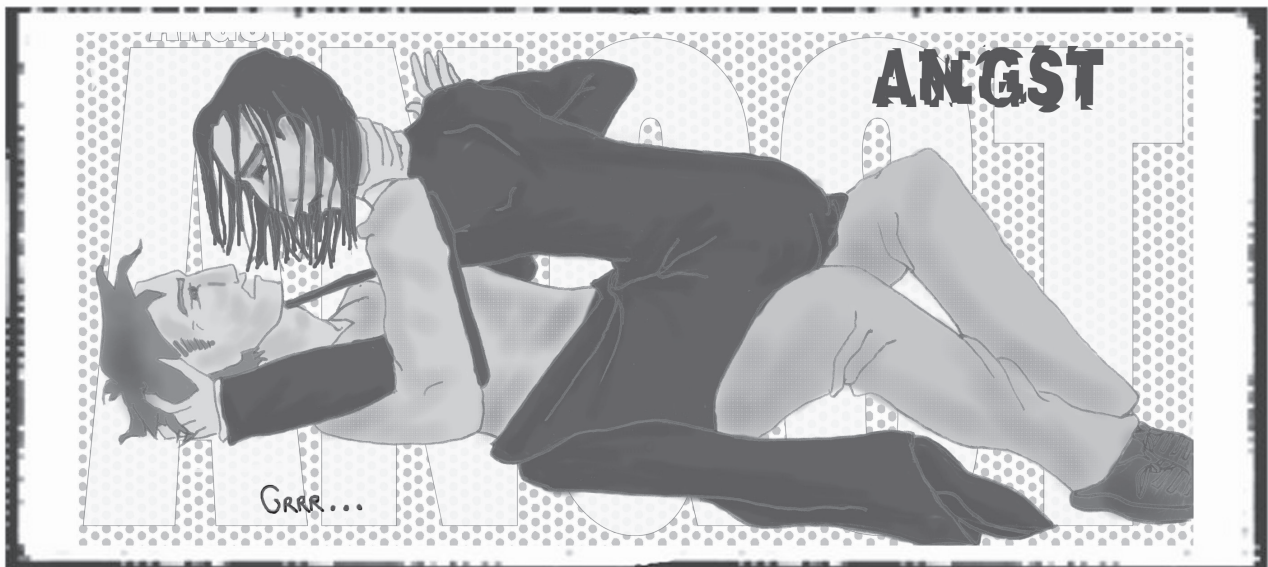
Remus leant closer and covered Severus' mouth with his own. Severus kissed back and pretended that it wasn't like kissing the wind.

## ♥ 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."

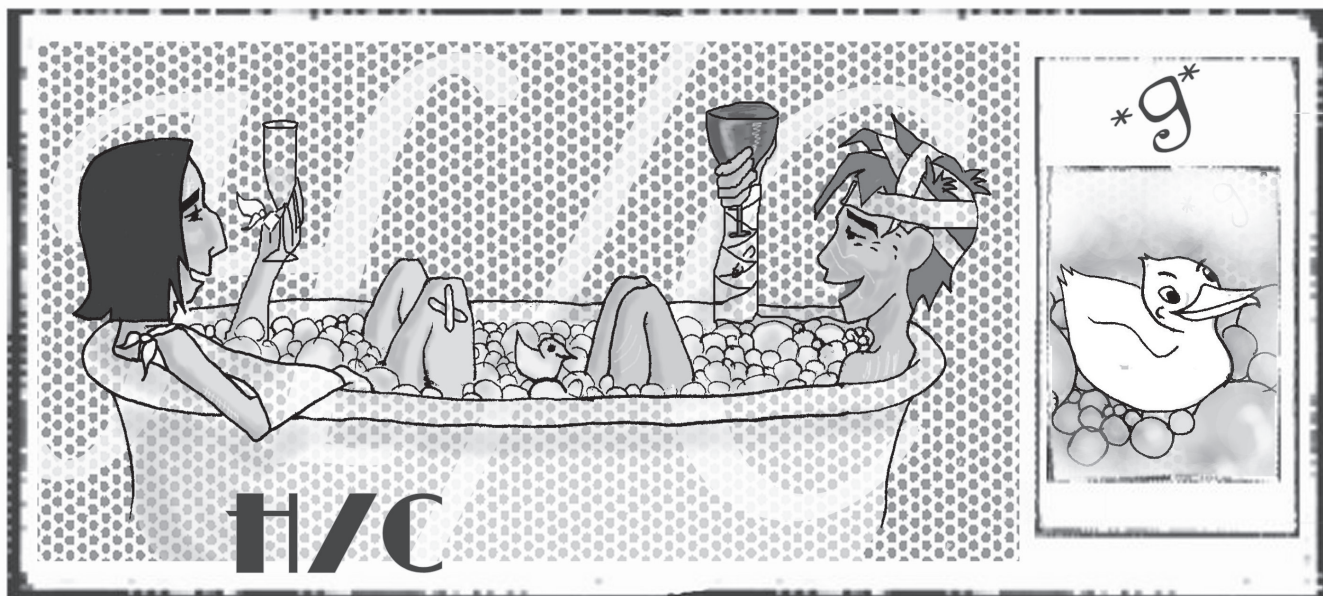
Severus nodded and wound his free arm around Remus in return while Roach ran in circles and wrapped his leash around their legs. "I suppose I should be cross with you for making me wait so long."

"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 frissonne 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*."

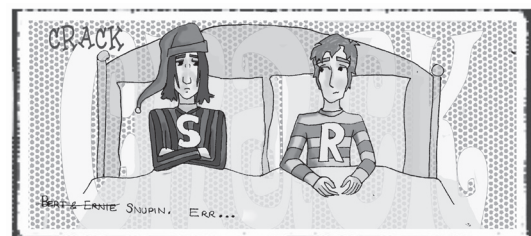
"*D'accord*," Lupin said. "Let us begin, then."

## ♥ 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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*Secret Meeting* by Moonycakes

# Two Secrets and a Wedding

by Ellid

“Sideboard — keep. Sofa — dustbin. Bed — Oxfam.”

The quill obediently wrote down every word as Severus slowly circled the ground floor. It was much easier to decide what to keep and what not than he'd thought it would be. His parents had not been wealthy, and most of their furniture and possessions had only sentimental value, if that. The estate agent would doubtless be pleased.

“Kitchen furniture — Oxfam. Pantry contents — dustbin. Dishes — Oxfam.”

Remus hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow when Severus informed him that he intended to sell Spinner's End. The house had stood vacant since Severus had been pardoned five years ago, and it wasn't as if they had the extra money to pay taxes on a decaying example of company housing for the deserving and thrifty poor. They lived outside of Hogsmeade now, with a yard and an outbuilding Severus used for his potions by mail business. It was time.

Besides, he needed the money if he was going to take six months off this winter.

“Linens — secondhand shop. Pots and pans — Oxfam.”

The itch below his navel was back, worse than ever. Severus made a face, sucked in his stomach, and reached inside his trousers to scratch.

“Note to self — moisturizer at apothecary's.” He paused. “Tell Remus it's because of winter eczema.”

He sighed, stopped scratching, and rubbed his stomach until the itch had eased. “Winter eczema” was as good an excuse as any, at least until early March. He had no intention of ruining Remus's birthday surprise by showing any physical weakness, at least until he had to.

His trousers seemed tighter as he pulled his hand out, and he was tempted to unzip his flies for a few minutes of blessed relief. Only the knowledge that he'd have to lie down to get them to zip again held him back. “Two more weeks,” he murmured. “Can't you wait that long?”

Of course there was no answer, nor had he expected one. Poppy had told him that babies grew at their own

rate, not at their — *gestational parent's* — convenience. “Tell him now, before you start showing,” she'd said. “You still have a male pelvis, which means you'll carry high. Besides, he needs know.”

“If I tell him now, it won't be a birthday present,” he'd said, with what he'd thought was impeccable logic. Poppy had rolled her eyes, given him a prescription for a vitamin potion, and told him to come back in a month. He'd thought her insistence that he'd show early tedious, and said so as he exited.

Now it looked as though the tedious old besom was right.

He hadn't originally planned to get pregnant. The article in *Advanced Medical Potions* on a male pregnancy potion had been a curiosity, nothing more. Then Potter and Lovegood had shown up at the Bonfire Day celebrations with the news that they were expecting their first, not a month after Granger and Longbottom had announced that *they* anticipated a blessed event. Before Severus could so much as make a cutting remark about disastrous results of Potter's recklessness bred to Lovegood's vagueness, Remus had gone pale and excused himself. Severus had found him at home, staring at a picture of Nymphadora and slamming back drink after drink. She had been the only woman he'd ever been involved with, and it was clear that her death had meant the end of more than a relationship to Remus.

Severus had cleaned Remus up and put him to bed, and then spent most of the night considering his options. Remus loved children and was clearly miserable at the thought of everyone else having a family while he didn't, and a miserable Remus was not acceptable. That meant a family, but how?

Adoption or fostering were out unless the Ministry relaxed its laws on ex-criminals and werewolves being suitable non-genetic parents. Surrogacy was prohibitively expensive, even if they could find a woman willing to be impregnated by one of them. Homunculi didn't live a normal lifespan and were usually deformed, and waiting for a Wizarding child to be rejected by Muggle parents might take decades.

That left one option, and though it would be uncomfortable and frequently painful, it was only nine months out of his life. That Potter might well have an aneurysm at



the thought of Severus carrying a baby for Remus made it all the better.

Severus had checked the recipe, ordered the rarer ingredients, and started brewing.

The potion had been a relatively simple variation on *Hermaphrodite Boreas*, and Remus hadn't suspected a thing when Severus turned into an aggressive bottom in November. He'd conceived early in December, based on the queasiness that started around Boxing Day, and Poppy had confirmed the pregnancy shortly after New Year's. She'd been shocked, and doubtless she wouldn't be the last, but Remus would have the family he longed for by September.

He rubbed his stomach again, smiling slightly at the evidence of his condition. He'd first noticed his waist getting thicker a few weeks earlier when his drawers had felt snug, and he was now getting by with expansion charms that grew as he did. His hair was thicker and less oily, and his face had begun to fill out as he put on weight. By some miracle Remus hadn't noticed the nascent bulge, or how firm his belly was getting now that he was in the second trimester. Unless Remus directly asked, he wasn't going to tell until March 10<sup>th</sup>, preferably after he'd given Remus the shagging of his life.

"Note to self, warded: speak to Pomfrey re: clothing at next antenatal visit."

This would be the best birthday present Severus could give, and he was determined to stay in his regular clothes until then. It would also take at least that long to find a maternity shop that offered anything suitably tasteful instead of the shapeless, pastel horrors he'd seen in Diagon Alley.

The itch had faded to a dull annoyance when the doorbell rang. Severus frowned. Spinner's End was still warded against intruders, so it was likely a Muggle collecting for charity or asking if he'd seen a missing cat. His old paranoia flared regardless — there were still people who wanted to avenge Albus's death ten years later, not to mention disposing of the few remaining Death Eaters, and he loosened his wand in its sheath before putting his eye to the peephole.

The skinny old man on the stoop seemed harmless enough: shaggy white hair, thick white beard, rounded shoulders. Something about him was vaguely familiar — was he one of the regulars at the Spinning Jenny? A retired plant worker?

Severus shifted his wand to his left hand and opened the door a few inches. "Yes?"

"Good day to you. I'm looking for the family that used to live here, the Snapes." A shadow passed over the hawk-

like face. "I know Mrs. Snape died a while back, but the son —"

An old neighbor, then. Severus relaxed a bit and opened the door. "I'm the son. What do you want?"

"You're — Sevy?" Before Severus could react the man had flung his arms about him in a crushing embrace. "I'm so glad I've found you! I've been asking for months, but no one knew where you'd gone —"

Sevy??? Severus managed to pull back before whoever this was choked him. "Sir! This display —"

"Oh lad. I'm sorry, don't know what come over me." The man stepped inside and shut the door. He frowned at the barren hall. "You really are moving, then? Can't say I'm surprised, the place was never the same after Lenie died. Poor woman, she deserved better."

"Lenie" had been his mother's nickname. Only her family and her Wizarding friends had called her that — what was going on? "Who are you? And what do you want?"

"Sorry, I was forgetting myself." The man grasped him by the shoulders and looked him up and down. "You look well, lad. Healthy for once, and it's good to see you've put some meat on your bones. I know the Princes were always lean, but I used to tell Lenie they weren't feeding you right at that school —"

It was like being doused with a bucket of ice water on a steamy summer day. Severus forced himself not to stare. "Dad? Is that you?"

"Aye, son." The eyes, the stoop, dear God the *nose* — how had he not recognized him? "I'm sorry I didn't write — you still don't use a telephone, do you? I tried writing to your school but the Headmistress said you didn't work there anymore. I came back here because Mrs. Harrison down the street said she'd seen you about lately, and I had to talk to you."

"Your *father*? And you didn't turn him into a potted plant?" Remus poured a steaming cup of tea and added sugar and milk. "That must have been a shock."

"I wanted to. Believe me, it was a near thing." Severus started to lean forward and sat back when the waistband of his trousers cut off his breath. He gulped half the tea at once so Remus wouldn't notice. "Then he started apologizing, and I was so shocked I couldn't."

"Apologizing? Good heavens." Remus reached across the table and began rubbing his hand in that way that always calmed him down. "How many years has it been? Thirty?"

Severus nodded. "Almost. He disappeared right after Mum's funeral. My grandmother told me that it was a guilty conscience since he wasn't there the night she died." He frowned into his mug. "He was drunk all the

time, and when he didn't come back we all assumed he'd died. I never thought he was alive, let alone that he'd sobered up and had spent most of the last few years looking for me."

Remus thumbed through the pamphlets Severus had brought home. "It looks like he's found a sobriety program. That must be why he wants to apologize. It's part of the process sometimes."

"Lovely. Just I need." Severus closed his eyes. His father had been a mean, nasty drunk, especially when he was out of work. Why would he think his son would welcome him back into his life? "That must be why he gave me this."

He drew a stiff white envelope out of his cloak and tossed it across the table. Remus opened it, read, and frowned. "A wedding invitation?"

"He found someone 'in the first year of his sobriety.' Evidently she helped him dry out and he's decided to marry her." There was a sudden wrench in his gut at the thought of someone, anyone, taking his mother's place. "Poor woman, she'll learn."

Remus turned the envelope over and read the address. "I assume I'm 'and friend'?"

Severus sat up and snapped his fingers at the pantry. It was definitely time for chocolate biscuits. "Oh, yes. He apologized for that, too. Said he hadn't known about the civil partnership or he'd have included you on the invitation."

"So he's not a homophobe at least. That's a point in his favor," murmured Remus. "Enid Elliot — where have I heard that name before? It sounds familiar."

"That movie about the ballet dancer?" The biscuit tin opened and positioned itself between them. Severus selected the most heavily coated digestive and took a bite.

"Maybe. It's a common enough name, I suppose." Remus tapped his fingers against the table. "Well. If we're going, we'll need Muggle clothes. I'll have to dust off that tweed blazer, I suppose."

"Muggle — I never said we were going!" Severus coughed as half the biscuit went down the wrong way. He swallowed the rest of his tea before he choked. "Are you mad?"

The teapot poured him a fresh cup. Remus waited for him to stop coughing. "I think we should, actually. It's what, two hours including the reception? If it's unbearable we can apparate home easily enough."

Severus shook his head. "It's the day before your birthday. I thought we were going out of town to celebrate!" He'd made the reservations at a cozy small hotel right after

Poppy had given him the good news. Spending most of Saturday in a grotty little reception hall with his father and his new wife was about as romantic as cleaning the chimney.

"Severus." Remus would not let him look away. "He's trying. You should at least meet him halfway. We'll still have Saturday night and all of Sunday to celebrate."

He never had been able to resist Remus when he was sensible and calm. Severus made a face anyway. "All right. But I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' if it's a complete cock-up."

"That's the spirit!" Remus came around the table and kissed him on the top of the head. "If nothing else, we'll have a good laugh out of it. Did I ever tell you about the wedding I attended where the flower girl leaned over and showed everyone her knickers?"

"I missed that one," murmured Severus. He tilted his head back for another kiss. Remus tasted of tea and biscuits. "How charming."

"It gets worse. The reception was outdoors, and halfway through a swarm of bees attacked the cake. I thought the bride was going to have a fit." Remus chuckled. "And of course no one knew a spell for getting rid of bees so we had to do without."

"I can imagine." Severus reluctantly let Remus stand up and start clearing the tea dishes. They'd have to start dinner soon, and then he'd had to check the "Will attend" box on the reply cards his future stepmother — stepmother! — had included in the invitation and walk it down to the Muggle post box. The exercise would do him good, and he could pick up a copy of the paper while he was at it. The local menswear shop was allegedly having a sale, and the sooner he started looking for a suit, the better.

It wasn't as if he'd been able to squeeze into his old Mod suit for the last twenty years, let alone now.

Severus hadn't been in St. John the Baptist since a Muggle cousin's wedding the year before Potter arrived at Hogwarts. That had been a monstrously expensive affair, with the bride in a two meter train, a boys' choir singing anthems, and a thurifer censing the aisle with smoke before the wedding party appeared. The coughing from the pews hadn't ended until the recessional, and even the priest had looked a bit green.

Toby and his intended had chosen one of the side chapels; it was a second marriage with a middle aged bride, so a full dress ceremony would have been even more tasteless than the usual brawl. The Lady Chapel was a far better choice, even with shockingly modern altar frontal showing an abstract Virgin holding a Child that looked rather like a raisin.

"This is a lovely building. Did your family attend?" Remus had paused by the elaborate baptismal font in the nave. *That* at least hadn't changed.

"Sometimes. I was christened here. I think my father had bet on the winner at the Grand National so he could afford the reception." Severus joined him by the font. They didn't live anywhere near Halifax, but he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to have their child baptized here. "It's original 15<sup>th</sup> century work, you know."

"It's beautiful," said Remus. He gave Severus a sidelong look. "Makes me wish we could wear robes. It would match the church at least."

One of the guests, a skinny woman who reeked of cigarettes, tottered by on painfully high spiked heels. Severus made a face at the smoky reek. "We'd have to pretend we were in a play. Not worth the trouble."

"I suppose." Remus gave the font a final once-over and let Severus guide him toward the chapel. "At least you found a decent suit."

"I'm glad you think so." The tailor had suggested that a suit in a larger size would be more economical than an elasticized waistband. Severus had tipped him double, muttered something about a glandular condition that would eventually correct itself, and held his ground. It was just as well, too. His waist had thickened abruptly over the past few days, and even with the elastic the trousers were a bit tight. "It was the least objectionable choice."

"Charcoal gray suits you." Remus let a hand linger on his arm as a plump, sweating usher escorted them to the first pew on the groom's side. A woman Severus thought might have been a distant cousin scooted over to make room. "You look good."

Severus nodded. One or two of the guests were clearly relatives, including a great-aunt who had always treated his mother abominably. The rest seemed to be friends, or possibly members of Toby's sobriety group. A large proportion seemed to be smokers, and he swallowed bile as a too-thin woman drenched in perfume plopped down directly behind him.

Mercifully, someone opened a door and he took a gulp of fresh air. Remus frowned. "Are you all right? It's a bit close in here —"

"I'm fine. Too much musk in that perfume." Severus glanced about, then cast a cleansing charm on the air. "What time is it? It should have started by now."

"Not quite half past two — oh. Here's the vicar, and that must be your father?"

"Thank God." Toby, looking more stuffed than Severus felt, took his place beside the mosaic altar. The priest adjusted her glasses and nodded to the side, and the great organ in the nave began the first chords of Clarke's *Trumpet Voluntary*.

The ceremony was surprisingly simple, and surprisingly dignified. Enid, who turned out to be a stately, perfectly coiffed matron, wore a champagne colored suit and a small veiled hat, and was escorted by her adult son. Toby, blushing violently, took her hands and vowed to "continue in my sobriety" in addition to the usual "love honor and cherish" nonsense, and Enid wept a little before promising the same. The vicar smiled, a soloist with a noticeable tremolo sang, and almost before it had sunk in that Enid was his stepmother and her son was his stepbrother (*stepbrother!*), Severus was watching the newlyweds recess to a thundering version of the *Wedding March* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The congregation rose as the music faded away with a faint *blat* from an elderly *vox humana* stop. Remus stepped into the aisle and let their pewmate slide past. "Where's the reception?"

"The social hall is this way." Severus felt another twinge of nausea as he got a whiff of his second cousin George's aftershave. "Pray that they used an outside caterer. Some of the WI can cook, but I wouldn't trust anything with dairy in it."

"Noted." Remus paused in the doorway. "This part looks modern. Too bad they couldn't have adapted an old undercroft. Those are much more attractive."

"Only a were — only you could possibly derive pleasure from a wedding reception surrounded by monkish tombs." Severus led him to the rear of the receiving line. He still wondered what he was doing here, and why Remus had insisted on attending.

A few of the guests stared at him, and one or two scowled as they realized that Toby's Boy had turned out a poof the way they'd always predicted. Severus straightened his back and returned each sneer with interest. They hadn't given a damn when Toby drank up his pay packet and screamed at his wife and son, so why should he pay any mind to them now?

"What should I call them?" murmured Remus. They were almost to Toby and Enid, and Enid's children from her first marriage. Completely average Muggles, every one, and Severus had to grit his teeth at the blindingly pink dress the daughter had worn as her mother's bridesmaid.

"I've no idea. I used to call him 'Dad,' but now he wants me to call him 'Toby,' God knows why."

"I should probably let him decide." Remus shook hands with the girl in pink and introduced them both. The girl grinned through shimmering lip gloss and threw her arms about them both, babbling about how Toby had told them about his son, and how happy she was to meet them both at last, and did they know any cute single men because she hadn't found *anyone* in Halifax who had a brain? Severus was tempted to say that Percy Weasley was considered good looking in some quarters and was planning to move north as soon as he finished his parole, but decided against it. Even Percy deserved better than this.

"Severus? I'm so glad you came, son." Tobias Snape, looking like an emaciated Father Christmas, gave him an awkward hug. "And you must be —"

"Remus Lupin. Pleased to meet you, sir." Remus held out his hand. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Nonsense. Of course we wanted you here." Enid handed her bouquet to her son and stretched up on her toes to kiss Remus lightly on the cheek. "You're family now."

She turned to Severus and kissed him as well, a gentle peck that felt surprisingly good. "I've wanted to meet you for years. It wouldn't have felt right if you'd stayed away."

"Madam," said Severus. He hadn't known what to expect — a hardened pub crawler? A religious fanatic with pamphlets railing against the evils of drink and gay marriage? A scrawny young thing who'd married his father out of a daddy fixation? Up close she looked almost familiar, handsome and clear eyed, with the straight back and calm, intelligent expression of a woman who wasn't easily fazed.

To his horror, he felt a slight prick of tears in his eyes. *She wasn't supposed to be kind. Or like Remus. Or welcome me.*

*Damn hormones.*

"Thank you for inviting us."

"Thank you for coming. Both of you." Enid smiled, then stepped back into line and retrieved her bouquet. Her gaze swept him up and down. "We must talk later — Toby's so proud of you, running your own business."

"Proud?" Severus was vaguely aware of Remus nodding his agreement.

"Aye, son. I was always worried about you after you went to school, and then your mum died —" Toby shook his head. His beard was neatly trimmed, probably for the wedding. "I was too drunk to do right by you then, but I mean to make it up to you now. You and your friend — partner both. It does me good to see you settled and happy."

Severus nodded, unable to think of a coherent reply. Remus let himself be hugged, then drew Severus aside as another well-wisher pumped Toby's arm while congratulating him on staying sober and finding such a fine figure of a woman.

"He's not so bad," said Remus under his breath. Severus shook his head.

"That's because he's sober. Once he gets a taste of champagne —"

"It's sparkling grape juice. Mum insisted because half the guests are former clients." Enid's son snagged a glass of pale yellow liquid from a tray. "Toby's one of her great success stories, actually. He's been sober for three years and counting. She never would have married him otherwise."

"Three years? Do tell." And why couldn't he have sobered up when his wife and son needed him? Severus barely noticed as Remus steered him toward the buffet. His stomach churned at the thought that *she* had managed what his mother never had.

The food was exactly what he had expected: sausage rolls, quiche, iced cakes of all sorts. Most of it seemed harmless, despite an Irish expatriate who had anticipated St. Patrick's Day with a green jelly shaped like a shamrock. There even was a plate of sliced vegetables and several varieties of seasoned hummus and dips that smelled —

That smelled —

Like yogurt that had started to turn.

Perfume. Smoke. Spicy food that had been out too long. Severus clamped his mouth against a sudden flood of bile, ground out something about it being too hot in this wretched place, and bolted for the gents.

The handicapped stall was big enough that he could kneel and vomit into the toilet without having his legs stick out into the rest of the bathroom. He groaned, leaned against the wall, and doubled over as another spasm emptied his stomach completely. So much for Poppy's cheery confidence that the nausea had ended after the second month.

Somehow he managed to flush before the smell made him sick again. He waited for his stomach to settle before pulling himself upright and lurching toward the sink. A spell restored his clothes and cleaned the sweat from his face, and another freshened his breath. He breathed deeply through his mouth until he was sure he wouldn't embarrass himself, splashed water on his face and straightened his tie, and opened the door.

"Here. You don't want to be sick again before the reception ends." Enid, calm as ever, held out a vial of Mother Carey's Best Morning Sickness Remedy. "I used it whenever I was pregnant."

Severus stared down at the vial. Poppy had recommended it to him at his first antenatal visit, and he kept a small, unmarked supply in the pocket of his working robes. How had a Muggle gotten her hands on it?

And how did a Muggle know that a man might need a potion certified as safe for pregnancy?

"You — Madam — I —"

"*Privatus*." Enid waved her fingers in a familiar pattern. "I work for the Calderdale Royal substance abuse unit these days, but I started out at St. Mungo's."

Severus stared at her. Now that he knew, he could just make out the shadow of a wand sheath in the left sleeve of her jacket. "You're a witch."

"Quite true. Hufflepuff, if you must know." She uncorked the tiny bottle and wrapped his fingers about it. "Here, drink this before you're sick again. You should have taken some before the reception, you know."

Severus scowled but complied. The remaining nausea settled almost immediately, and he rubbed his stomach in relief. "I had no idea someone would bring cumin flavored dip." He paused. "How did you know?"

"That you were a wizard, or that you were pregnant?" Enid conjured a glass of cold water and held it to his lips until he drank. "You need to rehydrate after that — better, yes?"

"Yes. And as to how you knew —"

"I believe you know my sister Poppy?" His shock must have been obvious, based on how quickly she continued. "Yes, my maiden name is Pomfrey. I'm Poppy's youngest sister, the one who left the Wizarding World about the time You-Know-Who rose the second time. My first husband was a Muggle and our children aren't magical, so naturally I wanted to protect them."

"Naturally." The water washed the remaining taste of vomit from his mouth. Severus drained it and transfigured it into a handkerchief. "I assume you kept in touch with your sister?"

"As much as I could without endangering my children," said Enid. "I knew who you were the minute I looked up Toby's medical records and saw that his next of kin was a son named 'S. Snape.'"

"And of course you're back in contact with Poppy, and of course she let slip that her old colleague was up the duff. Perfectly understandable." Severus curled his lip at the thought.

Enid folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. The resemblance to Poppy was suddenly obvious. "Of course not. She doesn't want to lose her license."

"No, I knew the moment I saw you. You've been in the *Prophet* enough that I knew you shouldn't have *that*." She tapped his belly with a sturdy finger. "I doubt anyone else in there has an inkling of your condition, but when you left so suddenly I had a hunch it was morning sickness. How far along are you?"

There was a plain carved bench a few feet down the hallway. Severus gestured toward it and waited for Enid to settle herself and arrange her skirt before sinking onto the hard surface himself. "Almost four months." He hesitated. "Remus doesn't know yet. It's a surprise until his birthday tomorrow."

"Almost four months and you haven't told him? Goodness, you're cutting it a bit close." Enid folded her hands in her lap. "I'll break the news to your father if you like — yes, he knows I'm a witch. We met in the casual ward at St. Monica's when he decided to stop drinking —"

"He went to a Wizarding Hospital?"

"It was the only place where he could talk about your mother, and about you." She laid a hand on his arm. "He loved her very much, you know."

"Forgive me if I can't believe that." Severus did not bother to hide the bitterness. "If it's true, he had a peculiar way of demonstrating it."

Enid took his hands in both of hers. Her palms were surprisingly smooth. "He knows that, Severus. He blamed himself for years for not noticing how sick she was, and for treating her and you so badly. That's why he started drinking — he couldn't provide for his family when you were small, and the pain was too much. Then your mother died, and he couldn't face it, or you."

"He was half-dead when I met him again at Calderdale Royal, and I'm still surprised that he found the strength to pull himself back from the edge. He's been trying to find you for at least a year so he could make amends."

Severus could not face her, not when the prickle was back just under his lashes. "He'll change his mind when he finds out about my condition. I daresay a pregnant man can't be easily explained to his friends."

"You aren't giving him enough credit. All he can talk about is how happy he is that you didn't curse him on sight, and that you've found someone at last even if it's a man. He'll be thrilled to find out he'll be a grandfather." Enid laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "We'll tell my children that you're adopting. Roger's girlfriend is talking marriage and babies, and he'll welcome the chance to see what it's like with a niece or nephew."

"He may flee in horror after he babysits for the first time." Severus still had vivid memories of a newborn Draco Malfoy pissing on the vicar at Malfoy Major during the most expensive christening of the year.

Enid laughed and rose to her feet. "He may at that! He's a bit young for a family to my mind, but we'll see." She raised an eyebrow. "Would you escort me back into the hall, Severus? The dancing should start soon."

Severus tucked her hand through his elbow. "I'd be honored." He paused as she dropped the privacy spell and rearranged her hat. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do," said Enid.

The rest of the reception was quite ordinary. A cake was cut, photos were taken, and the newlyweds danced their first dance. Severus' appetite had returned enough that he was able to finish a plate of finger foods and a slice of wedding cake, although he'd avoided the cumin dip. He'd talked with his new siblings, exchanged addressed with two cousins who had turned out much better than expected, and enjoyed a discreet dance with Remus once Uncle Algernon and his "great and good friend" Trevor led off a surprisingly vigorous jitterbug. It had been almost nine when Mr. and Mrs. Snape departed for a week in Paris.

Now he and Remus were safely checked into their luxury suite at the Albertus Arms, and Remus was taking his turn in the shower. Severus had gone first, and it had been a foretaste of heaven to strip off his clothes and wash away the last traces of smoke and grime and sweat under a steaming waterfall shower.

The quiet flicker of flames from the fireball was the only sound in the room. Severus glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Remus was still in the shower, unknotted the sash of the hotel's complimentary terry cloth dressing gown, and let the garment fall open.

The itch on his stomach had come back right after the happy couple had left in a shower of confetti and good wishes, and it had been agony to wait this long before moisturizing his lower abdomen. He'd made his own stretch mark salve, of course, with plenty of cocoa butter and healing ointments, and now he summoned it from his luggage and scooped out a generous dollop. He wasn't normally vain, but the pictures in Poppy's maternity magazines had convinced him that being permanently marked was not a desirable souvenir of pregnancy, especially since he'd end up with a caesarian scar regardless.

The cream was smooth, white, and smelled faintly of chocolate from the cocoa butter. Severus could not help sighing in relief as the uncomfortable tightness across

his lower abdomen eased a bit. Soon his condition would be obvious, and then no one, not even Potter or Weasley, could believe that Remus was no more than a passing fancy.

"Here. Let me help." Before he could react Remus had come up behind him, plucked the tub of salve from his hand, and started gently rubbing it onto the itchiest spot. "You're getting nice and round. When are you due?"

"Early September, and — " Severus froze. Remus chuckled, the low, throaty sound that meant he was pleased, and then he was kneeling in front of Severus to cradle his stomach in both hands, a look of such devotion on his face that Severus had to remind himself to breathe. "You knew. You *knew*. How?"

Remus kissed him just below the navel and rested his cheek against the bulge. "Besides you not fitting into your clothes? You started to smell different around Christmas time — all those hormones, you know. Then you stopped drinking, even wine, and you started taking vitamins. I'd seen that potions magazine when it came out and I couldn't help wondering." He caressed the swell. "But I didn't *know* until just now. Lily used the same cream for stretch marks, you know. I'll never forget how it smelled."

"It's a popular recipe." Severus shuddered and grabbed the back of a chair for support as Remus carefully explored every inch of his belly, from underside to shallow navel. "I assume you're pleased?"

"Very much so." Another kiss, this one low on the curve, and another delighted laugh. "We're having a baby. Us. Oh, love — you should have said something."

"I was planning to tell you tomorrow." Severus stroked the graying hair as carefully as Remus had touched his body. Remus sighed with pleasure and nuzzled his stomach a final time before rising to his feet. He wrapped his arms about Severus in a tight hug, close enough that Severus shivered at the pressure on his abdomen. Soon they wouldn't be to do this face to face, not if he got as big as Poppy thought he would, and he took a step toward the bed. "Tonight I wanted to make you scream."

"Oh, did you?" Remus moved past him and stretched out on the pristine sheets. The firelight brought out the gold in his hair, and he was so beautiful that Severus forgot all about his plans for a long, leisurely seduction. "Maybe I should do the same to you."

"Do tell." Two long strides, and Severus had joined him. He straddled the lean hips and leaned forward so that the bump looked even bigger than it was. "You'd best

remember that next year when we'll have a crying, teething, excreting infant. It's your baby, after all."

Remus grinned and pulled him down into a long, fierce kiss, one hand between them to cup the swell. "I won't forget. Promise."

"Good." Severus smiled against his lips. He ground downward until Remus moaned. "I'm doing all the work, it's only fair —"

Later, when the fire had burned low and they had worn each other out, the clock struck midnight. Severus, almost asleep, felt Remus shift beside him and spoon up against his back. "Happy birthday, Remus," he whispered.

Remus stroked his leg, then his chest, then rubbed slow, almost reverent circles on the rounded belly. "Best birthday ever. Best present."

"You say that every year," Severus murmured. Remus was warm and the bed was soft, and without thinking about it he reached down for the hand covering their child and gave it a squeeze. By now Enid would have told his father, and if Toby was sincere about reconciling, the baby would have a real family, not just two middle aged wizards.

"This year it's true. We're having a baby." Remus yawned and wriggled closer. "G'night, love."

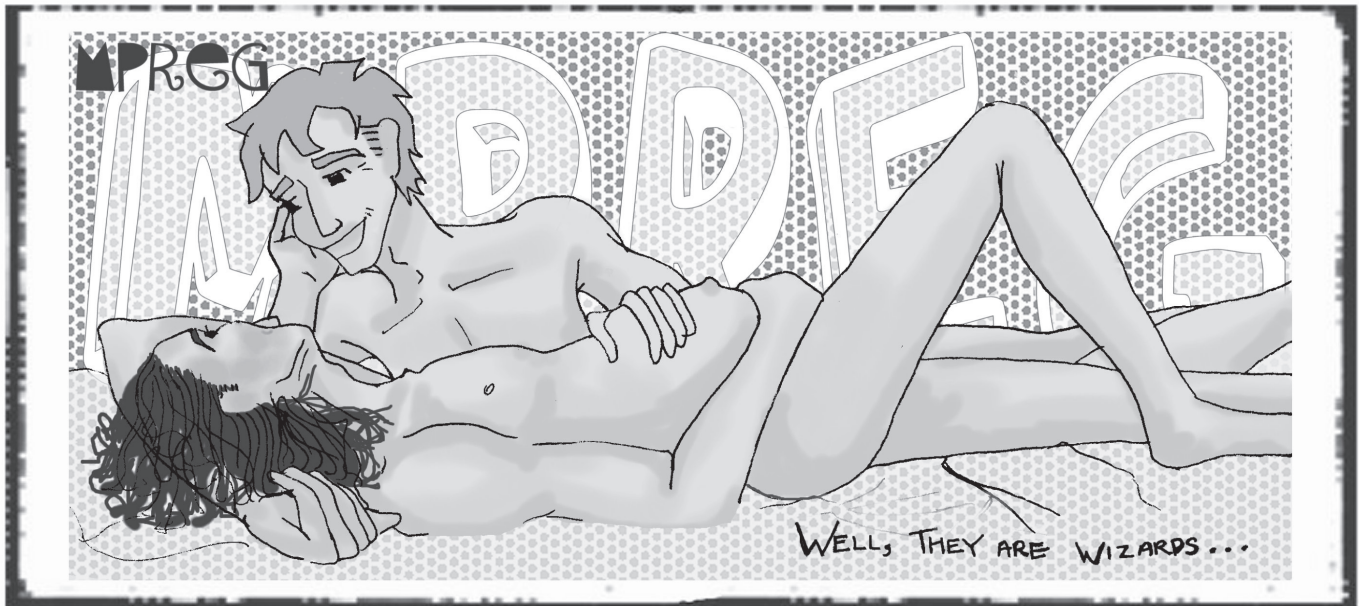
"Good night." Severus settled into a comfortable position on his left side and laced his fingers through Remus's. His partner was happy, and their child would be loved by many, not just a few.

*Happy birthday indeed.*

## ellid's bio

Ellid is a fan writer and textile historian from Massachusetts. She has three cats, a basement full of fabric, and an unhealthy obsession with early Tudor England and medieval quilts. Her best known Snape/Lupin stories are *New York Minute*, *Motherless Child*, and *Of Mutual Benefit*, all of which are archived at Moonshadow, the Snape/Lupin archive (<http://ssf-moonshadow.com/archive/>).

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*Candlelight* by Moonycakes



## Own My Heart

by Stasia

Severus sat in the darkened room, brooding. The window to his right showed rolling fields, with a hint, far in the distance, of the sea, all under the light of a fitful moon. He sat unmoving, eyes fixed on the figure in the bed before him.

The figure lay still for now, but the disarray of the sheets and the blankets crumpled at the foot of the bed spoke of earlier tossing and turning. Just as Severus leaned forward to place his hand gently on his forehead, the invalid jerked sharply in the bed. His eyes came half open, showing pure gold in the dim light.

"Fenrir, you can't—I won't let you... No!" He tangled in the sheets, recoiling as Severus tried to pull them away from his twisted limbs. "Please, please..." he trailed off, his voice hoarse and desperate.

Severus grasped him by the shoulders. "Lupin, you must listen to me. You are not with the pack any more. You are safe. Greyback is dead." He shook Remus slightly, but the gold eyes staring up at him held no recognition.

"I can't let you... he's mine. I have a claim." This time Remus spoke with total authority, and Severus was so startled by the repetition of the words he'd heard more than five years before that he dropped Remus' limp body back onto the bed. Remus showed no sign of noticing the rough treatment; he was far too lost in the past to see anything in the present.

Severus sank back into his seat. At the time, he'd tried to ask Remus why he'd acted the way he had, why he'd challenged Greyback, but Remus had simply looked at him with terrible cold eyes and told him to get on with it, if he was prepared. Then, the reminder of what the Headmaster had told him shocked him to silence, but now he found himself burning with curiosity.

He kept asking until Remus threatened to stop visiting him in Azkaban, but that hadn't made him less curious. Once he had been released from prison, his curiosity had to take a back seat to survival. He had no idea how Remus had talked Potter into championing his cause with the Wizengamot, but however it was done, it was done completely: he was acquitted, not pardoned.

Once he had settled into a comfortable life, he learned he wasn't as suited to solitude as he'd thought. The

first time Remus visited him, he'd been so pathetically grateful that he'd completely embarrassed himself by nearly begging him to stay for dinner.

Remus continued to visit regularly, only skipping when he was forced to travel for his work. Severus attributed his unease during the times when Remus didn't visit twice a week to residual stress from Azkaban and forced himself to ignore how often he checked the skies for owls and peeked out the door looking for surprise visitors.

Severus spent the rest of the night casting cooling spells over Remus and trying not to think of the strange way Remus had acted the last time he visited.

The next morning, Potter peeked around the door. "You're here, Snape? When did you get here?" He carried a tray filled with a full day's food for at least three hearty eaters and Remus' entire daily prescription of potions for the day. He took one look at Severus' face and set the tray down on a table on the far side of the bed. "What? Did something happen?"

"What do you remember of the time just before you found the last Horcrux, Potter?"

Potter's face tightened in thought. "Not much. Things were pretty crazy then. Ron was here, and Hermione was dividing her time between researching how to destroy the Horcruxes and helping me to find them. Why?"

Severus was silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on Remus. "Because something else happened. Something with the wolf pack Greyback controlled." Severus stood, drifting almost unconsciously to stroke Remus' hair away from his flushed cheeks. "I need to find out what was really happening."

Potter crossed his arms. "Well, you'll have a hell of a time doing it. Greyback is dead, remember?"

Severus controlled his sudden urge to shake the boy. "I know that, you whelp. I was there. I saw the moment when Re-Lupin killed him..." He saw the image of Remus' face, not triumphant as he'd expected it to be when Remus finally killed the werewolf responsible for destroying so many lives, but desolate, as if Remus were aware of something else, some pain Severus hadn't been able to see. "I saw it happen," he finished softly.

Potter approached the bed and tried to straighten the sheets. After a few fruitless tugs, he waved his wand and the sheets twitched straight, returning to shimmering white. "He's almost the last one. There's only one other who's lasted this long, so if you think there's anything you can do, you'll have to hurry." He waved his wand again and Remus was propped up into a semi-seated position. The urgency of his voice contrasted with his smooth movements.

Severus stepped backwards, startled. "The last one? What, all the other werewolves are dead of this? How long has this been going on?"

Potter reached for a bowl from the tray and began to spoon porridge into Remus' mouth, expertly catching the drips. Severus watched, realising that the confident way Potter handled the feeding implied a much longer illness than he'd previously thought.

"How long?" he repeated harshly.

Potter looked away from Remus' face. "A little more than two weeks now. The younger ones all died almost immediately. The older ones died more slowly, but it seemed to hurt them more. We didn't even connect it to Remus at first—he's one of the few who's come out of the pack to live like a hum—to live with people. The rest all stayed with the pack in the Forest. We didn't know anything was wrong until the latest alpha, Badelt, got sick." Potter put the mostly empty bowl back on the table and began the careful process of wiping Remus' face clean.

"Badelt contacted the Werewolf Office, and they came screaming to Remus as soon as they saw the initial death count. Remus brought it to me and..." His hands fell to his lap, "And then he caught it. I was so afraid, but he hung on and hung on. And so did the other man, but the only thing we can find that they have in common is that they've been the longest on Wolfsbane, so we—"

"Called me." Severus' face was buried in his hands. He let his hands slide into his hair, where they clenched into fists. "You should have called sooner, Potter. We could have tried to save the others—if it's been two weeks since Lupin fell ill—"

"No," interrupted Potter. "No, it's been two weeks since the pack started dying. Remus has been here about three days."

Severus went cold. He'd seen Remus just a little less than a month ago. If Potter was correct, Lupin had lost nearly a stone in a bit less than a week. He got to his feet. "Where are the bodies, Potter? The other werewolf who's alive? Where are they?"

Potter turned to face him. "The other man? I think Badelt's on this floor, a few doors down." He paused. "The bodies, though? The Ministry burned them. You might be able to catch the last two corpses before St Mungo's gives them over to the Ministry, but the rest are gone. I'll show you where the last of them should be."

Severus stormed towards the door and then he stopped. "No, I need to see the living one first. But you have to get them to stop burning the corpses. I need to see them, to run tests. And I want all the files on this—what's been tried, what's been done."

Potter looked at him, his expression bleak. "There's nothing, sir. They didn't run any tests."

Severus felt like he'd been struck on the head. "The mediwizards haven't tried to find out what this is? What if it's contagious to non-lycanthropes? What if it's curable?"

Potter's face twisted. "The Minister told Remus that it doesn't matter, a few werewolves here or there. He's burning the bodies because he thinks it *is* contagious..." Potter looked at Remus, who was thrashing again in the bed. "I brought you here because I can't let him die without trying everything, and you're the only one who knows what's really in Remus' Wolfsbane; I know you modified it." He raised his head and stared at Severus. "You have to save him, Snape. You just... save him."

Severus held his gaze. "I will." He knew he might not be able to keep his word, but he was aware of how much he owed Remus, how much of his life would be empty if Remus were dead, how much he—he refused to think about how he felt.

As he stalked down the corridor to find the other werewolf, he suddenly recalled that he'd been feeling ill himself for the past month. He knew he'd felt a connection to Remus ever since the scene in the Forest, but could this be connected to that? Behind him, he heard Potter's quick steps in the other direction.

It was easy to find the room Badelt was in. It was almost as if he could see something in the air in front of the room, some floating dark shape. He blinked, but the shape remained cloudy and inchoate. He strode through it and into the room.

The first thing that struck him was the smell. There was a scent of pine and of pitch, but Severus assumed those came from the clothes tossed into a pile in the corner. The man himself shone with sweat that gave off the rank odour of sulphur and a strange sharp bitterness. Above all was the clear scent of oncoming death.

Severus gave himself a moment to acclimate, then moved to the bed. The patient was emaciated—whatev-

er this disease was, it ate away at the afflicted terribly. Severus saw that Badelt was too far gone to be able to respond to him at all. With a sinking stomach, Severus pulled out his wand, closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and whispered, "Legilimens".

Immediately he was drowning in sensation—he felt his body wasting, his heart burning up inside him. Gritting his teeth, Severus pushed through to older memories. He looked for memories of when Badelt had first noticed he was sick. There was a flash of Remus, and Severus stopped. Carefully, he teased that memory out, but it was just Remus visiting the pack. It must have been relatively recent; Severus knew Remus hadn't had any robes as nice as that until after the war's end.

That memory of Remus led to others; Severus followed the chain of memories, watching Remus get younger and shabbier in each. The memories were coloured with some desperate emotion; it wasn't until he saw Badelt put his hand on Remus' shoulder only to have it shaken off that Severus realised he was seeing unrequited love. A flare of hot jealousy burning its way up his throat, he slipped further in, only to come to another halt when he saw himself, desperate and nearly broken.

The snatch of memory triggered his own, and he watched, horrified.

*Severus knows he's miscalculated the moment Greyback doesn't acknowledge his status as the Dark Lord's emissary. However, his plan for backing out of the situation gracefully dies with the feral smile that stretches across Greyback's face.*

*"You know where we are," Greyback says. "You could lead others here." He stands proudly, unconcerned that he's a good ten centimetres shorter than Severus. "You'll pay for that, and then the Dark Lord will know he can't just throw me around like he does the lot of you."*

*Severus knows he can just Apparate away, so he sneers at the disgusting creature in front of him. "If anyone is going to pay for this travesty, it will be you," he says. Just as he concentrates to Apparate to the Dark Lord, he sees Lupin's face over Greyback's shoulder, and the agony on it distracts him.*

*"Oh," Greyback purrs, his smile now incandescently malevolent, "I wouldn't try that. We had our resident wizard put up barriers so you can't run away like the coward we know you really are."*

*Severus' temper begins to burn, but as it's full daylight now and weeks from the full moon, he knows he's in no danger of being turned. He glances at Lupin, but Lupin's face is mirror-calm now. "I'm no coward. I just don't like filth, and the longer I stand here with all of you animals, the more*

*cleansing I will need." He hears the first few angry growls and tips his chin up slightly, his wand ready to fall into his hand and his two favourite curses in the back of his mind.*

*Greyback's smile tilts, and he chuckles. "You'll smell a lot more when we're done with you." He steps forward and is just reaching for Severus' shoulder when Lupin's voice cuts across the clearing.*

*"I can't let you...he's mine. I have a claim." Lupin stands slightly separated from the rest of the pack; only one other werewolf stands near him. That werewolf's eyes are on Lupin and Severus recognises the hopeless look in them.*

*He snarls, "I'm no one's but my—Lord's." The sound of his voice is drowned in the mocking laughter of Greyback, who turns to face Lupin.*

*"You'd challenge me, for this?"*

*Lupin steps forward, face tight and pale. "I do." He begins to pull his shirt off when Greyback turns and lunges at Severus. Severus flinches back, wand out.*

*"Petrificus Totalus," he screams, but nothing happens. Then Greyback's hands are on him, and they are hot and heavy, the nails like claws in the flesh of his shoulder. He feels them scrabble at his neck, and then they're pulled away. Lupin is there, his shirt half off and his eyes pure gold. Greyback spins and throws himself at Lupin, who falls easily backwards, hitting the ground with a thump.*

*Greyback snaps forward, trying to bite Lupin's neck, but somehow Lupin slithers out from under him and away, dashing straight to where Severus lies. The other werewolves have left a small space around Severus, many of them looking away from him; he hears others whisper curses at him.*

*Lupin doesn't reach Severus; Greyback catches his foot and pulls him back. Severus sees the other werewolf, the one who'd looked so hopelessly at Lupin, across the cleared space—his face is tight with horror. Severus looks back at the fight to see if he can see what is so horrifying.*

*Lupin is on the bottom again, and one of Greyback's claws has pierced his neck. The blood is shockingly red against Lupin's dreadful pallor. Lupin convulses and surges forward; his legs brace on Greyback and push him off.*

*There is a pause while the two combatants stand panting, facing each other. Lupin is slightly bent over; Greyback's back is bloody. Severus tries to think of when Lupin could have caught his back, but he can't. Greyback shifts to the left and Lupin follows, and Severus wants to scream that it's a feint, that Lupin shouldn't follow, but then it's too late and they've closed again.*

*The two werewolves are nothing but a tangle of arms and legs on the ground, Greyback's growl punctuated by Lupin's*

deeper one. Someone yelps, and they pull apart. Lupin's mouth is bloody, and Severus starts to move forward to help, but there's no time. Greyback is moving again. He dives forward but Lupin is faster. He shifts just a little, and it's clear that he's tired, but Greyback is tiring more. As they turn, Severus can see that Greyback's arm hangs at the wrong angle.

Suddenly Greyback pulls back, his malicious smile returning. He lifts his right hand, which is covered in blood from Lupin's neck, rubs his own bloody shoulder, then places his palm flat against his chest. "Imperium Animus," he whispers.

Lupin cries out, eyes burning in a dead white face. He throws himself forward, arms stretching, fingers looking almost like long claws and he catches Greyback's chin. It's clear that he's aimed himself badly—he's going to move past Greyback, but before Greyback can take advantage of this, Lupin closes his hand around Greyback's chin, and yanks.

The snapping sound of Greyback's neck fills the clearing. Lupin lifts his face to look at Severus, and Severus sees a flicker of some terrible pain; then Lupin's face closes to him.

"Get out of here," he whispers. "Get on with it, if you are prepared."

Severus stumbled back from the bed, gasping deep breaths of the thick air, but his head didn't clear. He hadn't let himself think of that scene in five years. Now, the memory had been impossible to escape.

He'd had time to see that, unfortunately, Badelt had no more understanding of what Greyback's last words meant than Severus did.

Severus turned back to the bed and reached out again to see if he could find more memories. Surely there was something useful here. When he looked into Badelt's face, he realised two things simultaneously: Badelt had been the werewolf standing next to Remus in the clearing, and he was dead.

Severus stood for a few minutes beside the bed and wondered why Remus hadn't returned this man's feelings. He knew Remus preferred men and this man must have been dependable and decent, if he'd been the pack alpha for five years. Giving up, Severus pulled the sheet up over Badelt's face and left the room.

Potter was waiting in front of Remus' room. "There you are," he said. "I had to tell them that I needed to see the bodies myself. They're in the morgue." He trotted down the hall, forcing Severus to walk quickly to keep up.

The morgue was at the very back of the building, several storeys down. On the way down, Severus pondered

what he knew of werewolf pack politics. He didn't know as much as he thought he did. He'd have thought that if Remus were the one who killed the pack alpha, he'd be the new leader. Yet somehow, Badelt had ended up leading the werewolf pack. He hadn't been able to talk them into taking the Wolfsbane, though.

Once at the morgue door, Potter waved him in. "I'm going back up to Remus. You'll be able to find your way back, right?" Potter didn't wait for a response, just turned and started back up the stairs.

The bodies were dreadful. Not because they were particularly offensive—they barely had any odour and were dressed in hospital gowns—but because they looked like they'd been desiccated. Severus stood over them and started on the list of spells he'd need to get information.

An hour later, he staggered away and sat down in a chair against the wall. It looked like both bodies had been eaten from the inside. Their hearts were shrivelled and dark, their lungs dusty smears against the cages of their ribs. There was nothing, nothing he could find that indicated any contagion factor, or, in fact, any infection vector at all. They'd simply burned up from the inside and died.



He tore up the stairs, pushing through the crowd of healers coming out of the cafeteria and galloping along the corridor. In Remus' room, Potter stood bent over the bed, and Severus felt his heart stop. He was too late. Remus was dead.

He collapsed against the doorframe. Potter heard the sound and looked up. His face was lined with worry, but curiosity lit his eyes.

"He wants to talk to you." Potter tilted his head slightly. "He's been asking for you since I got back upstairs."

Severus went slowly up to the bed. He could feel his heart beating, heavy pulses filling his head with noise. Remus lay on his back, one hand covering his eyes and the other clenched tightly in the blankets. When Severus came close, Remus' hand fell away.

"You need to know," he whispered, his voice thready. "You have to see. I don't...it shouldn't harm you, but you need to know."

Severus leaned forward, pressing his hand to Remus' forehead. He was still too hot, but it seemed like his temperature had come down. "Quiet," he said, "you can tell me later."

Remus shook his head. His face was still pale; the dark circles under his eyes made him look as if he'd been punched in both eyes. "No, you have to know now. There isn't time to wait any more."

At the door, Potter's breath caught in a barely suppressed sob; some part of Severus was glad that any noise he might have made was covered by Potter's. Remus shook his head again, his eyes never leaving Severus' face. "Just you," he whispered. "Tell Harry to leave." Severus lifted his head, but Potter was already out the door. As he looked back into the room, his expression was dreadful: a mixture of despair and anger that Severus hadn't seen since the final days of the fighting.

Remus didn't say anything at first and Severus wondered if he was going to change his mind. Then Remus moved slightly and smiled at him. Something shifted in Severus at that smile; it was gentle and made Remus' eyes brighten. He smiled back, helplessly. Remus struggled to sit up, and Severus reached out to help.

Remus wrapped his arms around Severus' neck as Severus rearranged the pillows. Carefully lowering Remus down onto them, Severus wasn't surprised at his own unwillingness to release him. Remus seemed to cling; his too-hot hands slid over Severus' neck and shoulders and Severus swore he could feel the tips of Remus' fingers brush his chest. He flinched, just a little, knowing that it was inappropriate for him to think of Remus in any way besides a friend, in many ways his only friend, and currently, his patient.

Remus leaned back against the pillows, his pallid skin almost as white as the fabric. "I didn't want you to know. I thought... if I just let Badelt have the pack, that it would stop with me. I was wrong." His expression was ravaged. "I killed all those poor people."

"You did nothing of the kind," Severus burst out. "There's some illness—you had nothing to do with it."

Remus laughed, a choked rattle. "They weren't ill. It's a curse. Something you never understood about werewolves, that most people don't understand about them, is that they—we—are magical creatures. Not Dark, necessarily, just magic." He pulled in a wheezing breath and coughed a little. "Like centaurs, or griffins."

He rubbed his chest. "Each creature has some special magic, a specialty, you could say. House-elves are uncontrollable when their family or house is threatened. Or dusty." He smiled, and Severus felt it go right through him. "It's impossible to lie when you're near griffins. Werewolves... since we're more human than most, our magic is of a different sort."

"This is from that spell, then?" Severus interjected, "That was five years ago."

Remus sighed. His face tipped away from Severus. "It was. Greyback didn't know about that curse until I found it when I was doing some research. I know you don't think so, Severus, but this is my fault. I could have refused to search, or withheld the information, or..."

Severus reached out and gently pulled Remus' face around to meet his gaze. "Killing that monster was a good thing. Nothing you say can convince me otherwise." Remus flinched, and Severus pondered how odd it was that he was counselling Remus on accepting the way life was. Usually Remus was the calmer of them, the one more prone to pouring oil on the waters while he himself was the type to light that oil on fire.

"Now," Severus continued, dropping his hand and closing it into a fist to keep from feeling the loss of Remus' cheek in it. "Tell me everything about that curse, and what I need to do to break it and you're as good as beaten in our next chess game."

Remus shivered. "There's nothing you can do to break it. I knew I was dead as soon as I heard him. I didn't think it would kill the others—I hoped that if I passed the leadership to Johan—" he glanced up into Severus' blank face. "Johan Badelt. I hoped that if I passed the leadership off to him, none of the other werewolves to bear the burden of the curse." His face was haunted. "I was wrong."

Severus' frustration increased at Remus' continued delay in telling him what the curse was. Based on what he remembered, it sounded like the words of the curse meant "control life", but that didn't explain why all the werewolves died so painfully, nor why it took them so long to do so. He could see Remus' fever was beginning to return; his colour was becoming hectic, his eyes darkened. Severus leaned forward, brushing Remus' damp hair away from his flushed face. "Remus," Severus said softly, "which books were you using to research? Where can I find them?" If the werewolves were magical creatures, that meant traditional magical theory didn't apply.

Remus blinked up at him. "They're in my flat," he said hoarsely. "Harry knows how to get in." He began to cough, his hands coming up to rub at his chest. Severus felt his own chest clench and his breath tighten. He rubbed at his breastbone and saw Remus' eyes catch on the movement. "You don't—you can't have this. It's not possible."

Severus stood, glad to have something he could do to help. "You are correct, it isn't possible. I would assume my lack of lycanthropic infection would render me immune." He could see that Remus didn't hear him however, as his eyes had now gone completely gold,

and he called out incoherently. Potter appeared at the door and Severus stopped to address him on his way out. "Do not let him die. And tell me how to get into his flat.."

Severus should just go on with things as usual. Severus could see him rubbing his chest again as he Apparated away.

On the way from the closest Apparition point to Remus' flat, Severus thought back to the last time Remus had come to his cottage.

Remus had been irritable, and Severus hadn't been able to figure out why. Usually, when Remus was in a bad mood at the beginning of a visit, Severus was able to bring him out of his funk with a new and interesting book, or a good game of chess. However, every time it seemed that Remus was relaxing, he'd rub his chest and cough.

When Severus was on his way back to the living room with a fresh pot of tea, fresh toast, and some of the dreadful chocolate-nut spread that Severus only bought for him, he tripped slightly over an upturned corner of carpet. Remus was there immediately, catching Severus' weight against his chest and waving his wand quickly to catch the tray before everything spilled. Severus froze, the warmth of Remus' body burning through him, making him suddenly aware of how much he wanted to touch Remus. He nearly turned his face towards Remus, wanting to feel more.

Then he remembered that Remus would never think of him that way. Remus had always been friendly, but never anything more; he'd never given Severus any indication he thought of him as anyone other than just the last one of their age group. Not wanting to expose himself, Severus jerked away from Remus so hard he staggered a bit.

When Severus turned to him, Remus' face was open for one moment, brimming with an emotion Severus couldn't identify. Before Severus could say anything, Remus' expression changed to one so furious that Severus found himself retreating. Remus proceeded to rage about other people getting things they wanted, about not being able to find a job until Lovegood had got the Werewolf Laws overturned, about pack politics, and finally, oddest of all, about research being a dreadful thing and how he thought information should be left alone.

Severus, who during this entire time had slowly been backing up until he knocked against the couch, sat down hard. He tried to interrupt, but Remus just started for the door. Severus started after him, determined to try to find out what was going on, when Remus said that he'd have to be gone for a longer time than usual and

Severus had never been to Remus' flat; all their meetings took place in Severus' small cottage. Remus' flat was in a bustling shopping centre in Brighton, above a small coffee shop and near an extravagantly large bookstore. Severus was not surprised at the location—only at his own wistfulness, and desire to be there himself. The bookshelves were well organised, so it didn't take Severus long to find the books he needed. Feeling like an intruder, he fixed himself a pot of tea and sat down in the small but sunny kitchen to study.

Four hours later, he flipped the last book closed and rubbed his eyes. The oldest of the books, which he treated with great reverence as it was crumbling in his hands, included the most detailed description of magical creatures and their inherent powers that he'd ever seen. Lycanthropic magic was drawn on the strength of the pack and the will of its alpha. What Greyback had done was to tie the lives of his pack to the will of his own heart. During times of war, this spell drew upon the strength of everyone in the pack to ensure that as long as the alpha lived, they all fought with unending ferocity. Greyback's perversion of it to ensure that they only lived if he wished them to was a true horror.

Severus assumed Greyback hadn't done a good job since none of the pack died when he was killed. Remus' notes indicated that he believed the curse transferred itself to whoever was alpha at the time, which explained why he thought relinquishing his leadership status to Badelt would ensure the pack's survival. Something had gone wrong, however; perhaps the strength of the curse was greater than Remus expected due to Greyback's deep hatred for him.

Severus stood, anxious to get back to St Mungo's. In his haste, he knocked against Remus' stacked notes and sent them flying. When he shuffled the notes to put them back onto the table, a page he hadn't looked at before caught his eye. Ancient Bonding Ritual, it said in Remus' neat script. Severus' eyes scanned down the page quickly, his breath stopping in shock. The other half of the curse became perfectly clear.

Severus sat down heavily in the chair, his mind whirling. Remus had claimed him, using the oldest claiming ritual werewolves had. His statement, combined with the blood he'd spilled in the fight with Greyback, had been the trigger for the first half of the ritual. No wonder he was afraid Severus might contract the illness.

Could it be possible that the action of the curse was delayed because Remus' heart, which after his battle with Greyback was the pack leader's heart, was half-given? Would a full bond block the actions of the curse entirely? Remus' notes indicated two parts to the bonding ritual. If the second part of the bond were performed, would it save Remus? Severus re-read the page, heart racing. He could cast the spell right now; he didn't even need to leave Remus' house.

It took him twenty minutes to gather the necessary supplies. Once he did, he stood in the kitchen staring at the small pile and wondered if he really wanted to do this. This would be permanent. There was no going back. He wondered if Remus would forgive him; this would be permanent for Remus as well. Finally he decided it was more important to save his only friend's life than anything else. They would work on how to live with it later.

In a small steel bowl he'd found in Remus' living room, the closest thing he could find to a cauldron, Severus put hair pulled from Remus' hairbrush, some stiff grey hairs found on the blankets near the foot of the bed and a quick clipping of his own hair. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths to try to calm himself. He hoped that he was right, and that this would work. Opening his eyes again, he took a silver bladed knife and carefully punctured the vein on the side of his neck. Blood rushed down and he quickly leaned forward so some would pour into the bowl. When the hair in the bowl was completely immersed, he stood up and muttered a quick healing spell. Then, without giving himself any time to think about it, he stuck his wand hand and the end of his wand into the bowl and said, "I accept the claim of Remus Lupin and claim Remus Lupin in return."

His lungs seized and his heart stuttered almost to a halt. It was as if he could see and feel two places at once. He stared around at the dimly lit room in St Mungo's, which was like a double impression over the bright kitchen around him. He heard a faint echo of Potter's voice asking what was wrong when the darkness swirling in the corners of the room caught him up and enveloped him.



He woke up in his bed at the cottage, the morning sun shining directly into his eyes. Groaning, wondering why he felt so sore, he tried to sit up. Immediately, he felt hands pushing back on his chest and he jumped.

"Lie back," came a voice, and Severus immediately relaxed. Then, realising what he had done, and whose voice it was, he jerked upright.

"Remus," he croaked. Remus was healthy again, his face a natural colour and his eyes clear. His expression wasn't, though; it threatened storms. He was glaring so hard at Severus that Severus was surprised he didn't burst into flames. He didn't care, at that point—he'd happily burst into flames if it meant that Remus wasn't ill any longer.

"You are irresponsible, reckless and inconsiderate," Remus snapped. "What were you thinking, to pull that stunt?"

Severus fell back onto his pillows again. He could feel, not only his own relief, but Remus' anger inside himself. "I feel—"

"Yes, you idiot. You feel everything I do." Remus rested his head in his hands, fingers buried in his hair. "You know this is permanent, right? I'll never be—you'll never be free."

Severus barely heard him; he was testing out how much of what he was feeling was his own and what part was Remus'. It was interesting, and a bit distressing, to find that he was no longer entirely alone inside his own skin. With a horrified rush of understanding, he realised that this feeling was most likely what Voldemort had wanted from his connections with his followers.

He felt more than heard Remus' sharp gasp at his side. He was staring at Severus, eyes wide and stunned. "You think I'm...why did you do this?" He stood up and backed away from the bed. Severus struggled with the blankets and sat up slowly.

"Don't leave, Remus, please." He pulled in a breath and then another. "I don't think you're like Voldemort. I just...I can feel you."

Remus stood with his back to Severus. "Yes. That's rather the point of this." He sighed and turned back around. "Let's get you cleaned up and find something to eat. I'm sure you have questions." His voice was calm, but Severus could feel how unsettled he really was.

Severus was surprised at how unsteady he was on his feet, and was grateful for the help Remus gave him on the way to the shower, then down to the kitchen. After a quick meal of omelettes and toast, Remus made them a pot of tea and sat down.

"Why, Severus? Why did you do this?"

Severus watched the steam rising off his tea. "Can you feel anything from me?"

Remus shot him a sharp look. "I can, but it's all very confused. You're just recovering from the after-effects of the curse Greyback used, and you're still a bit sick."

Severus stared at him. "I thought you said I should be immune?"

"That was before you pulled this prank. Now, tell me, damn it. Why did you do this?"

More confident now he knew Remus couldn't feel his emotions, Severus said, "I knew that Potter would be upset if you died, and the notes in your flat suggested that this was a way to save your life. I'd promised him—" His throat closed and he stopped.

"Rubbish." Remus' voice was flat. "You didn't read anything about the bond in the books, did you? You just read my notes and blundered into.... You can't lie to me, Severus, any more than I can lie to you, now." He smiled, and Severus was reminded which one of them was a vicious animal once a month.

"I wanted to," he whispered. "I thought it would be a way to save your life and I wanted to." The steam was making lovely patterns in the air, loops and swirls. He glanced up to see Remus staring at him blankly. Oddly enough, Remus' lack of response gave him courage. He pulled in as deep a breath as he could. "I know you don't want to be bonded with me, but isn't it worth it not to be dead at least?"

The sharp look was back on Remus' face. "You know nothing, but it's clear that there are things I need to learn as well." He leaned back and smiled. "Why do you think I don't want to be bonded with you? After all, I was the one who initiated the bonding spell."

Severus blinked, then raised a brow. "You said yourself that neither of us would ever be free again. I'd think that speaks fairly clearly."

Remus nodded, looking thoughtful. "What made you think completing the bond would block the curse?"

Severus sipped his tea, trying to think of a way to answer the question without giving away his feelings. "I thought about that day in the Forest. I saw your notes on the spell and on the bond, and I thought that, if you'd already done the first half of the ritual, that maybe the curse couldn't fully affect you. From there it was a simple jump to hoping—believing that a completed ritual would protect you, even at this late date."

Remus sent him a tilted smile. "That sounds reasonable. You didn't read anything but my notes? I think I'm flattered. You put a lot of trust in me. What if I'd been wrong? You could easily have died." He paused and sipped his own tea. "You know, if the bond had completed itself and I'd been too close to death, you might not have survived."

Severus tried to look like he'd thought of that, but given Remus' slight smirk, didn't think he'd been successful.

"Anyway," Remus continued, "once I started to recover, and I realised that I could feel the bond's completion, I sent Harry here. He found you on the kitchen floor, nearly dead." Remus' face was bleak. "Don't do that again. I won't survive you."

Severus could feel himself paling. "The reverse applies, I assume."

Remus nodded. "I think I've figured out why Johan and I were the only two who weren't completely affected by the curse. Most of the pack was fairly young by that point. Greyback had killed off most of the older pack members by then." His face was grim. "Johan and I were the only two who were ...who had bonded with anyone else. The curse wasn't originally a curse. It was meant to be a way for the pack's leader to help form the pack into a cohesive and strong fighting unit during a battle. There's a counter-spell, but it's complex and I didn't have time to finish researching it to make sure we had it right."

"It's a way to share out energy?" Severus sat back, thoughtful. "That could be very useful. But with whom had Badelt bonded? He seemed...." He blushed, unable to look at Remus, who looked suddenly startled.

"Oh. Ah, me. He bonded with me."

"What? Then why—how can you say that—"

Remus hurried into speech. "NO! I meant that he performed the first part. He didn't tell me until after... after you went back to Voldemort, he told me."

Severus covered his eyes with a shaking hand. He'd been so focussed on saving Remus' life that he hadn't even thought of anyone else having bonded with him. Just the thought of someone else being that close to his... bond mate...made sick jealousy fill his stomach. Remus seemed to understand, because he reached across the table and rested his fingers on Severus' hand. Severus could feel his muscles relaxing at the contact, and heat flooded his body. He breathed in deeply; it felt as if he were breathing clearly for the first time in his life.

When he opened his eyes, Remus was smiling at him. "I have a question for you, Severus." He waited until Severus made an impatient movement, then laughed slightly before continuing. "Do you believe that actions speak louder than words?"

Severus glared at him. "That's self-evident."

"Then why did it take you this long to figure things out?" Remus' words sounded accusing, but his tone was ...if Severus had to pick a word, it would be loving. Remus tilted his head. "What did I do, in that fight with Greyback?"



"You killed him, like the monster he was." Severus felt himself begin to get frustrated. What did killing Greyback have to do with their situation?

"No, before that?" At Severus' glare, he chuckled. "I knew what the bonding ritual required. I knew what it would do, to me and to you. I chose to act—to claim you—didn't I?"

"You did." Severus gritted his teeth.

"I thought you were loyal to Voldemort at the time." Remus held Severus' gaze, his own challenging. "I chose to protect you, to claim you, knowing you'd never return it, knowing you were working for and with someone with whom I could never agree.... What would you say my actions implied?"

"That you wanted to challenge Greyback? That you were looking for a way to gain control over the pack?" Severus could barely keep his voice below a shout. He hated being confused and out of control, and being able to feel Remus' amusement wasn't helping at all.

"Why would you choose to bind yourself to someone, knowing both that the bond is permanent and that you've spent years telling everyone that you will never allow someone else to control any of your life, especially after being trapped between two such difficult men?" Remus propped his chin in his hand, leaving his other

hand on Severus'.

"I told you I wanted—oh." Severus stared across the table at Remus. "Oh." His voice was very small. He felt even smaller when Remus laughed.

"Let me show you," Remus whispered huskily, and suddenly Severus was filled with emotions; he felt Remus' joy, his fading worry about Severus' health, his concern and—yes, love for Severus. Shaking, Severus tried to return the feelings, to show Remus what he felt, but somehow he was blocked. He closed his eyes and concentrated; if he could perform Legilimency, he could do this.

Across the table, Remus gasped, and then everything felt doubled; his own feelings for Remus were swept up into and combined with Remus' for him, leaving him shaking and gasping.

"This is only the beginning of how it can be," Remus said in a low, hot voice. "I can show you the rest, if you like." Remus filled his mind with images of the two of them tangled in sheets, heat and moisture and throbbing need surrounding them. Severus stood, pulling Remus with him as their combined joy spiraled up inside him.

"I would like that very much," he returned, knowing that he finally had everything he'd been looking for all his life.

## stasia's bio

I'm a knitter, a writer, a mother, a wife, a humorist, a woman, a student, a worker, a caffeine addict and finally, myself.

Age Statement: I'm well over 18. In fact, I'm twice 18.

Soon to be twice 18, plus 1.

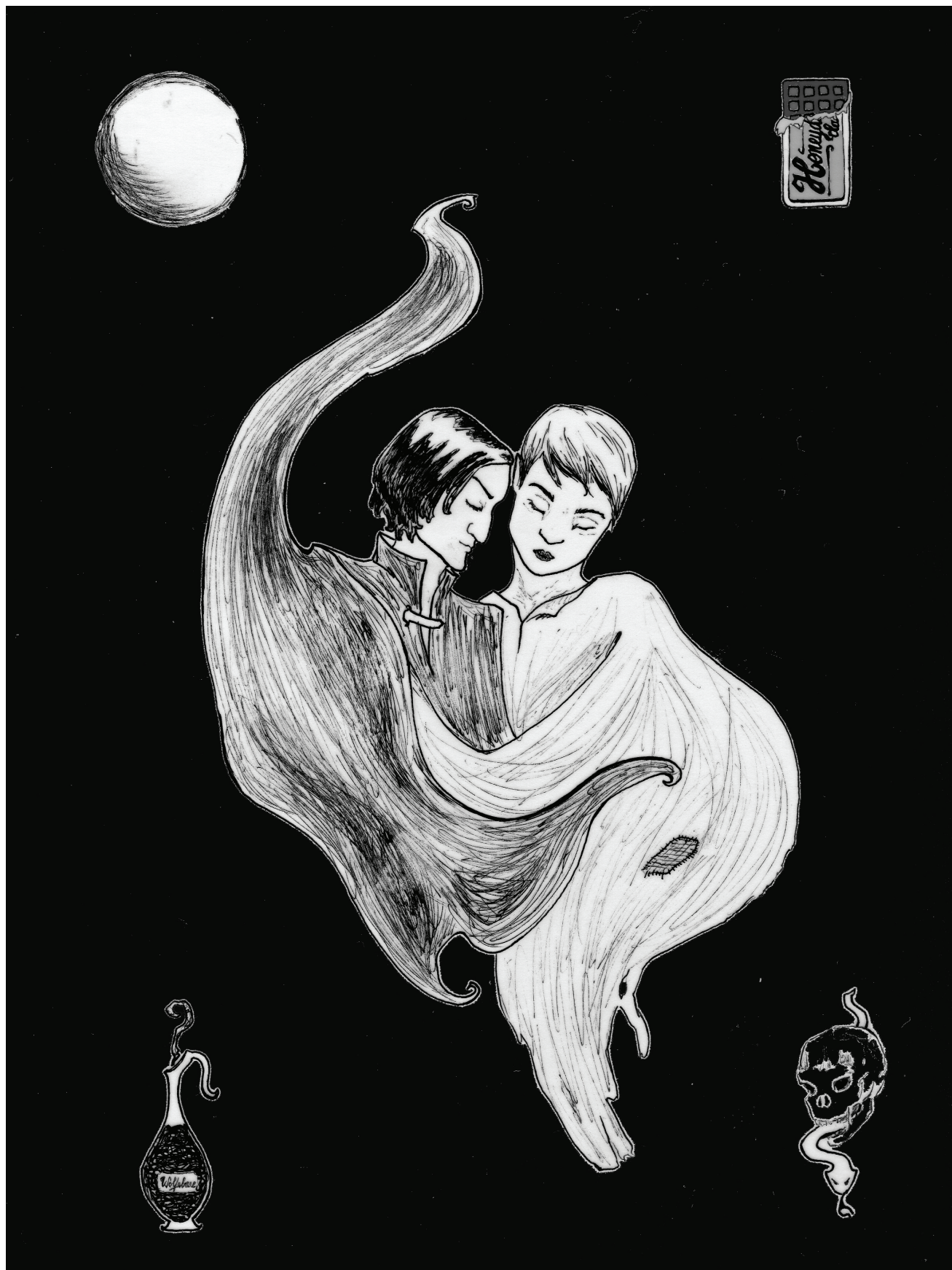
Author's Notes: I had many betas for this story: RexLuscus, McKay, Mechaieh, SchemingReader. Each of them contributed amazing amounts. The story wouldn't be half as good as it is without any of them.

Any remaining errors are all my own.

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*Tarot* by Neodandiesrule



# On the Same Damn Side



by Mechaieh

*I can imagine the moment  
Breaking out through the silence  
All the things that we both might say  
And the heart it will not be denied  
'til we're both on the same damn side  
All the barriers blown away*

- Peter Gabriel, "Come Talk to Me"

Nymphadora Tonks had known she might die during the War, but she hadn't anticipated how annoyed she would be about it. She was vexed, of course, that her demise had taken place in a clothing boutique, although it had also amused her to be proved right: she had told her mother for *years* that nothing good would come out of Andromeda's persistent campaigns to interest her in feminine frills.

To be fair, however, it was not her mum's fault that the shop had been ambushed by a gaggle of silk-robed Death Eaters during their visit. Thankfully, her mother had promptly obeyed Tonks's orders to Apparate the stunned proprietor away from the scene. With the older ladies safely out of the way, Tonks had actually enjoyed a good deal of the fighting. Outnumbered ten to one, she had literally thrown the contents of the store at the women she'd come to think of as "Voldemort's hens." As she ducked their hexes and dodged their missiles, she'd Transfigured little strappy shoes into grenades powerful enough to demolish walls. She'd converted jewel-embedded hair-sticks and gold-embroidered barrettes into self-propelling knives. She'd charmed soft scarves to melt flesh upon contact, flinging them across the room still half-tangled around their hangers. She'd blinded the women with jangling flurries of necklaces and whipped them with beaded belts.

She hadn't survived the battle, but neither had most of the hens. The instant before the end, recognising she would not be able to twist or lunge away from the final *Avada Kedavra*, Tonks hurled all of the wandless power at her command toward the roof of the boutique, ripping it free of its moorings. The rafters and plaster and shingles had already begun to avalanche down upon the remaining women as the green light struck her chest and she slumped across the floor-length mirror she'd knocked over earlier.

All told, it had been a good afternoon's work. Some hours later, however, once she returned to consciousness as a spirit, Tonks lingered in a corner of the building's ruins, disconsolately watching Kingsley Shacklebolt and his partner sift through the mess. Not only was she massively irritated that she hadn't managed to stay alive, she felt *cheated*. It had taken her so very long to persuade Remus Lupin that she was old enough, thrifty enough, and tough enough to cope with both his lycanthropic impairment and his work on behalf of the Order. He'd relocated himself and his few belongings to her flat in Camden Town right after Dumbledore's funeral, and the nights they'd spent in her bed, the kisses they'd stolen in between missions, the jokes they'd traded while sifting through reports and rumours -- there had been so much to share and not nearly enough time. It was grossly unfair that a single short summer was all the gods had seen fit to grant to them.

*Not that there's ever enough time*, she amended, catching sight of Bill Weasley. His family was still grappling with the death of his brother Charlie, who had perished in an ambush outside of Târgu-Mures the week before Bill and Fleur's original wedding date.

As Bill crouched down next to Kingsley, Tonks crept over to listen in.

"...took the news well," Bill said, his voice low. "Kept asking how *we* were, even."

"That's Remus," Kingsley said, collecting the remnants of a shattered wand. "I've never once seen him lose control."

*I have*, Tonks thought. *Both when he wanted to and when he didn't.*

"Mum sent two pies," Bill continued. "And, on our way out, Hestia intercepted Isabelle Vautour on the stairs."

"Her, already? Merlin."

Tonks felt as though her intestines had been hit with a Shrivelling Hex. Isabelle Vautour was infamous for her eagerness to offer teacakes and sympathy to recently bereaved men.

"Claimed her Sight showed her what happened," Bill said. "I think she happened to be shopping."

"Oh?" Kingsley paused. "An eyewitness, even?"

"That's exactly what Hestia thought," Bill said. "She's detained Miss Vautour for questioning."

"Good," Kingsley said. "Women like her give vultures a bad name."

"If Tonks were here, she'd be hexed, stuffed, and mounted on a hat already."

Tonks could keep quiet no longer. "I *am* here," she gritted out. Both men jumped as she stepped into their line of sight. "I'd be at the flat already, but every time I touch a property line I rematerialise on the spot where I died."

Kingsley swore under his breath. "Merlin, Morgana, and Maeve--"

Bill looked at her sympathetically. "You, too? Charlie had the same problem. Took him *weeks* before he figured out how to show up at the Burrow."

"Strewth. I'd forgotten about that. *Fuck*. Why didn't Binns ever teach *useful* stuff, like how to deal with crap like this? A fat lot of good his history does me now."

"Steady there," Bill said. "How about I go find Charlie? He'll be happy to be useful."

"Remus, too?"

Bill hesitated, uncomfortable. "I doubt he'll be back just yet. He all but ordered us to leave because he had 'work to do'."

Tonks stared at him, nonplussed. "Work. You told him I'm dead and he's all about *work*?"

Kingsley stood up and Vanished the heap of fabric and rubble he had been examining. "Best way to avenge you, isn't it?" he said, the savage swish of his wand belying his cool, reasonable tone. "Keep doing his job, get this sodding war over with. It's not like moping over your body would bring you back."

*You're right, of course. God, I hate that you're right.* Instead of answering, Tonks kicked a crumpled hosiery rack. She stared at her foot as it glided straight through the tangle of metal and nylon, her consternation mirrored in the expressions on her friends' faces.

Finally, Kingsley muttered, "You'd think we'd be used to this."

"It's bloody fucking different when it's someone you know," Bill said.

"Will you fetch Charlie already?" Tonks pleaded. Nodding, Bill stepped through a gap in the wall and Disapparated.

Kingsley walked over to another clump of debris. Tonks floated to the other side of it.

He studied her for a minute, and then shook his head as if to clear it. He said, "Would you forgive me if I questioned you about it? You did a fine job taking out half of the flock, but more ammunition--"

"To bag a few more? Kingsley, you're brilliant. No wonder you get the worst assignments." Tonks took a deep breath and then walked straight through the mound between them.

Kingsley grimaced at the demonstration but sat down on the ground, patted a spot next to him, and pulled out a quill and scroll. "Why don't you start by listing everyone you recognised."

"Marlene Neelow," Tonks began, with alacrity. "Christine Gardini. Helene Zograf. Simone Laurens. Elspe -- *noooooooooo!*"

A mistle thrush had swooped in, seemingly from nowhere. With a loud rattling call, it had brushed a wing against Tonks' forearm, sucking her whole into the shaft of one of its feathers.

*Bitch*, Tonks mentally hissed. *You wouldn't have taken me alive.* She could feel the bird jerk and plummet as a spell singed its tail -- *come on, Kingsley, you can do better than that!* -- but, to her dismay, the next shock of magic never came.

*What kind of Auror are you, Kingsley, that you can't even take down a bird?* Tonks knew she wasn't being fair -- *a moving target, after nightfall, out of range* -- but, sweet Iris, *this* had not been part of any of her fantasies of the afterlife, and she couldn't think of anything she'd done that she considered heinous enough to merit such a fate.

As autumn deepened into winter, and winter sighed on and on, Tonks endured her imprisonment within the shell-like walls of the shaft as a dull, extended muddle of cold, damp waves. She could dimly perceive the lift and fall of the feather's barbs and filaments as they tugged the shaft to and fro during the thrush's travels from forest to feeder to field.

*You pampered hen*, Tonks silently groaned, *shouldn't you be back in your human form by now?* Even as she thought the question, however, Tonks already realised the answer: whatever Dark spell Elspeth Craig had called upon in order to trap a ghost within her flesh had almost certainly condemned her to retain the form in which she had performed the capture. Tonks took a measure of satisfaction in knowing that Elspeth likely hadn't been aware of this side-effect; Tonks herself had learned about it only near the end of a breakfast conversation with Remus that had turned unexpectedly creepy. She had never wanted to learn *quite* that much about physi-

cal transformations gone awry, and there had been a chilly detachment in his gruesome descriptions of torn and slashed hearts literally on sleeves -- still beating -- that had given her a screaming nightmare two nights later.

Fortunately, Remus had been away that night. Remus had been away many nights, and she had been away on so many others. As dark blurred into light and grey against white, it nagged at her, how he had not seemed inclined to spare any time for her memory the night of her death, but she told herself again and again, *it doesn't mean he isn't mourning you.*

*No, but it doesn't mean he is,* an inner demon retorted.

*You will get nowhere,* Tonks admonished herself, *maundering over whether he ever loved you as much as you loved him.*

*It's not as if you're going anywhere as it is,* the demon replied.



A frantic fluttering. A Stunning spell. Then an extended period of stillness before another jumble of dark and light and mustiness. Confined within the feather, Tonks couldn't tell if Elspeth had been freeze-dried or merely indefinitely Petrified, but it wasn't as if the change had altered the framework of her own existence. *Her death should have released me -- but does that work on Dark spells? Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn...*



When she was finally, suddenly, freed from the feather, toppling over the edge of a table, Tonks heard the clatter of a knife and then a string of guttural oaths and violent cursing. As her senses adjusted to human-scale sensations once more, she realised most of the shouting was coming from a very angry Severus Snape, all of it directed at a slender, sallow-faced man she recognised as Clive Hiverfond, a man she had thought to be an ally of the Order.

Gesturing furiously at the bleeding bird, Snape shouted at the other man, "You. Coward. With fastidious nincompoops like you, no wonder this war will never --"

"It's not like that at all," the other man insisted. "At least you can use --"

"Utility be damned!" Snape spat. "That's all any of you think of. *Oh, we need a murderer -- Snape is just the man!*"

He slashed his wand through the air. As the body of the thrush careened into Hiverfond's chest, Snape continued, "Take her with you and do your own dirty work."

"Don't you think you should Legilimise her? Find out what--"

"I'm not going to waste any more of time on *that* bird-brain. Seeing that even *you* managed to catch her--"

"Right, right, fine," the man muttered. Cradling the bird against his chest, he looked around the room with an air of hastily collecting his belongings -- and then, only then, did he seem truly to register that Tonks was staring at him. Hiverfond swallowed, tightened his hold on the bird, and said, "Right. I'm going to Lupin."

"You -- what? No!" Tonks shrieked. *Must keep Remus sa--*

Snape bellowed "*Enfermatôme!*" the instant before she crashed into the spot from which the man had Disapparated. *Out of Dark frying pans into Dark fires,* she thought to herself.

Aloud, she said to Snape, "Over my dead body."

Snape sneered at that. "Is there a live one that's escaped our notice?"

"You utter bastard. Though I should thank you, I suppose, for your hen-carving skills."

"I assure you, your rescue was hardly on my mind." Snape scowled. "I hope Lupin tans Hiverfond's hide."

"You-- *what?* What does Remus have to do with any of this?" Tonks bounced up from the floor and hurled herself at her captor. "Snape, so help me --"

"Oh, for the love of Emrys," Snape snapped, "cool your heels, you daft bint." As she careened straight through him, he snatched up the knife he had dropped, inspecting the blade for damage. "Seeing that Hiverfond managed not to splinch himself, I imagine Lupin will find his way here soon enough. And then -- ah, see, what did I tell you?"

Remus, breathing as if he'd been running, had Apparated into the middle of the room. He took two steps toward Snape and demanded, "Are you all right?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Why are you asking that when *she's* here?"

"*Is she...?*" Remus frowned and stepped back, the better to sweep his eyes around the room. "Hiverfond claimed she was, but where...?"

Tonks had seen a number of expressions on Severus Snape's face over the years, ranging from condescension and contempt to fury and foaming-at-the-mouth.

"Dumbfounded," however, was a new one. *And not a half-bad look on him, actually.*

Aloud, she said, "Goddammit, Remus Lupin. Am I going to have to forgive you for being right?"

Snape's head swivelled around to her. "Right about what?"

Remus said, in a too-calm voice, "Severus, if this is *your* idea of a prank, I believe I'll take you up on that duel after all."

Snape whirled back around to face Remus. "You can't seriously think I would -- *Hiverfond*, Lupin. Who in their right mind would conspire with *him*?"

"Well, no," Remus admitted. "I thought that unlikely. And since *I* know how to turn animals back into people, Madame Elspeth Craig is now in the custody of Mr. Shackbolt. So she survived your little bloodletting, for all the good that'll do her."

Tonks noticed the infinitesimal release of tension in the set of Snape's shoulders at the word "survived." *Fuck me blind*, she thought. *He doesn't actually enjoy the killing?* "You still haven't answered my question, Remus."

Snape turned around once again. "And you haven't answered mine. What do you mean, he was right?"

Remus stepped up to Snape, gently pried the handle of the knife out of the other man's fist, and peered at the blood still crusted on the blade. As Snape turned back to him, he bestowed a wry grimace on the other man. "Even if I had any inclination to consider this a joke, I know you well enough to know you wouldn't treat your tools this carelessly." Cocking his head, he added, "How did *Hiverfond* manage to trick you into slicing into *Madame Craig*?"

"Dosed the bird with Draught of Living Death," Snape said. "And mistle thrush broth makes a superlative glue when mixed with silvertoe vine-powder--"

"Which, as a binder of books, *Hiverfond* would be keen on keeping on hand," Remus concluded.

"Exactly. So when he said he had a commission for me to execute, it didn't occur to me the son of a bitch meant for me to be *literal* about it." Snape retrieved the knife from Remus and hissed a charm to clean the blade.

Remus leaned against the table. "Tonks wasn't the first murder she'd joined in on, you know. *Hiverfond* had a sister."

"Ah," Snape and Tonks said, both at same time. Then they reflexively glared at each other.

Remus stared at the spot where Snape had aimed his glare. Tonks could practically sense him *willing* himself

to see her where she stood, but the spark of recognition remained absent from his face.

After a taut, tense silence, Remus knelt in front of Snape, locking his eyes with the other man's. "I hoped I wouldn't have to ask," he softly said, "but I see no other way I can join your conversation with her. Please, let me in."

"No," Snape automatically replied. "You ask too much."

"Do I?" Remus murmured, "I've asked you for very little, up to now. I didn't *ask* you for the Wolfsbane, though I'm grateful beyond words. I didn't *ask* you to set your wards to allow me in at any time, though I'm well aware that we're safer here than anywhere else in Britain, thanks to Draco and Peter doing each other in."

"As if I could have truly kept you out," Snape retorted. "I'm not fooled by you, Lupin." He added, grudgingly, "All your faults notwithstanding, you are as well-versed in barrier spells as any other salamander-brain hired by Albus."

Remus observed, without rancour, "There were many years without Wolfsbane. Keeping myself *in* as well as keeping other people out was a top priority once a month."

"So that's how you recognised the *Certesbielde* the night Dumbledore died," Tonks murmured.

Snape jerked back, eyes wide. "You..."

Remus leaned forward. "What did she just say?"

Snape said, his voice husky, "*Certesbielde*..."

Remus captured Snape's hands in his. "That night -- that stair-blocking curse you cast? Something about it kept nagging at me, and not because I ended up with a sprained elbow when it threw me back. Everyone else assumed you'd cast something Dark, but I taught DADA too, and I *know* a Dark spell when I run into it."

"Miss Tonks," Snape said, "what did Professor Lupin have to say about *Certesbielde* spells?"

"That they aren't Dark," she recited. "And that they're not even all that complicated," she added, earning a glower from Snape. She continued, "That they're traditionally used as sheltering spells. They keep animals from following their masters into danger and thwart children too intent on going where their parents went. There are legends about them being used to forestall the recently bereaved from throwing themselves into the graves of loved ones."

"Salazar be praised, Lupin didn't make a scene over yours," Snape muttered.

"You were there?" Tonks said, startled.

"Are you talking about graves?" Remus asked. "There were crocuses on hers last week."

"Who did you think Lupin had to meet the night you died?" Snape said to Tonks.

"His rendezvous was with *you*?" Tonks's voice rose. "He chose *you* over *me*?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "He didn't have a choice that night, you stupid woman. It was meet with me or get me killed."

"For Christ's sake," Remus interrupted. "If you're going to argue about me, *let me in*."

"There's nothing to argue about," Snape said. "We're talking about people merely doing what they must."

Tonks had floated in front of him so that *she* could look him in the eyes. "Only what they must? You're one to talk."

Remus simultaneously exclaimed, "'Merely'? Do you think I've been meeting you all this time 'merely' because I must?"

As their words overlapped, Snape glared at them both and then dropped his head into his hands. Remus turned to the empty space Snape had scowled at and tentatively said, "Tonks...?"

At that, Snape jerked his head up and said, "Fine. I will not have you say I kept her from you."

Remus glared back, exasperation writ large across his features. "Severus, it's *not* about -- oh, sod it. *Legilimens!*"

Tonks could tell the instant she became visible to him: his face lit up with the same pleasure he had shown the nights she'd arrived home safe. It was a subtle change in his expression -- a casual observer would have mistaken it for the same mask of reserve Remus wore for most of his interactions with other people -- but she had watched him so closely for so long that she could tell the difference.

And, apparently, so could Snape, if the man's flinch at the same instant was anything to go by. Which suggested that Snape had likely been studying Remus just as closely for just as long.

Which... the taunts and jibes Snape had needlessly directed at her all the last year suddenly took on a different colour. She had assumed he despised Remus as much as he'd hated her cousin -- and, until now, that's why she hadn't truly believed Remus's conclusions about the *Certesbielde* --

Gazing at both of the men, she quietly said to Snape, "Remus is convinced there were *two* barrier spells cast

on the stairs the night Dumbledore died."

Snape said, "That *would* have been doing more what was necessary. A simple 'Keep Out!' incantation would have sufficed."

Remus said, "Would have, yes. It would have kept out both friend and foe -- and also you yourself. That's why Minerva and Harry thought the first barrier had been Dark -- something able to let through only Death Eaters, since you ran right through it as though it hadn't been there."

Snape snorted. "As if anyone there that night had the wits required --"

Remus said, a little too casually, "They could have perused a book someone left for them to find."

Tonks had no idea what Remus was on about. Snape flushed but said only, "That was something that had to be done."

"So it was," Remus agreed, "but how you helped Harry isn't the issue at hand."

"No?" Snape said. "My vaunted ability to run through a barrier --"

"A barrier *that wasn't there* by the time you reached it," Remus said. "As you say, it doesn't take brains to cast a 'Keep Out' curse. It doesn't take much in the way of brains to dispel it. Which is why I was gobsmacked when I couldn't follow you up those stairs."

Snape manufactured a sneer. "You were shocked I wanted to keep you out?"

Remus said, "I was stunned that your *Certesbielde* could keep me out. Since it works only on people for whom the caster is willing to die."

Snape retorted, "And also on devoted animals."

Remus conceded, "There is that. But in spite of your penchant for calling me a beast, I somehow doubt you've ever seen me as your pet."

*Which leaves the category of "willing to die for Remus,"* Tonks thought.

Snape said to Remus, "You are confident of your conclusions."

"I'm quite familiar with *Certesbielde*," Remus said. His voice steady, he added, "I almost cast it on Harry the night Sirius fell through the veil."

*"Willing to die for does not mean in love with, Lupin."*

Tonks spoke up. "He never claimed you were. But *I* say you are."

Snape whipped his head toward her, but then remembered Remus would not be able to see or hear her without the Legilimetic connection. As he re-established the contact, Tonks slid behind Remus, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He was unnaturally still, although his right hand stole up to her left wrist, hovering where he would have once felt a pulse.

She couldn't resist. "*Why so wan and pale, fond lover? Prithee, why so pale?*"

Remus choked out a laugh. "You're terrible. Nice to know some things haven't changed."

She nuzzled his ear. "It *is* nice," she echoed, "but it won't do."

"No," Remus nodded. "Severus doesn't owe me this."

"Better here with me," Snape reluctantly stated, "than elsewhere without."

Tonks couldn't feel Remus's flesh, but she could see how the drape of his robes shifted as his shoulders tensed. She couldn't see his face, but she was familiar with how his throat would be working -- how new creases would have appeared at the corners of his mouth as he scrambled for an appropriate response. She'd seen that expression often enough during their own pre-relationship arguments.

And had she looked like Snape did now -- not nearly as greasy or curdled or worn, thank Godric, but with that same terrible yearning (*I want all of you, body and soul, but I'll take what I can get*)? She said, slowly, "You're the one who's alive, Snape. And you're the one who cast the *Enfermatôme*. A *Finite Incantatem* and a manoeuvre against a wall -- that's all it would take to banish me right back to the boutique."

"There's still a war on," Snape informed her. "I won't do that to Lupin."

Tonks took a deep breath. "I can't help existing. I can't help having existed. But you're willing to die for Remus, and I'm not in your way."

Snape bestowed on her a sour smile. "You won't stop me from dying, is what you mean?"

Remus said, teeth clenched, "Don't even joke about that."

Snape froze, arrested by the expression on Remus's face. Tonks drifted around his shoulder to see for herself.

*Oh. Oh, it hurt*, that that look was for someone other than her. But then he tried to look at her, forgetting he could see her only within Snape's mind, and the flash of anguish across his face -- *oh, love, I never should have doubted you.*

"You see," Snape said to her, as if the matter were settled.

"You don't do him justice," she snapped at him.

Remus stood up and grabbed Snape's shoulders, looking dangerously close to shaking the other man. "Severus, I loved her and I always will," he said. He pressed a hand against Snape's chin, forcing the other man to look him in the eyes once more. "But if I cast a *Certesbielde* right this moment, it would most certainly keep you out."

"A willingness to die is not a proof of love," Snape intoned.

"Neither are kisses," Tonks said, "but they're far more fun than the dying. What the hell are you waiting for?"

"It's not all up to me," Snape retorted.

"No," Remus agreed, his voice thick. "But..." He looked at Tonks, who gazed back at him sadly.

"Snape's alive," she said. "I'm not. And better him than Isabelle Vautour."

"I'm not putting on a show for you," Snape hissed, wrenching himself free from Remus's grip. "*Finite Incantatem.*"

She heard Remus's intake of breath as he saw her outside of Snape's mind, but she didn't feel any different from the moment before, other than the new frisson of danger: one false step and *she* would be the one outside of the three, even though Snape seemed utterly convinced Remus would choose her.

She pinned both men with a stare and said, "You don't get to use me as an excuse. If you're scared of what comes next --"

She smirked as they both reacted.

"I am *not* a coward!" Snape snarled.

"Tonks, I'm not a saint," Remus groaned.

"I know," she said, "but you need to prove it to *him*." She glided behind him, drew her hand back and gestured as if she were shoving against his shoulderblades. While Remus couldn't feel or see her pushing him, Snape instantly rushed forward to catch him.

She smirked again as Snape swore at her upon realizing he'd been tricked into the contact. He had ripped only a single oath at her, however, when Remus crushed his mouth against his, silencing whatever Snape had intended to shout next. Tonks savoured Remus's muffled groan as Snape clutched his arms, and, oh *God*, Remus's hands lifting up to stroke Snape's hair and sliding down to grope Snape's arse and Snape hungrily kissing Remus's cheek and lips and jaw and lips again and throat and lips yet again and *more more more*.



Tonks's own mouth tingled with the memory of such kisses -- how they had felt like being drenched in a cascade of fire, flowing and searing and so much *everywhereness* in each glide and nip and press of lips against skin and tongue. Tonks could feel herself starting to melt into a blessed nothingness as she watched the two men devour each other -- not enough to disappear completely, but enough to crave more of it.

*I was meant to see this, she realised. If this is what it takes...*

Snape broke away from Remus, gasping, his hands possessively sliding over Remus's limbs and chest and hips even as he locked eyes once more with Remus. "Too soon?" he challenged. "Too much?"

"Not enough," Remus panted. "Don't you *dare* think it's enough, now we've started."

Snape eased them to the ground and splayed his palms across Remus's chest. "What are you willing to give me?"

Remus stared back at him, every bit his match in aggression. "As much as you're willing to take. You think I won't be enough?"

Tonks said to Snape, "At least he's not giving you the 'too old, too poor' song and dance."

His shoulders shaking, Snape lowered his mouth to Remus's. As the kiss deepened between them, Tonks again felt the force of their passion surge through her own ghostly fibres. *Whatever forced me to linger -- this is part of its answer.* She watched avidly as Snape's hands roamed all over Remus's body, deftly undoing buttons and fastenings, and her heart soared at the sight of Remus writhing in pleasure as Snape's mouth travelled from lips to throat to nipple to navel.

As Snape pulled the last folds of cloth away from Remus's hips and legs, Tonks couldn't resist drifting closer. Her eyes still focused on her beloved's face, she began to speak into Snape's ear.

*...You see that birthmark just inside his thigh? He can't get enough of being licked right there, especially if you're stroking the backs of his knees at the same time. No, that's too light -- it should be almost a pinch, but not so hard that it stings. Yeah, oh yeah, just like that -- you see how much he likes it? And when you've had enough of that, there's also this spot, just to the right of his cock. Just scrape your teeth there -- oh, doesn't he sound so good? I don't know why it doesn't work on the left. His body's just weird that way. Stay away from his ankles -- something's not right*

*down there. No ropes, no chains, no leather -- he does like clothes pegs, though. Metal, not wood. Up and down the ribs and thighs --*

Tonks watched Remus's right fist beat against the ground as Snape's fingers lightly pinched their way down and up where the clothes pegs would have gone, his breathing increasingly ragged as Snape revisited his birthmark, tonguing its outline over and over. When Snape's hand closed over Remus's erection, Tonks eased herself away from his side, gliding to a spot where she could view Remus's entire body as it responded to the attention Snape was now lavishing on his member. She savoured the raw, desperate note in Remus's moans as Snape alternated stroking and sucking him, and the way Remus's fists continued to pound the floor as he struggled not to come, not so soon, not just yet...

*There. Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes...* Tonks basked in the bliss streaming through her phantom veins, feeling lighter and lighter as Remus lost all control, his hands uncurling as pleasure consumed him. Even with his lips and fingers still wrapped around Remus's cock, Snape radiated satisfaction. *He's almost handsome when he looks like that,* Tonks hazily mused. *And he actually listened to me...*

Snape stretched back up toward Remus, and Remus lifted his head just enough for their lips to meet in a long, seeking kiss. Cupping his hand against Snape's hardness, Remus murmured, "Shall we continue in your bedroom?"

Snape's expression was a curious mix of tenderness and trepidation. He moistened his lips several times before he managed to say "Yes."

Remus turned his head to look at Tonks, his gaze suffused with both wonder and sorrow. "You..."

She drifted up to them. Snape whispered, "You've become almost invisible."

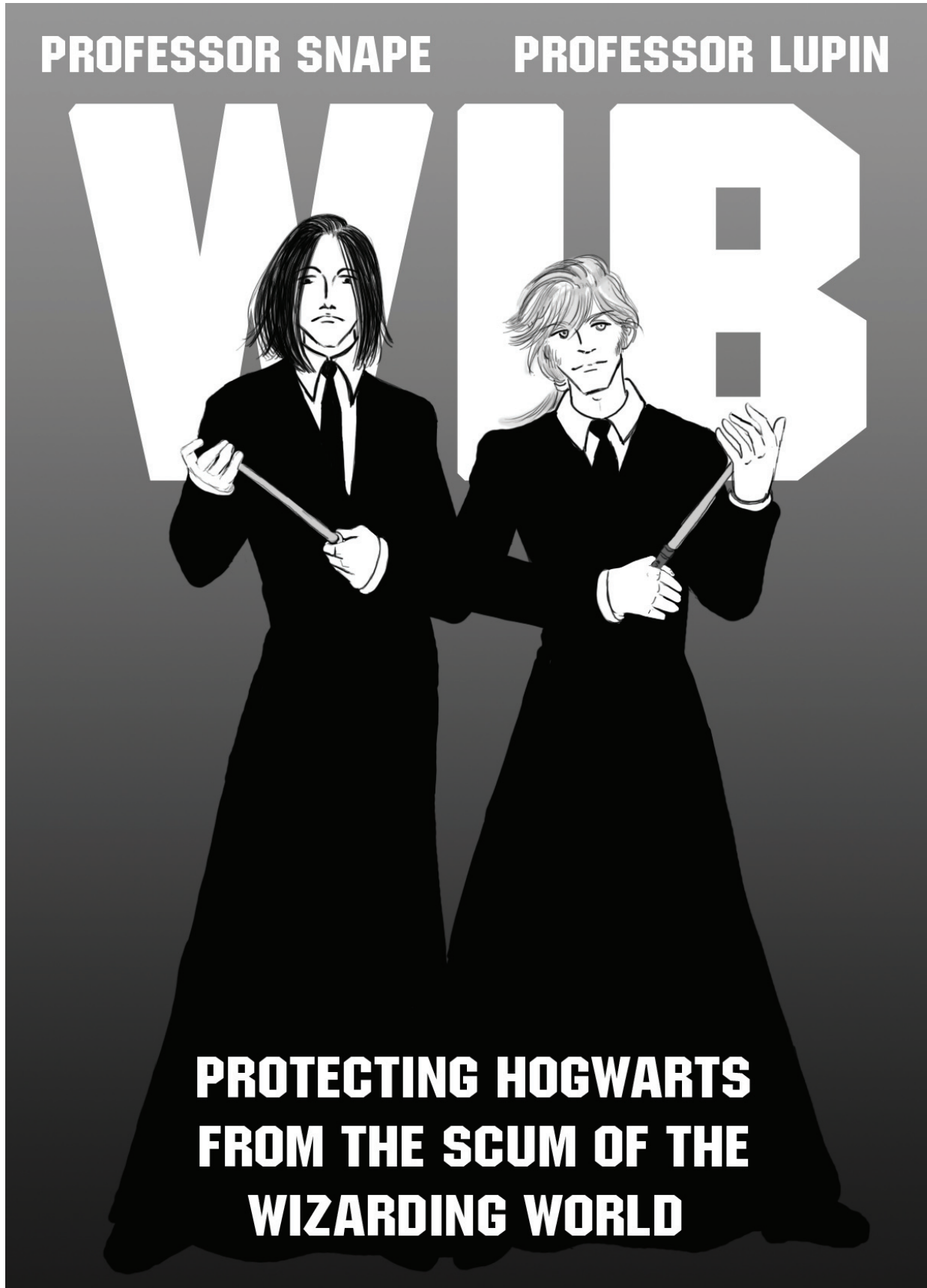
She simply replied, "I trust you'll take care...?"

She saw his arm tighten around Remus as he answered, "To my dying breath."

"Good," she said, and focused one last time on Remus. Acting on pure instinct, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his brow.

*There. This is a better farewell.*

The thought resonated through her entire being as she finally, fully melted into the peace of nothingness.



*WIB* by Karasu Hime

# ❧ *The Gates of Hell* ❧

by Mnemosyne\_1

On the days of the full moon, Remus Lupin wears the Gates of Hell under his patched clothes. It's one last measure of control that he is able to grant himself before the inevitability of the change.

Each month before taking the Gates out of their locked drawer, Remus wanks in the shower and carefully dries himself off. Gently, he runs a thumb along the black leather strap, the steel snaps on each leather ring glinting at him as he reaches for his now-flaccid cock. First is the largest strap, wrapping snugly around the base of his cock to snap behind his balls. Next comes a leather ring fastened just above the base of his cock, then one around the middle and one just below the head.

As the last steel snap goes into place, Remus gives a sigh of relief, the weight of the Gates a steady reminder that he is a man. He is not bound by base urges and desires, but binds them. It is one last measure of control he grants himself before being taken over by the wolf.

By lunch Remus is half hard, and by tea his cock strains against the leather straps. He will not touch himself until just before moonrise, when he stimulates himself to as intense an orgasm as he can manage in an attempt to relax himself, controlling the pain of the change.

He has never let anyone see this. No one knows, aside from himself. Lovers, even Tonks, were never allowed to touch him on the day of the full moon. He relishes the secret, as he savors the pleasure-pain of the Gates that bind him.

It is natural, Remus thinks, that Severus should discover this secret about him. After all, Severus has discovered everything else.

The potions master is now working for the Ministry — pardoned and free, as long as he uses his skills to aid their objectives. He brings Remus the Wolfsbane once a month, along with familiar words of derision.

They are an unexpected comfort in Remus' quiet and now solitary life.

Harry visits, on rare occasions, and a few others even less frequently, but Severus, bound by the schedule of the Wolfsbane, is the one consistency in his life. Severus and the moon and the Gates of Hell.

So when Severus does not show up on the day of the next full moon, does not supply Remus either the Wolfsbane or the thrill of having one last dirty secret to keep, Remus is irritated, then worried.

It has never been like Severus to be anything less than dependable, however much he hates such a Hufflepuffian word.

So when the clock reaches 30 minutes to moonrise, Remus resigns himself to the fact that Severus will not make it in time and sets about his pre-change routine. Silencing charms up, floo blocked, wards to keep the wolf in. He used to set wards to keep others out, until Remus decided that since everyone knows, it is on their own heads if they're foolish enough to enter his flat during a full moon.

Remus undresses himself and lies back on the bed, running a finger along the straps of the Gates of Hell. His cock has been leaking pre-come in anticipation since he set the wards.

He works hard at giving himself a shattering orgasm right before moonrise — a relaxed body handles the change better. The best transformations are ones after he's come hard enough to pass out, not that it's easily achieved with just masturbation. Remus has discovered the Gates of Hell are an essential tool in this endeavour.

Bringing a finger to his lips, Remus gently licks the pre-come off, then runs his wet finger over a nipple. He feels it bud beneath his fingertip and pinches it, shivering as his cock responds to the stimulus.

His other hand is on his thigh, gently tracing patterns on the sensitive inner skin. Remus makes a point of touching as much of his body as he can on this night, drawing the pleasure out. He usually rides his fingers hard, imagining the feeling of someone inside him.

He is so involved in the sensations his hands bring that he fails to feel the wards shiver or hear the soft crack of Apparition.

"Lupin, you must take this... bloody fucking hell!"

Remus closes his eyes and wills this to be a bad dream, a boggart, anything but Severus Snape discovering his final secret. He can only imagine the picture he makes, sprawled on soft cotton sheets, knees wide, hands touching himself, cock high and bound with now-glistening leather, matching leather band squeezed around his balls.

"Lupin, you should drink this directly." Since Remus' eyes are closed, he hears Severus' voice more acutely, and he notices a subtle shakiness which he otherwise would have overlooked. So Remus opens his eyes, grasps the goblet and drains it while meeting Severus' eyes.

He sets the empty goblet on the table next to him and says, voice rough from the painful burn of the potion, "The change is easier when I am as relaxed as possible."

"I see." Severus' voice has gone very deep, and his dark eyes take in Remus' splayed and wanton body. "Do you require...assistance?"

Shocked, Remus replies, "Not usually." Hardly believing his own daring, he continues, "but I wouldn't object if it were offered."

To have another pair of hands on his body is intoxicating on this of all days, and Remus finds himself responding as he never has to his own touch. Long, slender fingers pluck at a nipple, press his perineum, trace his collarbone and Remus arches up into the contact.

Bending, Severus presses a kiss to his jaw, then slowly works his way down Remus' neck, licking and sucking and nipping. Remus will have marks to hide tomorrow and he delights in the fact that Severus is giving him another secret to replace the one he's taken away.

Severus swipes his agile tongue across a nipple before biting down, and Remus hisses in pleasure, twining his fingers in thick, greasy locks. With a final tug, Severus releases the dark, tight nipple, moving to give the other the same attention.

As Severus traces patterns down Remus' stomach with his tongue, his hands slowly move up Remus' thighs. They come close to meeting and Remus groans, spreading his legs wide.

"Fuck me," he begs, but he feels Severus' head shake under his hands.

"No time left," Severus says, and Remus' incipient protest is cut off as a rough tongue laves the head of his cock. Severus' hands have disappeared for a moment, but their absence is explained when they return, now covered in lube.

"Yes," Remus moans as Severus takes him in hand, squeezing his cock between the leather rings. "Yes!"

A questing finger has found its way to Remus' hole and slides in slowly, searching. Two fingers, and Remus arches up into Severus' mouth as his prostate is stroked.

"God, yes," he pants, "hurry. The moon..."

Sucking the head of Remus' cock and inserting a third finger, Severus manages to unsnap the Gates of Hell with his free hand. Remus gasps in pleasure-pain as his cock and balls are released, and screams as Severus swallows him down to the root while pressing hard against his prostate.

Remus comes long and hard, feeling the beginnings of the change prickle under his skin, and as he falls into a welcome blackness, he hears a barely audible crack of Apparition next to him.



Remus has thought about the last full moon every day since, and worries that it was a never-to-be-repeated aberration. Neither of them has contacted the other. Now he paces anxiously in loose trousers and vest, feeling the welcome weight of the Gates of Hell pushing against his trouser front as he waits for Severus, wondering when he will arrive and what he might be willing to do.

An hour before moonrise, there is a knock and Remus opens the door almost before the third rap of knuckles. Draining the potion quickly, Remus follows it with a glass of water as Severus watches, seeming half-bemused, half-aroused.

There is now nothing that needs saying, so Remus pulls Severus into a fierce kiss, their first, and one of firm lips and tangling tongues. Arms wrap tightly around Remus' waist, and he moans into Severus' mouth as his bound cock presses tightly against the other man's hip. Remus slides his hands up and around Severus' shoulders, feeling the brush of long hair along his arms.

When Remus pulls away to catch his breath, Severus moves to his jaw, his neck, his ear and Remus can't help but melt under the attack of kisses.

"Do you still want me to fuck you?" Severus whispers in his ear, and in response, Remus grabs him by the front of his robes and drags him into the bedroom.

He treasures the stifled chuckle that is drawn from Severus.

As Remus unfastens Severus' robes, he discovers that the man has worn nothing underneath, and delights in the pale, smooth skin revealed as he pushes the robes completely off. It is a second's work for Severus to toe off his shoes, and Severus is standing naked and wanting before him.

It is a heady sight and Remus can't resist wrapping himself around Severus, running his hands down Severus' back to his arse, cupping and massaging the surprisingly abundant flesh as he kisses Severus fiercely.

Slim hands slide under Remus' vest, accidentally hitting a ticklish spot, and Remus laughs, twisting away. Severus' smirk tells him that spot has been noted.

Severus tugs on the vest as Remus raises his arms and it joins Severus' robe on the floor. The bite scar is on Remus' back, and he can feel Severus tracing it.

For a moment he wonders if this reminder of the truths of lycanthropy will send Severus away, but Remus shakes himself out of that thought. Severus brings him the Wolfsbane every month and has known about Remus for almost 30 years. He has not forgotten.

A nip just below his ear brings Remus back to the here and now, and Severus murmurs, "Are you ever going to let go of my arse?"

"I like your arse," Remus says, and squeezes for emphasis. "I didn't realize you had such a nice arse or I would have made an effort to touch it much sooner."

He moves on, though, just to make Severus happy, and as his tongue explores Severus' mouth once again, Remus' hands discover that Severus is thin and strong, with muscles defined from years of stirring and lifting cauldrons and running up and down dungeon stairs. This, his libido decides, is an excellent thing.

Severus pulls back to unfasten Remus' trousers, and Re-

mus can't repress a relieved sigh when his constrained cock pulls free... and rises only as far as the Gates of Hell will let it. He moans in protest and arousal, fighting the urge to remove the Gates himself, but Severus catches Remus' hand before it can move any closer to his tightly-bound cock.

"Tonight," Severus breathes in his ear, "this belongs to me."

"Yes," Remus agrees instantly, twisting his hips to make the trousers fall. He steps out of them and tugs on Severus' hands, leading him to the bed.

They strip the bed of blankets, leaving nothing to get in their way. Severus summons his own jar of lube from a pocket in his robe, and Remus laughs, suddenly realizing that he is more than aroused.

He is happy.

It is a strange and exhilarating feeling, and one that he has not felt in far too long.

Sliding onto the bed, Remus pulls himself back towards the headboard, and Severus follows him, kneeling between Remus' bent legs. Severus sets the now-uncapped jar on the bedside table and leans in to kiss Remus again, one hand braced on the bed while the other trails up Remus' calf.

"God, I want you," Remus says as Severus attacks his collarbone with kisses and nips, and the other man freezes for a moment before continuing. This may be convenient for both of them, but that doesn't lessen Remus' desire for Severus' pale skin, slender hands and long, thick cock.

Remus feels like time is growing short, and he squirms under Severus' ministrations, wanting him to speed up. Raising an eyebrow, Severus grabs a hip and flips him over easily. Remus rocks on his hands and knees and keens as Severus spreads his arse cheeks and shoves his tongue into Remus' hole.

God, it has been years since anyone has done this to him, and no one quite as desperately as this. Remus shoves back into Severus' face, begging incoherently. Severus pulls away, only to suck at his balls, tongue tracing the lines of the leather straps. Slender fingers dig into Remus' hips as Severus moves back to the tender hole, driving his tongue inside between licks and nips of the puckered entrance.

Remus suddenly finds himself on his back again, with Severus' tongue seeking entrance in his mouth. Gladly he opens, sharing the musky taste of himself and arching up as he feels two lubed fingers press into him.

Fumbling for the jar, Remus manages to grasp enough lubricant to smooth all over Severus' erection, and he takes his time making sure it is covered completely as he rocks back and forth on Severus' fingers. The fingers disappear, and Remus has no time to mourn the loss as his legs are hooked over Severus' shoulders and, with one hard thrust, Severus enters him completely.

Remus gasps, clenching, and Severus stills, dark eyes meeting Remus' as he waits for Remus to adjust.

"Move," Remus growls, and Severus does, pulling nearly all the way out before slamming back in. Remus is bent in two, is being fucked into the mattress, and he cries out in pleasure, scoring his nails along Severus' back. Each thrust in and each pull out hits Remus' prostate, and he begs for release, unable to take anymore.

His cock is straining against the leather bands, and Remus feels Severus grasp it, trying to release the bands with one hand while still pumping in and out of Remus' arse. Finally, after Remus is incoherent with pleasure, struggling to come, the final band is released, and he can feel Severus' hand wrap fully around his cock, tugging him to completion.

Screaming as he comes, Remus can barely feel his own desperate arch as he clenches tight around Severus' cock, drawing the other man's orgasm from him. Spent, they collapse onto the bed, Remus carefully sliding his legs from Severus' shoulders, stretching them out in the hope that they won't cramp. Severus is a welcome weight across his body, but he can feel the moon about to rise.

"A few minutes," Remus says, voice rough. His throat will be sore tomorrow, from all the screaming. Severus slowly rolls off of him and reaches for his wand to perform a quick cleaning spell on them both. Sleepy now, Remus watches the other man slide quickly into his robes, picking up his shoes in one hand as he reaches for his wand with the other.

"Thank you," Remus whispers, and Severus pauses before leaning down for one last kiss.

"I will see you next month," Severus promises, and Disapparates.

For the first time in his life, Remus looks forward to the next full moon.



The full moon evenings are variations on a theme for the next eight months, replete with Severus and sex and toys in addition to Remus' usual Gates of Hell. Remus is still a bit embarrassed about the previous month and his eager reactions to the giant dildo. He doesn't want Severus to believe that Remus thinks he isn't big enough, because he is. Dildos are very nice, but another person is infinitely better.

When Remus is being very honest with himself, he will admit that it is Severus that is infinitely better, not simply the presence of another body. He is not quite sure how to broach the subject of perhaps wanting Severus to come around more than once a month. The most time they have spent together is an hour and a half of sex every 28 days, and really, that isn't much to base a relationship on.

*Though, technically, he thinks, we have known each other for years.*

He's not sure if Severus will see it the same way, and Remus is a bit worried that he'll discover that Severus just sees these nights as the opportunity for some good sex, and nothing more.

It is three hours too early for Severus yet, so Remus is sprawled on his couch flipping idly through a book, cock a significant bulge in his thin pajama pants due to the Gates of Hell, when someone knocks at the door. Hoping it isn't Harry and preparing to summon an outer robe just in case, Remus peeks through the peephole in his flat door.

It is Severus, and Remus panics, wondering why he is here already. Perhaps Severus means to put an end to their routine, and is simply dropping off the Wolfsbane as he used to do. He doesn't realize how long he has stood motionless until Severus knocks again, impatiently.

Jarred into motion, Remus swings the door wide, then feels a grand sense of relief when Severus eyes the bulge in Remus' pajama bottoms and licks his lips. Apparently Severus has something planned that requires more time than usual, though this means that Remus is a bit unprepared. He chugs the potion and heads for the kitchen to get a glass of water.

Remus nearly drops the glass when he feels hands on his waist and a kiss on his neck, but manages to finish off the water without spilling any. He turns around and braces himself on the sink.

"Any particular reason you're here early?" Remus asks, smiling to show he doesn't mind at all.

"I had a thought," Severus says, kissing him. Remus teases Severus' lips with his tongue, and Severus responds immediately, sucking Remus' tongue into his mouth and twining it with his own. They are lost in moments of heady kisses, snogging like teenagers in the kitchen.

"A thought?" Remus prompts breathlessly when they finally pull apart.

"My thought is that if one orgasm before the change helps you relax," Severus says, tracing the shell of Remus' ear with his tongue, "then two will help you even more."

Remus shivers at that. "Oh, yes."

He pushes Severus toward the bedroom, because if Remus is only getting sex one evening a month, he really prefers to be comfortable. Along the way, Severus loses his shoes, one by one in the kitchen, then Remus drops his pajama bottoms by the couch, and Severus leaves his robe at the bedroom door. Naked, Remus guides Severus to the bed, pushing the covers aside.

Usually Severus focuses their attention on Remus, but tonight Remus wants to return the favour. Leaning in for a kiss, he gently pushes Severus onto the bed. He explores Severus' body slowly, memorizing the curve of his ribs, the jut of his hips, the arch of his feet. Finally, as Severus clutches the bedclothes in impatience, Remus drags his tongue along the underside of Severus' cock and looks up to meet a pair of smouldering eyes.

Remus gently sucks Severus' head into his mouth, sliding his tongue into the slit as he grasps the base of the cock. He lets go quickly as Severus reaches down and drags Remus up his body, calling him a bloody tease.

"Now you know how I feel most months," Remus says, laughing, and kisses Severus.

He sprawls across Severus happily, leather-bound cock rubbing against Severus' stomach as the other man massages his arse. Fingers brush Remus' entrance and he hums low in his throat and reaches for the jar of lubricant.

"Oh, now you want to hurry up?" Severus asks, smirking as Remus slicks Severus' erection thoroughly.

Remus arches back and slowly lowers himself down on Severus' cock.

"Careful," Severus whispers when Remus pauses to let himself adjust.

Bracing his hands against Severus' chest, Remus lowers himself the final few inches and sighs as he seats himself firmly. He rests a moment, then lifts up, Severus' hands gripping his hips tightly. They come together awkwardly at first, then with a growing rhythm.

Severus' eyes catch his own and Remus cannot look away as he draws closer and closer to orgasm. It is there, at that moment when Severus reaches to release the Gates of Hell, that Remus realizes how much he cares for this man.

Then the Gates are opened and Remus cries out as Severus surges up, slamming into his prostate one last time before coming. Wrapping one hand around Remus' cock and an arm around Remus' waist, Severus leans up for a kiss while pumping Remus' cock furiously. An interminable moment later, Remus' completion finally follows.

They slump to the bed, arms wrapped around each other, trying to catch their breath. Severus gropes for his wand and casts a quick cleaning charm before pulling the blankets up over them both, and Remus can feel himself smiling idiotically as they curl into each other and doze off.

When Remus wakes some time later, he is on his side with Severus spooning him, one arm around his waist and the other under Remus' head, face pressed into Remus' neck. He has the thought that *this* is how they would wake in the morning, if Severus came on nights other than the full moon, and Remus knows he will ask Severus if this is possible, or simply wishful thinking on Remus' part.

Remus rolls over in the circle of Severus' arms and kisses him, causing Severus to stir, nose wrinkling in a way Remus will never tell him is absolutely adorable. Remus has many wishes, but none of them is a death wish.

"Don't worry," Remus says when Severus opens his eyes. "It's still a while until moonrise."

"Not worried," Severus mutters. "I have an excellent sense of timing."

"And an excellent sense of self-preservation?" Remus teases, daring to place a kiss on Severus' nose.

"Hmm." Severus frowns, but doesn't pull away.

It's now or never.

"I had a thought too, you know," Remus says, heart beating fast. "You can come other nights besides this one, and stay."

Severus blinks, then focuses hard on Remus' eyes. "Stay?"

"If you want," Remus says quickly. "You don't have to, it's just a thought."

"You..." Severus hesitates. "I wouldn't be... intruding?"

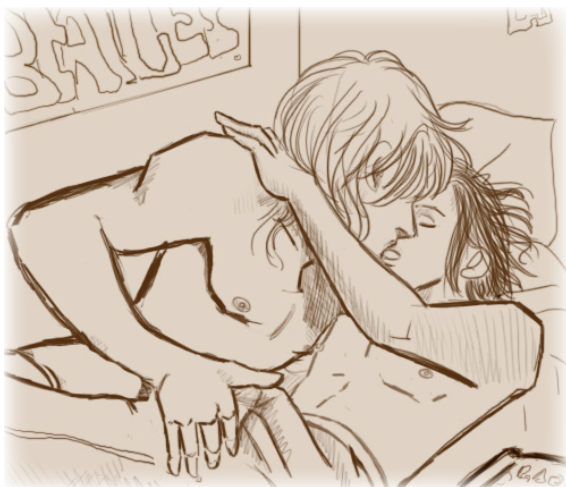
Remus is surprised at how unsure Severus seems. "No, not at all," he replies, trying to be reassuring. "Most months you're the only person I see, and I wouldn't mind seeing you more. If you want to come by."

"I'd like that," Severus says, quiet and intense. "I did not know..." He takes a deep breath. "I assumed that I was needed, not wanted."

"No." Remus gives a shaky laugh, hopeful now that Severus will be more to him than one night of pleasure and relief. "I've never needed anyone on full moon nights. I would never let anyone touch me those days. Most of my lovers either didn't know about the lycanthropy or were only too glad to avoid me if I wanted them to. Until you walked in on me."

"That was hardly my fault," Severus says, glaring mildly at him. "I was simply bringing you the potion."

Remus laughs. "I know. I'm glad it was you — you seem to discover all my secrets. Why not this one?"



"You aren't concerned that I'll tell?" Severus isn't looking at him anymore, seemingly afraid of Remus' answer.

"I trust you," Remus says. It seems to be what the other man needs to hear, because Severus kisses him fiercely, pushing him over onto his back, running his hands all over Remus' body, their now-hard cocks pressing against each other.

"You trust me," Severus breathes between kisses.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Remus reaches for the Gates, but Severus catches his hand.

"Just us this time," Severus says, kissing Remus' fingers. "No toys, no binding, nothing between us."

How Severus has been before is nothing compared to the way Severus worships Remus' body now. He is overwhelmed by touch, skin and lips and hands all contriving to consume him in a haze of arousal and need. Severus takes him, turns him inside out, and steals Remus' heart as he holds sway over Remus' body.

As he gasps and moans under the onslaught of sensation, Remus realizes that Severus has a secret too, and his hands now speak what his lips cannot. Writhing in ecstasy, Remus cries out and knows that he is loved.



Once a month, Remus Lupin wears the Gates of Hell under his clothes. One person knows this, one person who looks at him with heated glances, knowing what binds him. For one night a month, Remus belongs to the moon.

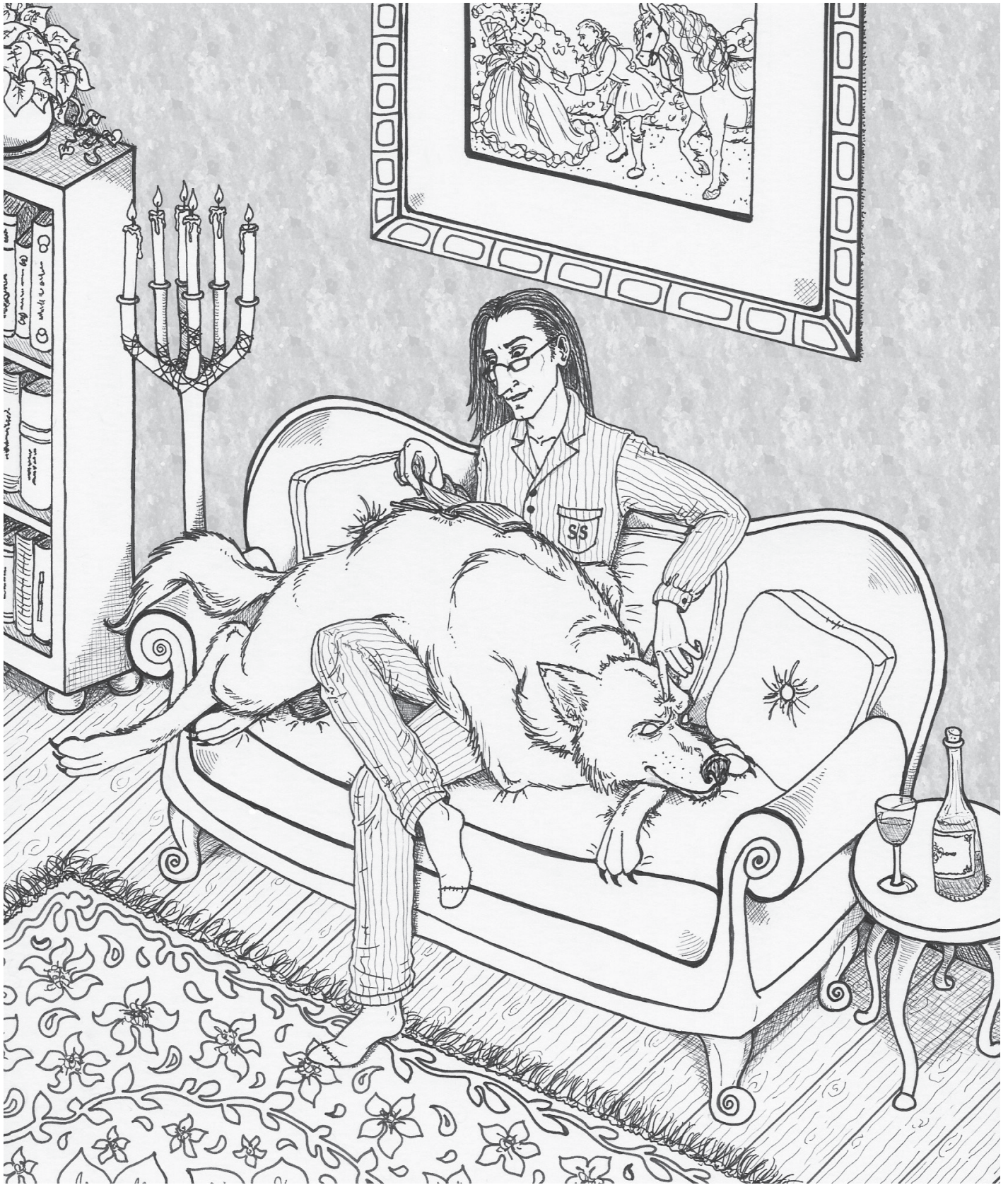
For the rest, he belongs to Severus, and every morning when Remus wakes, Severus is there.

## Mnemosyne\_1's Bio

Syne, after much internal debate, emerged from lurkdom on July 7, 2006. Since then she's written about 75,000 words' worth of fanfiction, and the plot bunnies haven't stopped coming yet. Aside from fandom, Syne loves to read, crochet and go to the opera. Her living room is decorated in as much of the Moroccan style as she can afford, and she dreams of one day actually being able to visit that country.

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**Lap Wolf**  
by Ebonyserpent

# ✚═ Breathings of the Heart ═✚

by Arionrhod and Mckay

Letters which are warmly sealed are often but coldly opened. ~ Jean Paul Friedrich Richter

Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart. ~ William Wordsworth

## ═The═ ═Daily Prophet═

June 1st 1998

Special Edition

Vol. XXX

### **DARK LORD SLAIN — WAR ENDS!**

#### ***Harry Potter Savior of Wizarding World***

##### ***All Hail Boy Hero For Defeat of Voldemort***

In a surprising and overwhelming victory yesterday, Harry Potter destroyed He Who Must Not Be Named, ending the war which has terrorized both the Wizarding and

Muggle worlds for the last two years. Details are sketchy at this point, but from all reports Potter destroyed He Who Must Not Be Named in a magical battle on the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Many of He Who Must Not Be Named's were also killed, along with an unknown number of Potter's

own Order of the Phoenix, a band of wizards and witches originally assembled by the deceased Albus Dumbledore.

As the list of confirmed dead and injured is made available, the Daily Prophet will update with further details....

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
June 2, 1998

## **MURDERER IN MINISTRY CUSTODY**

### ***Killer of Albus Dumbledore Survives Final Battle***

#### **Arrested by Ministry Personnel at Hogwarts**

The Daily Prophet has learned that Severus Snape, murderer of Albus Dumbledore and notorious henchman of He Who Must Not Be Named, was arrested at Hogwarts

School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the aftermath of the final battle. His physical condition is unknown at this time, as he was immediately removed by the Ministry of Magic to an undisclosed location. The Ministry will neither confirm nor deny that they have Snape in custody, but witnesses who wish to remain anonymous say that it is unclear why

Snape remained at Hogwarts following He Who Must Not Be Named's defeat. Hero Harry Potter, long time protege of Albus Dumbledore and long-time decrier of Snape's role in Dumbledore's murder, could not be reached for comment, nor could any surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix....

(Page 4 article)

#### **GREYBACK'S PACK TAKEN INTO CUSTODY**

Several members of the pack belonging to notorious werewolf and

terrorist Fenrir Greyback, who was slain in the final battle at Hogwarts along with He Who Must Not Be Named, were taken into custody this morning at a location somewhere outside Surrey. The Ministry reports

that the werewolves were captured easily, having lost any will to fight in the wake of their Sire's death. All have been removed to Azkaban to await trial for their crimes against humanity.

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
June 3, 1998

## **ALLEGED CONSPIRATOR ARRESTED**

### ***Remus Lupin, Former Hogwarts Professor, Arrested with Werewolf Pack***

#### **Claims of Lupin's Loyalty Called into Question**

Remus Lupin, former member of the Order of the Phoenix and long-time associate of Harry Potter who had gone missing over one year ago, was found to be among those members of Fenrir Greyback's pack who were arrested yesterday. The reason for

Lupin's association with the terrorist band seems clear; he was given the curse of Lycanthropy by Greyback himself as a child over thirty years ago. Many members of the Order of the Phoenix, the very ones who had cast doubt on Lupin's loyalties for the past year, are now recanting their stories and claiming that Lupin was actually an agent working undercover

for the Order. Yet there can be no question that Lupin was found with the survivors of Greyback's pack and not with his supposed comrades of the Order, thereby calling into question his true allegiance. Just who was Lupin working for during the war, or was he perhaps playing both sides against the middle in an effort to survive no matter who won the war?

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Special Edition)  
June 4, 1998

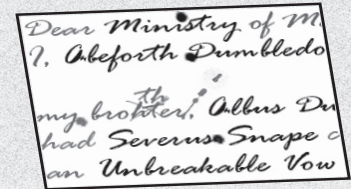
# RUMORS OF SNAPE'S INNOCENCE IN DUMBLEDORE'S MURDER

## **Brother of Slain Leader Claims Snape Is Scapegoat**

Aberforth Dumbledore, brother of murdered Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, has gone public with a statement claiming that

Severus Snape was not responsible for his brother's murder. In a stunning turn of events, the Daily Prophet has received a copy of a letter written by Aberforth which pins the blame for Albus Dumbledore's death squarely on the head of the deceased man himself. Below is a facsimile of the letter in its entirety, but it is

uncertain whether it casts more doubt on Snape's guilt or on Aberforth Dumbledore's sanity.



Dear Ministry of M.  
Aberforth Dumbledore  
my brother, Albus Du  
had Severus Snape c  
an Unbreakable Vow

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
June 5th, 1998

# ALBUS DUMBLEDORE'S WILL MADE PUBLIC

## **Slain Leader Leaves Bulk of Fortune Split Between Traitors**

Shock and horror are resounding through the Wizarding World from reports the firm that was entrusted with

Dumbledore's will has finally read and will act upon its contents. The document has been sealed for the past year in accordance with specific instructions left by the late Hogwarts headmaster. The Daily Prophet has learned the reports that Dumbledore directed his entire estate to be split evenly between traitor Severus Snape

and alleged conspirator and werewolf Remus Lupin are true. When asked if he was upset by being left out of his brother's will, Aberforth Dumbledore replied, "What do I need with his money? I have my own full vault and a fine establishment to boot." Further details of the will are being held secret by the Ministry of Magic...

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
June 6, 1998

# HARRY POTTER IN RETREAT

## **Savior of the World Goes Into Seclusion**

## **Refuses to Comment on Battle, War, Snape**

Boy Hero Harry Potter, whose defeat of He Who Must Not Be Named freed the Wizarding World from

two years of tyranny and terror, has reportedly gone into seclusion under a Fidelius Charm somewhere in Scotland. The Ministry will make no comment on this, but longtime friend of the young savior, Molly Weasley, was finally reached at her home in Ottery-St. Catchpole. Before refusing to speak further, she claimed

Potter needed a respite and should be left alone to heal from the stress of the last few years. When asked for Potter's feelings on the developments involving Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore's murder, Mrs. Weasley issued a firm "No comment, and don't you dare step in my garden on your way out!"

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
June 7, 1998

# MINISTRY DECLARES SNAPE WILL BE PUT ON TRIAL

## **Potions Master, Murderer to Be Tried for War Crimes**

Trial is set to begin tomorrow for Severus Snape, accused murderer of Albus Dumbledore and loyal follow-

er of He Who Must Not Be Named. The Ministry claims to have a solid case against the former Hogwarts professor, and although it cannot be confirmed, rumor has it that Harry Potter will testify in the case. Potter still cannot be reached for comment, although sources close to the

Boy Who Lived indicate he will come out of seclusion to make certain the murderer of his mentor receives his just desserts. The case is, according to one official who prefers to remain unnamed, "cut and dried", and they are confident the trial will last no more than a week.

**DAILY PROPHET**  
(Headline Article, Daily Edition)  
October 15, 1998

# TRIAL OF THE CENTURY ENDED

## **Verdict Reached in the Snape Trial**

After months of shocking testimony and unparalleled drama that left even the Wizengamot divided, the trial that has riveted the Wizarding World has ended at last, and Severus Snape has been declared not guilty. Initial reports from the Ministry declared Snape's trial would be an "open and shut case", but as more and more evidence was presented and witnesses came forward to speak on Snape's behalf, it became clear the Ministry were grossly mistaken.

Pensieve memories, signed documentation from the deceased Headmaster of Hogwarts, and even testimony from a portrait were among the evidence presented to the Wizengamot to disprove all allegations of treason. Aberforth Dumbledore, brother of the deceased, was among those who

testified on Snape's behalf, revealing he stood as witness to an Unbreakable Vow forged between Snape and Albus Dumbledore in 1981 prior to the downfall of He Who Must Not Be Named, which marked the end of the First War. Snape vowed loyalty on pain of death should he betray Dumbledore. Suffering from a slow-acting curse wound, Dumbledore was dying and charged Snape with the task of killing him in order to strengthen Snape's own place within the ranks of the Death Eaters that he might undermine the organization from within as well as smuggle information to the opposing forces via his contact, Aberforth Dumbledore.

Memories stored in Dumbledore's own Pensieve supported these claims, as did signed documentation which was unearthed along with Dumbledore's will. In spite of dismay from the prosecution, all signs pointed to Snape being innocent of treason. But

witnesses who spoke against the accused reminded the Wizengamot that he did in fact murder Dumbledore and cast an Unforgivable, regardless of his motivation.

After lengthy deliberation, Snape was cleared of all charges related to war crimes. Dumbledore's death was ruled suicide by unconventional means, leaving only the charge of casting an Unforgivable for which Snape was heavily fined and placed under house arrest at the Dumbledore estate for a period of six months. The notation will remain on his record, and the more disgruntled members of the Wizengamot have vowed against such leniency should Snape be brought up on any further charges for questionable behavior.

When questioned after the verdict was given, Snape's only comment was "Go away."

**DAILY PROPHET**  
 (Page 15 Article, Daily Edition)  
 October 17, 1998

## WEREWOLF TRIED, FREED

### Remus Lupin Found Innocent Amid New Revelations Concerning Albus Dumbledore's Will

After a lengthy wait while the Ministry of Magic dealt with the trial of Severus Snape, werewolf and alleged Greyback supporter Remus Lupin was found not guilty following a brief trial. Testimony was given by his supporters in the Order of the Phoenix, who lobbied for Lupin's freedom for months and requested charges against the werewolf be dropped for lack of evidence. Minerva McGonagall, leader of the Order, vouched for Lupin and called his long incarceration a "travesty of justice". Other Order members did not wish to go on record - unsurprising, given some

of them are employees of the Ministry - but there was a general spirit of jubilation following Lupin's release. As for the werewolf himself, he only smiled and said, "I just want to go home. Wherever that is now."

Lupin's comment does raise an interesting point in light of revelations today of a codicil in Albus Dumbledore's will. It had been previously reported that Dumbledore's estate was to be split equally between Lupin and recently released spy and former Death Eater, Severus Snape. However, conditions were attached to the division of Dumbledore's wealth, which has been estimated at several million galleons. According to Ms. Amica Curae, Executrix of Albus Dumbledore's estate, Snape and Lupin must both occupy the

Dumbledore family mansion, located in a remote area of northern Scotland, in order to have access to the late Headmaster's fortune. If one of them moves out, the other would be granted the entire fortune by default. There are apparently further stipulations concerning the death of either of them, which one source within the Ministry has been quoted as saying was no doubt to keep Snape from murdering the werewolf for the money. Neither Snape nor Lupin would comment on this latest development, and given the history of bad blood between the two which has been hinted at by our sources, speculation is rampant about who will emerge as the heir: the Death Eater or the werewolf.

**amicacurae**  
 barrister  
 55 diagonalley

October 18, 1998

Dear Mr. Snape and/or Lupin -

*Enclosed with this post, you will find a key to Tingling Gently, the ancestral home of the Dumbledore family located in Murthee-on-Toast, Scotland. As you are both to occupy the residence, please be aware the conditions of the late Headmaster's will are specific and unbreakable: if either of you leave the estate for a period of more than one week before I have received a jointly signed note from you indicating that you have agreed to share the estate henceforth and forevermore, then the party who is absent will forfeit his claim on the estate and the money which accompanies it. You should also be aware that certain magical protections have been placed on the dwelling and grounds, both to protect your privacy and your persons, even from each other. Death is also considered a forfeit, although Mr. Dumbledore was quite, quite direct in stating that murder was a forfeit as well, and the estate would then revert to St. Sinián's Home for Epymongous Equines.*

*If there are any matters which require my attention, such as advancement of additional funds for maintenance and upkeep of the estate, please contact my office during normal business hours.*

Yours,

Amica Curae, Esquire  
 London

[Letter written on plain, cheap parchment, folded and tucked into an envelope, and marked "Lupin"; left on the parlor mantle. Dated October 20, 1998]

Lupin,

I have selected the second bedroom on the left on the third floor. I have also decided to use the nursery on the third floor as a workroom. Those are my rooms, and I will not tolerate any intrusion into either of them. In fact, you may consider the entire third floor off-limits. There are bedrooms on the second floor; I suggest you confine yourself to one of those.

I will take breakfast between five and six o'clock in the morning; I will take lunch between eleven and twelve o'clock; I will dine at five o'clock in the evening. I expect you to avoid the kitchen during those times.

I will arrange to have my own groceries delivered, and I will label them. You will not use them.

Likewise, you will not use any toiletries, linens, clothing, or anything else in this house that is mine. You will be responsible for purchasing and restocking whatever you require yourself.

You will be responsible for your own laundry and cleaning up your own messes. I will not tolerate an untidy house. Nor will I clean up after you. If I find clutter belonging to you outside your chosen bedroom and toilet, I will discard it.

I will not take meals or tea with you. I will not be available for companionship or conversation. I do not wish to be disturbed - ever. Your presence in this house is unwelcome, and the sooner you are gone, the better. After the decades I spent in his service and the sacrifices I made for him, Albus should have left the entire estate to me, and I will have it. In the meantime, the less I have to endure your presence or any evidence thereof, the better.

Keep your distance, werewolf, or you will regret it.

S. Snape

[Letter written on pressed vellum, folded in half and propped up on the parlor mantle. Morning, October 21, 1998]

Severus,

I, for one, have too much respect for his wisdom to question his judgment in this, but Al-

bus disposal of the estate aside, I'm sorry you are inconvenienced by my presence, and I will do my best to make our cohabitation as painless for you as possible. Unfortunately, I am in rather desperate need of the legacy Albus left to us, having no other source of income or means of support, and so I can't leave as you wish. But rest assured, I'm not out to provoke your ire or make your life a misery. I think we've both suffered a bit too much in the last few years, don't you? I am ready to enjoy the end of the war and the rest of my life without having to worry about where my next meal is coming from.

Per your suggestion, I've taken the master suite on the second floor, since you didn't want it. Luckily for me, the closet has a charm which cleans all clothes placed within it. Isn't that delightful? I would also like to take the conservatory on the ground floor in back as my study, since I plan to occupy my time writing a history of both Wars and the role of Dumbledore and the Order in them, as a sort of a tribute to him. If you'd like to contribute your viewpoint so the real truth can be told, I would welcome your input.

I've also arranged for food delivery, and if you see anything in the cupboard that you like, you're certainly free to take it. Ditto if you run out of any necessities, such as toothpaste, soap, shampoo, chocolate, or tea. If you change your mind about companionship or conversation, please feel free to seek me out. No need to stand on ceremony at all.

Oh, in case you are worried, I have already located the room where I will spend my monthly transformations. I'm not certain if Albus family had a werewolf in the closet or perhaps something even less savory, but there was a room below ground with magical enchantments already in place, perfect for my needs. There is even a soundproofing charm, so your rest won't be disturbed.

Let me know if you need anything. Or if you change your mind.

Yours,

Remus

[Excerpt from Severus' private journal. October 22]

This is intolerable. All I wanted if I survived the damned war was to be left alone, and Abus damned well knew that. Why he foisted the werewolf on me, I will never understand. What the hell did Lupin ever do? I am the one who risked my life to gain information, and I am the only one - who was strong enough to do what Abus wanted in the end, even though it meant ruining both my life and my reputation. He damned well knew I couldn't possibly have anything resembling a normal life after that; the least he could have done was left me enough money to run off to Bermuda and live out the rest of my life in peace rather than forcing me to live under the same roof as Lupin.

I suppose I could leave and let Lupin have everything, but that is hardly practical. I have no money, no friends, and no prospects. I haven't even enough money of my own to afford the fare to Dover, much less to start over far away from here. What the Ministry didn't confiscate went to pay legal fees during that damned trial.

Lupin did nothing but cause trouble and complications for years, and a few months of romping in the forest with his own kind under the guise of "spying" does not entitle him to a single knut, much less half the estate. I need this money. It is mine. I earned it, and I will have it.

[Left on the mantle, October 22]

Lupin,

You seem to be laboring under the misapprehension that I give a damn about what you have suffered or under what circumstances you have lived. You are accustomed to poverty; I have no qualms about sending you back to that familiar state. I want to be left in peace by you, your so-called allies, and the rest of the world. I have had enough of people, and I will not continue to suffer your presence for long.

Take the conservatory if you must, but do not expect me to contribute to your inane little project. I have nothing to say on the subject or to you. If you want my perspective, read the trial transcripts, but do not pester me about it.

I will inspect the underground room myself. I will not stand for having my life endangered once a month because of your usual carelessness about your condition.

I will not touch any of your food or toiletries or anything else that belongs to you. Nor will I change my mind about company or conversation. If I must catch it in terms even a Gryffindor can understand: fuck off.

S. Snape

[[Letter written on the back of a Chinese take-away menu, left on the mantle. October 23]

Severus,

Well, I suppose you have been perfectly clear on all points. I stand by my offer, however. Call me a stupid optimist, but there you have it.

Let me know your opinion of the room and if there are any modifications you suggest. As you said, it's your life, and as I've never yet turned another human, I'd not like you to be the first. By the way, I'm ordering Chinese on Friday. This place has absolutely amazing food. If you enjoy it, I suggest you try them. They are Wizard owned and deliver via floo.

Yours, SERS

Remus

[Excerpt from Severus' personal journal. October 24]

I swear if Lupin does not leave me alone, I will hex him to Hell and back, protective charms or no. I do not want that hypocritical little rug chattering at me or offering food or even breathing the same air. It is very presence in the house is obnoxious to me, and the sooner he is gone, the better.

[Letter in an envelope containing the shredded remnants of the take-away menu, left on the mantle. October 24]

I have examined the room and deemed it secure.

You were early in the kitchen this morning by two minutes and infringed on my breakfast. Do not do so again.

S. Snape



[Excerpt from MS entitled *An Order for War — Albus Dumbledore and the Wizarding Wars* by R. J. Lupin]

.... Of course, one of the greatest enigmas in both the first and second Wars was the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and the man who was the instrument of his death, Severus Snape. While Snape's role during the first war was seemingly explained by Dumbledore himself at the trials of the captured Death Eaters following that fateful Halloween night in 1981, there were many unanswered questions about Severus Snape's loyalties which colored the next decade and a half, and which, indeed, caused some to doubt Dumbledore's sanity for his seeming blindness to a man whom many considered to be still in league with the forces of Darkness. Indeed, these naysayers were the first to step forward after Dumbledore's death and decry Snape's actions as complete proof of his guilt; yet the events of history have once again seemed to prove that Albus Dumbledore was right all along. Despite Dumbledore's own words, however, Severus Snape still went on trial, and even his vindication did not completely dispel the cloud of suspicion. It seems likely, in fact, that Severus Snape will always remain an enigma — especially as the man himself makes no apologies and refuses to cast light on the darkness of our collective ignorance.

[Letter scrawled on a napkin embossed with 'Woo's China Palace' and left on the kitchen table next to a salt-and-pepper set shaped like a knight and a dragon. 25 October]

Severus -

Sorry you missed the Kung Pao chicken; it was delightful.

I'm glad the room is secure, and I'll not trouble you on the moon. I found that howling has lost me more roommates than leaving the toilet seat up (and that's a joke, just in case you decide to read too deeply into it).

My clock must be fast; I've set it back by *ve* minutes to make certain I don't intrude on your time. And speaking of intrusions, Mivenva is coming over for dinner next Sunday. You're welcome to join us, if you'd like. I'm sure she'd love to talk to you, since she, for one, always believed in your innocence, perhaps because she knew Albus so well.

Leftovers in the fridge. Just so you know.

Yours,  
Remus

[Letter left on the mantle. October 26]

*How dare you invite someone into my home without consulting me? We have not discussed guests, and while I am frankly shocked you have any in the first place, I am most displeased you did not tell me you intended to bring people here before extending said invitation. It is rude and appalling, exactly the sort of inconsiderate behavior I should have expected.*

*I have no desire to speak to your guest. I find it impossible to believe your claim that she — or anyone else for that matter — believed in my innocence. I have both eyes and ears, and I know what everyone truly thought. I have no use for any of them now.*

*If you must persist in your plans, then I expect it to be quiet, and I expect the house to be clean when I go downstairs the following morning. When I said I would discard any clutter, it was not an idle threat.*

S. Snape

[Note penned on a receipt for a large quantity of tea from 'Oslo's Finest Herbals', left next to Severus' mug in the cabinet. October 27]

Severus -

Sorry I didn't consult you before inviting an old friend and colleague of both of ours into our home. You are correct; I should have, but I rather foolishly assumed that in the natural course of events, both of us would have visitors. I do beg your pardon, however, and in future, I will make certain to give you timely enough notification that if you have visiting plans, you may register them. As I said before, I have no desire to irritate you. On the contrary, I know that raising your ire would be not only stupid, but quite possibly painful as well.

It seems it would also be foolish to try to convince you that you did have your supporters, but if you would read the documentation submitted at both your trial and mine, you would see the truth. If the truth interests you, that is. I know sometimes it's easier just to clutch at your own misconceptions because they are safer.

Atas, I will tell Minerva that our plans to play raucous disco music and do the limbo to bongo drums are off. I suppose we'll just have to settle for tea and conversation, which will no doubt disappoint her greatly. And I'll be certain to banish our trash before I stagger up to my room, overwhelmed from an evening of far too much indulgence.

Yours,  
Remus

[Letter left on the mantle. Late afternoon, October 27]

*There is no one who would be interested in visiting me, and there is no one whom I would be interested in having visit. Therefore, it will not be an issue as far as I am concerned. If you intend to have people traipsing in and out of my house on a regular basis, then I expect to be informed well in advance as you detailed in your previous missive.*

*Do not presume to lecture me about misapprehensions. You know nothing of me or my situation. Your flippancy*

*makes it clear you have no respect for either, and I am not amused by your attitude or your puerile attempts at humor.*

S. Snape

PS - I found hair on the sofa. It was not mine. Clean it up.

[letter on parchment left on the kitchen table. Early morning, 28 October]

Severus -

I shall indeed inform you of any future visitors well in advance, so long as they are known to me. Perhaps this is a good time to mention that Halloween is in three days; if we receive any tiny ghosts or ghouls, I shall be more than happy to answer the door and dole out their treats. In fact, I've already obtained said treats in anticipation, assuming that with your previously stated wishes, you'd not want to do it. If I am wrong, do let me know.

My tripancy indicates only that, having walked a mile in your shoes to a certain extent, I find that the best way to deal with my issues is to try to make light of them. Were you to laugh at my faults, you'd no doubt find me chuckling right along with you. What else can I do? The alternative is to cry about them, and that just makes my nose run and leaves my face splotchy, a most unattractive sight indeed. Puerile though my humor is, it does allow me to wake up each morning and get on with living rather than curling in on myself to die. I have a great deal of respect for you, Severus; you're a survivor, and given what you've gone through, that means a lot. It shows you are not weak for allowing yourself to be crushed by your circumstances. Merlin knows a lesser man would have been.

I cleaned up the hair on the sofa. Sorry, it must have gotten there when I unexpectedly fell asleep there night before last.

Yours,  
Remus

PS - The last few nights I've been awoken by some very odd sounds from upstairs. Lycanthrope hearing, you know. I do hope there isn't a problem, but if there is, please know I'm always willing to help.


[Letter left on the mantle. Late afternoon, October 28]

*Do not presume to compare yourself to me or your situation to mine.*

*I have taken measures to make certain you will not hear any sounds in future.*

*S. Snape*

[Excerpt from MS entitled An Order for War — Albus Dumbledore and the Wizarding Wars, by R. J. Lupin]



...Although the Order of the Phoenix was disbanded at the end of the first war and the members went their separate ways in an attempt to put back together the fragments of their lives, they still shared a common belief that Voldemort hadn't been completely destroyed. Dumbledore did not try to squelch this belief; in fact, he began to make plans in secret, plans which would lay the foundation for the Order to be reactivated if - no, indeed, when - the need arose. Not the least of these plans was to retain Severus Snape as Potions Master at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It has been speculated by many that Dumbledore actually wished to keep an eye on Snape, proving his lack of trust for the former Death Eater by refusing to appoint him to the position of professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, lest Snape be lured back into his old ways. In fact, Dumbledore knew the position was cursed, and that no professor could be retained in it for more than a year. He needed Snape around for far longer than that, because Snape could do something that



no one else in the Order could do. He, and he alone, bore the Dark Mark, and through that, he would be able to warn Dumbledore the moment the lingering, un-living essence of what had once been Lord Voldemort gained enough strength to stage his return.

[Note left on the kitchen table. Early morning, October 29]

Severus -

Whether I make comparisons between us or not doesn't change the facts of either of our situations. You're an intelligent man, so I'll merely leave you to draw your own logical conclusions.

By the way, I wasn't complaining about the noise so much as saying that if you have a problem, I am willing to offer any assistance I can. Yes, I know you are a perfectly capable wizard, and I am in no way calling your competence into question. I am merely willing to provide help if you need it, even if it is no more than a set of willing ears (or eyes, I suppose, given the non-verbal state of our interactions). No man is an island, as the saying goes.

Yours,  
Remus

[Note magically stuck to Remus' door. October 30]

*You have placed two tins of your tea on the same shelf as my tea. Remove yours at once.*

*S. Snape*

[Note stuck on Severus' tea tin. 31 October]

Severus -

Moved.

Happy Halloween!

Yours,  
Remus

PS - I'm sorry for coming into the kitchen while you were still there this morning, but I am very certain it was 6:15. You seemed not yourself, as though you weren't sleeping well. Remember that my offer still stands, if there is something on your mind. Sometimes just saying something out loud (or writing it down, as the case may be) can help you sort out your thoughts.

[Note stuck to Remus' door. October 31]

*You did not rinse out the sink after breakfast. I found tea leaves and bits of egg all over. Do not let it happen again.*

S. Snape

[Note tied to a bunch of pure white lilies, left in a slight depression in the ground before the ruins of a house in Godric's Hollow]

To absent friends,  
 May grief surcease,  
 God let your souls  
 Rest in eternal peace.

RJL

## THE QUIBLER

(Headline article, Special Edition)  
 October 31, 1998

### BIZARRE LIGHTS SEEN OVER SCOTLAND

The Quibbler has interviewed several eye witnesses who claim to have seen odd floating lights in the sky over a remote area of the Scottish Highlands early this evening. While some claim it was merely an overflight of migrating dragons, everyone knows that dragons don't migrate at this time of year. It is our belief that now that the Dark Lord has finally been defeated, it is, in fact, the long-awaited return of The Gryte Neep, a legendary figure which hasn't been seen since just after Grindelwald's defeat. Further investigation is certainly called for, since the children of Scotland are no doubt anxious for the return of the generous Neep and his presents...

[Note left on the mantle. Late evening, October 31. It is attached to a small black bag containing chocolate frogs and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans]

Severus -

Sorry that my rinsing job was inadequate; I was distracted by an article in the Quibbler. I've rectified the situation, hopefully to your satisfaction. I also mopped the oor and dusted the entire downstairs in recompense.

I hope you enjoy the treats. By the way, there is some cocoa in the cabinet which I use when I am having trouble sleeping. Feel free to indulge should you need it.

Yours,  
 Remus

[Note left on the mantle along with the unopened bag of sweets. November 1]

*Stop pestering me, Lupin. You are a nuisance and a slob, and I am tired of constantly keeping after you to keep my house in decent condition. Just do whatever you must, clean up after yourself, and leave me alone.*

S. Snape

[Note left on the kitchen table, afternoon. November 1]

Severus -

Sorry the treats weren't to your liking. But I must protest your characterization of me as a slob; I have done my fair share of cleaning, and one or two isolated incidents hardly constitute being a slob. Nor do making perfectly civil overtures constitute pestering. I can only assume it is a lack of sleep which is contributing to your increasingly ill humor; it's unfortunate, and I do wish you would allow me to help.

Yours,  
 Remus

[Excerpt from Severus' personal journal. November 3]

*Foolishly, I thought there were limits to Gryffindor thick-headedness, but living with Lupin has shown I was wrong. I have told him repeatedly that I wish to be left alone, and I have ignored his prattling notes. Yet he persists in pestering me no matter how clear I make it that his overtures are unwelcome.*

*The worst part is he has noticed my problem, and now he is constantly offering his assistance - as if I would ever*

believe him sincerely interested in my welfare. Perhaps he is simply worried that I will keel over, and he will be accused of trying to off me for the money.

If I do not tell him, he will keep asking even though it is none of his damned business, and there is nothing he can do about it. Even if there were, I would not accept help from him. I suppose it is too much to hope he will shut the hell up and drop the subject, not when he keeps bringing it up. I suppose I had best tell him and get it over with. As much as I loathe admitting any weakness, especially to him, perhaps when he sees it is neither life-threatening nor anything that can be remedied, he will leave me alone at last.

[Note left on the mantle. November 3. There are blotches of ink on the parchment, as if the quill was held over it and allowed to drip. The parchment itself is wrinkled, as if it had been crumpled and later smoothed out. The handwriting seems a trifle unsteady.]

I have nightmares, nothing more. I do not require your assistance.

[Note left on the mantle. Evening, November 3]

Severus -

Well, it's not surprising you'd have nightmares, given what you've been through. You've survived things that would have destroyed a lesser man. Just know that if you ever do need my assistance, it's available.

The full moon is tomorrow; I shall endeavor to be as quiet as possible to avoid disturbing you.

Yours,

Remus

[Note inked in the margin of an MS entitled An Order for War - Albus Dumbledore and the Wizarding Wars, by R. J. Lupin]

The war cost people too much... What nightmares could he be having? Whatever they are, they must be horrific... How unfair it is, in a way, not to be the dead hero, but the alive, unacknowledged hero...

[Note left on the mantle. Morning, November 4]

What part of "I do not need your assistance" and "leave me alone" fails to permeate your thick skull? I do not need or desire any assistance from you or anyone else. My problems are my own affair, and I will deal with them as I see fit. Stop bothering me, and stop pretending you have any shred of understanding or sympathy. In case you have forgotten, there are decades worth of negligence that have proven otherwise. I do not give a damn that we are trapped by circumstance in this house together; it does not mean we must fraternize with one another, and I have no intention of doing so. Go and pester your friends. They might want your companionship; I do not.

S. Snape

[Note left on the mantle. Late evening, November 5. The handwriting is rather shaky]

Severus -

I think I have more sympathy for suffering than you might believe. As for past negligence, I can only apologize and point out that I doubt you would have been any more receptive to my overtures in the past than you are now, but perhaps that doesn't excuse me for not trying harder. I know you don't care, but I do. Whether you want my companionship or not, that doesn't change my offer of it. Whether you take it or not is, of course, your own choice.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the mantle. November 6]

I see. My possible lack of receptivity to your overtures is what kept you from reining in your friends, even when you were a prefect. It kept you from revealing you knew Black was an Animagus and thus could enter the school undetected. It kept you from drinking the Wolfsbane, thus endangering the lives of everyone in the school. It kept you from not encouraging Longbottom so that the story of his boggart appearing in my shape, wearing women's clothing, didn't sweep through the school like wildfire. Had I

known saying "hello" once in a while would have prevented all of that, perhaps I might have made a greater effort to be receptive to your overtures.

I choose not to accept your offer. Go and pester your friends. I am certain Miss Tonks in particular would value your company far more highly than I do.

S. Snape

[Note left on the mantle. Early morning, November 7]

Severus -

Since you brought up the past, please allow me to address your points. First, yes, I do doubt that you would have been receptive to my overtures in school, although that is not why I didn't rein in my friends or why I didn't reveal Sirius' abilities. For those two, all I can say is that I acted in a self-ish manner that I have been paying for ever since. I did it out of a need I felt to protect myself, knowing that in many ways, Sirius, James, and Peter had more control over my fate than I did myself, given that they knew my secret and could have destroyed me by revealing it. Was it wrong of me to be self-ish in that fashion? Yes, it was. It was even more wrong of me not to have told Albus about Sirius being an Animagus, although I think the habit of keeping secrets and protecting myself is one that died very hard, even though I knew it was self-ish and wrong. I was made to pay for all of it, however, although I hold no bitterness now for that fact. In a way, it was rather liberating; a secret revealed, I have found, no longer had as much power to control me with fear as it once had.

As far as Neville's boggart, all I can say is that the I was trying to teach the boy, and I'm sorry, but your dignity or lack thereof never entered my mind when I was trying to show a terrified boy that fear shouldn't be allowed to control his life. If you lost face in that, I am very sorry, but to be honest, it never occurred to me that you'd give a bloody damn what the children thought of you. In fact, you always made it painfully clear that you didn't care what anyone thought of you; if that was merely an act, it was a very good one, and I apologize again for not realizing it wasn't the case.

With regard to Tonks, I spend no time with her now, nor do I have any desire to do so. I never did, although once again my abominable habit of, unlike you, caring far too much what people think of me led me into not being as forceful as I should have been in the matter. Which is unfortunate, because my interest doesn't lie with her or with any woman, for that matter. Fortunately, she came to the realization that we were unsuited quite on her own once I nally agreed to 'try a relationship'. Actual practice demonstrated far more satisfactorily than my protests alone ever could.

Hopefully this clears up a few things; however, I am quite certain that any apology I might offer, no matter how sincere, can't make up for the past. For that, too, I am sorry. If there was a way I could change the past, I would. You have no idea how many times I've wished it were possible.

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the mantle. November 9]

You have no idea how receptive or not I might have been. Do not presume you know or understand me to the point of being able to predict what I would have done. You are neither intelligent nor insightful enough for that.

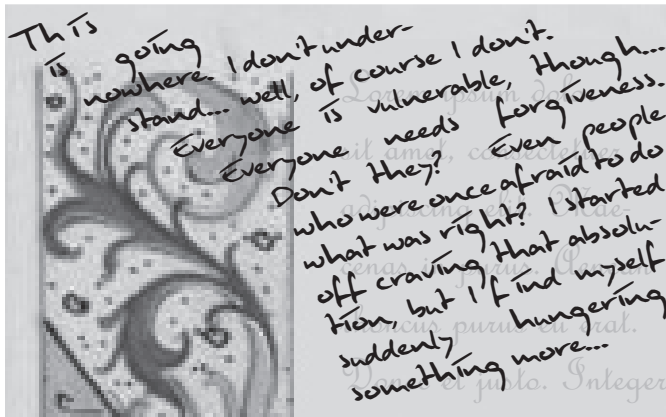
As for the rest, at least you realize you are selfish, although you left off the part about being a coward as well.

I never cared what anyone thought, particularly those spotty faced brats. However, I strove to cultivate a certain demeanor and reputation, which you undermined by giving the little snots something to laugh at me about. I did not care whether they liked me, but I did care whether they respected or feared me enough to pay attention.

Do you have any idea how difficult it was to generate any interest in potions? There were no sparks or light shows, thus it was boring with nothing shiny enough to attract their shallow minds long enough to learn anything, despite the fact that what I had to teach could save their lives. I had a difficult time as it was without you making it worse.

S. Snape

[Note inked in the margin of an MS entitled An Order for War - Albus Dumbledore and the Wizarding Wars, by R. J. Lupin]



[letter left with a tray containing a pot of cocoa and two cinnamon scones, placed in front of Severus' bedroom door in the middle of the night, November 9, and alerted to by a knocking charm]

Severus -

Before you get upset, I didn't come up to the third floor to deliver this. I levitated it up, recalling your order that I am not to ascend to your level, as it were. The reason for the cocoa and scones is that I heard you pacing, and I thought perhaps it might help you to sleep.

To reply to your earlier missive... Yes, I have been a coward in the past. I hope that I am past it now, however. I make no excuses for that; it was wrong, but I have learned to not let fear control me. Even as much of a doer as you consider me to be, I do eventually learn.

Well, usually.

I don't think you have to worry about the students at Hogwarts not fearing you; with the single exception of Harry, I believe all of them did, and many of them, years later and full grown, still do. If you wished to leave that lasting impression upon them, you did so successfully.

I didn't mean to make your job worse; again, I apologize for that. I did and still do find potions fascinating, perhaps because they are so subtle. Unfortunately, my lycanthropy and the various allergies to certain ingredients that entails limited my options in the field. But as I

recall, there were a few students who did show promise even during my time there. Perhaps the others, if they couldn't see the benefit of what you were offering, lacked the insight or wisdom to realize it.

I hope your sleep becomes easier.

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the mantle. November 11]

I fail to understand why you persist in trying to explain yourself to me, to force attention on me, and to continue pestering me when I have repeatedly said such is not welcome. You claim to be capable of learning, yet you prove obtuse in this matter, leaving me to wonder why. Just because we inhabit the same house does not mean we must interact or get on. The house is big enough that we may avoid each other easily.

S. Snape

[Note left on the mantle. November 12]

Severus -

I'm not sure, either. Maybe I really am an idiot, since oddly enough, I seem to have begun caring about what you think of me. Or rather, about changing your opinion, since you have been quite clear about the current state of your regard.

By the way, the holidays are fast approaching. I would like to purchase a small tree and put up some decorations. May I place them in the parlor, or should I limit myself to my own study?

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the mantle. November 13]

If you care what I think of you, you are indeed an idiot. You should stop behaving toward me as you behaved toward Black and Potter; I will not be your "pack" or whatever it is you are seeking with me simply because I am convenient. My opinion will not change.

As for the decorations, do as you will. I will avoid the parlor if they are too gaudy and obnoxious. Do not expect me to be festive or celebrate the season with you.

S. Snape

[Letter left on the mantle. November 14]

Severus -

Believe me, I am not behaving toward you as I did toward Sirius and James, nor am I looking to make you part of my (non-existent) pack; with you, perhaps I am looking more for forgiveness than acceptance. I may have let them down in small ways during my life, but I never failed them as I failed you. Not that I'm not saying I wouldn't like being friends with you, or, if that is too much to aspire to, at least being non-hostile acquaintances. But I am fully aware that I've done things which have caused you to suffer, and I wish I could make that up to you, even though I know it's impossible.

Lest you think I am motivated solely by a sense of guilt, let me assure you that isn't the case. You are a fascinating man, Severus. I would be both more blind and far more stupid than even you credit me with being if I didn't realize that, and I wish to get to know you better.

Thank you for your indulgence on the decorations. They will be neither gaudy nor obnoxious. I suppose I just want to mark the season as being special, with the war having ended and blessed freedom nally at hand.

Yours,  
Remus

[Excerpt from Severus' personal journal. Evening, November 15]

One would think after all this time, I would no longer care whether anyone apologized, admitted they were wrong, or acknowledged the burdens that have been placed on me since my youth. To hear someone - anyone - say "Yes, I know, and I understand" scarcely seems possible, and yet, that is what Lupin has said.

It is ironic that I was alleged to have sought attention and recognition. I am not certain who began the rumor that I created the Order of Merlin, although I would not be surprised if Abus was behind it to explain what happened at the end of Lupin's term at Hogwarts. It was not a bit of shiny metal I wanted. It was justice, old and new.

It was acknowledgment that I was right. It was not to feel as if I had failed in my duty to protect the denizens of Hogwarts because Harry damned Potter was above following the rules.

What I wanted was to atone for my past mistakes and to make the world a right and orderly place. What I wanted was for someone to say "You did a good job. Thank you." I kept trying, doing everything he asked no matter what the cost, and it was never enough. Others received his attention and praise for far less effort.

I do not know whom I mean by "he": my grandfather, the Dark Lord, or Abus. It is true of them all.

Letter left on the mantle. Middle of the night, November 16]

You have the dubious distinction of being the only person who ever came close to acknowledging fault where I am concerned; everyone else is content to cast me as the villain. Even Abus never acknowledged the weight of the burdens he placed on me, although I have no doubt he was aware of them. Perhaps he assumed I was strong enough not to require such acknowledgment. Then again, people have always had a way of making assumptions about me.

I would find guilt easier to understand than fascination. Again, you have the distinction of being the only one to think such of me.

As for the decorations and the season, I find no cause for celebration nor anything special about it, and I have no interest in seeing garland and fairy lights strewn everywhere. The war may be over, but freedom is relative.

S. Snape

[Note left on the kitchen table. Morning, November 17]

Severus -

I will try not to make assumptions in the future, as hard as that can be. But I do acknowledge, freely, both my fault and my fascination.

I promise to keep the decorations to a minimum. And yes, I do understand about freedom not being all that it might seem. As a Muggle song from our youth said, sometimes all it means is that you have nothing left to lose.



Just to let you know, I will be away tomorrow, possibly overnight. I have to go to St. Mungo's to have some tests done. No doubt you will enjoy the peace and quiet.

Yours,  
Remus

[Note stuck to Remus' bedroom door. November 19]

*What sort of tests, and why were they necessary?*

[Note left on the kitchen table. Late afternoon, November 19]

Severus -

Nothing to be concerned about, really. I'm a werewolf approaching forty, and as you know, there are various physiological conditions which can begin to affect werewolves of that age, especially ones who have been infected as long as I have. I also spent a year living feral, then several months incarcerated; I've found the transformations increasingly painful over the past year, and I just wanted to make certain I wasn't developing arthritis or any other degenerative condition.

I hope you are managing to get some sleep. If the cocoa helps, please take all you need.

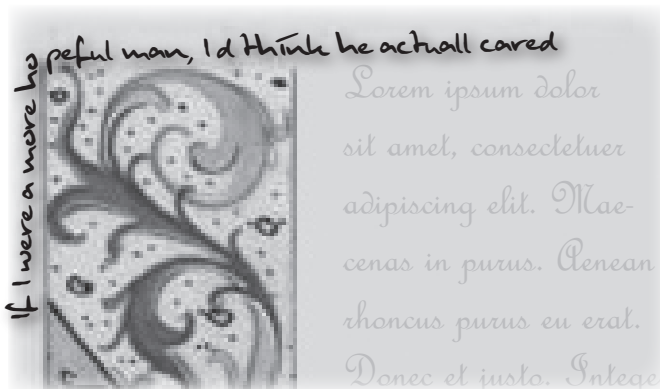
Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the mantle. November 20]

*Don't be stupid. Cocoa is not a useful remedy against insomnia or night mares.*

*In what ways has the transformation become more painful? Have you developed symptoms of arthritis? Symptoms of other conditions? Are the Healers concerned, or was this a routine examination?*

[Note scribbled in the margin of an MS entitled An Order for War - Albus Dumbledore and the Wizarding Wars]



[Letter left on the kitchen table. Morning, November 21]

Severus -

According to my Mum, there is nothing chocolate can't cure. I shall be very wounded to find out she was wrong!

I've been having far more joint pain and stiffness following my transformations, yes. The Healers say that I probably will develop arthritis at some point, but for the moment, just making certain that I take it easy on the day after the moon, specifically by staying warm and moving as little as possible for twelve to twenty-four hours, will suffice. Other than that, they think I'm fine, or as fine as someone who has been a werewolf for thirty-five years can expect to be. I've been put on some dietary supplements, as well. Apparently my time in Greyback's pack

and my distaste of the feral diet has led to some malnutrition. And here I thought I was only missing my morning tea.

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the mantle. Afternoon, November 21]

Your mother was wrong.

What sort of dietary supplements have you been given? Doubtless anything you received from St. Mungo's is swill. I suppose it would be best for all concerned if I began brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for you again. I will no longer have to worry about you breaking free of the room and ripping my throat out, and you may gain some relief post-transformation. If not, I have a salve meant to work on arthritic joints. It provides heat, and I have tweaked it so that it penetrates deeper than the weak, watered-down rubbish from the apothecary.

[Letter left on the mantle, which has been decorated with a tasteful evergreen garland tied with blue and silver bows. Evening, November 21]

Severus -

Well, my heart is broken, if you must know. If one can't rely on the wisdom of one's Mum, what is there left to believe in?

Other than you, of course. Thank you, your offer of the Wolfsbane is not only appreciated, but I wish to do something to pay you back for the trouble as well. I am also very grateful for the offer of the salve; on the morning after, I sometimes think the creaking of my joints could wake the dead. At the least, I have gotten some annoyed looks from a few of the portraits.

My dietary supplements are mostly herbals; the bottles are in the cupboard in the kitchen, if you'd like to take a look. I would appreciate your advice, as well, if there is anything you believe they have overlooked. I know that your expertise in potions is far superior to most healers.

Thanks again. I am definitely in your debt.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table along with a half-empty cobalt blue jar with a hand-made label reading "joint salve" in Severus' distinctive script. November 22]

Here is the salve. It should help with any joint pain after the transformation as well as if you have twinges during certain types of weather. I will provide more when you run out.

There is no need to take so many supplement pills. I can brew a tonic that will provide what you need in one daily dose, and it will be more efficacious than what the Healers have provided.

I do not need or want recompense, but if you wish to pay me back, taking that "rocking around the tree" song out of your seasonal music rotation would be a start.

S. Snape

[Letter left on the kitchen table. Morning, November 23]

Severus -

Thank you for the joint salve; it worked fabulously. I used some last night before bed on my shoulders and knees, and I woke completely pain-free for the first time in months. If you were ever interested in marketing and selling your salve, you'd be very rich indeed!

Again, I am in your debt, and I would be very grateful for the tonic. I find swallowing all those pills very tedious, but drinking a single glass of something would be much easier. I've no doubt that anything you make would be much better than what I was given at St. Mungo's.

"Rocking Around the Christmas Tree" has been removed from my collection, as well as all other songs by that artist and other songs which resemble it from a musical standpoint. So you see how grateful I am for everything you have done. If there is anything else, please do let me know.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table. November 25]

I already am very rich indeed, especially since I have no intention of moving out and leaving you with the entire estate, thus I have no need or desire to sell my save. I have had my fill of dealing with people for one lifetime, and becoming a tradesman would be as bad as, if not worse than being a teacher.

Your tonic will be ready in a few days. I have been preparing the recipe; you I must order a few ingredients which I do not already have in stock.

As I said, I do not need or want recompense; that you removed the obnoxious "song" is enough. The research and preparation of the tonic has given me something productive to do! [in the middle of the night has been scratched out].

S. Snape

[Letter propped on the mantle. November 26]

Severus -

True, you are very rich indeed; I tend to have a hard time remembering that we both are. Having lived on so little for so long, having what I want when I want it is something that I've still not grown used to. I doubt I ever shall!

With respect to the salve, I did notice that the jar was half full. Have you been having any difficulties of your own? If you will excuse my inquisitiveness (and no, I know you won't, but I will ask regardless), perhaps if you are having pain, it might be contributing to your nightmares? I cannot help but notice that you are often up late at night. If you ever feel like company, do come knock on my door. I'm often up very late myself.

Thank you again for the tonic. I'll find a way to repay you somehow!

Yours,

Remus

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[Note left on the kitchen table. November 29. Once again, the parchment is wrinkled as if it had been wadded up, and there are numerous scratch-outs.]

The nightmares have nothing to do with why I require the save. In my time as a double agent, I was tortured when I failed the Dark Lord experienced the Cruciatas more than once was occasionally punished took a certain amount of curse damage that has had lingering effects. I am not up late because of the curse damage, however. I sleep little because I wish to avoid waking up screaming my throat raw the nightmares and because I cannot stop thinking about the past long enough to let myself sleep have insomnia. I see no reason to inflict my sleeplessness on someone else, thus I will remain in my own quarters.

And I repeat: I do not want repayment. I do not want an overzealous werewolf with delusions of honor following me around, attempting to repay a non-existent debt.

S. Snape

[Letter left on the kitchen table. Early morning, November 30]

Severus -

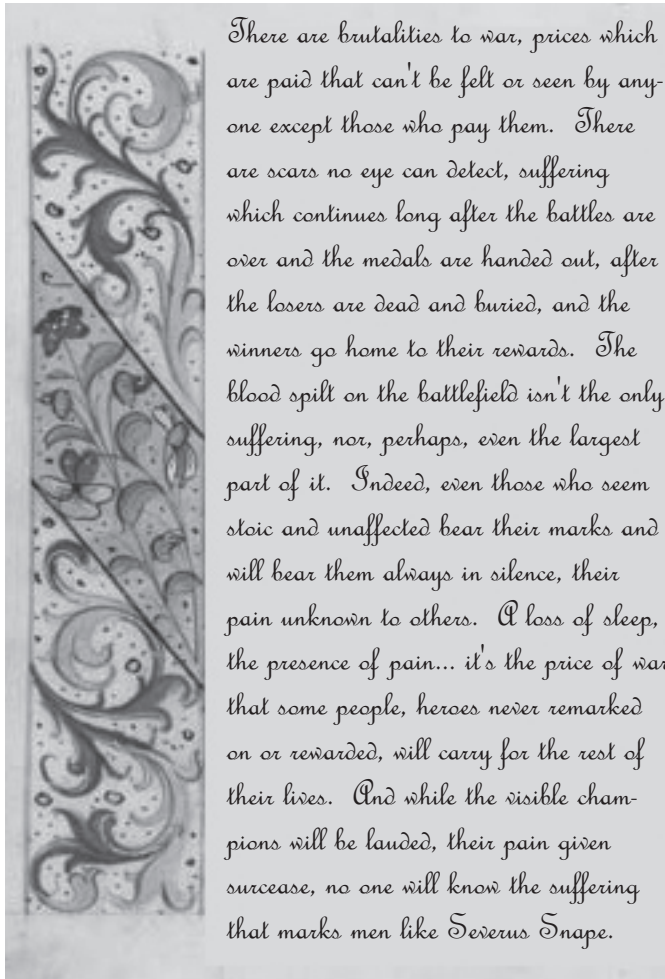
Curse damage? I've heard that repeated exposure to things like the Cruciatas can cause long-term difficulties. I'm sorry that you've been the victim of such. I suppose in a way, it's not unlike my own lingering pain from my curse. As to the insomnia, that's very difficult, I'm sure. I've rarely had to deal with it myself and definitely nothing long term, but I would assume the accumulated effects combined with your pain is a combination that is incredibly unpleasant.

Very well, I will not continue to irritate you about the matter of repayment. But I am grateful, and as you have helped to ease my difficulty and pain, I would not add any burden at all to offer company if you ever require it on those nights when darkness - any Darkness - might be drawing in too closely.

Yours,

Remus

[Excerpt from MS entitled An Order for War - Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, and the Wizarding Wars, by R. J. Lupin]



There are brutalities to war, prices which are paid that can't be felt or seen by anyone except those who pay them. There are scars no eye can detect, suffering which continues long after the battles are over and the medals are handed out, after the losers are dead and buried, and the winners go home to their rewards. The blood spilt on the battlefield isn't the only suffering, nor, perhaps, even the largest part of it. Indeed, even those who seem stoic and unaffected bear their marks and will bear them always in silence, their pain unknown to others. A loss of sleep, the presence of pain... it's the price of war that some people, heroes never remarked on or rewarded, will carry for the rest of their lives. And while the visible champions will be lauded, their pain given surcease, no one will know the suffering that marks men like Severus Snape.

[Note left on the kitchen table accompanied by a goblet. Morning, December 2.]

*Here is your last dose for the month.*

*Yes, the combined effects are unpleasant. The damage is not merely from the Cruciatius. There are people on both sides of the war who are creative, shall we say, with their spell work, and I was a double target. As for the darkness, I have lived and dealt with it by myself for twenty-five years. I do not require anyone else's assistance.*

*S. Snape*

[Note left on the mantle. Late evening, December 3]

Severus -

*The Wolfsbane did its normal efficient job keeping the wolf at bay, and it was most pleasant to transform right in my own bed rather than having to worry about dragging myself upstairs or sleeping on a cold stone floor. Between the warmth and comfort and your excellent salve, I feel better today than I have after any transformation in years.*

*You definitely got the worst of both worlds from the war, which is horribly unfair. Yes, I know that life is rarely fair, but it still seems to me that you deserve to be recognized for what you sacrificed and still continue to sacrifice. Unfortunately, I also know that as much as the populace needs heroes, they also need scapegoats. I think the price we both had to pay afterwards shows that being Dark in any way is a guarantee that heroism isn't something to which we can aspire.*

*I've been accused of being overly optimistic before and of seeing too much of the good in people. Those who have said such probably know me least well, since they never see just how hard it is to keep from giving in to the hopelessness that I have very often felt. Perhaps you're right, Severus; everyone can share the light, but we all walk in our Darkness alone.*

*Yours,*

*Remus*

[Note left on the kitchen table. December 4]

*Many people feel I have not received what I deserve, but they are not thinking about recognition for my sacrifices. Believe me, I do not expect recognition, much less for my actions to be regarded as heroism. I have too!*" much blood

on my hands" is scratched out] many burdens, to qualify.  
Best to leave that to Potter and his ilk.

You are overly optimistic. I have no use for optimism or hope. I have not been able to rely on either for decades, and I parted ways with them long since. I am alone whether in darkness or not, and I have accepted that fate.

That is why I want this house. It is large and secluded, and I need never see anyone again. I will be able to live the rest of my life in peace and quiet - alone.

S. Snape

[Excerpt from a balled up piece of parchment in the rubbish bin in Remus' study. There are many strike-throughs and inkblots]

Alone. Alone alone alone alone. He wants to be alone, and I... what do I want? Why must I communicate with him? Why do I worry? Why does he matter to me when all he wants is the one thing I don't want - eternal solitude? I thought... well, maybe. Hoped? Dreamed? Stupid. I'm definitely stupid, just as he said. It doesn't matter what I do. He doesn't want me around, he'll never forgive me, he'll never see me as anything but a monster. Why do I care? It shouldn't matter.

It matters. It matters more than I ever could have imagined.

[Letter left on the mantle. December 5]

Severus -

I am going away for a few days, perhaps as much as a week. Perhaps you're right. I have been overly optimistic, and in ways that I am

only now finding are probably even more futile than I had imagined. I suppose I need to think

No matter what, though, don't forget that you are a hero. I may not know much, but I do know that.

Yours,  
Remus

[Letter written on December 6, never sent]

Lupin,

What the devil is going on now? What is all this "you need to think" nonsense? Is that some sort of euphemism for going back for more tests? If you're going to die, do me the courtesy of giving some advance warning so I won't be caught unawares when I find your corpse.

I am not best pleased by this. You put up decorations - and I meant to tell you to stop leaving notes in the parlor where I must subject myself to the sight of Christmas cheer - and then you run off and leave me stuck with seasonal decor. It is hardly fair, and you shouldn't be surprised to return and find it all chucked in the rubbish bin.

S. Snape

[List jotted on the back of an old receipt from Slug & Jiggers, crumpled up and thrown away on December 8]

Slug & Jiggers  
bee pollen for immune system 14 sickles  
butcher's broom for circulation 2 farthings  
3 musketeer tea tree 24 galleons  
milk thistle for liver 12 galleons  
1 jar ground monkey bone 123 galleons  
red clover (needed?) 125 galleons  
3 jars of moonbeam  
for sale - comfrey and feverfew running low  
n.b. Check Spirulina's Herbology Compendium  
for source of vitamin C and calcium.

[letter written on December 9, never sent]

*I could have you thrown out of the house for this, you know. You packed your bags and left, which could easily be interpreted as an intention to move out, and I'm certain I could find a lawyer who would agree. You're damned lucky I haven't begun proceedings to claim the estate as mine.*

S. Snape

*PS - I drank all your cocoa, and I have no intention of replacing it.*

[letter written in the wee hours of the morning on December 12, never sent]

*This is hardly fair. I had only just got used to talking to you, and now you're gone. You're no better than any of the rest of them; you get what you want from me, and then you're off. I should count myself lucky I hadn't done something so colossaly stupid as develop any sort of attachment to you, but I knew this would happen.*

*I suppose, then, I ought to thank you for reminding me of a fundamental truth of my life: no one ever stays. Not my grandfather, not Abus. For all the pretty words used to lure me in, it's always the same in the end. I am always alone. I was in danger of forgetting that for a time thanks to you, but now I remember, and I shan't forget again.*

*I have always been an outsider and never more so than now; for all your prating about people forgiving me, I know better. I know how I am regarded, and I refuse to subject myself to that manner of scorn, loathing, and rejection. Enough is enough. I am tired, and while my life may not be much, I want to spend what is left of it in peace.*

*But I can have no peace while you are in this house, not when I find myself weakening when you are here and missing you when you leave. I cannot decide whom I hate more for it: you or myself.*

[Letter left on the mantle, along with a package of expensive chocolates. December 12]

Severus -

*I returned rather early this morning. I hope I didn't wake you; was trying very carefully to be silent. I noticed that the cocoa was gone; I do hope that it helped you to sleep. I've ordered more, and it should arrive this afternoon with my other foodstuffs.*

*I'm sure you found your peaceful time alone to be restful, and I'm sorry to be inflicting my presence on you again, but I'm afraid I'm here to stay. I would apologize for my abrupt departure, but I suppose you were just as glad I was gone. For my part, I missed our exchanges; strange as they might seem to outsiders, I find our "conversations" to be the highlight of my days.*



Yours,

Remus

*PS - The chocolates are from the best confectioners in Germany. That's where I went, by the way. I wanted to find out if Mum was right about chocolate curing everything, or if you were.*

[A cobalt blue stoppered bottle with a hand-written label reading "take two spoonfuls once daily" is left on the kitchen table along with the unopened package of chocolates. December 15]



[Note left on the kitchen table, December 16]

Severus -

Thank you for the supplements. It is so much better than taking all those pills! Your talents never fail to impress me.

I'm sorry if you didn't like the chocolates.

Yours,

Remus

[Letter left on the mantle, December 19]

Severus -

Your supplements are definitely doing the job. I'm feeling better already.

I noticed you've not replied to me. Is there something wrong? Have I done something to make you especially angry with me? If so, I'm sorry, and I'd be more than happy to do whatever I can to make it up to you.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table. December 20]

Even if I wanted you to "make it up" to me, you could not. Just leave me alone.

[Note left on the kitchen table. Late evening, December 20]

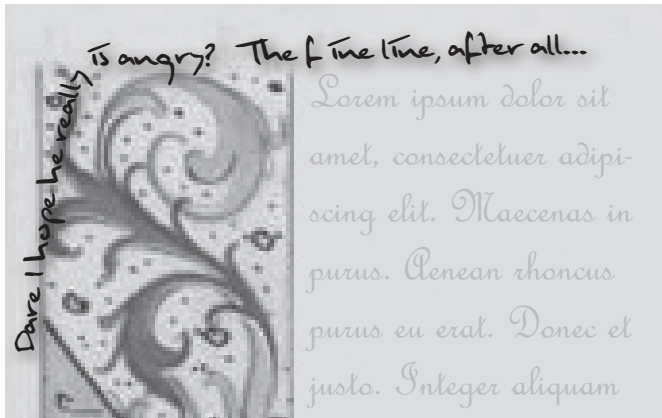
Severus -

How do you know I couldn't if you won't let me try? And I did try leaving you alone; for some reason, it's almost as though you seem to be angry with me for it.

Yours,

Remus

[Note scribbled in margin of MS entitled An Order for War - Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, and the Wizarding Wars, by R. J. Lupin]



[Note left on the kitchen table. December 21]

*I am not angry. If anything, I am grateful for the reminder that I am meant to remain alone and not count on anyone else.*

[Letter left on the mantle. Afternoon, December 21]

Severus -

You were counting on me? I thought I was nothing but a nuisance and a burden. Here you have been doing things for me, making me Wolfsbane and supplements and giving me salve, making my life better, and all I've done is to annoy you and make you angry with me. Really, what I wanted to do was let you know that someone does care about you. I care. Not that you will believe me, I'm sure, but I had to say it. I've given you ultimate power over me, because you know that you do have the ability to hurt me by your anger and distance.

Whatever I've done, I'm sorry. And you can count on me, if you want to. It helps me to know that what I do matters.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table. December 22]

*You are a complete idiot. I began making the Wolfsbane Potion, salve, and tonic for you; I allowed you to put up those wretched decorations; I began communicating with you. And you left. That does not speak of caring or reliability to me.*

[Letter left on the mantle. Evening, December 22. It is creased, as though folded many times, read and reread before being placed with great care exactly in the center of the mantle]

Severus -

*I'm not certain if I'll leave this for you to read; if I do, I am possibly more Gryffindor than I ever thought.*

So. The reason I left was because of the last letter you wrote before I went away. The one in which you said you wanted to spend the rest of your life alone. I know you were making the Wolfsbane, the salve, and the tonic, and I thought that might mean... well, something that I was hoping it meant. But then when you wrote that you wanted to be left in peace and quiet, I felt I had been wrong, reading things into your actions that weren't there; being, as you have often accused me of being, an overly optimistic idiot who only sees what he wishes to see. I didn't know what to do. I thought perhaps I ought to give you what you had asked me for so often: solitude. And then in the end, I couldn't even do that right. I couldn't stay away. I had to come back. Not because of the house or the money. But because you were here.

*You were right, by the way, and my Mum was wrong. Chocolate does bugger all against a broken heart.*

Yours,

Remus



[Note left on the kitchen table, written on a better quality of parchment than before. The wee hours of the morning, December 23]

Lupin,

I did want to be left alone in peace and quiet. Then I had what I wanted, and I found it was not as pleasant as I thought it would be, which is entirely your fault for making me grow accustomed to your presence here. You should not have left for a whole week without a single word. I was concerned there was a medical issue you were not telling me about. Then I thought you had abandoned me. Then I drank all of your cocoa, which serves you right.

S. Snape

[Note left on the kitchen table after breakfast. December 23]

Severus -

I happily take the blame. You're right, I shouldn't have left for a week without telling you where I was going. My only excuse was that I wasn't thinking very clearly. Again, I'm sorry for that, and I will make it up to you. I promise. If, that is, you are willing. And preferably face to face.

Yours,

Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table. Afternoon, December 23]

That will largely depend on how you intend to make it up to me. I prefer to know the details first.

Note left on the kitchen table before dinner. December 23]

Severus -

I have more cocoa. And I like to sit quietly in front of a roaring fire on cold winter nights with insufferably cheerful Christmas decorations around. If you were to join me, I think we could make the face to face (literal, if you were willing. With or without the assistance of mistletoe.

Yours,

Remus

[Note stuck to Remus' door. December 24]

If you insist. However, you must understand I have not been "face to face" with anyone in a very long time. Moreover, you had best not expect that if I sit with you, it means I will somehow be filled with the joy of the season or any such rot or that I think you any less an idiot. It simply means I do not crave utter solitude as much as I once did.

Severus

[Owl post to Remus Lupin, received late evening, December 24, along with a parcel of chocolates and cardigan]

Remus -

Sorry I haven't written since that note when you got out of prison. I just needed space, you know? I had to not think about the war or Dumbledore or anything else. I just needed to be eighteen, I suppose. I've enjoyed it. I think I'm ready to come back, perhaps after the first of the year. A fresh start for a new year, I guess. Thanks for the books on Defense you sent me for Christmas - since I'm thinking of becoming an Auror, they'll be very useful.

How is life with Snape? Does he hide in the cellar there and snap at you when you stick your head down? I can't imagine how you can abide living with the man, and it was rather a bad joke on Dumbledore's part to have made you share the place with someone who hates you. Maybe you should "forget" to lock yourself in at the full moon and deal with the problem that way. Just remember, I'd back you up on it.

See you in a few weeks. Hey, maybe that's the way we can get Snape out: tell him I'm coming for a visit, and the house will be yours.

Happy Christmas,  
Harry



[Owl sent to Harry Potter. Early morning, December 25]

Harry -

Life with Severus is rather different than you might imagine. I think Albus did me the biggest favor of my life by putting us together in this way, and I hope Severus will think so as well. I don't want to speak to soon, but I think you might be surprised at how well we get along. There will be absolutely no question about me doing anything to harm him, full moon or not; while I appreciate the support you are showing me, believe me when I say that I'd much rather be nibbling on Severus as a man than munching on him as a wolf.

No, I'm not under Imperius, nor has he slipped me a potion, or cast any sort of charm or curse

on me. Finally, for the first time that I can remember, I'm really and truly in love, and that is the most potent, wonderful magic of all. I rather think of it as a Christmas miracle, and I hope when you recover from the shock, you'll think so, too. I'm sure Albus is probably up there laughing at us all, and for once, I'm quite willing to be the butt of the joke.

Happy Christmas, Harry.

Remus



[Note left on the kitchen table along with a wrapped parcel. December 25]

Severus -

I enjoyed last night very much, and I hope you did as well. It was wonderful to actually be able to see you, and touch you, and speak to you - even if we didn't do much talking. You might not have been "face to face" with anyone in a long time, and to be honest, neither had I, but I believe we both did rather well in that regard. Or at least I believe that you did; I wouldn't want to presume anything further.

Before you dismiss the gift I've left you (and no, I am not expecting anything in return, since you have given me so much already!), it's not much, really, just something that I hope you will be able to use.

Happy Christmas, Severus. If you have any desire for more cocoa, I shall be in front of the fire this evening.

Yours,

Remus



[Note left on the kitchen table. Late afternoon, December 25]

*I was not expecting a present, but the thought is appreciated. My old watch was confiscated, and I never got round to replacing it; the pocket watch will be useful. While I am not likely to be associated with Hogwarts again - and I will be much surprised if they do not expunge my name from the records as having served as Head of Slytherin - the engraved crest serves a nostalgic purpose.*

*As for your face to face technique, I have no complaints. It was satisfactory enough to make me inclined to join you again this evening.*

Severus

[Letter left on the mantle. Morning, December 26]

Severus -

*I'm glad my technique was satisfactory enough for a repeat. I find that practice really does make perfect.*

*I'm also happy that the watch will be of use. It is rather nostalgic, I suppose, but a bit of nostalgia can be a good thing. We are, after all, the sum of our experiences.*

*I rinsed out the goblet from the Wolfsbane last evening, and I've left it in the kitchen. I hope that's all right, but I wasn't certain if I left it outside your door that you might not trip over it unawares. And speaking of the Wolfsbane, I shall leave my door unlocked that evening. If you feel so inclined, you are welcome to join me at any point you are comfortable with. Or not, of course - and I won't take offense. I just wanted you to know that the invitation is open, and it always will be.*

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table along with a goblet containing the Wolfsbane potion. Afternoon, December 26]

*It would seem you were not speaking idly when you mentioned practice makes perfect; you certainly seemed intent on making up for lost practice time last night. I will remind you that just because I have spent time with you, snogging like the randiest adolescent at Hogwarts, I am not a sappy romantic. I still want time alone, and I will not tolerate a lot of hearts and flowers rubbish.*

*As for the night of the full moon, I suppose if we are to share quarters indefinitely, I ought to face my old fears and overcome them.*

Severus

[Letter left on the kitchen table, along with a bottle of fine brandy and two glasses. Evening, December 26]

Severus -

*Facing your fears is a good thing, I've found. I shall look forward to the full moon knowing that you will be there, too.*

*If hearts and flowers are out, how about brandy and popcorn? Snogging is optional, but I'm certainly not going to turn it down. Or if you prefer an evening alone, that's fine with me; I understand the need to sometimes be by yourself, and you don't have to worry about causing me offense by taking the time when you need it.*

*If you're up for the evening, bring the brandy with you, all right?*

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table along with the Wolfsbane Potion. December 27]

Your attempt to get me drunk and seduce me was transparent, even for a Gryffindor. I suppose I should be concerned about my virtue if this continues - and if your hands continue to become ever more wayward. I expect you to find those buttons you popped off and return them to me.

So far, I have had sufficient alone time during the day that I do not find spending the evening with you onerous. You needn't worry; if I grow tired of your company of an evening, I will not hesitate to say so.

Severus

[Letter left on the kitchen table, along with the empty goblet and a plate with grapes, cubes of cheese, and chocolate covered strawberries. There is also a small crystal dish holding six black buttons. December 27]

Severus -

Transparent, perhaps, and you are very resistant to blatant attempts, I see. Your buttons are returned. All save one, that is. If you recall, there is a childhood game based upon noting a button, and so I leave it up to you to ferret out the location of the remaining one. As a hint, it might require your own hands to become somewhat wayward in the process, although I have no worries about my own virtue. As you have no doubt already been able to tell, it's yours for the taking.

I'm very glad that you are willing to spend evenings with me and that you are willing to speak your mind. That's very important, you know, for two people who are living together. Trust is essential, and so is communication.

The snacks are for this evening, if you choose to once again give me the excellent pleasure of your company. I promise I shall even peel the grapes for you, if you need an extra enticement.

Yours,

Remus



[Note left on the kitchen table along with the Wolfsbane Potion and a single black button. December 28]

Very clever of you, hiding the button there.

I suppose you would consider me to be stating the obvious if I said neither trust nor communication come easily to me. Trust has been problematic for me since my school days; you and your friends did not help, but it was not much easier being in Slytherin House in that time either. It was all politics and prejudice, and I wanted to fit in somewhere. Trust is especially difficult now, after having been shunned and scorned by the world. Somehow, however, I seem to have gained a small measure of faith in you. Betray it at your peril.

As for communication, I find this easier than speaking, perhaps because of the illusion of a safe distance. Thus if you have wondered why I tend to be quiet during our evenings together and save my speech for the next day's note, now you know.

On the subject of virtue: games of button-finding aside, I believe it best to wait until after the full moon before proceeding further. That night will determine a great many things, and I think it best not to act in haste beforehand. I trust you understand and will agree.

That does not mean, however, you will be freed from grape peeling duty.

Severus

[Letter left on the kitchen table, along with the empty goblet. December 28. The button is missing]

Severus -

I have the grapes and a nice dessert wine I was given by Minerva for Christmas. I'd love to share it with you.

I do believe you are right about the full moon; it might change your mind about your involvement with me. It's been a long time since you've seen the wolf, and if you are reticent about things, it's better to find out now.

I understand about the letters being easier as forms of communication; you can also think things out as you write them down, and it can help clarify issues even in your own mind. To be honest, it was as I was writing the history and putting down the parts pertaining to you that I realized how I was beginning to feel about you, how my own attitudes had damaged things, and how my perspective had changed. It's fascinating, really; perhaps sometime you would like to see what I've written.

Until tonight,  
Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on the kitchen table along with the Wolfsbane Potion. December 29]

The wine was tolerable, and your grace peeling technique was adequate, thus I suppose we may call it a successful evening. Dare I ask what you have in mind for tonight? Or what nefarious plans you have for the button?

I am reticent when it comes to your wolf form. Before the so-called "prank", I was fascinated by Dark creatures, just as I was fascinated by the Dark Arts. I suppose in my youthful arrogance, I romanticized them, not recognizing the dangers or perhaps not believing the danger could affect me. That night proved me wrong, and it tempered my fascination somewhat to be faced with the harsh truth that yes, Dark Arts and Dark creatures are dangerous, even to clever, talented Slytherins.

What I saw that night haunted me, and while the passing of time has eased the primal fear instilled in me that night, I have much to overcome. I do not doubt the efficacy of my own potion, but my good sense will be at war with deeper instincts. We shall see what happens.

Regardless, I would indeed be interested in seeing what you have written.

Severus

[Note left on the kitchen table., December 29. Included are several handwritten pages of manuscript, specifically detailing Severus' role in the wars, and his bravery and sacrifice.]

Severus -

Ah, now what fun would it be if I told you where the button was? Finding it is all the fun, isn't it? Well, that and the anticipation. But if you must have a hint, it's inside a piece of my clothing. That I will be wearing. To retrieve the button, the clothing will have to go as well. I leave it up to your imagination about just how far you will need to go.

I'm glad that you thought the evening was a success, because I certainly did. And I find I am hopeful for tomorrow evening as well. I hope that I can help you overcome the things which have haunted you. Not just those concerning my wolf form, either. If I have the opportunity, I would very much like to banish all the Darkness from your life, save those bits you might wish to keep.

As you can see, I have attached the bits of the history which pertain to you. Please feel free to correct, add, or delete anything you wish. My only stipulation is that you will be mentioned in the book. You did far too much to fade off into obscurity, or worse, to be villainized for it. Even if only one person reads it and has their opinion altered, it will be worth it in my mind.

For tonight, I thought perhaps we could share some of our favorite literature? I have obtained another bottle of brandy and some rather nice chocolate cake. Sometimes when I find my own words inadequate, reading those of others helps me to express myself.

Yours,  
Remus

[Letter left on the kitchen table along with the Wolfsbane Potion and the pages of the manuscript with spelling and punctuation corrections and annotations in the margins. Morning, December 30]

*You really, most people will discount your claims where I am concerned if this manuscript is ever published, especially if word gets out that we are sharing quarters and - depending on how tonight goes - more than merely former colleagues. Friendship alone would be reason enough to cast aspersions on what you have written, much less a more intimate relationship.*

*Still, if you insist on forging ahead and including me for posterity's sake, I will not argue. Likely it will be the only recognition I receive, and I have never been one to fall back on false modesty. I did do much for Abus and the Order and botg damned wars, even if everyone would like to sweep me under the rug now because what I did was covert and unpleasant, not a heroic charge on a white steed, flaming sword of righteousness in hand like some damned Gryffindor. And if what I did was any less useful or dangerous just because it was undercover and forced me to fraternize with the enemy.*

*At any rate, if you still wish to interview me for the manuscript, I will oblige. I am not optimistic about the chances of a publisher accepting a manuscript from a werewolf or an editor leaving in the more flattering descriptions of my deeds, but I will indulge you nonetheless.*

*On a different topic entirely, you really are shameless, Lupin. Putting the but on there was quite brazen of you, and as if that wasn't enough, you had the audacity to read Donne. I'm beginning to wonder if the rumors regarding werewolf appetites are true, or if you have been celibate for too long.*

Severus

[Note left on the kitchen table, with the goblet. There is also a studded leather collar. Late afternoon, December 30]

Severus -

Frankly, I don't give a Dark Lord's arse about what other people think anymore. I know, I know, what a stunning turn around from the Lupin of old, but there you have it. I think writing this has helped me to achieve some perspective on things, something which I have lacked due to my closeness to everything that was happening. Which isn't to say that my friends don't matter to me anymore - they do. But as far as what society at large thinks, I have learned from my time in prison and among Greyback's pack that to people outside my immediate group of intimates, I will never be anything more than a werewolf. Perhaps it is your influence, but this no longer bothers me as it once would have.

I would love to interview you for the manuscript, but we can talk about that after. And yes, you were hardly the knight on the white steed, but I have found out recently that I (like my heroes the same way I like my chocolate: dark, slightly bitter, and with more of a bite than sweetness. It seems you suit my tastes exactly. Perhaps after tonight, we'll find out just how true that is.

Shameless? Well, yes, I suppose I am, but I didn't hear any complaints last night. As far as my appetites, I would say that a bit of both is true. If you wish to find out how true, let me just say that the collar isn't just for the wolf.

Until tonight,

Yours,

Remus

[Letter left on Remus' bedside table along with the jar of salve and a vial of pain potion. Morning, December 31]

*I suppose you would not appreciate it if I dragged this out and kept you in suspense, thus I will come straight to the point. Last night was not as difficult as I feared it would be. It was far from easy, mind, but it could have been worse.*

*The worst part was immediately following your transformation. Even though I knew you retained human sensibility due to the potion, it was difficult to remember and quell my baser instincts to fight or flee when I first saw the beast. I am not certain how much you remember clearly, but you behaved in a non-threatening manner, which helped.*

*For a long time, I, simply held the collar and braced myself to approach you. When I moved nearer at last and fastened the collar around your neck, it felt like a symbolic act: collaring old fears that had controlled me and finding a way to control them at last. It was also liberating in a sense, and I found myself regaining a spark of my old fascination.*

*I will not say I am completely at ease yet; however, I can say I was neither terrified nor appalled. Therefore, I believe we may proceed with this whatever-it-is between us.*

*I am pleased to know you have ceased caring so much about the opinion of the world. That was what always got you in trouble: trying to keep people happy with you. What did it get you in the end? You lost everything anyway, and you are only just now getting any measure of stability and security in your life. You might say I lost everything as well, but the difference between you and me is that I was not trying to cling to anything.*

*As for your shameless appetites, they will have to wait for satisfaction until you are rested. I am going to make soup, and I will bring you a tray later. Meanwhile, I expect you to stay in bed and recuperate.*

Severus

*PS - I have the collar, and I will keep it until such time as I may fasten it around your neck again.*

[Note left on the beside table. December 31. The handwriting is a bit shaky]

Severus -

*I woke up and had to reply, although I don't know how long I shall be awake. I just wanted to say that I'm so very glad you faced your fears and that you are willing to proceed with us finding out where this relationship might end up. I can't find words to express how it makes me feel, so I shall simply have to show you.*

*One of the side effects of all the supplements you have been making for me is that I find I am feeling much stronger, and I recovered much more quickly from my last transformation than I had in a long time. I have a feeling that by the time you have the tray done, I shall be recovered enough to wear that collar for you. I look forward to it very much.*

*Wake me after you read this, please? As much as I need the food, I need the taste of you far more.*

Yours,  
Remus

[Note left on Remus' pillow. Early morning, January 1]

*I slept for more than four hours without the aid of a sleeping draught for the first time in years last night. Well, once you allowed me to fall asleep, that is. You are rather voracious, aren't you. You do realize we cannot make up for a long run of celibacy in one night, do you not? If this vigor is a side effect of the supplements I am making for you, perhaps I should water them down a bit.*

*Then again, perhaps not.*

*The collar makes a nice contrast to your fair skin. I find I quite like the look of it. I like the feel of leather and skin against my lips. I like the scent of it mingling with yours. I like what it represents.*

*I will return soon with breakfast, and we can continue making up for lost time. I have never cared to celebrate the death of the old year and the beginning of the new year before; to*

me, one year was just like any other. This time, however, I am glad to put the old year behind me, and I find I am looking forward to what the new year has in store.

Happy new year,  
Severus

[Note left on the night table on Severus' side of the bed.  
Late afternoon, January 1]

Severus -

Making up for lost time sounds like a good plan to me, and I'm a believer in "start as you mean to go on". A whole new year, and we have it ahead of us; I'm very glad to be at a beginning with you here. Now. It's symbolic, I think, that so much of our respective pasts has been left behind, and we have what I feel is a brilliant future to look forward to.

Don't you dare water down the supplements. If I might make a cheeky suggestion, you might like to try them yourself. Not that I have any complaints about your vigor. At all.

I, too, like the symbolism of the collar, and even more so since you enjoy it so much. I am more than willing to wear it for you any time you like. You've bound my heart, Severus; binding my body is an outward display I shall be most pleased to offer you at any time.

I'm glad that I am able to help you sleep, and it must be true as you are slumbering peacefully as I write this. I feel awake and very energetic, and so I shall put that to good use while you regain your strength. You're going to need it.

When you wake up, come downstairs. I am making dinner, which we shall have on the floor in front of the fireplace. Afterward, we can

scandalize the portraits, if you are up for it. I know I am - especially since I distinctly noticed an old portrait of Albus twinkling at me.

Happy new year. The first of many, many more.

Yours,  
Remus

[Special Delivery Owl Post. Afternoon, January 2]

Ms. Amica Curae, Solicitor  
Dragon Alley

Ms. Curae -

This is to inform you, as executrix of Albus Dumbledore's will, that it is our mutual decision to continue to share Albus Dumbledore's ancestral home. We have reached an accord, and therefore, we would like the codicil removed so that we will be free to travel as we wish without fear of losing the estate. If you need further clarification, Severus says we should put it plainly: we will not merely be cohabitating; we will be partners in a committed relationship.

Please let us know as soon as possible when the codicil has been removed. As soon as Severus' house arrest is over, it is our intention to take a long vacation as something of a honeymoon.

Thank you for your prompt attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Mr. Remus Lupin

Mr. Severus Snape



[Letter dated June 28, 1994]

*My dear boys,*

*If you are reading this, we may assume two things. One: I am dead. Two: You have decided of your own free will to share the estate and live together peaceably. For that, I extend my heartiest congratulations and well wishes for a happy future to you both.*

*You have no doubt wondered (along with the rest of the wizarding world, I am certain!) why I named the two of you as my beneficiaries. The reason is simple: you are the most deserving, and I am desirous of you putting the past to rest and learning to co-exist amicably.*

*Remus, you have suffered much deprivation due to the constraints that have been placed upon your kind. Yet you have persevered, and I applaud your strength of will. I regret that the solace I offered was only temporary, but I thought a short respite from your troubles was better than none at all, and our students needed your guidance and expertise.*

*Severus, my dear boy. I have asked much of you, and doubtless I will ask much more before the end, and you have borne it all with a strength that astounds me. I have used that strength, and it has neither broken nor faltered. There is steel at your core which will serve you well in the days to come, and I hope at the end of the coming battle, you will find peace. Consider this my contribution to that end and enjoy it with my thanks for your years of service.*

*I am not forcing your cohabitation as a punishment, I assure you. I merely wish to repair that which has been long broken. It is the prerogative of meddling old men to arrange things to their liking, especially after they are dead, and I wish to see the two of you exist in harmony after the pain and discord of the past. Perhaps I should have tried to mediate after the incident of your schooldays. Perhaps I should have tried to mediate this past year; little did I know Severus would be the instrument of the curse, thus widening the rift between you.*

*At any rate, I hope one day this letter might be delivered so that I may say it is behind you now. Enjoy the estate and each other with my blessings.*

*Sincerely,*

*A. P. W. B. Dumbledore*

"Oh. Well, I wasn't expecting something like this."

"You may imagine my surprise as well."

"It's almost like he knew, somehow. But... how could he? I mean, after that particular year and everything, I would have thought that even Albus would have given up hope of us fixing things."

"He was always annoyingly optimistic. Meddling old bastard. It wasn't enough that he pulled my strings in life. He had to find a way to do it from beyond the grave as well."

"Would it be horribly sappy of me to say I'm very glad he did?"

"Yes, it would, but I wouldn't expect it to stop you."

"Ah, and in that, you are as wise as Albus ever was. I'll try not to be too annoying about it, but... well, being a Legilimens has some disadvantages, I suppose."

"Only if I make a point of looking, but I wouldn't dream of prying. Or meddling. I know something being horribly sappy wouldn't stop you from saying it because I know you. I will find a way of coping with it somehow, I suppose."

"Why, Severus, how romantic of you. You'll turn my head with such praise!"

"Only you would find a way to see that as praise. Is this what I have in store for the next fifty years?"

"This, and much much more. Aren't you lucky? All right, all right, don't say it. How about, um... I intend that the brilliant sex will make up for any inconvenience you might suffer?"

"Brilliant sex will make up for much. Especially as voracious as your appetites have proven to be."

"Pot, couldron. Not that I'm complaining at all! Hmmm... That's a thought, though. Seeing which of us gives out first. I suppose it doesn't matter. We'd both end up winning. Or at least not care if we lost."

"It would hardly be a fair contest. You have recuperative and stamina advantages that I do not. I must make up for it in creativity."

"Ooooo. That sounds brilliant. So. When do you want to start? Is now good?"

"We just got out of bed not an hour ago."

"Has it only been that long? Seems like ages. Or perhaps it's just that you inspire me. Of course, if you aren't up to it..."

"The problem with you, Lupin, is that you talk too damned much. Now shut up and act."

## Arionrhod and McKay's Bio

Despite rumors to the contrary, McKay and Arionrhod are not Siamese twins, even though they share a love of Severus/Remus, cross dressing (the characters, that is, not themselves.

Or not that they will admit to), mpreg, and even on occasion, a brain. They have been writing together for almost three years, and this story constitutes their ninth collaborative fic - although they also have a nearly obscene word count when it comes to their Severus/Remus RPG and their collaborative serial work, Time of Storms.

Arionrhod, who freely admits to being the less grammatical of the two, started writing SS/RL in late 2003, and has authored 62 solo fics in the pairing. When not writing or roleplaying her OTP, she can usually be found building computer systems or tending to her family.

McKay is a veteran of several fandoms online and off, but she has been involved with HP fandom the longest, having written HP fic since fall, 2001. Snape/Lupin has been her OTP all this time, and she has written over 65 solo stories in addition to RPGs and collaborations. When she isn't indulging her organizational tendencies in fandom, she teaches composition and literature and serves as a pillow for her cat.

• <http://asylums.insanejournal.com/blessedmoon>

# RESOLUTIONS

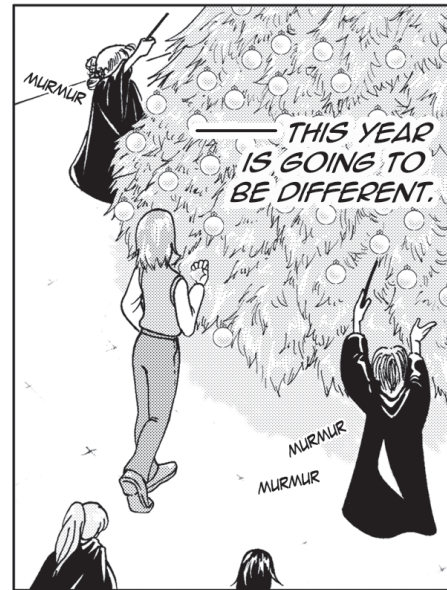
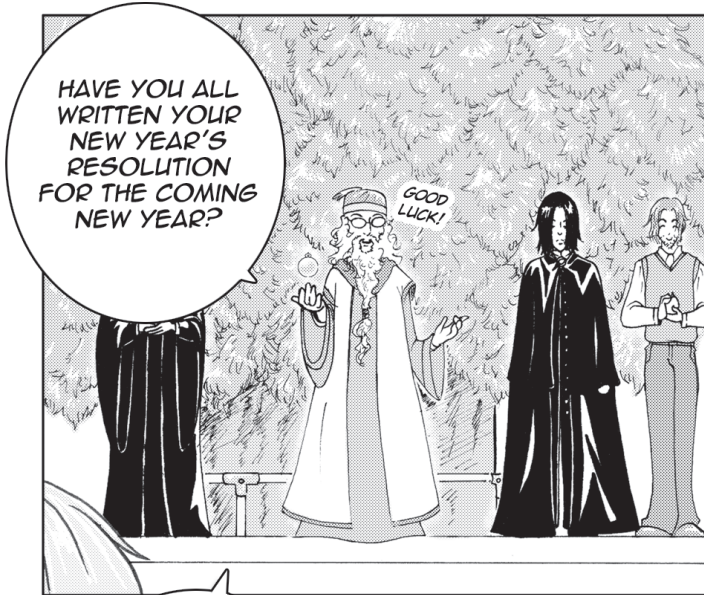


TAGAY IS A NEWLY-FORMED DOLJINSHI (FAN-COMIC) GROUP COMPOSED OF THREE WOMEN BASED IN THE PHILIPPINES. TWO OF THEM ARE MANIC SHIPPERS OF LUPIN/SNAPE WHILE THE OTHER TOLERATES THEIR BEHAVIOR. ALL OF THEM LOVE HARRY POTTER. THIS IS THEIR FIRST DOLJINSHI AS A GROUP. THEY CAN BE REACHED THROUGH TAGAYTA@GMAIL.COM

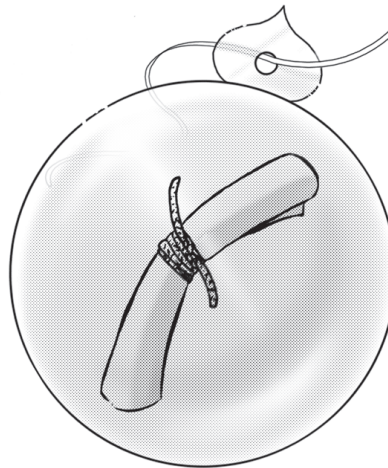


TAGAY IS:

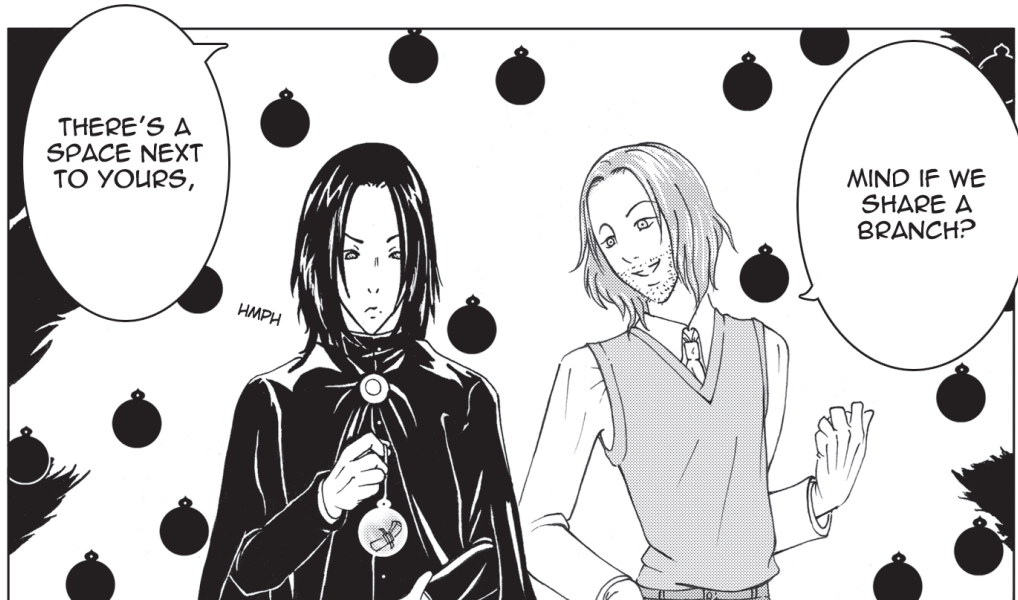
OSMALIC : PLANNING, SCRIPT, CHARACTER DESIGN  
ZHYNCHAN : BACKGROUND ART, TONING, QUALITY CHECK  
SIN : CHARACTER ART, BACKGROUND ART, TONING

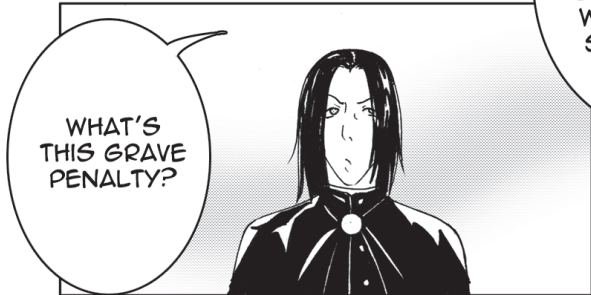
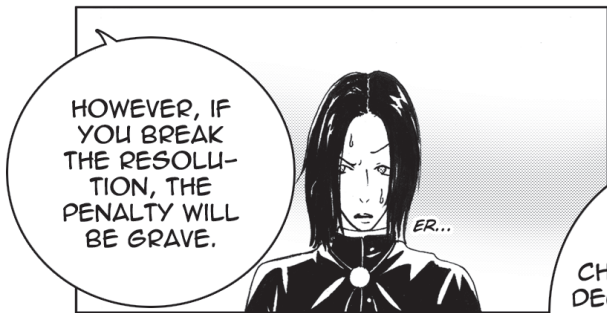


TO PREPARE FOR THE COMING YEAR, I'VE MADE YOU ALL WRITE YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION AND DROP THEM INSIDE THESE CHRISTMAS BALLS, ALL OF WHICH YOU MUST HANG ON THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN THE GREAT HALL.



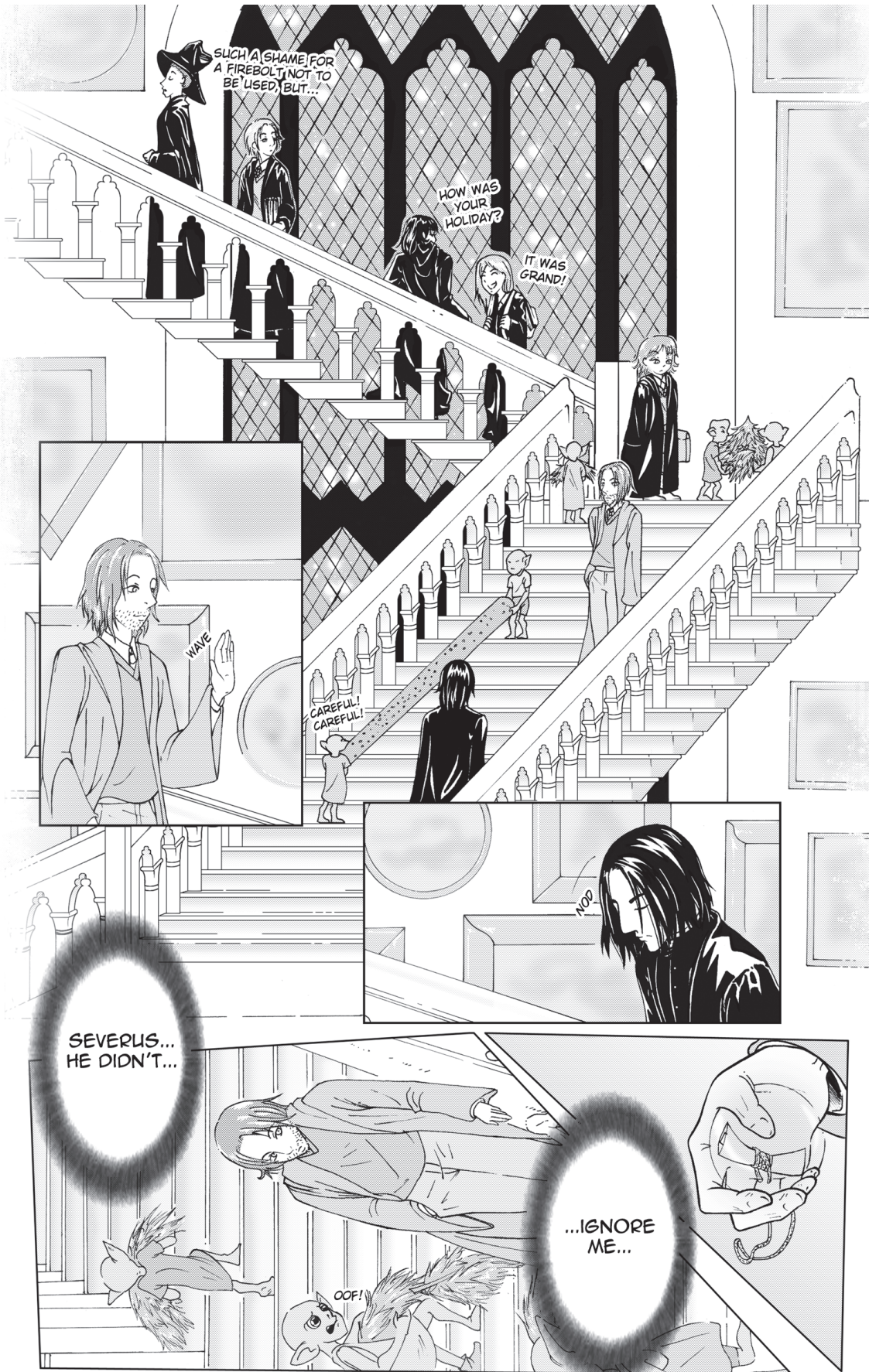
AFTER THE CHRISTMAS TREE IS TAKEN DOWN ON NEW YEAR, YOU WILL EACH GET IT BACK AS A CONSTANT REMINDER OF YOUR SACRIFICE.

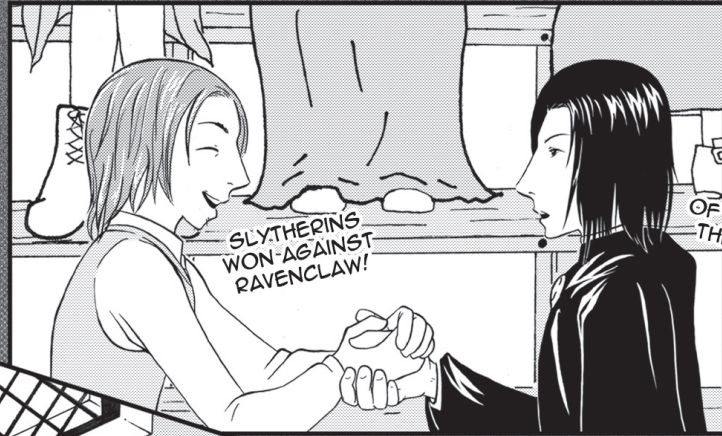




FOR THE YEAR 1994, I RESOLVE

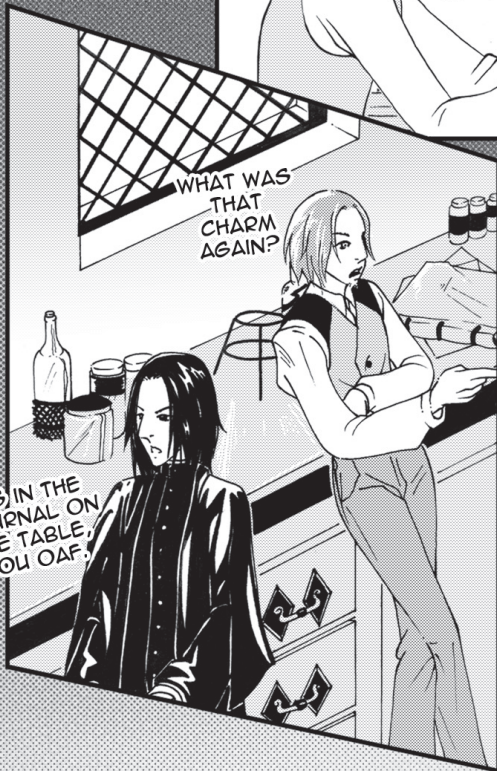






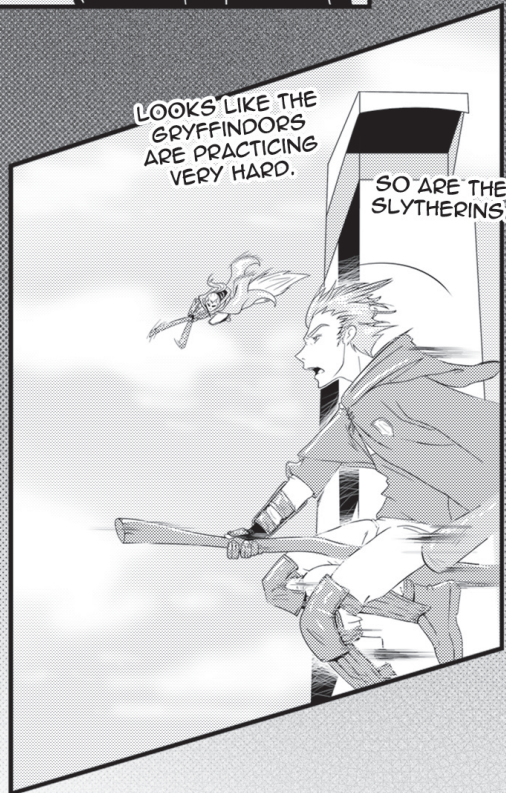
SLYTHERINS  
WON AGAINST  
RAVENCLAW!

OF COURSE  
THEY DID.



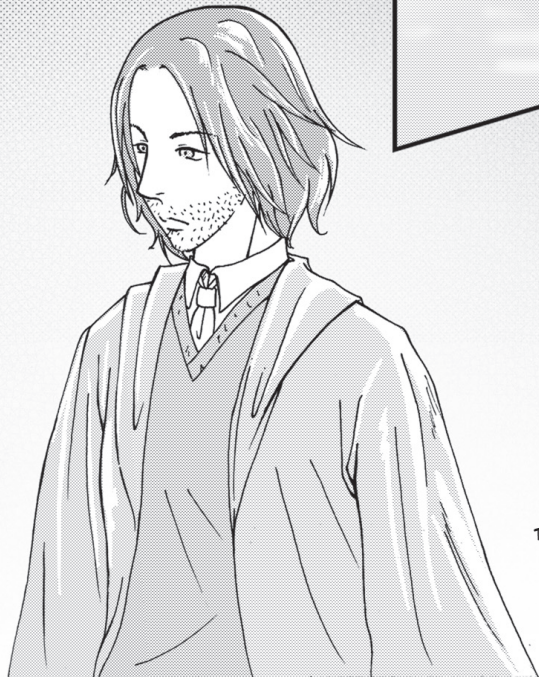
WHAT WAS  
THAT  
CHARM  
AGAIN?

IT'S IN THE  
JOURNAL ON  
THE TABLE.  
YOU OAF.

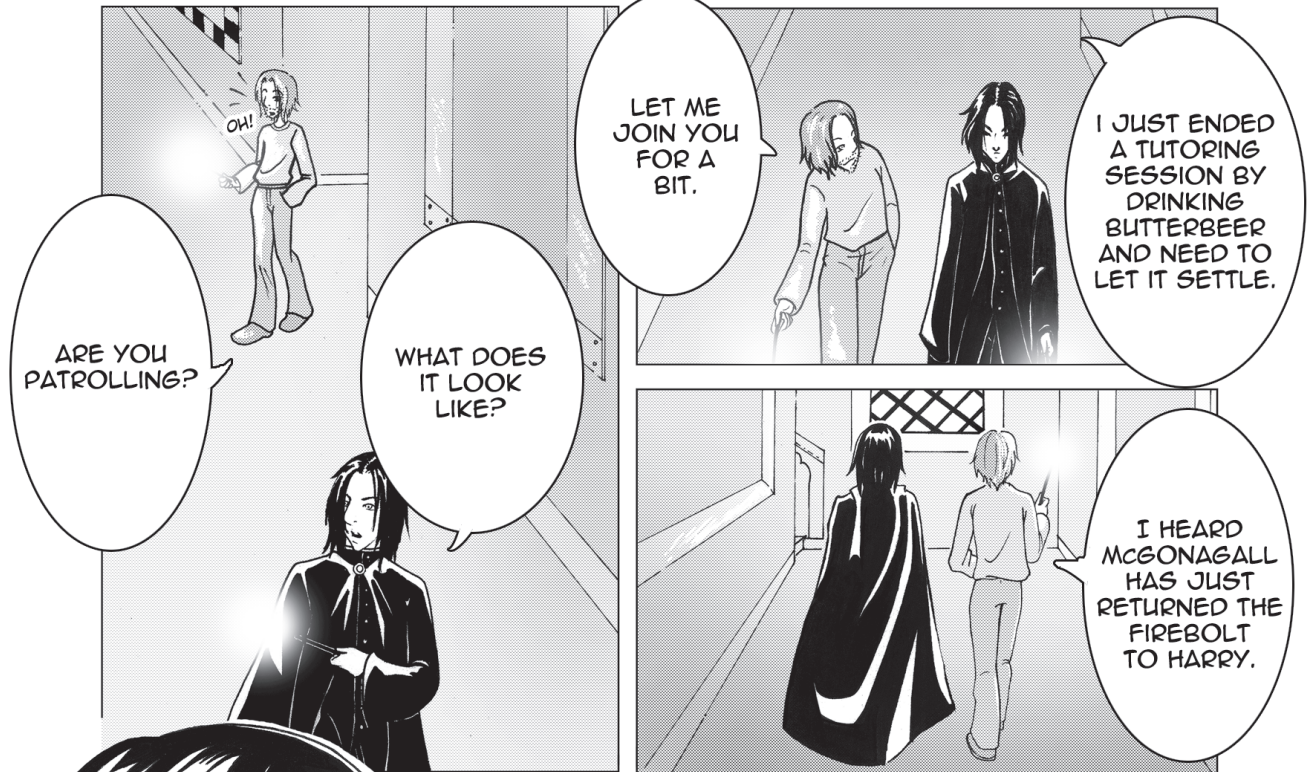


LOOKS LIKE THE  
GRYFFINDORS  
ARE PRACTICING  
VERY HARD.

SO ARE THE  
SLYTHERINS.



TMP  
TMP  
TMP

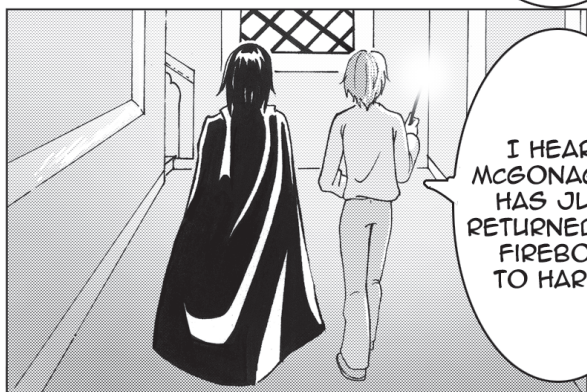


ARE YOU PATROLLING?

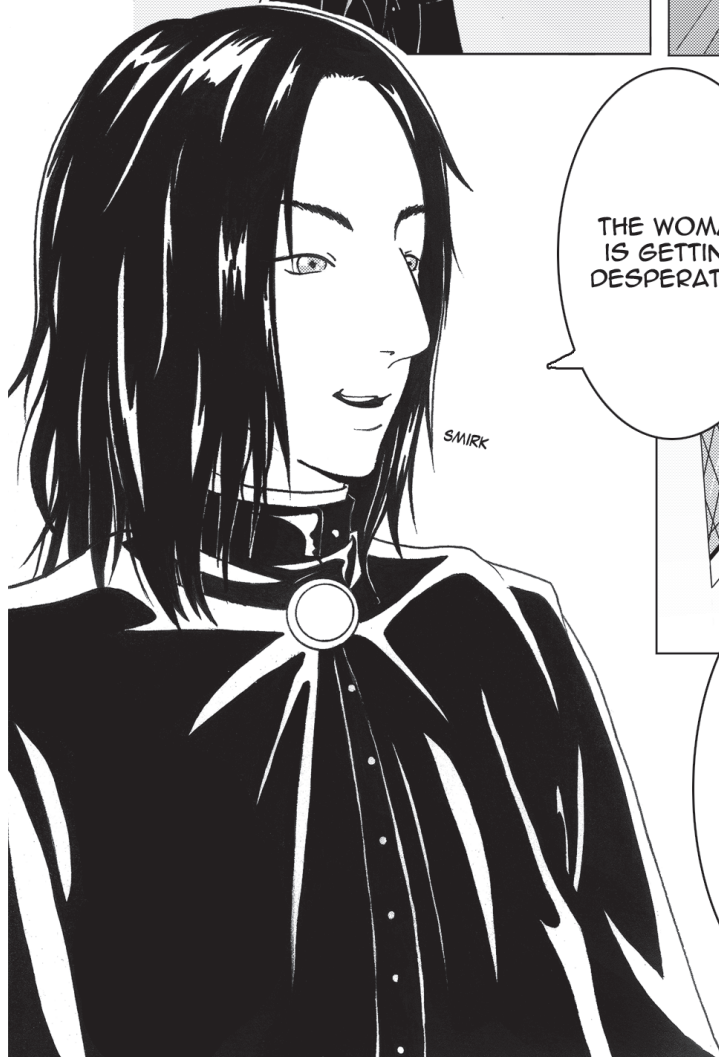
WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

LET ME JOIN YOU FOR A BIT.

I JUST ENDED A TUTORING SESSION BY DRINKING BUTTERBEER AND NEED TO LET IT SETTLE.



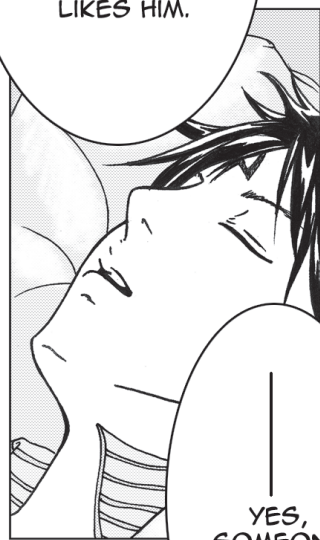
I HEARD MCGONAGALL HAS JUST RETURNED THE FIREBOLT TO HARRY.



THE WOMAN IS GETTING DESPERATE...

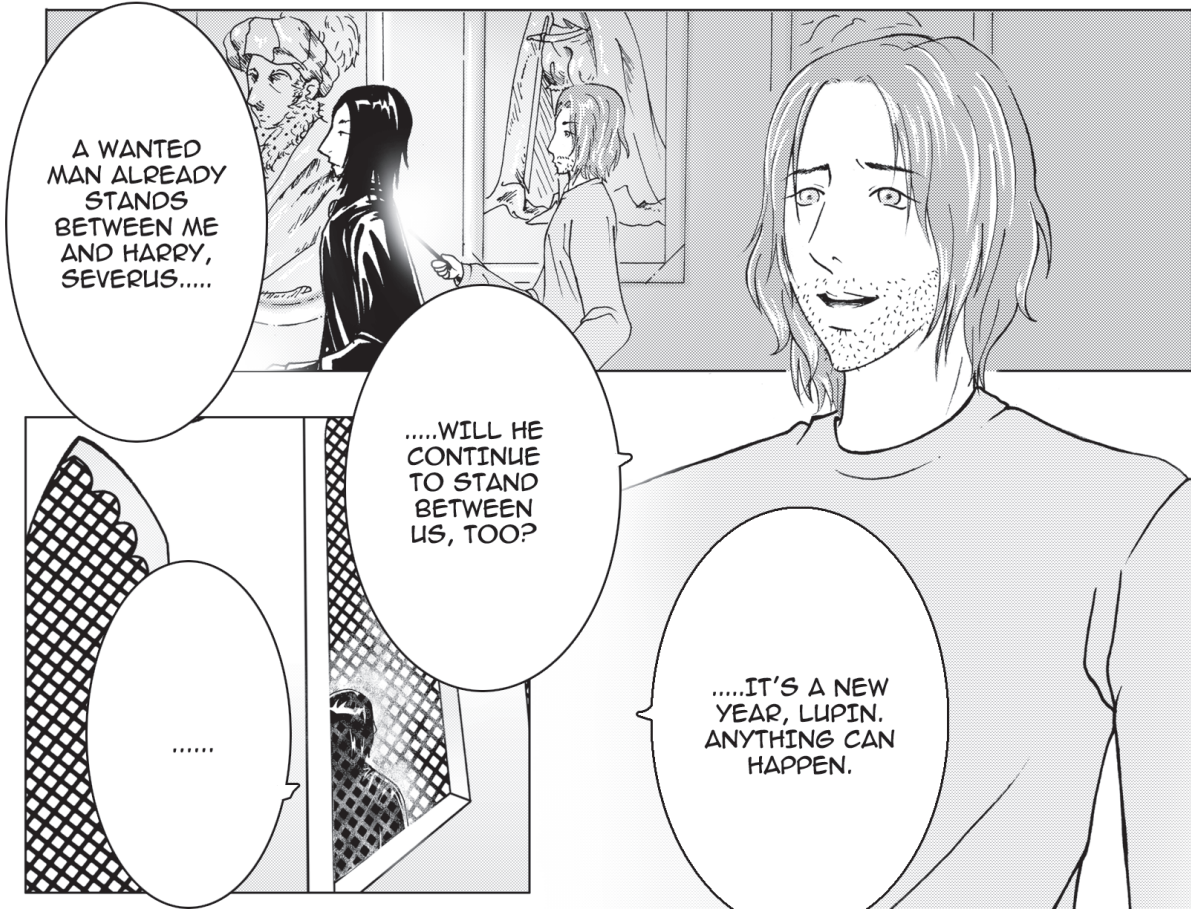
EVEN SO, SEVERUS, IT MIGHT CHEER HARRY UP. SOMEONE CERTAINLY LIKES HIM.

...BUT THAT WON'T HELP GRYFFINDOR WIN THE CUP.



YES, SOMEONE CERTAINLY DOES.





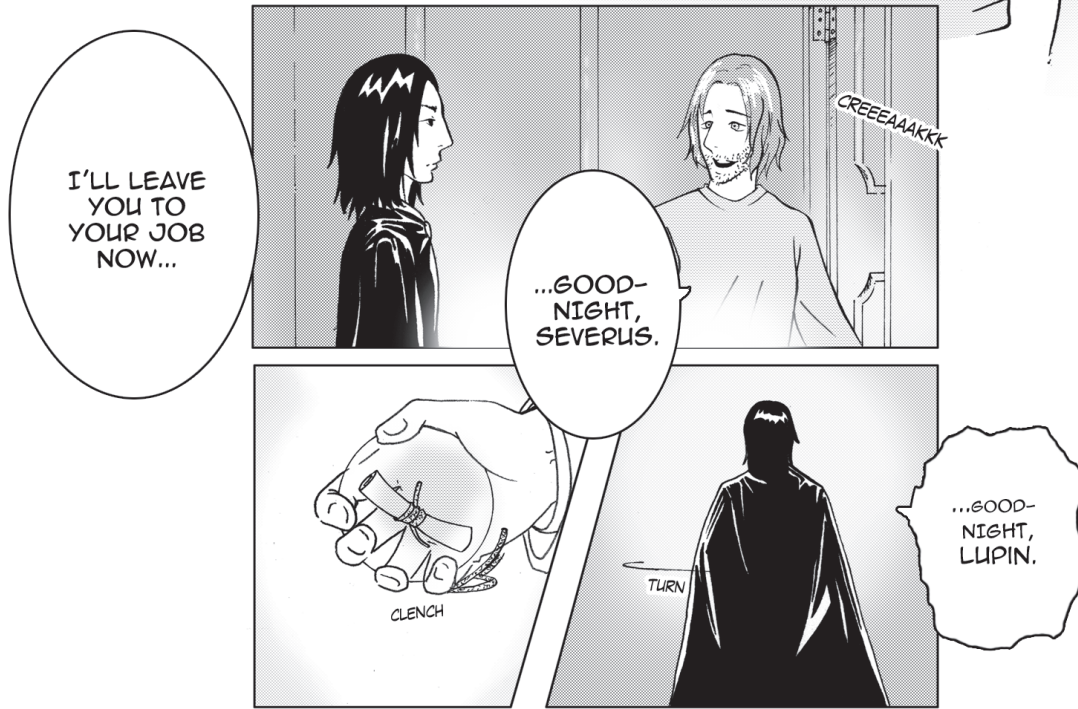
A WANTED MAN ALREADY STANDS BETWEEN ME AND HARRY, SEVERUS.....

.....WILL HE CONTINUE TO STAND BETWEEN US, TOO?

.....IT'S A NEW YEAR, LUPIN. ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN.

.....

AND MAYBE YOU'LL SMILE AT ME THIS YEAR.



I'LL LEAVE YOU TO YOUR JOB NOW...

...GOOD-NIGHT, SEVERUS.

...GOOD-NIGHT, LUPIN.

CLENCH

TURN

CREEEAAAKK

JUST A  
LITTLE  
MORE

WE'RE ON  
THE SAME  
SIDE OF  
THIS WAR

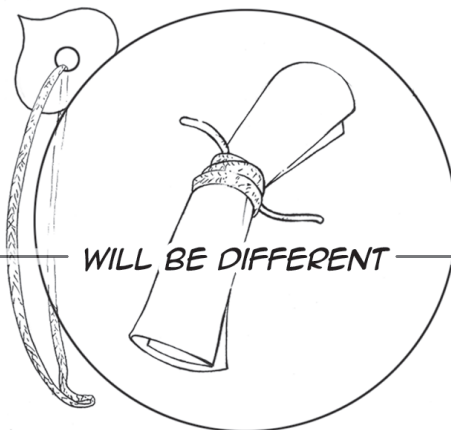
AFTER ALL  
THESE YEARS,  
MAYBE WE CAN  
STILL CHANGE



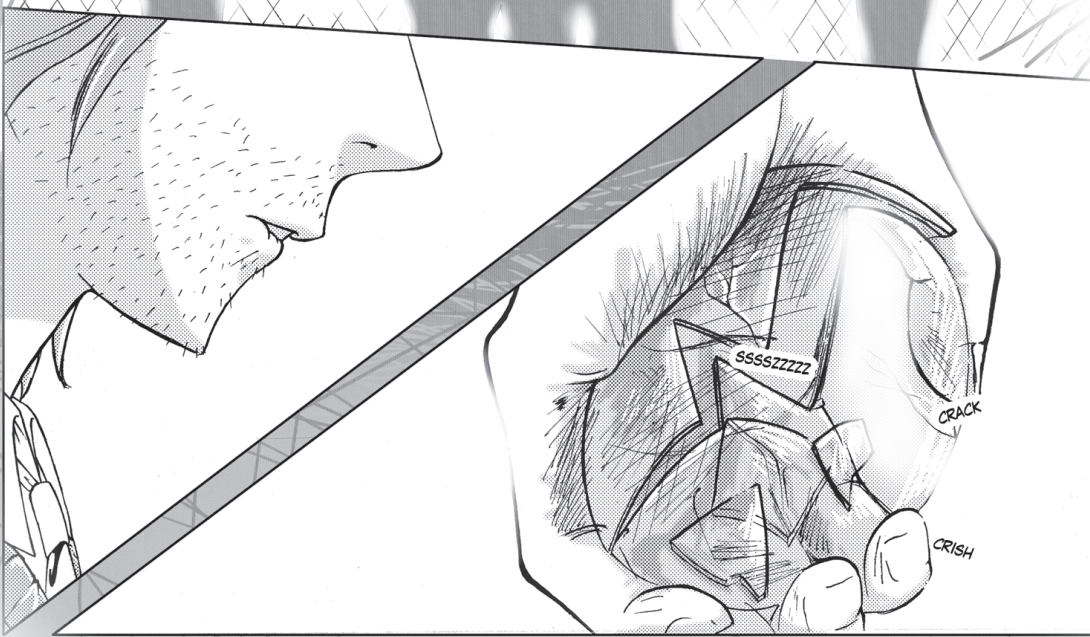
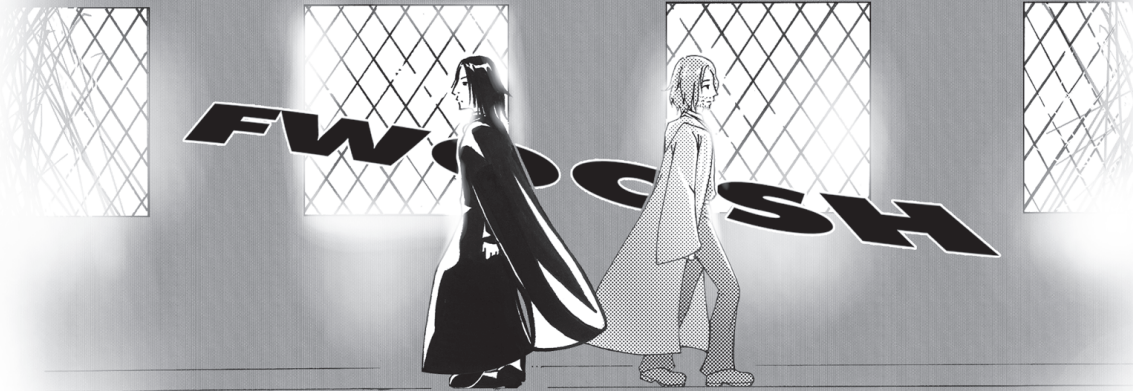
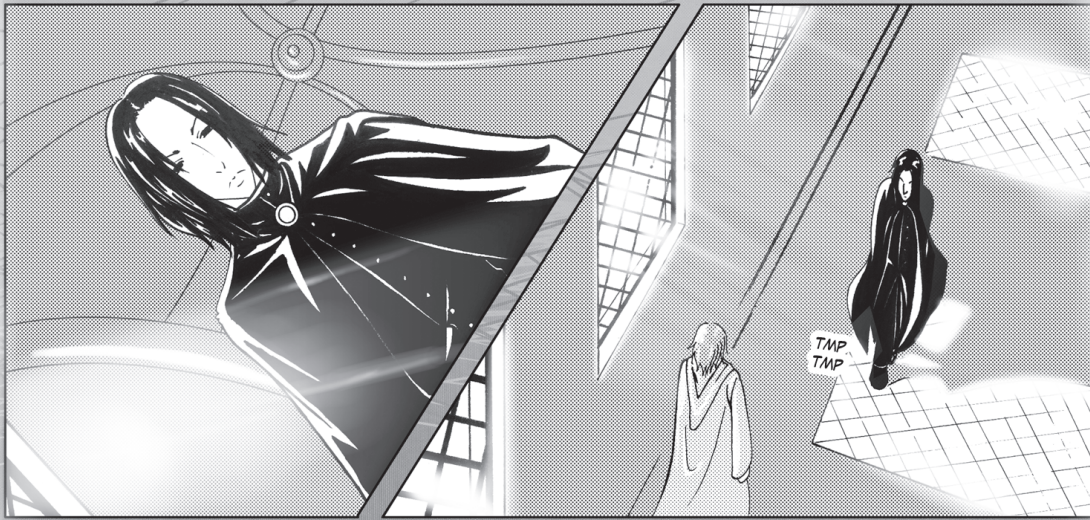
AND  
THE  
REST

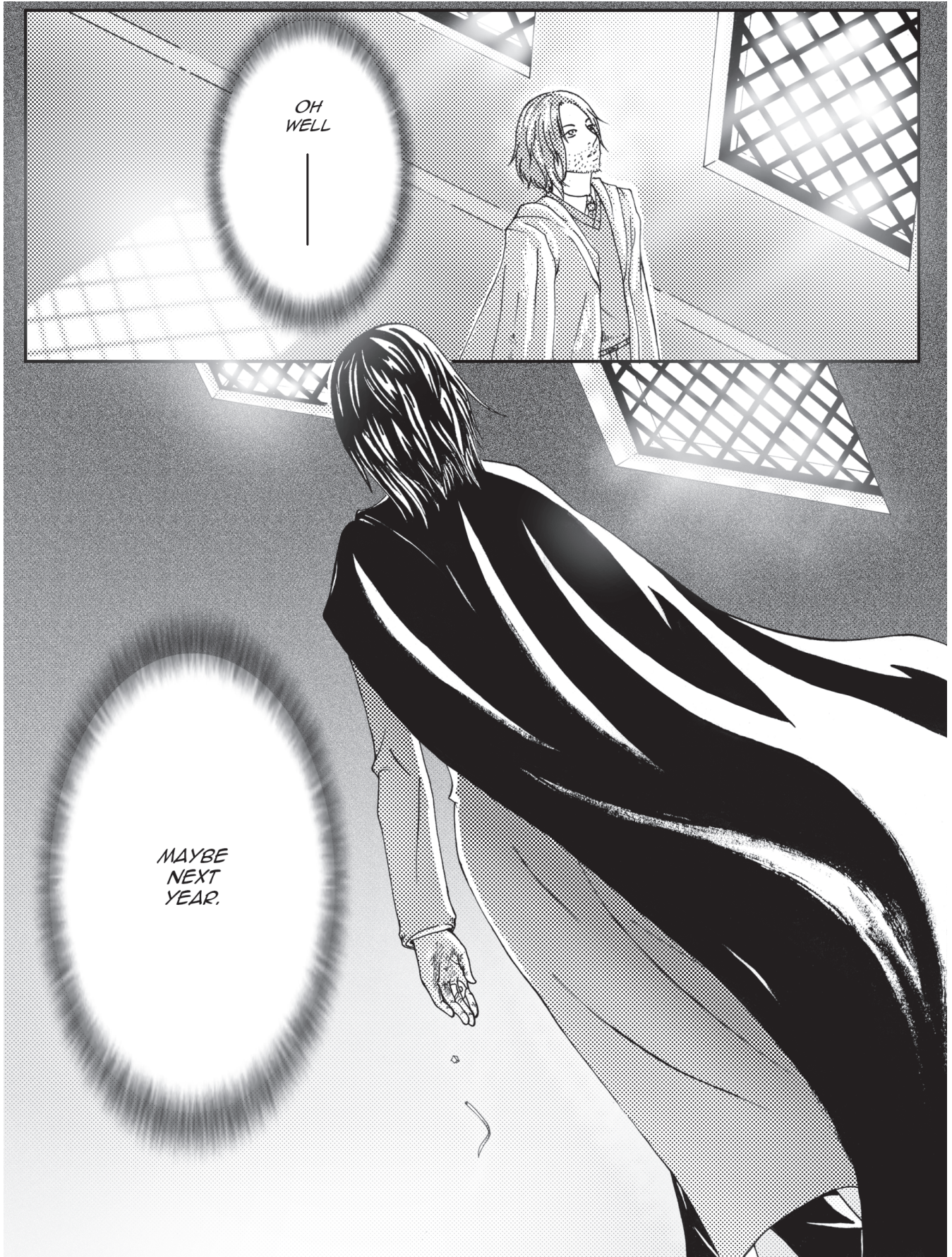


OF  
THE  
YEAR



WILL BE DIFFERENT





# ❧ *In Such a Sovereign Way* ❧

by *Innerslytherin*

Because passionate love breaks down walls and at first does it in such a sovereign way, we are rarely willing to admit how little that initial barrier breaking is going to count when it comes to slow, difficult, accepting of two isolated human beings who want to be joined in a lasting relationship.

- *May Sarton*

The wind was out of the west. In Remus Lupin's experience, that was never a good thing.

He sniffed carefully, turning his head in a semi-circle, surveying his surroundings. The forest was quiet, but this close to Full, he knew better than to expect safety. He was just glad he had the Easter holiday from school, unlike the last two missions he'd run for Dumbledore, which had been at bad times of the term. He tightened his grip on his wand. Moonrise wasn't for another several hours, but he was already feeling the desire to pace. He missed the Marauders. He hadn't yet readjusted to spending the full moon alone, and although he had something to help (well, Severus said it would help, though Remus knew far too little about Potions to really feel confident about it) he still knew he was in for a bad moon.

Branches rustled in the breeze and he froze, listening. Strange how much he'd learned in the past few months, how to move like a predator, how to be still for hours at a time while doing surveillance, how to think up better lies than he had as a boy. After a long silence, he decided it was only the wind. He eased his position and took a few steps across the clearing, seeking a good place to stash his clothes and, eventually, his wand.

It took less than half an hour to find a good safe spot and strip down to his boxers. It was brisk in the Wye Valley in late March, but (according to Severus) werewolf metabolism—always faster than wizard metabolism—sped up shockingly in the hours immediately preceding and following the transformation. Rather than feeling the cold, Remus lifted his head, relishing the breeze on his skin. He paced barefoot for a few minutes, then sighed and stopped.

"You can come out. I'm not here to cause trouble."

The surrounding area went even quieter than it had been, the silence taking on a listening quality. Finally the bushes in front of him parted and a girl stepped out. She couldn't be much older than his own eighteen years, but she moved with quiet weariness.

"Thou'rt no Forester."

He shook his head. "I'm from Scotland," he said, which was true enough—Hogwarts was his home now, more than his parents had ever given him.

She tipped her head to one side, her dark brown hair swinging down. "Bein't safe for vurrenerfs tonight."

"I can take care of myself, despite being a foreigner," he said. He didn't need to tell her he was a werewolf. She could smell him, just as he could smell her. He wondered if she was the Alpha female, if he would have to mate with her to gain acceptance. Dear God, he hoped not. It was so demeaning when instinct took over like that. He wasn't sure whether the worst part was that he was whoring himself out for Dumbledore, or the embarrassment of that being the only time he could work up any interest in mating with a woman.

The girl paused and studied him. "Tessa. M'the top girl here."

He nodded. "Lupin. I'm asking your hospitality, just for tonight."

She narrowed her eyes. "Thou won't make trouble."

"I just want company. Someone to run with." His shoulders were tense. The rise was close, less than an hour. He wanted to glare at the sky, where the sun still touched their shoulders.

"The villagers keep inside tonight. Don't want to know who we are, and we don't tell. Mervyn'll want to see thee." She turned away and waded back into the undergrowth. "Come, then."

He followed her, deciding to keep his wand. It was that decision that saved his life, in the end. They'd taken bare-

ly two dozen steps when she turned, her face contorted, her hands crooked into claws, and leapt at him. Caught by surprise, Remus began to lift his wand, but was too slow. The force of her leap carried him over, her face too close to his. He grunted and pushed at her, but there were snarls around them and he realized they were no longer alone.

Something hit him, sharp and burning, in the side, and Remus cried out. The female took that moment of weakness to bite his forearm, her teeth sinking easily into his flesh. He managed to get off a few sloppy hexes, then in desperation, he Disapparated.

The crack of their arrival elsewhere rolled through the air, but Remus was too busy fighting the girl off to pay attention to where he'd landed them. Hopefully he'd not splinched himself, though he didn't feel it at the moment. They tumbled across the rough ground, the girl shrieking epithets at him. Remus was paying more attention to her hands (one had just raked across his cheek under his eye) than her words, until she snarled, "The Dark Lord will have your guts, traitor!"

That was the only evidence required, and with a sickened feeling, Remus tried to call up the hatred necessary for the Killing Curse. It was a difficult thing for him; he didn't hate many people, and he usually just felt sorry for the ones he dealt with. This one called up rage, though, because they'd been so sure, damn it, that the Forest of Dean wolves weren't siding with Voldemort yet. *Damn you, Moody*, Remus thought grimly, and shoved the girl away hard enough that he heard a bone crunch. She slumped against the tree, looking dazed, for a moment, but before he could more than raise his wand, the pains hit them both.

Cursing and howling, the girl doubled over, clutching at her body as it began to twist and elongate. Remus' concentration broke entirely and the girl's last opportunity for a clean death was gone. He hunched over and howled, and then the madness took him.



"Bloody Alastor Fucking Moody," snarled a caustic voice. "That's the last time, Lupin. Why, for God's sake, didn't you use the potion I gave you?" A gentle hand was dabbing at the raw area on his right shoulder, completely at odds with the voice, though Remus knew, hazily, that they belonged to the same person. "I'm not doing this

for fun, you know. Dumbledore promised me an apprenticeship if I got this bloody potion right. If I'm to manage it, I need my test subjects to actually use it."

Remus didn't bother answering. His throat was sore.

The dabbing ceased and then the other man began chanting—almost humming, really—and Remus felt the skin of his back creeping together. The muscle under it shuddered in reflex and Remus twitched.

"Oh, good, alive, are you?" A shadow fell across Remus' face and he finally forced himself to open his eyes. Sallow skin and glittery black eyes met his gaze. "Took me half the day to find you, you imbecile."

Remus swallowed and worked his lips. Hell, that was a loose tooth. "Thanks, Severus," he slurred.

"Moody's been pacing in Dumbledore's office since I brought you back. Wants to know why you didn't *Avada* her." The thin lips twisted in a sneer.

"Too close," Remus whispered. "Timing was off."

Severus shoved his lank hair behind an ear. "And you *still* think it's somehow better to kill them with your teeth, don't you? Bloody fool." He sat up, filling Remus' line of sight with his black robes, and something cold splashed over Remus' lower back.

The haze of pain began to recede.

"Oh *fuck*," Remus groaned feelingly.

"In a few minutes I'm going to tell Pomfrey she can take over, and then you'd better clean up that mouth," Snape said. No one but Remus, and perhaps Dumbledore, would have heard the change in his voice, but the ire had faded, tinged with grudging amusement. "The Headmaster's waiting to see you, too. This was a botched job, Lupin."

"I know," Remus sighed. "Only just got away." He snuffled and then coughed, spitting blood on the sheet under him. "Uck. Where did you find me?"

"Forbidden Forest—far side from the castle, of course, since the Apparition wards wouldn't let you through. You ass, why don't you take Portkeys?"

"Have you forgotten I'm naked when I transform?" Remus asked. He managed to sound wry, which was an improvement, he thought, over pathetic.

Severus snorted. "I ought to turn your prick into a Portkey next month."

That startled Remus into a laugh, which set various things aching badly around his body and made Snape swear again, but Remus could see, when Snape left to write up his conclusions, that the acerbic seventh year's lips were quirked slightly upwards.



They were unlikely friends. Remus and Severus both knew it, though neither of them ever spoke of it. Remus thought he understood Severus, and Severus knew he would never understand Remus, and both of them were oddly satisfied with the status quo. Both of them, they would learn over and over through the years, were wrong.

It had all started after Sirius' ridiculously stupid 'prank'—an improbability in itself, but Severus had been intrigued, rather than repulsed.

*"You're a werewolf. Filthy Dark creature. Why do they still like you?"* Snape's voice came from the bed next to Remus', harsh in the dim light of the infirmary. Remus turned his head. Snape wasn't looking at him. He hadn't spoken all day.



Remus cleared his throat. "I'm only a wolf once a month." He could see the bandages shining in the darkness. He knew he hadn't been close enough to wound Snape, that it had been the Slytherin's struggle with James that had injured him, but it didn't make him feel any less guilty. His stomach lurched again, despite the fact that nothing remained to be emptied.

"I'm sure they'd like to think it's a little problem you have once a month," Snape sneered over Remus' dry retching. "You're a bloody great monster all the time, though, aren't you? Just keeping your real nature behind a mask designed to lure innocent people into danger." His voice sounded as if he relished this thought.

"I don't start rows," Remus said. "That doesn't mean I'll back away from them."

"Bollocks. You do every day. You did **last term** when your buffoon friends attacked me after the Defence OWL." Snape was still merely a white huddle under the blanket. "Why do you hide?"

*"Why would I want to be noticed?"* Remus countered, propping himself up on one elbow and wiping his forehead. "Another minute and I'd have **killed you, Snape!** You think that makes me happy? You think I'm **pleased** about it? I could fucking kill Sirius now for what he—" He broke off, appalled, and sank back onto the bed.

*"There, you see!"* Oddly, Snape had finally moved, his dark eyes glittering at Remus. They were less than two metres apart, yet the gulf seemed suddenly as wide and as far as east from west. Remus shivered. "You are a monster through and through, Lupin."

*"I can't help what I am,"* Remus said after a long silence. His voice sounded strangled to his own ears. "But I can help what I do. You want your revenge? You want me to fag for you the rest of the term so everyone can see you've status over me? You want to curse me? I'll take whatever penance you set."

Snape sat up in bed and swung his legs over the edge, settling his sling-wrapped arm carefully. "You could make me what you are," he muttered, his voice hectic. "You could give me that power."

"No!" Remus yipped, his voice cracking. "Any penance save that one."

Snape's pale bare feet touched the floor. As he shuffled across the distance between their beds, he reached up and scratched at his chest hard; a line of red followed his fingernails. "You wouldn't even have to wait until next month. I'll bet this is deep enough, and you can lick it or spit in it. I've read about that doing it."

It was those last words that finally clicked things into place for Remus. His eyes widened. "You knew! You knew before you came down after me!"

"Five points to Gryffindor," Severus said, his voice lowering to something that was almost seductive; it made his skin crawl. "Took you long enough, Lupin. Any fool can count the moon phases and compare them with your attendance."

"That's bloody rotten of you, Snape," Remus said, glaring. Severus' expression was frighteningly smug. "You like it, don't you?"

Remus did.



"I said from the beginning that this was a mistake, and I'm not going to back down! To think that you knowingly sent one of my students into danger! Sent him to possible death! Albus, it's unthinkable!" Professor McGonagall was pacing furiously, her lips pressed so tightly together they were only a thin white line. Remus watched her from his place sitting stiffly on a settee in Dumbledore's office.

"My dear Minerva, you don't seem to realize the extent to which Tom is willing to take this." Dumbledore was relaxing in his chair, hands steepled together. "Do sit down and have a biscuit. Or a glass of sherry? Mister Lupin is in a unique position to help us, and he has been eager to do so."

"Only because the boy is convinced that he has no alternatives!" Minerva shrieked. "You made certain of that, didn't you? He can't be an Auror because Moody knows he's a werewolf! He can't do anything for the Ministry, because they would track his attendance and discover his secret! What other options have you left him?"

Remus blushed furiously and stared at the front of Dumbledore's desk. He wished she wouldn't talk about him as if he weren't sitting there.

"Remus," said Dumbledore, his voice kind, "do you feel as though I coerced you to join the Order?"

"No!" Remus said quickly. "I wanted to do something to help. Anything I could, professor."

McGonagall threw her hands in the air. "I can see there's nothing for me to say that will change things," she said waspishly. "You've managed to take all of my seventh years and enlist them in this war of yours. I imagine you think it's a fair trade for Slughorn's students joining You-Know-Who?"

"I don't indeed," Dumbledore said, just as Remus indignantly interrupted, "Snape isn't!"

The two professors looked at him, McGonagall in astonishment, Dumbledore with curiosity. He blushed deeper.

"What? He hasn't."

"My boy," said Dumbledore quietly, "You know the company he keeps. It is almost inevitable he has chosen to side with Tom. I thought you knew."

Remus shook his head, staring. No. No, that couldn't be right. Why would Severus still be working with them if

he'd taken the Mark? Why would he help them subvert his own master? "You're—you're wrong!" he blurted. "I know he's talked about it, but he didn't! He wouldn't!"

McGonagall's stricken face and Dumbledore's quiet certitude shook him. He got to his feet and stumbled away from them. "He wouldn't!"

But Remus knew, sickeningly, that Severus would. He knew Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus LeStrange were after Severus, knew Severus was flattered by the attention of the young men who'd left school years ahead of them. He knew no matter what frightening, conflicted feelings he had for Severus, Severus was unlikely to consider him important enough to influence that decision in the end.

He didn't bother with the library or the Slytherin Dungeon. The only place Severus spent his free time these days was in Slughorn's laboratory. The other boy had been working obsessively on this potion, claiming he wanted to convince Dumbledore he was worthy of the apprenticeship, worthy to go on and earn a mastery in potions, to make himself famous for easing the pain of the monthly lycanthropic transformation.

Remus' footsteps were loud on the stone floor of the passageway. He knew James and Sirius and Peter would be waiting for him to return to the dorm, wondering what had happened with his mission two nights earlier. He didn't care. Snape—Snape couldn't have taken the Mark!

He reached the laboratory door and shoved it open, not caring who might see Lupin the Prefect acting a right git. He stormed into the laboratory, ignoring Professor Slughorn's astonished squawk, and grabbed Severus by the collar of his robes, carrying him backwards until they smashed into the wall.

"Oof! God, Lupin, get off me!" Snape was stringy and not terribly strong; he plucked ineffectually at Remus' hands.

Remus leaned in close. "Tell me you didn't take it," he growled. Behind them, he heard Slughorn bleating about something, but he didn't pay attention. "Tell me they're wrong."

Snape's expression cooled. "Finally listening to your mates about me, are you?" he asked. "I can't believe it's taken you this long, frankly." He went still, allowing himself to be manhandled with perfect aplomb. Embarrassment flashed through Remus, fuelling his anger.



"Did you?" Remus insisted.

"Why should I answer that question? If I have to tell you, there's no point in your asking."

"That's not true!" Remus screwed up his face, glaring at Severus.

"It is true," Snape replied. "If you don't trust me, you can fuck right off."

"Fine," Remus snarled.

"Good." Severus levelled a gaze at him, clearly expecting to be released.

"Fine!" Remus repeated, louder, and shoved Severus back against the wall again before letting go. Severus' expelled his breath in a surprised puff; it stirred Remus' fringe. "Have a nice life, Snape. Good luck with your little project."

He turned and strode out of the room.



"You coming, Moony?"

Remus stared at his friend's curious expression and knew he ought to say no. He ought to tell Sirius he didn't want to spend time with people who felt no qualms about mistreating others—even conniving Slytherins who gave as good as they got. He ought to tell Sirius that the sudden cold, furious silence between Remus and Severus didn't give the Marauders more leeway to mistreat Severus.

Instead he set his book aside and stood up. "Yeah, all right."

It was the last Hogsmeade visit of the year, the last Hogsmeade visit of their school career, and somehow Sirius had talked James into ditching Lily for it. Remus knew Sirius was trying to recreate something that had been slipping away for the past year, while Sirius and James were in early Auror training and Remus went on his missions as Dumbledore's ambassador. All the same, he'd been furious with Sirius over the most recent prank (some sort of powder, slipped into Severus' breakfast, that turned his skin blue for an entire day). He'd been debating whether to go or stay behind, leaving the rest of them to their own devices.

But when it came down to it, those pleading blue eyes were impossible to resist.

All the way to the village, Sirius was bouncing around them, looking more energetic than he had any right to. He was prattling on about it being just like old times when they ran into Severus—literally.

The Slytherin was coming out of the bookshop, his arms laden with a bundle of books, and a brown-paper-wrapped parcel tucked under one elbow. Sirius crashed into him with a great deal of force, and Severus' purchases went flying in all directions.

"What the fuck—" Severus began, but was cut off by Sirius' loud explosion.

"Snape! You greasy git! Watch where you're going!"

Severus bristled, one hand going to his wand. He gazed at Sirius, a snarl frozen on his face.

Remus swore under his breath and wondered if it would be possible to stop them. He stepped forward, a hand stretched out to each of them. "Come on, don't do this." Severus glared at him. "Too little, too late!" he spat, his dark eyes flashing.

"Don't!" Remus said, as Sirius drew his wand and Severus, lightning-quick, mirrored the gesture.

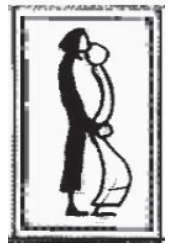
"Get out of it, Moony!" Sirius ordered, shoving him aside. Remus stumbled backwards, rubbing his side where Sirius' elbow had knocked into it, and feeling a calm sort of despair. It was going to be like this the rest of his life, wasn't it? If he and Severus ever managed to make it up, he and Sirius were always going to be butting heads over it.

"Typical of you, Lupin, letting your friends bully you around as always!" Severus snarled. "Letting your friends fight your battles for you! Why are you more afraid to stand up to your friends than you are to kill strangers?"

Remus gasped and staggered slightly, his gaze riveted on Severus' face, which was contorted with hatred. No one knew about that—no one but Severus! He hadn't even told his friends where he was going when Dumbledore sent him out!

"What?" Sirius turned to stare at Remus, who worked not to flinch. There was shock and, this was new, *doubt* in Sirius' gaze. Severus let out a crow of triumph and raised his wand.

"Sirius, watch him!" James shouted, and Sirius turned away from Remus, shooting a Jelly-Legs Jinx at Severus before he'd even turned to face him completely.



Severus blocked it and fired a Tarantallegra of his own, which Sirius deflected to hit Peter. Another hex sizzled past and Remus jerked away, staring at them both and still feeling short of breath from Severus' attack against him.

James had drawn his wand by now, though he was distracted by helping Peter, who was dancing uncontrollably. Remus backed away.

"Fuck you all," he whispered, though not nearly loud enough for any of them to hear. "I don't want this anymore," he added, still in that same low tone. Then he'd had enough, and he shouted, "Stop it, stop it, you lot! All of you, just fucking stop it!"

They ignored him.

Remus fled.



"Snape? You ever planning on telling me why you're not chumming around with my git of a brother's friend?"

Severus cuffed Regulus on the back of the head and turned the page with more violence than necessary. No, he bloody well was *not* going to explain. He didn't explain himself, not to anyone. He'd explained too much to Lupin, about too many things, and look where that had got him.

"Sorry!" Regulus rubbed at the back of his head, glowering. "Look, it's your business, but if he needs to be gotten at, all you have to do is tell Malfoy. Or if you want, my cousin would take care of it.

"Shred," Severus ordered, glaring at the boomslang skin to keep from showing Regulus just how angry and confused he was. He liked Regulus, in his way, but the other Slytherin was too clever, always half a hop ahead of Sirius, which meant not as far behind Severus as Severus would prefer. Had Regulus taken the Mark? He was impressed with Malfoy and wanted to please his parents now that his idiotic brother had failed them all. Regulus wanted the Mark, but Severus thought he would wait until leaving school, and that was still a year off for the younger boy.

"You oughtn't let Lupin and his friends bully you," Regulus said, his voice childishly reasonable.

"Fuck you, Reg," Severus said conversationally. "I had my

own reasons for putting up with Lupin, and I have my own reasons for chucking him."

"So you did chuck him?"

"I'm going to hex you." Severus didn't want Regulus to know about this, and he didn't want Lupin hurt, not by Malfoy and his friends, anyway. If Lupin was going to be hurt, Severus wanted to inflict the wounds himself, bloody and deep, the way Lupin's distrust had cut him.

"Ooh, yeah, hurt me." Regulus snickered.

Severus snorted and rolled his eyes, but he had to admit Regulus' juvenile humour and easy threats had a way of making him feel marginally better. Lupin was just a fucking idiot Gryffindor, for all that he had the advantage of being a Dark creature. Couldn't see life in shades of grey at all, just black or white, Voldemort or Dumbledore's mealy-mouthed Muggle-lovers.

Asking Severus—in front of Slughorn—if he'd taken the Mark! Demanding answers as if it were Lupin's business! As if Severus wouldn't have informed Lupin if he'd made a decision! And anyway, who said he had to make a decision right now? Malfoy and his precious political friends were still courting Severus' attention. There was no harm in listening. No harm in seeing what he was offered. Malfoy and his friends had money, after all, and Dumbledore hadn't guaranteed that apprenticeship. Severus couldn't afford to go on doing secondary work on potions unless he got some sort of grant, not with Tobias drinking his way through the dole money *and* Eileen's pay.

*None of this would matter if he hadn't had the accident.* Severus sliced at the ingredients under his knife with more viciousness than precision for a moment, thinking of his father's arm—mangled so badly it had to come off—and the infuriatingly superior hands-off attitude of the St Mungo's staff. *He's a Muggle, injured by Muggle means! Of course we can't interfere! Violate all sorts of codes! Fine!* But it wouldn't violate them to Oblivate Tobias if Eileen decided she didn't want him to know about magic anymore?

Dumbledore's group of peace-loving fools wanted to protect the Muggles, and Malfoy's group wanted the purebloods to seize power. What happened to the people in the middle—people like the Snapes or, yes, even the Lupins? What happened to good men who worked hard to provide for their family, even when their

wives had hidden their magic, even when their sons did things like blow up the telly or make things float, even when they got their arm caught in a loom and ripped off and they couldn't work anymore, couldn't hug their wives, couldn't do anything but drink to forget the pain and the shame?

"Fucking hypocrites," Severus muttered, forgetting for the moment that he had a very curious audience in Regulus. Magic was all right for some of them, but not all of them? A deserved honour from the Gryffindor Headmaster to a Slytherin had to be bought with kindness towards a werewolf? Severus shouldn't take the Mark because Lupin thought it was mean and low-minded? Fine! He'd bloody show all of them at once. He'd talk to Malfoy's friend, see what sort of offer this Voldemort would make, and then he would have the last laugh. He'd carve a place for himself between the factions that were arising, and no one would be the wiser until his end game was played.



"Mr Lupin! I thought you would have young Snape with you."

Remus looked shifty. "He—that is, I—"

"I was just running late," Severus said smoothly, torn between annoyance and amusement. If Lupin was no better a liar than that, how was he keeping from getting himself killed? Hadn't Dumbledore had the idiot trained in Occlumency? Then Severus reminded himself that he didn't give a toss what Lupin knew or didn't know. He was only here because he wanted that Potions apprenticeship.

The expression of relief on Lupin's face made him scowl. What, did the bloody imbecile think they were suddenly *friends* again? Wanker. He'd learn tomorrow, if he hadn't already figured it out by then.

"Drink," Severus ordered, shoving a beaker at him. He wasn't going to give Lupin a chance to forget again. He watched the other boy tip his head back and swallow, then recoil and shudder.

"God, that tastes *vile*," Lupin gasped.

"Live with it," he said. "How do you feel?"

Lupin shrugged. "Impatient. Anxious. Very hot."

"Usual, then." Severus frowned and noted it on his scroll.

"Wait. I—ooh. I feel chills now. Like someone dumped water on me."

Severus wrote this down. The potion was affecting Lupin's metabolism, then. He hadn't intended that. It could prove dangerous after the transformation. He'd have to find something to counter that.

"Best get you to safety, dear," Pomfrey said.

Lupin nodded. "See you tomorrow, S-Severus."

Severus met his gaze impassively, ignoring the outstretched hand. Lupin's face fell and after a moment Pomfrey urged him past Severus, her expression disapproving. As soon as they were gone, Severus regretted not taking Lupin's hand—one of these days, with their experiments, the transformation might kill him, or someone more dangerous than Severus might discover the secret—or one of those bloody missions could go completely pear-shaped—but of course Severus couldn't call him back. He had too much pride for that.

He started back to the Slytherin dungeon, but found himself standing in a window embrasure, staring at the sky. Outside the moon rose.



Remus knew as soon as he woke that it was Madam Pomfrey dabbing the astringent healing potion on his ankles. He sighed. Her hand paused and he snapped his eyes shut. He didn't want her to know he was awake. She was kind and motherly, and he didn't want her to realize he wished it was Severus touching him instead of her. After a moment she continued her ministrations and a cool relief spread slowly through his stinging skin. When she finished, she stroked a soothing hand once across his shoulders, then he heard her heels clicking away.

He was alone, and he felt lonelier than he had since the morning he'd lain in this same bed with Severus one bed over, not speaking.

The Marauders hadn't run with him last night—Dumbledore had, apparently, had a task for James and Sirius—but Peter had kept him company in the Shack and kept him from chewing his paws to bits, at least, so his hands ached, but they weren't bloody as they sometimes

were. He opened and closed them a few times, working the stiffness out. He felt sluggish and tired today, and emotionally sloppy, as if he might cry or shout or laugh at any moment for no reason.

He shifted over onto his side and tried not to watch the Infirmary door.

Why had he confronted Severus like that? He'd asked himself the same question a hundred times over the past month, and he could never understand why he'd rushed out of Dumbledore's office the way he did. What if Dumbledore had been wrong? Severus' reaction initially had seemed one of a guilty man—if he wouldn't answer Remus' question with a simple no, he must already have the Mark. But now...Remus sighed in frustration. He should have had more faith in Severus. He should have believed Severus would tell him if he were going to take the Mark. He shouldn't have flown off the handle like that.

"You look like your dog just died."

The words sent a chill down his spine—*Sirius*—but the voice made him snap his full attention to the present.

"Severus," he said softly.

"So the potion didn't kill you. How do you feel?"

He swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. "Vulnerable," he blurted. Then he saw Severus' eyes narrow and wondered if that had been a mistake. "It's like I'm not sure I can control my own emotions," he said haltingly.

"Stay away from your bloody friends, then," Severus muttered. He bent to look at Remus' ankles. "Chewed on yourself this month, did you?" He gave Remus a piercing look. "Why is it worse some months than others?"

Remus shrugged, his throat still feeling clogged. "More restless some months, I suppose," he said. "I—I don't remember, you know. What happens at full."

"You've said that before," Severus said absently. He was inspecting a long scratch up Remus' calf. "That's going to scar. He frowned, then pulled out his wand and chanted something, running his wandtip along the wound. Remus watched in astonishment as the skin crawled and draw back together. It was the same spell Severus had used last month to knit up the deep gash the female had given him across his back.

"How do you do that?" Remus whispered.

Severus glanced at him, then away. "Never mind. You don't want to know anything about my *Dark magic*, remember, Lupin?"

Lupin. Remus' throat tightened again and he tried to swallow twice before he could without choking. Severus hated him, was only using him as a Potions experiment now because he needed Remus to get what he wanted. He bowed his head. "I miss the way we used to be," he admitted in a low voice.

Severus' voice was harsh. "Too bad. You're the one who said you didn't want anything to do with a Death Eater."

Remus' gaze snapped up to Severus' arm, but it was covered by the long-sleeved uniform robe. He turned his gaze up to Severus' face.

The glittering black eyes were fixed on him. "Still don't know me, do you, Lupin?" He was silent for a moment, his lip curling. Then he said quietly, "Fuck you." He turned and walked out.

Remus laid his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes, letting the tears streak down his cheeks and wet his ears. He heard Madam Pomfrey return, heard her asking him what was wrong, and he just ignored her and wept for what he had lost.



Severus left the Hospital Wing and went straight to the Owlery. He'd be leaving school in two months.

His resolve had been wavering, thanks to a letter from his mother, saying his father had got a job in a shop. She had seemed happy, writing that Tobias wasn't drinking every night now, that they were both looking forward to Severus leaving school and coming back home to live. He'd meant to wait until then, to wait until he could no longer put off a decision, but Lupin's little glance, Lupin's continued distrust—that was the final straw.



The words he wanted to say to Lupin pressed against his clenched teeth, wanting to be spat out like venom. *When will you see the way Dumbledore uses people? When*

will you realize he's just using **you**? Why can't you see that life isn't black or white, one or the other? Why don't you see that we have to carve our own place in this world? Don't you know you could have had a place with me?



His mind flinched away from the ideas he'd had, the sickeningly naïve hope that Lupin would have the courage to stand next to him. He swallowed, trying to wet his throat. He wasn't disappointed. His heart wasn't cracking.

He snatched up a piece of parchment and a quill, not even caring that they were obviously school-issue. If Malfoy and his Dark Lord were going to take Severus Snape, they would take him as the Half-Blood Prince. He would make no pretences. He wouldn't bow to their pureblood rhetoric.

*Malfoy,*

*You say this Lord Voldemort wants potions makers. If he can provide the ingredients and laboratory, and I'm given free rein in the laboratory, I'll brew for him. I take orders from no one but him, and I am allowed to pursue private studies in my own time. I'll require an allowance of ten Galleons a week.*

*Snape*

He beckoned to a school owl and attached the letter to its leg. "Lucius Malfoy only," he told it. "If his father tries to take it, shit on him and fly away."

The bird let out a hoot that he would swear sounded amused. Then it flapped away.

Severus stood at the window long after the speck had faded.



Remus was sprawled comfortably in front of the fire next to Sirius, revising for N.E.W.T.s and trying to ignore the soppy nonsense Lily and James were spouting at each other, when he heard someone yelp in shock or fear. He had already turned towards the portrait hole when it opened and a third year tumbled in. The boy looked around, then made a beeline for the Marauders.

"Lupin?"

He sat up.

"There's a Slytherin outside the Fat Lady wanting to see you. He said he'd hex me if I didn't tell you."

Severus. A flash of hope ran through Remus, chased by a flash of alarm. He closed his book and stood. "Thanks, Bell." He heard Sirius growl something and said, "No, Sirius." He managed to resist the tempting "Stay!" before crossing the common room and going out.

A soaked, gawky scarecrow of a figure was hunched tautly against the stone wall opposite the portrait. His stringy hair hung down around his lowered face. He didn't move when Remus came out, which alarmed Remus. What if Sirius had come out to hex him, instead? The other boy—no, *man*, Remus thought, embarrassed; they were men now, weren't they?—clenched his right hand around his left forearm.

Remus drew in a silent breath. "Severus," he said hoarsely.

Severus' only response was to shudder. Remus took another step closer, and another, and another, until he could lift his hands to either side of him and hesitate less than an inch from touching Severus.

"Severus," he whispered.

Severus pitched forward into his arms. Only his recently-honed reflexes allowed Remus to catch Severus, arms folding around him and holding him up. Severus made a strangled noise that was somehow more frightening to Remus than if he had screamed.

"What's happened?" Remus whispered. He held Severus for a moment, wondering what in God's name he could do. They were too far from the Hospital wing, and James' Invisibility Cloak was upstairs, but he knew he could get Severus to the Come and Go Room without any help—there were times having a werewolf's strength was an advantage. It would have to do. He set off at a pace Severus could handle, but as the Slytherin's steps faltered, Remus finally resorted to carrying Severus the last hundred feet. He paced back and forth in front of the empty wall, thinking, *I need to take care of Severus*. When the door opened, he found a bed and a chair, a fireplace, and a drinks cabinet. He hoped there were potions in there as well as alcohol.

Severus still hadn't spoken a word. Remus got him to the bed and started undressing him, wondering how badly he was hurt.

"No." Finally Severus rasped the single word. His gaze was focused on Remus' chest.

Remus huffed impatiently. "You're hurt," he said. "I can help you, Severus."

"Nothing can help," Severus said, his voice still rough. "Go away, Lupin. Shouldn't have come—" He broke off and coughed. "Go away."

"But you did, and I'm not leaving," Remus said, feeling a stubborn flare. "Shut it." He pressed Severus down against the bed, ignoring the way his blood tingled at that touch. He got Severus' robes unfastened, peeling the wet layers of cloth away. He had to see how badly Severus was hurt.

"Fuck—Lupin!" Severus gritted out.

Remus laid his palm lightly across Severus' mouth, which made the Slytherin's eyes snap open. "Stop this," Remus said, gentling his voice. "You came to me. Now you have to let me help you."

Severus glared at him, and Remus could see fear as well as pain in his eyes, but finally there was the tiniest curt nod. As suddenly as that, Remus felt Severus relax slightly. His eyes closed.

"Good," Remus breathed, lifting his hand and brushing Severus' hair away from his face. He wished he could brush away the lines of pain as easily. He carefully unbuttoned Severus' shirt and got him, unresisting, out of everything but his trousers and shoes. The trousers were too short, exposing slouching, grey socks. Remus knew when Severus had started wearing trousers under his robes—it had started after their fifth year. He unlaced the tall jackboots and eased them off, then pulled the socks, cringing slightly. He was afraid to touch the other man's trousers, but his feet were icy; Remus knew he had to get Severus warmed up. That meant first getting him out of his wet clothes.

"What happened?" he asked, to take his mind off the fact that he was undressing Severus.

There was a long silence as he worked at the zip, which was difficult with fingers that were getting chilled from the wet. He wondered if Severus had passed out. Finally, though, Severus whispered, "Stupid."

*Well, that's enlightening,* Remus thought, rolling his eyes. He tugged Severus' trousers off and decided that was

enough; the greying pants would stay in place; a drying charm would do for them. He flicked his wand with the drying spell and wrapped Severus in two of the blankets. Then he conjured the flames in the fireplace higher.

"I need something warm to drink," he muttered, opening the drinks cabinet—and there was a pitcher of chocolate steaming next to two cups. "What, I'm supposed to drink some, too?" he asked, but he took both cups and poured them full.

"Severus, can you sit up?" he asked. "I can help you."

Severus just sighed, but he didn't resist when Remus sat on the edge of the bed and slid an arm underneath him, lifting him carefully to rest against Remus' chest. His hair dripped water down the front of Remus' shirt, but Remus ignored it. Severus was leaning on him, was curling his fingers around the cup, and Remus didn't know whether to be relieved he wasn't pulling away, or worried that he didn't mind the invasion of his personal space.

Suddenly Remus realised there was blood soaking into his trousers. He looked down and saw a trail of scarlet down Severus' thigh and stomach—from where his left arm was clutched against him. Severus was shivering, his eyes slightly unfocused.

"Oh, fuck, Severus," Remus muttered, drawing Severus' arm out to look at it. "You did it."

"Thought you'd already decided I was a Death Eater two bloody months ago," Severus muttered. "Isn't that why you slammed me against a wall in front of Slughorn?"

Remus sighed. "I was wrong. I knew I was wrong once I really considered your reaction, and I'm sorry I doubted you. As you would've known if you'd just once not pushed past me on the way into the library or Transfiguration, and actually listened to me."

"Fuck you," Severus said tiredly. He leaned his head back against Remus' shoulder, his eyes closing. It scared Remus; this behaviour was too casual for Severus.

"What can I do, Severus?" Remus asked, staring at the ugly black skull that was still dripping blood. The snake in its mouth almost seemed to be crawling. Or maybe the flesh was crawling in protest of the Mark.

Severus didn't answer for so long Remus thought he'd passed out. Finally he whispered, "Stay."

Severus wasn't as cold anymore; though his body was still shivering, he suspected it was shock. He was aware of Remus' arms around him, Remus' body against his, and he knew he didn't want to lose that. He turned his head, tucking his face under Remus' chin and pretending that this comforting presence would always be his.

He went limp with relief when Remus' hand stroked his hair and the hoarse voice said, "I'm not going anywhere, Severus."

He knew, in the back of his mind, that he should be pushing Remus away. There were so many reasons he should be swearing at Remus and pulling away from his touch and hexing him. But Remus' touch was warm and unhesitant, and Severus decided anything that could arouse him, through the stunning welter of pain that radiated from his arm throughout his body, had to be a good thing.

Remus was lowering him back to the bed, easing the half-drunk cup of chocolate from his hands. "I'm going to find you a pain-relieving potion," he promised, and then that warmth was going.

Severus bit back a whimper and turned his head, slitting his eyes open to watch Remus open the drinks cabinet. The werewolf wasn't wearing his school issue robes and waistcoat. Severus could see the way Remus' muscles moved under his shirt. He turned, carrying a vial of bright blue potion, and Severus sucked in a slow breath at how Remus' white button shirt was plastered wetly against his chest.

"Here, drink this," Remus said, sliding a hand under Severus' head and holding the vial to his lips.

Severus swallowed, identifying the potion by its taste as something to rebuild blood and reknit flesh. It wouldn't help against the Mark; he had a feeling there was nothing that would erase the ugly testament to Severus' supreme idiocy. He shivered.

"Are you still cold?" Remus renewed the warming charm. "Budge up, I'll sit with you."

Severus shifted over slightly, giving the shorter boy room to pull his legs up on the bed. The overwhelming pain began to recede, carried away on a tide of peace. Severus wished he had the stones to snuggle against Remus.

"Can't tell anyone, Lupin," he muttered. "Get us both killed."

Remus touched his hair again. "I'm pretty good at keeping secrets," he said, his voice choked.

Severus' last clear thought was that he had become Remus' enemy. And damn them both, Severus wanted him anyway.

Severus woke up alone.



He wasn't surprised by it; he hadn't expected Lupin to stay. After all, Severus was a Death Eater now, the Enemy. Remus would never speak to him again, most likely.

He rolled over and something crinkled against his cheek. He sniffed—parchment. Biting back a groan, he shifted and unfolded the note.

Severus,

*I have to go back to Gryffindor Tower or Sirius and James will decide you've hexed me and go to the Headmaster. I'll be back to check on you as soon as I can. ~~We don't have to~~ We should talk—but I don't know if now is the best time. I don't want us to hate each other, Severus.*

*The full moon's still a fortnight off. Could we talk before then please?*

*I'll be back.*

Remus

Suddenly it was much easier to breathe, even though Severus suddenly felt like he was going to throw up. Remus didn't want to walk away from their friendship—but he was going to demand explanations. He was going to expect repentance. Well, he could have the repentance. Severus' left arm still throbbed angrily in reminder of how mistaken he'd been.

How could he have thought he could use Lord Voldemort for his own ends? And the Dark Lord had seen through all of that and burned away every vestige of Severus' pride, had exposed every flaw in his seeming cleverness; the Dark Lord had read his mind and laid it bare to Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus Lestrangle.



Severus hung his head over the edge of the bed and was violently sick—not that there was anything left to come up. God, he was so humiliated! How could he ever

have thought those men respected him? How could he have ever thought he would prove himself a better wizard than any of the purebloods?

The door opened and Severus lifted his head. Remus was peering into the room. His hair stood up wildly, as if he'd just got out of bed and not bothered to comb it.

"You...look like...Potter," Severus managed between deep breaths.

Remus hurried forward, the door shutting hard behind him. "You're ill."

Severus closed his eyes. "Mostly...humiliated."

Remus' fingers were pressing against his forehead. "You must not be yourself yet," he said conversationally. "You're being far too honest with me."

Severus scowled and smacked Remus' hand away, but Remus smiled sadly down at him and stroked his fingers down Severus' cheek. "I've always known you had secrets, Severus," he said. "I just wish I'd learned sooner that I could trust your judgment."

The look in those warm brown eyes made Severus want to beg to be forgiven—or else lash out until Remus wouldn't look at him like that anymore. It wasn't right to get hard when you thought about your friends. Severus knew it wasn't natural; he'd heard Regulus' jeering remarks about the Ravenclaw poof in his History of Magic class. Severus had no illusions that his feelings about Remus—confusing and irritating though they were—would ever be reciprocated or considered proper.

"Severus?" Remus' expression was concerned now, but also just a little frightened. Good. Severus glared at him.

"Go away, Lupin. You've soothed your conscience enough."

"What? Severus, this isn't about my conscience! You're hurt! I'm not going to just leave you here."

"You ought to hate me!" Severus hissed. "Go the fuck away, Lupin. Leave me *alone!*"

Remus' expression hardened. Good. He stood up and walked away from Severus—but instead of walking towards the door, he was moving to the only chair in the room. He settled down in it and glared at the fire.

"I'm not leaving you, Severus. Perhaps you think we're enemies, but I refuse to think that."

"Then you're stupid!" Severus said, but he was glad, *glad* that Lupin was staying.

Surprisingly, Remus laughed. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I shouldn't have argued when the Hat wanted to put me in Hufflepuff. It did say my loyalty could be dangerous to me." He shook his head. "No, Severus. You've made me care about you, and now you can't be rid of me so easily."

"You didn't seem to care so much about loyalty after Easter hols!" Severus snapped.

Remus sobered. "No, you're right. I was angry and swayed by what people said. And no, it wasn't my friends. It was someone I thought I could trust."

"Finally learned not to trust Potter and Black, have you?"

"Sirius tried to kill you," Remus said, his voice tight. "That eroded my trust for him rather sharply."

"Nice to know *someone* cares," Severus murmured. "Bloody Dumbledore didn't even flinch. Just leapt right to your defence and told me I couldn't let the news out and had to protect you and didn't even fucking talk about the fact that Black had attempted murder by werewolf."

Remus' expression closed, and Severus wondered what he had said that was finally too much. But Remus just sighed. "Dumbledore...has been wrong. Occasionally."

Severus widened his eyes as he stared at Remus. So Dumbledore was the one who'd thought he had taken the Mark already? But why hadn't he been thrown out of school, if that were the case? Surely Dumbledore wouldn't let him keep working on the werewolf potion for Remus, if he thought Severus were a Death Eater! It made no sense.

"Severus?"

He looked up. Remus was studying him with open concern on his face, and Severus scowled. "Don't think you're entitled to be my minder just because I came to you for help while I was out of my head with pain."

Remus' expression cleared slightly. After a moment he nodded.





"I can't quite believe N.E.W.T.s are finished," Remus said, leaning his head back against the warm stone of the Astronomy Tower. The sun was just setting, and the June air was thick as stars emerged from the growing darkness over their heads.

Severus lit his cigarette with a practised flick of his wand and shrugged. "Doesn't change much, really," he lied. Of course it changed everything, but he couldn't think of the right words to explain things to Remus. He still wasn't sure he wanted to. It would be easier if they walked away from each other tonight, if Remus never looked back except in anger, if Severus could relegate Remus to yet another fantasy that would never come true.

"Full moon tomorrow," Remus said, not looking at Severus.

Severus took a long drag off his cigarette. "Dumbledore hasn't ordered me off the project."

"You told me not to tell anyone," Remus replied.

"I'm a bloody Death Eater, Lupin!" Severus snarled. "What if I'm planning to kill you this moon?"

"You don't want to kill me."

No, but Severus wasn't averse to hexing him. He sighed. "You're an idiot. Why do you trust me?"

Remus turned his head and met Severus' gaze finally. "Because you're you," he said simply, and took the cigarette from Severus' unresisting fingers to have a drag himself.

"God, sometimes I hate you so much," Severus muttered.

Remus smiled around the cigarette, his brown eyes picking up glints of gold from the setting sun. He said nothing.



"Shouldn't be doing this," Severus muttered, handing Remus a potion bottle. "If V—*fuck*—the Dark Lord found out—"

Remus' hand was rough against Severus' mouth. "Don't say that!" he hissed, fighting back a thrill of fear. "Don't mention him at all."

Severus sighed. "Where's he sending you tonight?"

"North of France," Remus said, frowning. "And I hope my French is good enough to explain why I'm there." He was worried that he would make them think he had come from Voldemort, instead of trying to dissuade them from joining Voldemort.

At Severus' prolonged silence, he looked up. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't know you spoke French."

"*Mais oui.*" Remus grinned. "But very badly. My father's mother was from France. My mother and all her stock are Scottish, though. He met her while he was working in the Ministry's Glasgow office."

"My da's Halifax born and bred," Severus replied, surprising Remus. "A Muggle."

Remus turned to stare at his friend, but the black gaze remained firmly fixed on the potion he was decanting. "What, you're a half-blood like me?"

"Did you think Slytherin was purebloods only?" Severus' voice was cool.

"Well, no, but..." Remus floundered. They hadn't had the conversation he'd requested, though not for lack of trying. On Remus' part, at least. Now that he considered it, it seemed obvious that Severus had been avoiding it. "Why would you want to join—*them*—if you're a half-blood?"

Severus sighed. "I..."

But just as he appeared to be ready to explain, the door to the infirmary opened and Dumbledore came in, followed by Alastor Moody. Severus' mouth snapped shut and he handed Remus one last vial of potion and stepped away.

"Lupin!" Moody barked, glancing him over. "You ready to Portkey? We've set it up to take you into the heart of the pack's territory. If you need to activate it for emergency withdrawal, just say 'Hogwarts' and speak your password."

"The password's the same as always?" Remus asked, though he thought it would be.

"You've shared it with no one?" Moody glanced sharply at Severus.

"I haven't," Remus agreed.

Moody nodded. "Remember, Lupin, you get in and you get out. If there's trouble with the pack, if they refuse to cooperate, kill the leader and get out of there."

"Only if he has to," Dumbledore put in. "We didn't start this to make Remus a killer."

"We do what we must, Dumbledore," Moody argued. "I don't *like* it, but they can't be allowed to fight against us."

Remus swallowed hard. It left a bad taste in his mind, the thought of killing fellow werewolves with a wizard's curse. It felt too much like an unfair advantage.

Dumbledore stepped closer and placed a hand on Remus' shoulder. "Take care of yourself, my boy," he said kindly. "If you feel your life is in any way threatened, activate the Portkey and come home. Better for you to come back safe to us. And make sure to get back to us in the morning, if you don't come sooner. I have a friend, a Potions Master, who is coming to observe Severus' work. It would be best if he could speak with you just after the Transformation back."

Remus blinked and nodded. So many possibilities were suddenly opening out in front of him, now that he was leaving school. He wanted this role as the Ministry's executioner to end. Perhaps this time, with the French werewolves, he would be able to convince someone that Voldemort was dangerous, evil. He clung to the hope of success.

Moody draped a chain around Remus' neck. "It's charmed to be unbreakable and unremovable. You'll have no trouble getting back to us in the morning, if not before. It's set to activate for the return trip twenty minutes after moonset, if you don't activate it before."

Remus nodded again.

"This one takes you to France," Moody said again. "It'll activate in ten minutes." He glanced at Severus again, then turned and stumped off.

"Be careful, Remus," Dumbledore added, and then followed Moody.

And it was Remus and Severus again, and Remus had a sudden desperate urge to grab Severus, to hug him hard, to make him understand that if Remus didn't come back, it wasn't because he didn't want to. He resisted, of course. Severus had that about him, that it was difficult to touch him. It took a great deal of courage to

do so, and though Remus had worked his way up to casual touches—the brush of fingers, the occasional hand on a shoulder—the night they had spent with Remus curled protectively around Severus in the Come-and-Go Room had rather increased the physical tension, than lessened it.

Finally Remus sighed and held out a hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, I hope," he said calmly. It was amazing how his voice didn't betray any of the fear or self-doubt or guilt that he felt every full moon.



"Of course you will, dolt," Severus replied, and placed his cool, slender fingers in Remus'. After a moment, Remus pulled, and Severus sort of fell against him. It wasn't so much an embrace as it was a running into each other, but Severus didn't tense too much, and Remus let his cheek brush Severus' hair, and that was that.

Severus was watching Remus with a curious gaze when the Portkey activated.



"I suppose you remember nothing of why you're back with a great bloody gash all down your left shoulder-blade. It's amazing the things you manage to forget, when you're a monster instead of a man." The tone was conversational, belying the anger Remus could feel radiating off his friend. "Someday, I want you to know, I will kill Alastor Moody. I may even kill Dumbledore. I hate the way they use us all. I don't blame them for using me—after all, I *am* the enemy. But you don't deserve to be used like this." Severus' voice lowered, growing speculative. "You are a good person. A good man. Are we men? It's odd, to call us men. Remus Lupin. You're a good man. I hate the way they use you. Someday I'll kill them."

Remus ought to say something. He ought to let Severus know he was awake, at least. It felt wrong, as if he were eavesdropping, for all that Severus was talking to him. But he hurt so badly, and he was facedown on the bed. He could feel a sheet draped very low over his arse, and his hair was in his face, plastered to his forehead. It was too long. He drew in a raspy breath.

"Awake? Or just getting ready for another seizure?" Severus' voice was soft, though from gentleness or fear,

Remus couldn't tell.

"Way," Remus managed. He felt thick-headed. What did Severus mean, 'another seizure'? Remus didn't like it.

"Good. I thought you'd bitten your tongue in two with the seizure. I didn't recognise it in time, and there was so much blood."

Remus made an inquiring noise.

"Two days. You can't imagine how worried your friends have been."

It was a strange way of phrasing it, was Remus' last coherent thought, so that he didn't know if Severus meant his *other* friends, or if Severus was worried too.

"It's been bloody difficult convincing Belby that I deserve the apprenticeship when my experiment is lying there in a dead faint. Dumbledore's annoyed with me. I'm sure I've made him look bad, but I can't be arsed to care about that if you're just going to die on me."



Remus cleared his throat and Severus stopped talking. "M'not dead yet," Remus joked, and as far as jokes went it was lame, but it was something.

Severus' hand smoothed down Remus' back, almost as if the other man weren't aware of the motion. "Well, good. I don't want to end up in Azkaban for something accidental."

Remus coughed. "What, you want to earn your way there?"

Severus' tone, when he spoke next, was bleak. "I think I already have."

The third time Remus woke was the time he felt strong enough to do more than drink broth and tea, shuffle to the loo with assistance, and fall asleep again. He turned onto his side and looked around for Severus. Unsurprisingly, the Slytherin was in the chair next to the hospital bed. His arms were folded across his chest, his head back at an awkward angle. Faint snores escaped from his slightly-open mouth. Remus smiled fondly.

He was content to watch Severus sleep for a long, peaceful time. He could hear Madam Pomfrey moving about beyond the curtain, and once he thought he heard her half of a Floo conversation. He closed his eyes, straining, but he felt as if he were wrapped in a cushioning charm, and nothing could get through.

When he looked back at Severus, the other boy was watching him.

"I didn't do it because I hate you. Or out of spite." Severus' voice was very quiet.

Remus watched him avidly. It was private here, safe. This was *their* place, somewhere no one else could come between them, and had been since that horrible day after the so-called prank. Of course Severus would be able to confide in him here.

"I thought...Originally I thought to do it because you didn't trust me," Severus said, looking down. "I hadn't committed to anything, you know. It drove me mad with rage, thinking you'd already decided based on what your friends said of me." He shrugged. "But I still put it off. Why make a decision before leaving school? I thought—for a while, things seemed better. But..."

Remus licked his lips, but he didn't know what to say, so he simply watched Severus.

"I thought I could use him. Dumbledore obviously doesn't trust me, doesn't believe in me—so why not see what V—*fuck*—the Dark Lord can do for me? I didn't tell Malfoy what I was planning. Malfoy and his friends seemed all right, though Rabastan's a little off in the head, I think. But...when I was standing before the Dark Lord, and he was looking at me..." Severus shook his head. "He knew. He knew everything. All of it, all my plans, all my thoughts..." He shuddered. "I—It hurt like fuck."

Remus reached out, his fingers just brushing Severus' shoulder before dropping again.

Severus looked up for a moment, then turned his gaze back to the floor. "It was stupid. I know that now." He sat up and reached over to the bedside table for a vial of potion and poured out a measure. He stared at it for a moment before holding it out to Remus. "He's—well, he's not merciful. But it amused him to know that I'd planned to use him. And it amused him not to kill me for my presumption. It amused him to have a servant who hates him." He drew back as soon as Remus took the potion. "I'm lucky."

Remus didn't think Severus sounded lucky, but he supposed that was relative. He sighed and swallowed the potion.

"I know, I got myself into a right mess," Severus said. "My mam will disown me, if she finds out. I mean, she bloody married a Muggle, didn't she, and here I am in a group that wants to suppress Muggles. And Da's been working again. She actually sounded happy in her last letter." Severus snorted. "Trust me to bugger that up."

Remus frowned, not liking the tone of Severus' voice. "So quit. Tell this Voldemort bloke that you've changed your mind."

Severus laughed bitterly. "Don't you know *anything*, Lupin? This Mark is a binding oath. I come when he calls, I serve as he commands."

"But it lets you hate him," Remus said, confused.

"Our feelings are our own. Even if our thoughts and memories aren't."

"I don't understand."

"Legilimency. Have you heard of it?"

"Of course, it's in *Hogwarts: A History*. Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor were both experts at it. It's fascinating, rea—oh. Oh, no, this Voldemort, he's a Legilimens?"

"A bloody good one," Severus elaborated. "It's how he knew my plans, how he senses lies..."

"But Occlumency counters it," Remus remembered. "Can't you just learn that?"

"From whom? My mam doesn't know it, and it isn't exactly standard coursework here."

"Dumbledore will know someone."

Severus glared. "The Dark Lord would fucking kill me if I talked to Dumbledore about him. I won't even be able to hide *this* conversation from him." Severus sighed. "Fortunately everyone knows you and I are friends—even if Malfoy is appalled I had the poor taste to befriend a Gryffindor. But that means they all know how suspicious it would look if I suddenly dropped you."

"Well. Everyone suffers lapses in judgment from time to time," Remus joked. He thought the pain potions must be kicking in.

"You're a wanker, Lupin," Severus said, but his voice sounded more normal than it had been.

"Mmm, that's the only thing you and Sirius agree on," Remus murmured. His words seemed soft on the edges.

He sank into the mattress, then reached out to clasp his fingers lightly around Severus' wrist. "We're still friends, then? You won't leave me?"

Something about that question sounded off when spoken aloud, but Remus couldn't puzzle it out. His eyes were closing on their own.

He hadn't the energy to be surprised, then, when Severus covered Remus' hand lightly with his own. "We are still friends," said the hesitant voice. "You can't be rid of me so easily."

Remus fell asleep with a smile on his face.

"You lost your job."



Remus looked up from his cup of tea, a startled expression on his face. Severus thought he looked skinnier than he had a fortnight ago. "How'd you know?"

"You've the same look on your face that you had when Slughorn said you couldn't go on in Potions seventh year. Relief mixed with guilt." Severus had to work to keep from smirking at Remus. The werewolf was ridiculously transparent.

"You must be getting better at that mind-reading magic you're studying."

Severus sighed in exasperation. "I *told* you, Lupin, it isn't—" He broke off. Of course Remus hadn't forgotten. The berk just liked winding Severus up. He knew enough about Occlumency, even if he didn't realise why the Dark Lord was instructing Severus in it.

Remus was smirking. It made Severus' fingers itch to smack it off his face, but at the same time it made that tug at Severus' stomach that it always did. He wouldn't let anyone else get away with looking at him like that; he'd hex Lucius into next Tuesday if *he* tried it. But sRemus' eyes were warm when he smirked at Severus, like he was inviting Severus to share in the joke, and not just laughing at him.

"Prat," Severus declared, and sat down at Remus' table. "Why are we meeting at Madam Puddifoot's? This place is dreadful."

"Three Broomsticks is full of people at some wizards conference up at the school," Remus said. "Anyway, this place is quieter."

"Ah, so Black and his friends are at the pub, is what you mean," Severus guessed.

Remus sighed. "You keep saying it isn't mind-reading, but—"

"Deduction, idiot," Severus said, his tone more patient than his words.

"I'm tired of arguing with them about you, is all," Remus replied.

Severus thought for a moment, staring into his teacup. "Why did you even care about staying friends?" he asked finally. He'd been wondering for weeks.

Remus had been gazing mildly across the room, but at this question he turned to look at Severus, his expression serious. "Because I like you, Severus," he said, holding Severus' gaze. "I missed you when we weren't speaking."

Severus swallowed; why was his mouth so dry? He took a sip of tea. "I don't know why you care," he muttered finally.

Remus' expression didn't change. "I like being around you. You're clever and funny and interesting." Severus felt like Remus was watching for something, but he didn't know what.

"I—you are, too," he said finally. He felt his cheeks heat. What a stupid way to give someone a compliment. Especially when he wanted to tell Remus how fit and cool he was. Spending time with Remus made Severus feel like, even if Remus didn't always understand him, he did at least appreciate him.

Remus smiled with his whole face, a rare expression for him. It gave Severus another jolt in his stomach. It was hard to breathe when Remus looked at him like that.

"Want to go for a walk?" Remus asked. "It's nice out."

Severus nodded mutely and finished his tea. He wished he'd been able to buy Remus a meal, though. He knew his friend didn't have any money to spare, even when he was working.

Remus shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and led the way out, turning south down to the High Street. Severus followed, feeling a little off-kilter, though he couldn't quite say why. Remus was acting oddly, a strange mixture of light-hearted and discouraged, and it was confusing Severus. They walked silently along the high

street past Dervish and Banges, the High Street turning into a winding lane that headed up towards the foot of the mountain. They came around a corner and climbed over a stile, and then they were suddenly in wilderness, crossing scrubby ground and out of sight of any of the cottages of the village.

"Something on your mind, Lupin?" Severus asked finally.

Remus stopped and turned to look at him, a startled expression on his face. "All right, that isn't deduction," he said finally.

Severus raised his eyebrows. "I suppose I know you better than I thought," he said. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you that Legilimency doesn't work like that. I'm not reading your mind. And anyway, I still have to hold eye contact to make it work. Maybe someday I'll get better at it."

Remus sighed and looked around, then went over to a rock outcropping to sit. He pulled out a fag and lit it, leaning back and gazing across at the castle. "Dumbledore's sending me to Africa in a fortnight. Not sure how long I'll be gone."

"Africa? The fuck?" Severus stared at him, then went over and stole Remus' fag to get a drag himself. When had Remus started carrying fags about, anyway? Severus was the one who smoked.

Remus shrugged. "There are werewolves in danger there, and he thinks I can help them."

"How? You're not exactly safe yourself!" Severus felt a hot anger building inside him. He was trapped here in England, doing research for Belby, but if Remus was doing work involving werewolves, it concerned Severus and Belby, too! "Was Dumbledore going to say anything to us? You're our werewolf! We haven't got any other test subjects yet!"

"Your werewolf?" Remus asked, glancing at him with an odd smile lingering about his lips. "That's why I'm telling you now, Severus. I wondered if you could give me enough for the other wolves. I'm not sure how many—a pack of them, but I don't know what that means. I've always been a lone wolf, myself."

Severus rolled his eyes at the joke. "We have a fortnight to do it?" he asked, calculating. "Yes, I think we could brew enough for, say, a dozen. Perhaps more, but I'd have to ask Belby."

"He's a good bloke, working on potions for werewolves," Remus said. "Did you ever find out why?"

"Had a nephew or cousin or something that got bit," Severus said dismissively. He didn't know Belby very well, and he wasn't overly inclined to get to know him. Belby was a jolly sort, too much like Dumbledore for Severus' liking, though not as calculating as the Headmaster.

"You'll be by to pick up the potion before you go, then?"

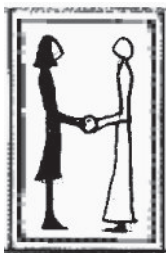
"Yeah, August 13," Remus said. "If that's all right with you."

"When will you get it through your head that I'm just the apprentice?" Severus snapped. "I have to do what Belby says. It was only through his sufferance that I got today off to meet you."

Remus snorted. "I know very well that he doesn't keep you slaving away twenty hours a day," he said. "Anyway, owl me if that day doesn't work. I'll have to get Dumbledore to adjust the Portkey if I have to stay longer."

Severus took a long drag off the cigarette and held it out to Remus again. Remus took it, his fingers brushing Severus', and finished it off, seemingly oblivious to the way Severus' stomach had jumped when they touched.

They sat there for a long time, staring across the hot summer sky and not speaking. Severus found himself feeling oddly content. After a while he realised Remus was leaning against him, ever so slightly, a small smile on his lips.



Severus wanted to lean over and press his lips against Remus', to slide his fingers into the soft brown hair that fell into Remus' eyes and hung into his collar. In the months since he took the Mark, since he'd gone to Remus for help, he hadn't forgotten the feeling of Remus' strong arms around him, holding him together. He hadn't forgotten—

He stood up, so abruptly Remus nearly fell over. "Severus?"

Severus cleared his throat and paced to the opposite side of the path and looked back at Remus. "Let's go get some supper," he said finally. "I have to get back soon."

Remus' trip to Zimbabwe was planned to include the full moon, but when the third quarter arrived and Remus still hadn't returned, Severus began to fret. There was no other word for it, he was fretting as if someone had appointed him Lupin's minder. The worst part about it was that Severus couldn't bring himself to be embarrassed about being worried.

Everyone was worried these days.

Belby spent a lot of time chewing his moustache, a sure indication that he was worried. Belby was friends with Dumbledore, and though Severus wasn't sure if his teaching master helped the Headmaster with his secret missions, Dumbledore certainly would have consulted him about this particular one, since it involved werewolves.

"Snape, that friend of yours—"

"Lupin?" He blurted it before Belby was even finished speaking, then looked away and cleared his throat.

"Yes, Lupin. He should have been back by now, shouldn't he? We're at the new moon, and I'd hoped to begin our study on whether the lunar cycle affects how potions work on werewolves."

Severus bit the inside of his cheek and shrugged. "I'm not his minder," he said. His voice sounded sullen even to his own ears. He could see Belby's exasperation building.

"Yes, well, I want you to go see Dumbledore and find out if we're going to have another test subject in time for the new moon, or if we're going to have to postpone our experiment for a month."

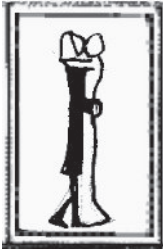
Severus heaved a put-upon sigh, but inwardly he was pleased. Dumbledore *must* have news, and if Severus were there on behalf of his teaching master, the Headmaster could hardly be all cryptic and refuse to answer. It had been a mistake to go to Africa. Remus wasn't quite willing to question Dumbledore's judgment, but it was very clear that the African wolves were very different to European wolves—and an Englishman werewolf was another thing yet.

He took another half-dozen halting steps through the dark night, hoping he was at least close. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head, but with the regrets and doubts and self-recriminations all swirling into a dizzying cycle, the pain in his head was only getting worse.

The last days of his captivity by the Zimbabwe Werewolf Pack had become a sweltering blur of pain and fear. He knew they had beaten him, and they had forced him to fight at the full—there had been bets made over him while he was muzzled and tied like a dog, just before the transformation—and that they had expected the Englishman to die.

Then again, they hadn't expected their benevolence ambassador to be an assassin in his spare time.

Remus bit back a groan and stumbled over the kerb. He staggered to a halt and stared up at the buildings around him. Would Severus really live in a dirty Muggle neighbourhood like this? He didn't care. This was where the tracking spell had led him, and it was better than going to Dumbledore. Dumbledore would want a report, and Remus didn't think he could give that until he was sure he wouldn't fall apart while giving it.



The spell tugged him to a first floor door. He stared at it, his wolfish senses telling him that yes, this was where Severus lived. (Since when, he wondered, had he come to feel so comforted by Severus' scent?) He leaned on the door frame, tears of exhaustion and relief welling up in his eyes. *Home*, he thought.

He lifted his hand to knock and the door flew open, a wand pointed at his face. Remus stared stupidly at it, then looked up to Severus' face.

He didn't miss the wash of emotions across the other man's face, though he couldn't interpret them. Then Severus was reaching out to him and Remus just let himself fall into Severus' arms, fighting against sobs.

There was another long blur of time, and then Remus was naked and clean, and Severus was tucking him into a bed, Severus' scent rising up all around him. Cool glass touched his lips, and Remus swallowed automatically, the foul taste of healing potion making him shudder. He whimpered, and Severus' hand brushed hair back from his face.

"Rest," Severus told him. "It's all right. You're safe."

Remus' hand caught at Severus' wrist with all the strength he had left to grip. "Stay." He heard Severus' swift intake of breath, but he didn't care. "Stay," he pleaded, tugging.

"Wait." Severus pulled out of his grip, but before Remus could protest, he realised Severus was only shrugging

out of his shirt and shucking his trousers. Then Severus climbed under the covers with him, and he wrapped his arms around Remus, and yes, the world was pushed at arm's length suddenly, as Remus relaxed into his friend's embrace.

He woke thrashing and shouting. The room was dark and warm, but not hot. Someone was talking, speaking his name. Then there were wiry arms wrapped around him, forcing him still, holding him tightly.

"Remus!"

He went still.

"Remus, it's me! You're safe! Whatever it was, you're safe now!" Severus' voice was low and anxious in his ear.

Remus let out an involuntary noise and melted against Severus, shivering. "So much blood," he gasped.

He felt Severus tense at that, but his friend said nothing. A hand stroked his tangled hair, working through the knots. "You're safe with me," Severus murmured.

Remus lifted his head and kissed him.

It wasn't anything he'd planned, though he'd wanted to for ages. His nose smashed against Severus' and Severus' teeth cut his lower lip, but God, it sent a thrill through his entire body, and it provoked a groan from Severus. Remus snaked his arms around Severus' waist and held on to him, and Severus groaned again and bore him down against the mattress, still kissing.

Little flashes of heat were playing across Remus' body, following Severus' hand down his side. Severus' other hand was still curled in his hair, tugging gently. He slid a palm down Severus' back, encountering the elastic of the other boy's pants, and worked his hand underneath to stroke the forbidden curve of arse.

"Remus—" Severus gasped, pulling away just enough to peer down at him through the darkness.

"Want you," Remus murmured. "Love you. Have for ages." He heard Severus' ragged exhalation but wasn't sure what it meant until Severus shivered and kissed his neck. "Yes," Severus murmured, so softly Remus barely heard it. Then Severus' lips were running down his neck and chest, and Severus' tongue flickered out, leaving a wet trail that he blew across. Remus gasped and arched slightly, and a sore muscle twinged. He whimpered, and Severus looked up, the whites of his eyes flashing in the dimness.

"I hurt you."

Remus shook his head, but Severus pulled away a little, studying him.

"I—I've never done this," Severus said hesitantly, stroking one hand down to Remus' cock, which was achingly hard. Then he leaned down and put his mouth awkwardly in place of his hand.

Remus gasped and whimpered.

Severus pulled back, a smirk spreading slowly across his lips. "I suppose that means it's all right?"

"Merlin, yes!" Remus managed, reaching down to touch Severus' face and hair.

Severus' lips ghosted across his cock, then wet heat engulfed him and Severus was sucking, oh God, Remus had never felt anything like that before! He made a strangled noise in his throat and squeezed his eyes shut.

Severus was bobbing his head up and down, one hand circling the part he couldn't take into his mouth, and it was brilliant, just brilliant, even though it was clumsy. Then Severus' teeth scraped Remus' cock and he let out a strangled yelp, but that had sent a shock all the way through him, and he tensed, making sore muscles shriek at him, but who cared, because he was coming so fucking hard, and "Oh my God, Severus!"

Severus made a choked noise and pulled back off his cock, but he sounded pleased all the same. Remus tugged Severus closer.

Severus wrapped his arms around Remus and pressed his face against Remus' shoulder, which hurt a little, but Remus didn't want to mention that. Severus was breathing heavily, and Remus worked his hand down between them to curl around his cock. It surprised a groan out of Severus and made Remus smirk. He stroked Severus like he would himself, except backwards. It was strange, to be touching someone else's cock. But he liked the grunts and sighs that Severus was making, and the way Severus' arms tightened around him. He stroked as energetically as he could, ignoring it when his arm tired. Before too long, Severus' climax flooded over him as Severus gasped out Remus' name.

Merlin, was this real? Remus peered through the darkness as Severus whispered a cleaning charm. Then Severus moved closer, his arms wrapped securely around

Remus. It made Remus feel safe. He relaxed, turning his head to tuck his forehead against Severus' skin.

They slept.



When Severus woke up, he was warm and happy. He inhaled deeply and snuggled against Remus. Then he realised he was *snuggling against Remus*, and they were naked. Well, Remus was naked. Severus still had his shorts on. And they'd—oh, Merlin, what they'd done last night!

His face burned with the embarrassment of remembering. It had felt so good, but what if Remus didn't mean it now?

Remus grunted and turned to burrow against Severus, one arm curving around his waist.

All right, perhaps he would mean it.

Severus stared at Remus' face from the corner of his eye, wondering what he was supposed to do now. Should they talk about this today? Well, he was pretty sure they should. Only he didn't know what to say, or how to say any of it.

He pressed his lips against Remus' bare shoulder and wondered if he should say something.

"Sev'rus," Remus slurred, and there was happiness in his voice, happiness that Severus hadn't heard in what seemed like a long time. He wondered how it could be possible that he had caused that happiness.

"Don't ever scare me like that again," Severus ordered. It was nothing close to what he'd meant to say. "I thought you were dead."

Remus let out a sleepy noise and then muttered, "Thought I was, too. But I'm an assassin. They didn't know that."

They'd never said it in such bald terms before. Severus' eyes widened. It was true. Remus was killing for Dumbledore. What was that but assassination? All the same, Severus didn't like it. He tightened his arms around Remus.

"I'm—glad you came to me," he said.

Remus sighed. "You're safe."

Severus snorted. "You don't really believe that."



"You said we'd stay friends," Remus murmured. "You said you wouldn't leave me." He nuzzled against Severus. "I trust you."

God, if words could kill, those would be the ones, Severus thought. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and took a long, deep breath. Remus would be the death of him.

Much later, Severus actually got out of bed and made breakfast. Well. He fixed them both Weetabix and toast and pumpkin juice. That was as good as breakfast got, when he was making it. He carried the tray back to bed and studied Remus.



He looked exhausted. His mouth was slightly open as he slept, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He had bruises down his torso, and an inflamed cut across one cheekbone. Severus reached down and brushed Remus' hair out of his face. Severus didn't like the way Dumbledore used him. He didn't like

that Remus felt he had no choice but to go out and be the Order's assassin. Not that Severus had any right to talk. He'd joined the bloody Death Eaters, after all.

Remus snorted and woke up, a confused expression settling on his face. He stared up at Severus, then smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." Severus felt a rush of warmth at that smile on Remus' face. It wasn't the sort of smile you gave your mates. It was a private smile, a smile that acknowledged secrets shared. He leaned down and kissed Remus, his mouth slightly open so their tongues touched. It sent a thrill all the way through him.

"God, Severus," Remus murmured, groping an arm around his waist. "You're so...God!"

For once in his life Severus felt no desire to make a smart aleck comment. He felt as stunned and awed as Remus did. "Yeah," he whispered, and kissed Remus again, liking the soft wetness of Remus' mouth.

After a while he remembered the tray. "Oh. I made breakfast."

Remus detached himself from Severus, seeming reluctant. They ate with shoulders and hips touching, and when Remus was finished he shifted onto his hip to turn towards Severus, watching his face avidly.

"You—you really want this?" Severus smoothed a hand down Remus' side. "I—you're not just being kind?"

Remus gave him a look. "I've been going mad with wanting you. I gave up fighting it the night you took the Mark. I just never thought you might want the same."

"You're so beautiful..." Severus touched his cheek. "How could I not want you?"

Remus looked self-conscious. "I'm not as clever as you are. And I'm utter crap at potions."

Severus snorted. "Good thing you have me, then. Don't be daft, Lupin."

Remus beamed at him. The expression made Severus feel warm all over. He shifted up against Remus again.

"We won't just go back to how we were, right?" Remus paused. "I mean—well, we're...together now?"

Severus smirked. "Yeah, you're my boyfriend now." He kissed Remus' ear and felt him shiver.

"That's—it's a great word."

Severus was inclined to agree, though he would never admit it. He smiled, laid his head against Remus', and closed his eyes.



"I have to go to Dumbledore." Remus' voice was heavy with the dread that was making his stomach roil. Severus looked up from the potions book he was scribbling in. "I've been putting it off long enough." Remus didn't want to tell Dumbledore what had happened. He wasn't entirely sure he even wanted to tell Severus. He'd failed. He'd gone to help the werewolves and had ended up tricked into captivity. And then what he'd done to escape—

He shuddered.

They had been lying in bed all day, Severus reading and snorting and making notes and occasionally making incomprehensible declarations like "The idiot thinks frogwort makes a better float media than glyffinnis paste", while Remus drifted in and out of a doze and occasionally reached out to stroke a fingertip against Severus' naked hip.

Severus didn't speak, but his long fingers were suddenly resting on Remus' hair. It was a gesture unlike anything he had ever made, but it was comforting, possessive, and somehow familiar to Remus. He sighed and turned his head slightly so his cheek grazed Severus' skin.

"It was the tribe of werewolves, in Zimbabwe. They pretended to be in danger of starvation, under persecution. Dumbledore sent me to help them. Neither of us knew it was an elaborate ruse to lure in fresh meat."

Remus felt Severus tense, but he didn't speak.

"I took the bait completely. I went in with those potions you gave me, and food, and clothes. And they jumped me and shoved me in a cage." Remus shivered. "I thought they were going to kill me, but soon I realised they were going to fight me at the full, instead. They taunted me and beat me. I didn't know what was going on half the time." He licked his lips and swallowed. "The sun was so hot. I couldn't breathe properly. I was—I thought I'd die."

Severus turned his head slowly to look at him.

"They said if I fought, I could win my freedom." Remus' voice lowered. "So I fought. Fought them all. There was so much blood." He trailed off, staring blankly across the room.

"You're safe now." Severus' voice was angry, but Remus knew it was what had been done to him, not for what he said. "Stay here."

"I will," Remus murmured. "I want to." He buried his face against Severus' stomach and felt a wiry arm reach around him and pull him close. He would go to Dumbledore soon, and tell him the whole story, but for now, he just wanted Severus to keep him safe.



"I lied to the Dark Lord today."

Remus looked up from his book at the odd triumphant expression on Severus' face. A moment later the words registered and he stared. "You what?"

Severus sat down across from him, his features working as if he were trying to hide his excitement. He was failing badly, if that were the case. "Perhaps 'lie' is an exaggeration, but I hid from him the fact that we slept together."

Remus blinked rapidly. He hadn't even thought about the possible consequences if Voldemort learned of their new relationship. Some Order operative he was. "You—you *lied* to Voldemort."

Severus winced at the name and Remus felt a twinge of guilt. He had to learn to call him the Dark Lord around Severus. He wanted to spare Severus the twinge of pain that flared in the Mark at the sound of Voldemort's name.

"Sorry!" Remus said.

Severus waved a hand. "This is the day I've waited for, Remus. And the Dark Lord handed it to me himself by teaching me to keep his secrets from other Legilimens."

Remus knew suddenly where this was leading. He opened his mouth and stared at Severus.

Severus leaned across the table and gripped Remus' hands. "Remus, I want you to take me to Dumbledore."



"I confess, I was surprised to see Remus again so soon, Mr Snape," Dumbledore said. His voice was mild as he poured tea for them both. "Perhaps you would be so kind as to explain to me why you are here. He merely told me that it was imperative I make time to see you."

Severus watched the arc of tea into the cup and tried not to hate Dumbledore. "I'm here to put right the mistake I made," he said in a low voice. *The mistake I wouldn't have made if you hadn't convinced Remus I couldn't be trusted.* Oh, he didn't know for certain that it was Dumbledore who had made Remus believe Severus was a Death Eater already. But it had been someone Remus had trusted beyond measure, someone who wasn't one of the Marauders. There were few choices.

"What mistake would that be?"

Severus' eyes snapped up to meet Dumbledore's. *You know, you manipulative bastard.* "I entered the Dark Lord's service earlier this year. It is the most idiotic thing I have ever done."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows and pointedly didn't disagree. "What do you propose, Mr Snape?"

"The Dark Lord is an accomplished Legilimens," Severus said. "Which you might know." He sipped at his tea. "He's been teaching me. He wanted me to be able to lie to a Legilimens. I don't know yet how he plans to use me, but I thought you might be interested in knowing as much as I do know."

"Why should I believe you?" Dumbledore's calm question shocked Severus, though he couldn't say why.

"Because—because I know what I did was stupid. Because I bloody hate him. Because Remus is my friend." He paused. So much more than friend. Remus was his everything, and had been longer than Severus had suspected. "I have to keep him safe. I have to make up for this."

Dumbledore steeped his finger together and studied Severus' face. Severus felt the first probe of Legilimency from the Headmaster, and at first he countered it, showing off his strength. Then he gave way, showing Dumbledore that he was willing to deliberately abase himself if it would aid him in keeping Remus safe.

Fortunately Dumbledore didn't seek out any thoughts—he merely tested the truth of what Severus had told him. He tasted just enough to satisfy his need for knowledge, then nodded and withdrew. "You are perfectly positioned, then, to pass information along to the Order. It will be dangerous."

"I'm not afraid."

"It will be difficult."

"Life is difficult."

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall do everything in my power, of course, to protect you." He reached across his massive desk to clasp Severus' hand. "Thank you, Severus. Welcome back."



"So you're a double agent now," Remus murmured, liking the way Severus leaned against him. He still couldn't believe that only two days ago he'd been hoping he could stay on his feet long enough to reach his friend's house...and now he was here, staying in Severus' flat, pressed together on the sofa, and for the first time not feeling self-conscious about the fact that he got hard whenever he and Severus touched.

"Mm-hmm, regular James Bond," Severus replied. His head was on Remus' shoulder, his fingers twined with Remus'.

Remus laughed. "Well, Bond," he teased, "Would you like to be shaken, or stirred?"

Severus made a noise in his throat and lifted his head to kiss Remus. It was still sort of a surprise to be kissed like that, but Remus didn't have any trouble returning it. He turned his head to meet Severus properly, his mouth open. Their tongues touched, the wet warmth sending waves of heat and desire straight through him.

"God," Remus gasped, and Severus chuckled.

"Not exactly," he murmured. He shifted and got up on his knees, framing Remus' face with his hands. He held

Remus there and kissed him again, with more concentration this time. Remus clutched at Severus, his hands pressing against Severus' sides. This was brilliant.

"How're you feeling?" Severus muttered.

"Like I've never been happy before now," Remus replied, his voice quiet.

"You're so wet," Severus said. "What I meant is how are you feeling physically?"

"Horny," Remus said, and laughed. After a moment, Severus laughed with him.

"Fine, if you won't give me a real answer." He kissed Remus again, his mouth more demanding, giving Remus a taste of passion and drawing out his own at the same time. When Severus pulled away again, Remus was gasping with desire.

"Have you ever done—shagged a bloke?" Remus asked softly.

Severus drew back and glared at him. "What do you think?" he demanded.

Remus considered that for a moment. He wanted the answer to be no. He wanted to be the first Severus ever had. He didn't know if it was likely, though. "I think...no, I think you never have."

Severus didn't reply for a moment that drew out, making Remus nervous. Then Severus shook his head. "Never." His voice was quiet. "What about you?"

"Of course not," Remus said. He shrugged awkwardly. "I always just wanted you."

Severus let out a small moan and captured Remus' mouth again, his hands sliding down to work at Remus' buttons. Remus clutched at Severus' arms, already excited about what they were doing. When Severus' fingers skated down Remus' stomach to the top of his jeans, though, he grasped Severus' hand and held him still.

"Wait! Not here, all right?"

"Bed?" Severus murmured, and Remus nodded. Severus smiled, an expression rare enough that it still sent a thrill through Remus every time he saw it.

They got up and managed to stumble to the bed, still kissing and touching and fumbling each other's clothes off. Remus' heart was pounding in his chest, only partly from arousal. He wondered anxiously what it would be

like, if Severus would want to be in control, or if he would let Remus, if it would feel as good as rubbing their cocks together, if he would be any good at this.

"Merlin, this is brilliant," Severus whispered, stroking his fingers down Remus' bare sides. He nuzzled Remus' cheek and kissed his way down his jaw.

Remus moaned in answer and arched his hips, wanting more pressure for his cock. He hooked a hand behind Severus' neck, rubbing the back of his head.

"Do you, ah, know any spells for, for what's needed?"

Remus smiled at the hesitation in Severus' voice. "Um. Not really. There's—well, there's a spell I know for wanking. It gives you, you know, lubrication." He stifled a giggle at the word.

"That would be good," Severus said. He'd wriggled out of his trousers and had his arousal pressed against Remus' leg.

Remus nodded and fumbled around for his wand; he'd dropped it when Severus' hand closed around his cock. "Right. Um...*lubricatio!*"

Severus stroked him experimentally and Remus let out a groan. "We ought to try this on your arse," Severus pointed out, his hand moving lazily along Remus' shaft.

Remus gasped out the spell again, twitching as he felt something cool and slick inside his arse. That was really weird. "Yeah, that worked—God!"

Severus chuckled, making Remus wonder if he were really as into this as he was acting. But as he peered narrowly at Severus, a hard cock nudged his arse and Severus sucked in his breath. "Fuck, Remus, you—relax a little, will you?"

*Relax?* Remus wanted to say. *How can I relax when you're about to fuck me?* But he just let out a long breath and tried to relax. Severus nudged him again, then swore.

"Hold on."

Remus wondered, inanely, if he should have looked for a book about how to have sex. It seemed like an absurd idea, but they obviously hadn't the slightest idea what they were doing. Then a feather-light touch stroked around his opening and he gasped at the unexpected pleasure that sent through him. "What—what're you—" "Shh." Severus had that tone that said he was concentrating. Remus lifted his head and craned to see Severus

peering at his arse and petting him with a gentle finger. As Remus watched, Severus looked up and saw him watching, then gave him a decidedly wicked little grin. He leaned down and *licked* Remus there, oh God! Remus moaned, so loudly he even startled himself.

Severus lifted his head to smirk at him, then licked again. "All right, we'll relax you this way," he murmured, and kissed Remus' inner thigh. "You really ought to trust me more."

"It's—oh *God*, Severus—not a matter of—unh—trust. It's—it's just—this is different!" Remus writhed and arched, wanting Severus to give him more.

Severus hummed and slid a finger inside, making Remus yelp. Merlin, that was *quite* different. But when he looked at Severus' face, he was floored by the expression of awe that had suffused the other man's sharp features. "This is..." Severus whispered, but he trailed off without finishing and lifted his head to kiss Remus' mouth possessively.



Remus groaned and wrapped an arm around Severus, pulling him closer. As they kissed, Severus worked his finger around inside Remus, sliding it in and out, then wiggling. Something he did hit a spot that had to be magically charged. Remus cried out in shock as a jolt of pleasure gave him a full-body twitch.

"Oh my God, do that again!" he ordered, clutching at Severus.

Severus smirked and worked his finger around again for a minute, then made a noise of delight as Remus twitched and gasped again.

"What the fuck is that?"

"No idea, but I like what it does to you," Severus said, his expression softening into a slight smile. He shifted, stroking Remus' thigh with his free hand. "Can I try again? To do this right, I mean?"

"Yes, yes!" Remus babbled, staring hungrily at Severus.

A moment later Severus' cock was nudging at his arse again, but this time Severus' movements were more insistent. Remus panted and tried to focus on staying relaxed as the blunt head of Severus' cock slowly pushed inside. He felt himself stretching, stretching, until it felt like he was going to split open. He whimpered and

Severus stopped pushing forward, but didn't pull away.

"All right there?" Severus murmured, one hand brushing at Remus' cheek.

Remus told himself to breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. "Yeah, I think," he grunted. "Needed a moment there. Go again."

Severus obeyed, pushing in as he stroked Remus' face. "You're beautiful, you know that?" he muttered. "This is brilliant."

Remus just groaned and panted, but he looked up and caught Severus' gaze. Dear Merlin, Severus was fucking him!

Finally Severus was fully seated inside and Remus was breathing deeply, trying to adjust. They clung to each other for a little, Severus leaning most of his weight on Remus, and kissed. The kissing, more than anything else, helped Remus relax. Soon he was arching against Severus, who groaned, hips jerking. Remus gasped and slid a hand down to clutch at Severus' hip. That was all the encouragement Severus needed to begin thrusting, moving hesitantly at first, then with increasing speed and force as Remus' noises of pleasure grew louder.

Severus tensed suddenly and groaned, and Remus gasped as heat flooded his passage. He stared at Severus, whose eyes were nearly closed; the faintest glitter betrayed that they were fixed on Remus' face. Severus leaned down and kissed him tenderly. All the same, Remus felt a little disappointed. It felt good, but what was he supposed to do now that Severus had come?

Before he could wonder too long, Severus had closed his hand around Remus' cock again and was stroking, fast and hard. "That felt fucking amazing," he told Remus, leaning in to run his tongue along Remus' ear. "I'm definitely going to keep fucking you."

"I—ohh—I want a go, too!" Remus protested.

Severus hummed in his ear and licked it. "Course you do." He twisted his hand and flicked his thumb over the head of Remus' cock, and suddenly Remus felt himself launched over the edge, crying out and spurting over Severus' hand and their stomachs.

After they'd been lying in a heap for a minute or two, Severus sighed and shifted. "Need out," he explained, and then rolled over onto his back, pulling Remus along so he was curled against Severus' side.

"That was bloody wonderful," Remus said.

Severus snorted. "It was horrid. We didn't know what we were doing."

"Well, yeah, but we will," Remus replied. "And that was just the first time. I mean, we'll get to do this forever."

He wondered if he'd said too much when Severus lifted his head slightly to peer at Remus. "You think you're going to want me forever?"

Remus smiled and wrapped his arms firmly around Severus. "Oh, yes."



"I can't do it anymore. It's too much, too much destroyed. I didn't know what it would cost."

Severus stared at Regulus, surprised at the way his friend was acting. "What are you on about, Reg?" he demanded. He was perplexed by the whole day, when it came down to it. Regulus had sent an owl out of the blue, saying he was spending the day in Diagon Alley by himself to buy his seventh year books, and asking Severus to meet him for lunch.

Regulus stared at him. "They wanted me to do it! I knew I had to! Sirius fucking abandoned the family, and I had to do *something* to uphold our honour! I had to make my parents proud!"



"Oh, fucking hell, Reg, you didn't—" But Severus knew, suddenly. He reached out and seized Regulus' left forearm in a tight grip. The younger boy flinched and tried to pull away, but Severus squeezed harder and pushed the sleeve back, staring at the bloodied Mark burned into Regulus' porcelain-pale skin. "You fucking idiot," Severus said.

"I didn't know how hard it would be," Regulus whispered. He pulled his arm out of Severus' grasp and put his sleeve back down, glancing about to make certain no one had seen. "I didn't know how much he would demand."

Severus sighed. "I should have told you," he muttered. "I should have warned you."

"You—" Regulus stared at him. "Did you—"

"Yes." Severus' voice was curt. "It was the stupidest thing I've done in my life."

"But that's better!" Regulus said. "You can help me get out!"

"I *can't* help you, Regulus!" Severus said sharply. "No one can help you. You serve him until you die."

Regulus made a little gasping noise and stared at Severus, his dark eyes burning with desperation. "I can't! Severus, you don't understand—"

Severus leaned forward, his voice a harsh whisper. "I *do* understand!" he exclaimed. "I of all people understand. I hate him, Regulus, hate him more than I have ever hated anything. I despise myself under his rule. I despise what he requires of me. I loathe his followers—those who were once my friends. I revile the depravity to which we have all sunk." He grabbed Regulus' wrist again, in a tight grip, and pulled him so close their faces were mere inches apart. "But *I cannot escape*. I have made my death-bed, and now I must lie in it. As must you."

He sat back, staring at Regulus, willing him to be convinced. If Regulus didn't believe him, if Regulus tried to defect from the Dark Lord's service, Severus would be ordered to kill him. And Severus knew he would obey.

He would commit any sin and sacrifice anyone if it meant staying alive, or keeping Remus alive.



"God, it's bloody awful, Remus! He wants out, but what am I supposed to do? If I help him, they could discover our secret. The Dark Lord would have you killed and he would kill me himself. If I don't help him—blast it, he's one of my friends!" Severus heaved a mighty sigh and clenched his fist around the sheet.

Remus kissed his chest. They were sprawled naked on his bed in Severus' flat. Remus had given up his own flat, because he'd been spending nearly every night at Severus', anyway—they were getting the hang of this shagging thing, though Severus liked to joke that a bit of practice wouldn't hurt.

"I liked Regulus all right," Remus said. "I mean, he was a little toerag around Sirius, but at school, we got on all right."

Not really, Severus thought, but he didn't see any reason to correct Remus on that point. Regulus had never liked Remus much; he'd been jealous of the werewolf's friendship first with his brother and then, Severus sus-

pected, with Severus himself. But if Remus felt kindly towards Regulus...

"I just wish I could think of a way to get him away from the Dark Lord without telling him first. Perhaps we should kidnap him."

Remus laughed, but then lapsed into what Severus knew was a thinking silence. "Well. We'd have to have a safe house to put him in. I could get James' Invisibility Cloak—"

"Ha!" Severus crowed, making Remus jump. "An Invisibility Cloak! No wonder he could sneak around the school like that! Bloody bastard."

Remus made an apologetic noise. "Well, but it is handy," he said. "We could use it to sneak up on Regulus and Stun him. Then we take him to the safe place."

"And what about when the Dark Lord summons him?" Severus said, though he wished to God they could do as Remus said. "The Mark may be only a one-way link as far as Apparating goes—though I'm not sure even about that—but the Dark Lord can certainly use it to cause pain." He rubbed his forearm lightly against Remus' side, trying to brush away the memories of times the Dark Lord had done just that.

"Fuck." Remus sighed,

"Quite."

They lapsed into silence. Severus had been turning the problem over in his head for hours already, and no solution had presented itself. He could go to Dumbledore, he knew, but Regulus didn't want to defect to Dumbledore, he just didn't want to kill anyone else. There was a difference between leaving and betraying your friends. *I did the latter, and look where it's got me*, he thought.

"We'll think of something," Remus whispered finally. "We have to."

Yes, they had to. Otherwise Regulus was going to get himself killed.



"Severus, how good to see you after so long."

Rodolphus Lestrage lit a cigarette and studied Severus, his gaze challenging. Severus knew Rodolphus found him wanting. He wasn't a pureblood, he hadn't found a pureblood girl to marry, and he refused to be cowed

by the purebloods among the Dark Lord's servants. Severus didn't care what Rodolphus thought of him. He knew he was more than equal to any of the purebloods.

There were even theories, he had read, which argued that wizards of mixed blood were more powerful and more versatile than purebloods. He knew that certainly they were less inbred.

"I come and go at my master's will, not yours, Lestrangle," Severus retorted. "I've been summoned. Tell him I'm here."

"Tell him yourself, Severus," said a thin, cold voice.

Severus stiffened, then went down on his knees, waiting until he was kneeling before he turned. "My lord," he said formally. "I did not realise I was in your presence. I apologise for my impertinence."

Voldemort studied him with a glittering red gaze, his face impassive. There was a silence that lasted long enough for Severus to break into a cold sweat, but Severus pushed his emotions behind a wall of Occlumency and kept his own gaze focused on the Dark Lord's collarbone. It was respectful, but it would give him a moment's warning if Voldemort moved.

Finally Voldemort laughed, high and thin. "Your bold nature pleases me, Severus. Come into my sanctum. We must speak frankly where none may hear."

He turned, and Severus rose smoothly to his feet again. He wanted to send a mocking look at Rodolphus, but he decided that ignoring the man entirely would be a bigger insult. He followed the Dark Lord into his study.

The room was dark, deep red curtains drawn across the windows so that what light did filter in was tinted an ominous blood red. Voldemort strode to his chair and settled gracefully into it, indicating that Severus should kneel at his feet. It was a position Severus particularly hated, which was why, of course, the Dark Lord chose it.

"Severus, there is a traitor among us."

The words made him freeze with fear, but he knew, he knew, the Dark Lord could not be speaking of him. He had worked so very hard to hide his meeting with Dumbledore, to provide the Dark Lord with memories of yet another row between Severus and Remus, about Severus' loyalties. The Dark Lord could *not* know Severus was passing his secrets along to the Order. "My lord, how could anyone betray you?"

Voldemort laughed again. "You speak lies so easily, my Severus," he said. "And yet I see through them to the truth. You would betray me, did you not fear me more than you hate me."

"My lord," Severus said, "I have always been faithful. I will always be faithful."

Voldemort's smile was hard. "I know. That is why you have been chosen, Severus. You are my potions expert. You will brew for me a poison that is excruciatingly painful and slow-acting—and irreversible."

Severus swallowed his horror. "My lord, I do not know if such a thing even exists. There are antidotes to every poison."

"You will invent one, Severus. One that cannot be broken. One that cannot be defeated."

"What...what if I am not able, my lord?" Severus worked to inject fear into his voice.

"You will not fail." Voldemort's tone said very clearly what would happen if he did.

Severus bowed his head. "My lord, may I know for whom this poison is intended?"

"No, you have no need of that knowledge."

"As my lord commands." Fuck.

"You will bring me the poison in two weeks' time. Until then you will not be summoned."

"Yes, my lord." Severus waited several heartbeats, then stood, keeping his head bowed and his torso inclined. "I will attend you in two weeks."

Voldemort made a gesture of dismissal, and Severus left quickly. He closed the door to the sanctum and was unsurprised to feel a hex sting past him. He dodged and sent one back, pleased to hear Rodolphus swear.

"You think you're so much better than the rest of us, Snape," he snarled. "You aren't even fit to lick the Dark Lord's arse."

"I would not speak of the Dark Lord's arse, if I were you," Severus replied, and sent another hex back at him.

"Mudblood filth!"

Severus set up a shield and decided to ignore Rodolphus' raging. He was impassive as his parents

were insulted, his clothing was insulted, his nose and hair were mocked. It wasn't until Rodolphus exclaimed, "Why should someone such as you be honoured with Black's execution?"

A chill ran through Severus' entire body. "Black?" No matter how much Severus would enjoy it, Remus wouldn't like it if he killed his best friend.

"You get to execute the traitor."

No. Not Sirius. *Regulus*. Of course. Severus clenched his jaw. "He's only a boy," he said.

"He's a traitor!" Rodolphus cried. "And he will be killed like a dog!"

Severus raised an eyebrow and gazed impassively at Rodolphus. The staring match went on for several minutes before Rodolphus finally lowered his gaze.

"He will be killed as I see fit," Severus said then. He hoped his voice was cold enough, haughty enough. He hoped Rodolphus would forget his brief slip.



Remus was early; the Order meeting was set to begin in twenty minutes. He had waved to the Headmaster's brother and climbed the stairs in the Hog's Head, heading for the room where they always met. He had just reached the top of the stairs when he was seized from behind and dragged out of the passageway. He struggled, but didn't have time to cry out. The hands on his shoulders were strong, biting into his skin.

He was shoved against the wall, his cheek pressed against it, a lean body pushing at his back. Hot breath fluttered across his cheek.

Then the person behind him chuckled.

"You should be more alert," Severus murmured, his lips just brushing Remus' cheek. "I could've been anyone grabbing you like that."

"Prat!" Remus gasped. His heart was still pounding from the shock, and he could feel the little pings and surges of adrenaline in his blood.

"Slytherin." He could hear the smirk in Severus' voice, and he felt himself getting hard. God, it took so little these days, just a look or a word from Severus and his body was raging with want.

He pressed back against Severus, unsurprised to feel his lover's cock hard against his arse. "You'd better be a Slytherin who takes what he wants," Remus panted, twisting an arm out of Severus' grip so he could grope his arse.

That got a tensing and a slight moan. Remus smiled to himself and ground his arse against Severus' groin. "You want me, don't you?" he asked, only slightly breathless.

"You know I do," Severus bit out.

"Then take what you want," Remus urged.

Severus groaned softly and rubbed his trouser-clad cock against Remus' arse, his fingers already working at the zip of Remus' jeans. "Want you," he murmured. "Need you."

"Yes, yes, Severus," Remus panted. He knew it was foolish, if Severus hadn't locked the door—they could be caught! But he needed Severus, needed to be reminded that this was real, that what they had wasn't going to fade away. The danger just added to the desire.

The quick, frantic nature of the fuck didn't detract from the pleasure at all.

Afterwards, as Severus slumped against his back, trapping him, Remus tilted his head to kiss Severus' neck. "What are you doing here?" he murmured.

"Just got done meeting with Dumbledore," Severus replied, and darted to capture Remus' mouth with his own. After a minute he added, "He doesn't want the others to know about me, yet."

"S'a good idea," Remus muttered. "Don't know who the spy is."

Severus hummed and kissed Remus again.

"Black will kill us," he whispered. "If he ever finds out about this."

Remus felt a cold chill at the first words, and even after Severus had elaborated, he wondered why Severus had moved on from the subject of the spy to the subject of Sirius. "It's not his business, is it?" he retorted. "Whoever I want to be with—"



"Isn't going to be a Death Eater and a 'greasy git' like me," Severus interrupted, "and probably *oughtn't* be a bloke at all, if you really want Black's approval."



"I don't tell him who he can go out with," Remus snapped. "Shut up, Severus! This isn't about him, it's about you and me."

"Then you'd tell him, if I demanded it?"

"Tell him? Why the fuck would I tell him?" Remus stared at him. "He already doesn't trust me as much as he used to! I can't tell him I'm shagging a Death Eater!"

Severus snorted. "Exactly."

Remus' back turned cold as Severus pulled away and did up his zip. Remus started to turn, frowning, but Severus pushed him away. There was a tense moment of silence, then Severus left, the quiet snick of the door behind him echoing more in Remus' mind than any slam.



"I'm sorry."

Severus didn't look up. He wasn't really interested in Remus' apologies right now, even if they were well-deserved. He wanted to read his book and pretend he hadn't just given the Dark Lord the poison that would kill Regulus Black. He was murdering his friend, and because of the Dark Lord's Legilimency and the dangerous nature of Severus' position, he didn't dare do anything to keep Regulus alive.

"I know I was an ass." Remus shifted from one foot to the other. "I shouldn't have—I'll tell Sirius if you want."

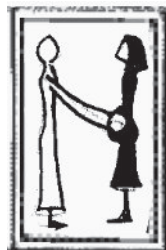
Severus scowled at his book. Of course Remus wouldn't tell Black. He'd be a fool to tell Black, and they both knew it. It just rankled that they had to keep quiet about this. Not that he really wanted to tell people he was queer, but it would be so bloody satisfying to see the look on Black's face when Remus told him.

"Look, I *will*. I'll Floo him and tell him now."

But he wouldn't. They both knew he wouldn't. Severus sighed. "Shut up, Remus. Just—look, just sit down and...and...sit down."

Remus sank down slowly, his gaze fixed on Severus' face. Severus steadfastly refused to look up, though he felt his cheeks get hot. Finally he snapped, "What?"

"Are you all right?" Remus asked.



"I just want to read," Severus said irritably.

"All right, sorry." Remus shifted so he was leaning back in the sofa, staring across the room. Severus pretended to read, but he was all too aware of Remus next to him. He knew when Remus drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes.

He wanted a very strong drink. He thought about getting out the Firewhiskey he knew was in the cabinet. He thought about brewing himself a Dreamless Sleep potion and just going to bed. Instead he shifted and closed his book.

"Regulus—" he began, and cleared his throat. "The Dark Lord is going to kill Regulus. I can't stop it."

Remus didn't answer at first, and for a moment Severus wondered if he'd gone to sleep. Then he breathed, "Oh, Severus." He didn't open his eyes, but he did fumble his hand over until his fingers closed on Severus'. It made Severus feel absurdly grateful, that Remus wasn't staring at him.

"I'm so tired of this war. I'm tired of the whole bloody thing. I hate the Dark Lord. I hate most of my old friends. I hate your friends, too. I just—I just want to leave the country and never come back."

Remus turned and opened his eyes just long enough to wrap his arms around Severus. It didn't fix anything, but it made it just a tiny bit more bearable.



Remus and Severus were sitting on the sofa, reading, when the distress call came. The huge silvery stallion galloped through the wall, reared, and whinnied shrilly. A barrage of images hit Remus—approaching figures, white masks, flashes of hexlight—and Gideon was screaming, screaming, he'd been hit! Remus ducked away and yelped, his book dropping forgotten to the floor.

At the same time Severus hissed and clutched at his arm. "I'm Summoned."

Their eyes met. "The Prewetts," Remus said. "I have to go."

Severus' lips quirked in a bitter smile. "See you on the battlefield," he murmured, only half joking. They kissed briefly, then pulled away and Disapparated, each to his side.

Remus arrived at the battle and immediately stumbled over a body. He glanced down, saw the Death Eater mask, and told himself Severus hadn't had time to be killed yet. He looked around; he was standing in an alley of some English village, that was all he could tell.

"Lupin!" He glanced around and saw Dedalus Diggle gesturing frantically from behind a skip. Remus ran over, sucking in a breath as a hex sizzled past his ear.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Dedalus shook his head. "I don't know any more than you. The Patronus message called me here and the Death Eaters are entrenched."

"Where's the rest of the Order?"

Dedalus shrugged. There was the *Crack!* of someone Apparating, Remus spun in a circle, scanning the area. Another hex flew, and he aimed a curse blazing in the direction, hoping it wasn't Severus he was firing at.

There was an explosion of swearing and Remus relaxed; *That* didn't sound like Severus, at least. Someone else swore, and then James ducked behind the tip with them. "What the fuck's going on?" he demanded. "Where are the Prewetts?" he asked.

Remus shrugged. "We got here, there were bodies all over. The Death Eaters are entrenched and firing hexes. No idea where the Prewetts are."

"Fuck." James looked around, wand raised. "Okay. Moony—you can find the Prewetts. Diggle and I will hold the Skullheads off while you do that, keep you from getting your arse hexed."

Remus nodded and did a locating spell, though he was relying as much on his preternatural senses as he was magic. He studied each body, making sure they were Death Eaters. He could see three from where he was.

"All right. Cover me." He dashed out from behind the skip and headed down the street in the direction he felt his spell tugging him. A few stray hexes whizzed past him but were deflected by his shield. Then he heard James firing them back. He grinned; James was good at countering curses.

He found Gideon Prewett at the mouth of the street. Remus stared at him, feeling bile rise in his throat. "Fuck," he whispered, "fuck." He dropped to his knees, checking for a pulse. Nothing. He made a noise and got up again,

scanning the area for Fabian.

He stumbled over another Death Eater and went sprawling headlong on the cobblestones, skinning his palms. The Death Eater didn't react. Another dead one, then. Remus got to his hands and knees, then pushed himself back to his feet. *Fabian. Where's Fabian?*

The street down here was thick with smoke; he wondered if the battle had set something on fire. He stumbled around a corner and found Fabian sitting propped against a wall. A fifth Death Eater was crumpled near Fabian's feet in a pool of blood. Remus knelt and reached up to check Fabian. A moment later a wand was digging into his throat.

"I've taken five of your mates," Fabian rasped. "What makes you think you'll finish me?"

Remus cleared his throat. "Fabe," he murmured, holding his hands at his side. "Fabian, it's Remus."

"Lupin?" Fabian coughed and blood trickled from his full lips. Remus watched in sick fascination as it spilled down his chin.

"What happened, Fabian?"

"Followed them here...knew they were out to cause trouble..." He coughed again. "Gid said we should stop them." His eyes opened. "Where's Gideon? I lost him in the chase."

Remus looked down at the gaping wound across Fabian's stomach and swallowed hard. "He's with James and Dedalus. He—he sent me to find you."

He tried to summon enough of a happy thought to conjure his Patronus. The silvery wolf loped off in the way he had come. They wouldn't get here in time, Remus thought.

"You're hurt," he murmured. "Let me—I know a few Healing spells. I..." But he didn't know how to deal with anything this serious. If he were injured like this, his body would send him into unconsciousness and heal itself. He didn't know how to help someone else injured this badly.

Fabian shook his head. "I'm all right, Remus. Tell Dumbledore—five Death Eaters won't torture...any more Muggles."

"Fabian—"

"I'm all right. I'm all right." Fabian breathed out slowly and didn't breathe in again. His head slid slowly to one side. Remus caught him, not caring that he was getting his friend's blood all over him. Shaking with anger and grief, he cradled Fabian's body until the others arrived.



Severus, for obvious reasons, didn't go to Gideon and Fabian's funeral. He decided to spend the afternoon brewing in the lab the Dark Lord had provided at headquarters, instead. He missed the way Regulus used to interrupt his brewing with constant questions about why he was doing things differently to how the books said it should be. He missed the way Lucius used to talk about things other than his beautiful, conceited wife and the impending birth of what would undoubtedly be a beautiful, conceited baby.

When he arrived at Death Eater headquarters, Rodolphus, Rabastan, Bellatrix, and Antonin were toasting each other with what was probably very expensive champagne. Roddy was smoking a thick, reeking cigar, leaning back in his chair. Rabastan, the bright, clever one with an emotive face, was telling a story to an attentive audience.

"And then—" He gestured as if he were brandishing a wand.—"the idiot tried to hit me with a Confundus! As if that would stop the Cruciatus I'd already placed on him!" He cackled, his laughter a lower-pitched imitation of the Dark Lord's.

"What happened then?" Antonin asked. "I didn't see. I was too busy pulling his brother's guts out."

Severus' stomach turned. He wasn't surprised they had been involved in the battle with the Prewetts, but he didn't want to hear about it. His own Summons had called him back to help heal the ones who had been injured in the battle.

"My impression was that the Prewetts gave a decent accounting for themselves," he said, his tone snide. He had always enjoyed provoking the Lestranges, though he was aware that there were people who thought him mad for that.

"A decent accounting?" Bellatrix repeated, her voice falsely childish. "Where did you hear that, ickle Severus?"

He clenched his jaw, but maintained his smirk. "I had several injured wizards to patch up, though I'm told you four were able to seek treatment at St Mungo's. Something about a potion experiment that reportedly blew up in your faces?" He shook his head. "Tsk. Are you afraid to subject yourselves to my tender mercies?"

"We're just rich enough to bribe the Healers we want," Lucius said, coming in and accepting a glass of champagne from Rabastan. "Pureblooded and rich, Severus—everything you aren't."

"Ah, but I'm powerful and clever, Lucius, and you'll never be able to claim those two things," Severus retorted. There was a burst of laughter at that. All the same, he was tired of the banter already. He was tired of the Death Eaters, tired of all of it.

He waved off the glass Rabastan held out towards him. "I am here to do our Lord's work," he said, gently emphasizing the last word. "I prefer to brew with a clear head."

"I don't think ickle Severus likes us any more, brothers," Bellatrix said, still in her ridiculous mock-childish voice.

"What makes you think I ever did?" Severus said coolly. He turned and stalked away.



"Ahh, Severus, very good."

He looked up from his cauldron in startlement. As he frequently did, he had become so wrapped up in his brewing that he had failed to notice when the door to his laboratory opened. A moment later, he dropped to his knees.

"My Lord!"

An ungentle hand rested on his head, the fingers curling around his skull until he felt as if the Dark Lord were trying to lift the top of the bone off like a lid. "Rise, my servant. I am pleased with you."

Severus stood, watching Voldemort warily and wondering what he had done to please him. "It warms my heart to hear that, my Lord."

Voldemort chuckled, a sound like the crawling of fingernails across blackboard. "I am quite certain it does. Severus, I have need of a spy."

His eyebrows went up. "My Lord." They'd thought he already had one.

"Of course I already have one, Severus." Voldemort looked amused. "I wish to have two spies. You will not know the identity of the other spy. I wish you to go to Dumbledore and apply for a teaching position."

*Oh God. I hate children.* Severus blinked but bowed his head slightly. "My Lord, will he not suspect me? You know Lupin is aware of my loyalties."

Voldemort chuckled again. "Of course he will suspect you. That is the beauty of my plan, Severus. You will go to him, pretending to be repentant about your decisions. You will offer to give him information, to spill all my secrets to help him defeat me. Then you will tell him everything—everything that I wish him to know."

Severus nodded, letting realisation dawn on his face. "Then he would think me *his* spy, while in reality I am your spy. It is pure genius, my lord." And ideal, though he pushed his triumph behind a thick wall of Occluding.

"Yes, of course." Voldemort smiled, which was a ghastly sight. "You are clever and inventive. I am certain you are the best choice for this task. Not to mention you will be able to use your friendship with that mutt of a werewolf as your reason for the change in loyalties."

Severus nodded quickly. "Of course. They are such naïve fools, they will believe it."

"Ah, Severus, you are truly one of my most valuable children. Despite your resentment, you serve me so faithfully, so diligently. It is a shame you are so wilful in your emotions. I could make so much of you."

Severus bowed his head, letting his resentment come to the forefront. "Forgive me, my Lord," he murmured.

"You don't mean that." Voldemort's voice was indulgent. "It so amuses me to watch you hate me. Some day, though, you will realise that hatred is a much more effective tool than love."

"I know that already, my Lord," Severus lied.

Voldemort laughed.

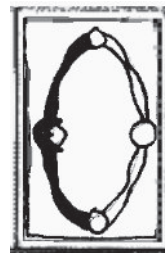


"You heard everything?" Dumbledore held Severus' gaze, perhaps trying to gauge how well he could trust a man who could, when suitably motivated, lie even to the Headmaster.

Severus nodded. "Are we going to be fighting this bloody war until the brat grows up?" he asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I don't know, Severus. I was poorly prepared for this, though I saw the hunger in Tom." He sighed. "Born as the seventh month dies... could it be one of ours? The Longbottoms and the Potters are both expecting a child this summer." He was silent a moment. "I think, Severus, that there are parts of this prophecy that Tom must not hear. We shall tell him only this: The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..." He steepled his fingers and nodded slowly. "It will be enough to force Tom's hand. He will take quick action, and he will mark the child as his nemesis."

Severus stared. "Are you mad? Tell Vo—fuck—the Dark Lord who his nemesis is? Would we rather keep the person as a secret weapon?"



Dumbledore chuckled. "Ah, Severus. You alone among all my acquaintances are never afraid to speak your mind to me. It is always refreshing. But you see, Tom must identify this child for us. The child will need preparing, cultivating, if you will."

"What if he just kills him?" Severus asked flatly.

"I think he would rather corrupt him, if possible," Dumbledore said. "Though it is a valid question."

Severus frowned. "It didn't actually say that the chosen one was about to be born, did it? It just said that he is approaching. What if there's already someone who was born at the end of July whose family has defied the Dark Lord?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Can you think of anyone who has already defied Tom three times?" he asked.

"Well, not just now, but that doesn't mean it isn't possible!"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "It is a possibility we must consider. Thank you, Severus. I would ask you to return to Tom quickly. Tell him you were not offered a position, but that you did overhear something that is much more valuable. Tell him I have invited you to apply for the Defence position again next year, when you have gained more experience."

Severus nodded.

"Horace has been making noises about retirement, particularly since this business with Tom has grown more serious. He was Tom's Head of House, you realise. He feels it keenly."

Severus nodded again.

"I shall hire you next year, Severus, to teach potions. Belby has been impressed with your work, and I know you will do admirably."

"You know I don't want to teach at all," Severus pointed out. "I bloody hate children."

"Yes, yes, but you are brilliant at your craft," Dumbledore said, beaming. "What an honour, to impart some of that brilliance on to the next generation."

Severus was barely older than some of that 'next generation', but he decided not to argue further. He merely nodded and left.



"They've had a boy!" Remus looked up from his letter and grinned at Severus, who looked sour.

"Wonderful, Potter is reproducing. I shudder to think what a horrid child it will turn out to be."

"Oh bosh, he'll have Lily for a mother, you can't think she'll let him get away with anything."

Severus tilted his head to one side. "You may have a small point. But the poor thing will probably be ugly."

Remus shook his head. "You're always determined to look on the bright side, aren't you?" he teased. "Look, I'm going to stop round to visit after work, so don't wait tea, all right?"

Severus gave him an appalled look. "As long as you don't insist I accompany you."

"I wouldn't dream of it. You might've had Advanced Potions with Lily, but I know you never considered her a friend."

Severus shrugged. "Anyone who thought so highly of Potter..."

"What about me? James is my mate." Remus lifted an eyebrow in challenge.

"Yes, well, you're daft, but I can understand a Dark Creature being desperate for friends. Evans was pretty, clever, and popular. Why should she care whether Potter liked her or not?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't know whether to be more insulted or amused," he remarked. He finished his toast and left for work.



"Isn't he the most darling thing?" Lily said, smoothing her hand over the head of thick, wild black hair.

"He looks a bit too like James to be handsome," Remus joked.

Lily looked up, eyes flashing. "Remus Lupin, you—oh. You're teasing."

"Of course I am. He's lovely. And probably the closest I'll ever have to having a son, myself." Remus smiled. "May I hold him?"

Lily placed baby Harry carefully in Remus' arms. "Don't give up hope, Remus. I'm sure you'll meet a nice girl, someday. Someone who won't care about your furry little problem. After all, it doesn't bother me."

"Yes, but you had the poor judgment to marry James," Remus said, smiling. He cradled Harry carefully. "He feels so fragile." He wasn't a big baby, and for someone like Remus, who had to be hyperaware of his own strength, it was intimidating. It seemed absurd that the weight of the prophecy could be hung on the shoulders of this tiny person. He'd been searching the Hogwarts rolls for Dumbledore, looking for adults born near the end of July or the beginning of August, but tracking them down and learning whether they'd ever defied Voldemort was a time-consuming task.

"Yes, but he's a magic baby, so of course he isn't as fragile as he seems."

Remus dragged his attention back to the conversation. "How do you know?" he asked. "Couldn't he be a Squib?"

"Bite your tongue," Lily ordered. "Of course he won't be." She frowned. "Not that I would love him any less if he were," she said. "But I...oh, I just know. He isn't a Squib. I hope his brothers and sisters all turn out as perfect and wonderful as he is."

"Just make sure you teach him to hate bullies," Remus said, smiling down at Harry. "We'd all have been better off if James had learned that."

"Yes," Lily said, her voice absent. "Remus, I hope it won't hurt your feelings...James is insisting on Sirius for Harry's

godfather. But I promise," she added hastily, "that when little Gloria or David is born, you'll be the next."

Remus shrugged. It didn't surprise him, nor did it upset him. "Sirius and James have always been like brothers," he said. "I'm not bothered."

"Oh good." Lily gave him a relieved smile. "I should hate to think we'd offended you. Then again, you're too sensible to take offence at such a thing."

Too sensible, Remus thought in amusement later, when Severus' tongue was in his mouth and Severus' body pressed him against the wall of the bedroom. He wasn't too sensible for anything. He was just used to being shunted off to the side. It didn't bother him anymore.



"Dumbledore's accepted me as the Potions Master at Hogwarts," Severus said. He dragged a kitchen chair over to the fire and spread his cloak over it to dry.

Turning from the soup he had simmering on the cooktop, Remus laughed. "Don't sound so glum, Severus! You're brilliant at Potions."

"I hate children."

"Point."

"But the Dark Lord will be pleased. He will have a spy inside the school."

Remus nodded.

Severus sighed. "I hate this," he confessed. "I am so bloody tired of always pretending, always acting like someone I'm not. The only time I can be real is when I'm with you."

Remus felt a pang of sympathy. "I wish I could help," he said. He dished out a bowl of soup for each of them and carried them to the table. Then he went and wrapped his arms around Severus, ignoring the fact that he was cold.

Severus clung to him, resting his head on Remus' shoulder. "And now I won't even have that anymore. I have to move out."

"What?"

"I'll be teaching at Hogwarts," Severus reminded him. "The teachers all live at the school."

"Dumbledore won't make some sort of allowance for us?" Remus asked.



"What us? There is no us, as far as Dumbledore is concerned." Severus sighed. "Unless you want to tell him."

Remus swallowed. He didn't think people needed to know their business. "Do you think he'll make exceptions for us?"

"Probably not."

Remus sighed and kissed Severus' ear. "I wish...I wish this war was over. I wish we could be together without the war and the secrecy getting in the way."

"Dumbledore's pretty certain the prophecy is talking about either the Potter baby or the Longbottom baby." Severus sighed. "Another fifteen or twenty years of this, Merlin."

"He still has me searching the Hogwarts rolls for adults," Remus said. "Perhaps I'll find someone."

"Where are you now?" Severus asked dryly. He pulled away, the desperate look faded from his eyes again.

"Nineteen-thirty-four," Remus sighed.

Severus snickered. "When was Moody born?"

"April," Remus replied, "and several years earlier."

"Ah," Severus said in mock regret. He sat at the table across from Remus. "I'm going to miss this. I'll visit every weekend that I can. Well, every weekend I'm not supervising detentions." He smirked.

"Detentions? Severus—"

"I intend to have their fear if I cannot have their respect."

"Why wouldn't you have their respect? You're a teacher!"

"I'm a teacher who was at school with some of them. I'm a teacher who, if you'll recall, was de-pantsed in front of more than half the school a mere four years ago." Severus' eyes glittered.

"Five," Remus corrected. "It was five."

"Whatever it was, some of them saw that!" Severus snapped. "And the first time I hear anything about it will be the last."

Remus sighed. "You know, you catch more billywigs with honey than vinegar."

"Yes, well, spraying a tincture of luminous lemongrass and wormwood catches more billywigs than either," Severus retorted.

Remus rolled his eyes and continued eating.



Severus loathed children. He loathed the small simpering children who arrived as first years, and he loathed the smug seventh years who left Hogwarts. He detested the swotty ones who sucked up and the lazy ones who made no attempt to learn.

In short, he hated his job.

Day in, day out, he was forced to attempt to drum potions knowledge into minds that were simply nonreceptive. He took little satisfaction from the job. He was more skilled as a researcher than as a teacher. Why had the Dark Lord ever thought he would be a good person to put into position at the school?

Because you can bloody lie to anyone, he reminded himself. He had the mental control to hide his thoughts and emotions from Dumbledore as well as from Voldemort—and yet Remus could undo him with a mere glance or touch.

He sighed and finished marking the last of the third-year papers, then stood up and stalked to the window of the staff room. He had taken to sitting in the staff room to mark papers simply because he was lonely. When had that ever happened? He gazed at the distant lights of Hogsmeade, wondering if one of those lights he saw was Remus'. He'd grown soft, living with Remus like that. He'd grown accustomed to having someone else around, even if they were working in separate rooms for hours at a time.

The staff room door opened and Minerva walked in. She seemed unsurprised to see him there. "Severus, Professor Galli is requesting a bit of assistance with the Slytherins. I told him I would find you."

"He's Head of House. Can't he manage them?" Of course he couldn't manage them. Someone who taught Muggle Studies would never be respected by the Slytherins, even if he had been a Slytherin Prefect during his own days at Hogwarts.

"Severus, please," Minerva said. "You know you handle them better than he does."

"They're more afraid of me, you mean," Severus muttered, but he left his papers and followed her down to the dungeons.

Galli was a small, dark-haired man with bright eyes and a talent for annoying Severus. Perhaps it was merely because Severus felt Galli unfit to be Head of House. "Ah, Professor Snape! I'm very glad to see you! The Slytherins have, ah, blocked me from the common room."

Severus snorted and stalked past Galli, raising his wand. "Abritaportus," he ordered, flicking the wand in a shooing motion.

The door swung open and Severus glided into the common room. Crowds of Slytherins, who had undoubtedly been snickering only moments before, watching him warily.

"Ten points to Slytherin for creative use of a blocking spell," Severus announced. "And a week of detention for all of you unless you tell me whose idea this was."

Slytherin was truly a beautiful house, Severus thought, as every student took a step away from Travis Avery, who glared at his housemates. "Avery!" he barked. "Detention for a week. Be in my office after dinner tomorrow." He moved closer, using the gliding gait he had been perfecting. He'd discovered it intimidated people. "Your brother," he murmured, "would be disappointed."



He pulled away, satisfied by the glimmer of fear that produced in Avery's eyes. He turned and stalked out, ignoring Galli entirely and giving McGonagall a curt nod.

He would be Head of House before he was twenty-five, he vowed.



"Meeting with Fenrir Greyback at the Full Moon was a spectacularly bad idea," Severus said. He dabbed the healing ointments on with a careful hand, despite the way his voice was shaking with fury. "I don't care what Dumbledore says about the full moon project, Greyback is a Death Eater and a pack leader! You were an idiot!"

Remus sighed. "It's just a broken arm. It could be worse."

"Just a broken arm! It's an arm that's broken in four bloody places!" Severus' voice rose in pitch as well as

volume. "You're bloody lucky it wasn't your neck, you fucking idiot! What would I have done if he'd killed you?"

"I'm sorry." Remus closed his eyes. "I should have told Dumbledore I couldn't, this moon. I just..." The Marauders had wanted to run with him, one last time before James took his family into hiding. Remus had convinced them it would be a bad idea. He said they never knew who might be watching him, to use him to get to them.

Instead of running with his friends, he'd gone to meet with Greyback. Dumbledore had hoped Remus would be able to earn a place among Greyback's pack so the Order would have two spies within Voldemort's ranks. What happened wasn't exactly as they had planned..



"What exactly is it yer lookin' for here, lad? Acceptance? Absolution? There's neither here for you. Killer. Traitor. We know what you've done. You kill your own kind." Greyback glanced over Remus' shoulder, and before he could turn, he'd been seized by two burly werewolves.

"Tonight, your own kind will bring justice on you."

A flash of heat went through him. It was near enough to moonrise that he could feel his skin shivering. They were going to kill him! He struggled and used a nonverbal spell to slick their hands, breaking their grip on him. He pulled away and darted off, the pack behind him. They were still wearing their human bodies, but their voices were howls and yips and barks.

"Run, laddie!" Greyback roared, laughing as he chased Remus. "Run! We'll find you!"

He did run, twisting and turning through the underbrush. He thought he could hear water over the noise of pursuit, but he didn't care—if he came to a river, he would levitate himself across and leave the werewolves behind. It was too bad he'd never Apparated while in motion—if he'd had practice, he might have been able to Apparate away. But he didn't dare stop running, or they would be on him.

Suddenly his pursuers dropped back. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering why. They were watching him, ranged in a half circle behind him. He turned again and nearly screamed aloud. An Acromantula the size of the Knight Bus was poised above him, drawn perhaps by their shouts.

"Oh, God, I'm going to die," Remus muttered. He hexed the giant spider and darted away, hoping it would be too stunned to cast web after him. The werewolves were another matter. One of them caught his shoulder as he passed.

Remus spun, snarling, and slammed the man into a rock outcropping. A shudder rippled through his body and he groaned. The others doubled over, but their gazes were on him. He let out a howl as his body twisted against his will. His heart was slamming against his ribs. He knew as soon as they were transformed, they would be on him—and five to one, there was no question but that he would lose.

He only had one choice. In the last moments before the insanity overwhelmed him, he Apparated. He was aware of a sensation of falling, falling, and then horrific pain.

"I've already told Dumbledore you won't be doing any more raids," Severus said. "Your ankle is broken, too, though you probably didn't notice that after the arm."

Remus sighed. "It was—there was a...I fell," he said finally, giving up on trying to remember anything after the pain. "Trying to get away from them."

"You must have actually got away from them, or you wouldn't be alive right now," Severus said. "What happened, Remus?"

"Greyback knew. He knew I was the assassin." Remus sighed and let his eyes close. The pain potions were kicking in now, spreading their haze across his mind and body. "I'm sorry, Sev'rus."

Severus' hand stilled, then rested in Remus' hair. "You're bloody lucky I'm a spy. That's the only way I found you. Greyback came to the Dark Lord, boasting that he'd found and killed a rogue wolf. He described you, and I knew..." He sighed. "I reported it to Dumbledore, and Dumbledore's had us out searching for the past two days. I know the general territory Greyback's pack keeps, though, so I found you first."

"He told the others about you?" Remus asked, his eyes opening in alarm.

"They might as well know," Severus said. "The Dark Lord set me as a spy on Dumbledore. I told him I had been accepted as a double-agent into the Order. The spy, whomever it is, won't be able to convince the Dark Lord I am doing anything other than his bidding."



That sent Remus' mind jumping in another unpleasant direction. The spy. They'd known of the spy for nearly a year now, but so far Dumbledore had been unable to identify him—or her. Severus didn't know the identity of the spy, but he said that wasn't unusual; the Dark Lord was notoriously paranoid.

Remus' eyelids felt too heavy to open them again. "You stay with me?" he slurred.

Severus' hand found his hair again. "Of course I will, idiot."



The farewells had all been said. The Potters were gone, as if they had never existed. Sirius was in hiding. Remus was trying to convince himself that life would go on as usual instead of falling apart around them. The Fidelius felt like a defeat, somehow. It felt as though the Order had failed entirely, because they could not protect something that was good and precious and right. He went to work every morning as usual, missing Severus and missing Sirius and missing the Potters and wondering where Peter was these days. Nothing was normal.

He managed to spend part of the weekend with Severus, at least. They'd spent hours just lying in bed, alternating between shagging and talking. Severus said Voldemort had big plans for Halloween, so he wouldn't be able to come back the following weekend.

"That's all right, I'll just dress up as a werewolf and scare away any children here to do mischief," Remus joked.

Severus laughed and kissed him and went back to the school.



The cottage door crashed open, rattling the windows. "Remus!" Severus' voice was desperate. "Remus! God! Where are you?"

Remus set his book aside and stood up. "Here, in the sitting room," he called, shuffling in his socks towards the door.

Severus burst in, his Death Eater robes billowing around him, and threw himself on Remus. "Thank God you're all right!" he gasped, squeezing Remus tightly.

Bewildered, Remus hugged him back. "Severus, what's—

"I can't stay," Severus panted. "I shouldn't have left my lord's side. He has plans for multiple attacks on the Order members tonight. He also says he knows where the Potters are. Your friend Black betrayed them! Find Dumbledore, tell him he has to warn them somehow."

"But—"

Too late. Severus Disappeared.

Remus shoved his boots on and flung a cloak around his shoulders, then rushed up to the castle. He was strong and fit, and his stamina was better than a human's, but all the same he was gasping and staggering by the time he reached the school. He stumbled into the Entrance Hall and nearly collided with Hagrid.

"Dumbledore! I need Dumbledore!"

Hagrid stared at him for a moment, then said, "He's in the feast with the children. I'll take yeh—"

"No! Go in and get him! I can't be seen here."

He bent at the waist and propped one hand against the wall, panting for breath, as he waited for the Headmaster to appear. It seemed like ages before the door creaked open and Dumbledore's voice reached his ears.

"Remus, my boy, are you all right?"

"Voldemort is going after Lily and James!" Remus gasped. "Severus says he knows where they are." A voice in his heart was wailing that Sirius couldn't have betrayed them, but there would be time for that later. Now he needed to save his friends.

"No..." Dumbledore whispered. A look of distress crossed his face. "I don't know where they are, Remus. I can only send an owl."

"Patronuses?" Remus gasped. "Will a Patronus work?"

Dumbledore nodded and flicked his wand, sending a silvery phoenix shooting away from them. Then he seized Remus' arm and hustled him towards the Headmaster's office. "Come, we'll send an owl and wait for news." Then he paused. "Wait. Hagrid!"

The half-giant hadn't got far. He turned and hastened back to them. "Yes, Headmaster?"

"Tell Minerva I should like for her to go to Lily's sister. She'll know what I mean."

Remus stared from one to the other, confused. Lily's sister was a right pill. Why would Dumbledore want to send someone to her.

Dumbledore glanced at Remus. "She may be in danger," he explained. "Come."



The night went slowly, so slowly. Remus paced the edges of the office, then sat long enough to drink a few sips of tea, only to jump up and pace again. Dumbledore stood at the window, staring out pensively. He broke the silence only once, to explain he could not leave the school defenceless.

"You don't know where they are, anyway," Remus pointed out.

"That is true, but I suspect," Dumbledore said.

As the eastern sky was paling, he summoned Hagrid to his office.

"Go to Godric's Hollow," he said. "Tell me what you find there."

Remus would have followed, but Dumbledore shook his head. "Severus will need you, Remus," he murmured. "I think this has been a very difficult night."

Remus wondered if Dumbledore somehow knew—but then Dumbledore sighed. "Peter will need you, too, but I fear he is unlikely to come out of hiding until tomorrow, if what I suspect is true."



Severus arrived some time later. Remus wondered if he had missed Severus' arrival, or if Dumbledore had just been guessing. His lover was bloody and dirty and exhausted, but he was alive. Remus moved to help support him until they got to a chair.

Severus didn't speak. He just held out his left arm, bared to the elbow. It was pure, smooth skin.

"The Mark!" Remus gasped. Dumbledore said nothing.

"The Dark Lord is gone." Severus said finally. "We're all the same. No one has their Mark anymore."

Dumbledore nodded. "And the Longbottoms?"

"Unharmful. We were sent there, but I subdued the others sent with me, then Obliviated them. Frank and Alice were to turn them over to the Aurors after I left."

Dumbledore sighed. "Then it was the Potters."

Remus' throat tightened. "What?"

"He chose Harry."

Severus reached out and grasped Remus' hand.

"Remus, take Severus to Poppy. I...there are arrangements to be made."

"Yes, sir."

They made their way slowly to the hospital wing, Severus leaning on Remus with every step. "I'm sorry," Severus whispered.

"They're dead, aren't they?"

Severus didn't speak. He just leaned more on Remus.



Remus was glad Sirius had been sent to Azkaban without a trial. He hated himself for still loving Sirius, for still finding it difficult to believe that his friend, his laughing, exuberant friend, had been responsible for killing Lily and James and Peter and so many Muggles. He hated Severus for feeling responsible, because he hadn't known the spy was Black. He hated Dumbledore for using them all and then letting Voldemort kill the most beautiful of them.

But mostly he hated Sirius.

He wanted Sirius to be given the Kiss. It had been discussed, but violence, the Ministry had discovered, was easiest committed in the heat of passion. When they had time to consider the effects of the Kiss, the cost of maintaining a live but soulless body after the Kiss was administered, they had changed their minds.

At least Severus had stopped making snide remarks about Sirius, once the target became unable to defend himself. For that much, at least, Remus was grateful. He found a new job, working as a delivery boy in Muggle London. He didn't enjoy it, but at least it was a job. Severus' teacher salary was enough to keep them comfortable for a month or so. They started taking the Evening Prophet as well as the Daily.

Remus told himself life was normal. In reality, normal returned to Remus.



RESURGENT DEATH EATERS ATTACK AURORS

Rita Skeeter reporting

Nearly a year of freedom from You-Know-Who's campaign of terror ended yesterday. Frank and Alice Longbottom are in St Mungo's Extended Care Ward after being attacked and tortured by Death Eaters. Little is known about the purpose of the attack, or why the Longbottoms were targeted; however the Death Eaters involved have been taken into custody. Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus Lestrange, Rabastan Lestrange, and Bartemius Crouch, Jr., were arrested early this morning and are being held in a secure location. This reporter wonders if Barty Crouch will be mysteriously acquitted of all charges despite eyewitness testimony that places him at the scene.

The Longbottoms had a young son, Neville, who has been placed in the care of his paternal grandmother, Augusta Longbottom.

"This is my fault," Severus said. He dropped his head into his hands and heaved a deep sigh.

"You couldn't have known," Remus protested.

"I could have, and I should have!" Severus snapped. "I know Bellatrix! She's her master's devoted bitch. I should have known she would try to find him."

"Why only those four?" Remus asked.

"Because no one else is stupid enough to bloody want him back," Severus muttered. "God, Remus. Tortured. Bellatrix would drive them to madness. She knows no mercy. She wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted."

Remus leaned against Severus and put his arms around him. "It isn't your fault."

"I still feel like it is."

"Have you talked to Dumbledore?"

"I don't care if Dumbledore agrees with you, Remus, I still feel guilty."

"Then you did talk to Dumbledore."

"Yes, yes, I talked to him." Severus sighed. "He says Frank and Alice will live. He also says that when they were awake they didn't recognise him, or Augusta, or even their son."

Remus sighed, too. "I'll go to St Mungo's tomorrow."

"I'm going to tell my parents."

They were eating breakfast, sitting at the small wooden table in Remus' kitchen. Severus still thought of it as Remus' kitchen, despite the fact that he lived here three months out of every year, plus holidays. It was July, not quite a month into the summer holiday, and Severus was feeling unsettled.

Remus put down the paper. "What?"

"I'm going to tell my parents," Severus repeated. "My mum keeps asking if there's someone in my life. I'm tired of lying to her. I'm going to tell her."

He felt as much as saw Remus tense. "Severus, she wouldn't understand. None of them would."

Severus clenched his jaw. "They're my parents. They deserve to know."

"Why? What have they done that makes them deserving?"



Severus sighed through his nose and pressed fingertips against his temple. "They had me. They raised me. They scrimped and saved to put me through Hogwarts, even after Da lost his arm. They fucking love me, Remus! They deserve to know!"

Remus sat back in his chair and stared at Severus, his expression hooded. "Don't expect me to tell mine," he said.

It hurt, but Severus wasn't about to admit that. "Don't worry, I'd never ask you to grow a bloody spine." He stood up and carried his bowl to the sink, imagining he could taste the acid of his words.

Remus didn't say anything. Severus could feel another passive-aggressive sulk coming on, and he wasn't going to sit through it. He ran water in his bowl and then folded his arms across his chest.

"I imagine it would be too much to ask you to come with me."

Remus looked down at the tabletop. Please, please, Severus thought. He didn't want to go through it alone. He knew they wouldn't like it. They'd ask where they went wrong, they'd probably shout and blame each other. But it would be easier if Remus would go and stand by him as he told them. He couldn't fully explain,

even to himself, why it was so important to come clean with them. Perhaps it was because he'd lived so many lies for so many years now. Perhaps it was just because he was proud of Remus, no matter how it might look, and he just wanted to tell someone that he was loved. Even if it was just his parents.

After a few minutes, Remus sighed. "I don't like it," he said finally. "But I'll come with you."

Severus nodded. "Thank you."

Remus shook his head and held out his hand. Severus gripped it.



The experience itself was both easier and exponentially more difficult than he'd expected.

They'd seen Remus at Kings Cross Station a few times, and they knew Remus was a friend. He didn't know what they would think of Severus owling them and asking if he could invite Remus to Halifax for tea. He'd never had anyone for tea before, not even Regulus. From the moment he sent the owl, he felt on edge, as if they would guess his secret before he had a chance to tell them outright. That would be worse, somehow, for them to guess.

But he and Remus arrived at the house on Spinner's End for tea on Thursday. Remus was in brown cords and a plaid shirt, Severus in jeans and a button-down shirt. His freshly-washed hair was tucked behind his ears, and Remus kept smoothing a hand over his own hair, which was beginning to curl inside his collar.

Tobias answered the door, sober and clean, to Severus' relief. He still worried about the drinking, even though Tobias had cut back his drinking since getting hired on at the printing shop.

"Sev." Tobias pulled him into the one-armed hug that no longer seemed strange. Severus embraced his father fiercely, mentally daring Remus to ever call him Sev. Only his dad got away with calling him that. Tobias' thin lips curved in a smile. "You must be Remus."

"Yes, sir," Remus said, extending his left hand as if he routinely used that hand to shake. Severus felt something between his shoulders relax just a bit.

Tobias held Remus' hand for a long moment, obviously testing his grip. Then he nodded. "Good to meet you.

Any friend of Sev's is welcome here."

Remus smiled. "Thank you, Mr Snape."

An eloquent hand wave. "Call me Tobias. I know you boys age slower than I do, but there's no need to age me prematurely."

Remus laughed. That something between Severus' shoulder blades relaxed further.

Eileen came from the kitchen then. "Severus. This is Remus, then?"

"Yes, mother." He dropped a kiss on her dry cheekbone.

"Your hair is longer."

Severus shrugged.

"Tea is nearly ready. Would you like to come sit down?"

It wasn't a question, it was an order. They followed her to the table. Tobias settled into a chair. "What do you do, Remus?"

"I work at a shop in Hogsmeade."

"Is that where you live?" Eileen asked. "Are you part of the school?"

"No, though I did attend school there, the same time Severus did. I don't teach like he does."

Tobias glanced at Severus. "You're teaching, chemistry, I think your mother said."

"Sort of," Severus agreed. It was easier than explaining.

"Sort of." Tobias snorted and looked at Remus. "That's Severus-speak for 'It's too complicated to explain, Dad.' Didn't take long to learn that."

Remus looked as if he weren't certain whether to laugh or not. He shrugged. "Chemists are those people you buy paracetamol from and that, yeah?"

Tobias gave his sharp laugh. "Sort of."

Remus did laugh, then, and it was laughing at himself rather than at Tobias. Severus' shoulders relaxed entirely. At least Remus and Tobias were going to get on. That was what he'd worried about the most. Tobias was a good man, he was, but he was hard to understand, sometimes. Well, most of the time.

"And how is the teaching going, Severus?" Eileen asked. "Are the students all still dunderheads and idiots?"

"Mostly," Severus said. "There's one, Bill Weasley, who may have a bit of promise. He's a bit of a smart-aleck, but he has a decent grasp of potions."

"Weasley - that would be Molly Prewett's oldest boy, then?"

"Yeah. He's actually got the Gryffindors in his year mostly caught up with the rest of the students."

Remus frowned. "Hey, not all Gryffindors are idiots."

"No, only most of them," Severus said, glancing at him.

Eileen's eyebrows rose. "You were a Gryffindor, then, Remus?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you knew the Potters, I imagine. They were in Severus' year, weren't they?"

Severus tensed again. Blast. He hadn't counted on his mother mucking things up. He glanced at Remus, who hadn't spoken yet. He looked as if he'd swallowed something wrong.

"Yes, ma'am. James was in my dorm." He frowned. "We—we don't talk about them. Not to be rude, that is, but—"

"No, of course not." Eileen waved a hand. "How insensitive of me."

"No, really—"

"Yes, it was. We shan't speak of it further."

Remus apparently recognise the finality of Eileen's statement, because he turned his attention back to his plate with no further protest. Severus relaxed a bit again.

The meal itself went fairly smoothly from that point. Severus could sense his mother's simmering impatience, but he didn't care. He focused on his father's good-natured talk about how Halifax was going downhill and something or other Maggie Thatcher had done. Remus paid more attention than Severus did and got Tobias involved in explaining how the textile mills really worked. It wasn't anything Severus hadn't heard before, and he concentrated on eating and avoiding his mother's gimlet stare.

Finally, when pudding had been served and Eileen had finished pouring tea for them all, she sat back in her chair. "Well, Severus, you said you had something important to discuss with us."

Severus cleared his throat and considered chickening out. He rejected a half-dozen lies before he noticed Remus' gaze on him. That got his back up. He nodded. "Yes."

Then all ability to speak seemed to abandon him.

"Well, son, what is it?" Tobias asked finally. "It can't be any worse than this spying business you did during that war you wizards fought."

Eileen thinned her lips and glanced away; she'd not approved of Severus' involvement in the war. She hadn't understood why he'd allowed himself to be drawn into the Dark Lord's nets.

Severus could hear a distant roaring in his ears and wondered if perhaps he were going to be saved by a tidal wave from the River Calder. Then he realised it was his blood rushing through his veins. Merlin, he was panicking, wasn't he?

At that moment he felt Remus' hand close on his, under the table.

Severus squeezed Remus' hand hard and took a deep breath. "Yes. I thought it time I tell you that I'm queer."

There, that hadn't been too difficult.

Remus' hand tightened on his. Severus swallowed.

Tobias looked as if he'd been hit with a board right between the eyes. Eileen stood up and walked away from the table. Severus' breathing sped up.

From the kitchen came a distant crash. Severus' shoulders tightened again. Tobias finally moved, glancing towards the kitchen door with a frown. Then he cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. "Was it something I did wrong, son? Was it the drinking?"

Severus heard Remus' sharp intake of breath, but he didn't look at him. "You didn't do anything wrong, Da. I've always—it's just the way I am."

"I shouldn't have taken it out on you and your mam. I should have done more."



"It isn't anything to do with you, Da!" Severus said. He felt a sudden desperation that his father not hate him for this, and he wondered why he'd ever thought it was a good idea to tell his parents the truth.

Tobias leaned forward and rubbed his hand over his face. "So you and Remus, you're both poofs, then."

Severus felt something bridle inside him at hearing Remus called names. "Yeah, we're gay. He's my lover. Has been since we left school."

"What, all this time? And we never knew? Did someone do something to you? Was it someone at that school?" Tobias looked up, his face going red. "It was that Slughorn bloke, wasn't it? I always thought he looked dodgy. If he—"

"No, Da!" Severus shouted. It shocked them all. He didn't usually raise his voice to Tobias. "Look, Sluggy's not queer, no one did anything to me. If I'm a pervert, it happened all on my own, all right? I just—I felt like you deserved to know, that's all." He pushed away from the table, not letting go of Remus' hand. "We'll go."

Belatedly Remus stood, too, letting Severus drag him away from the table. There was a scrape of wood on wood and then Tobias' strong hand was closing around Severus' arm.

"No, son. Don't—don't go away like this."

Severus jerked out of his grip and Tobias let his hand fall to his side. They stared at each other for a long time. Severus could feel Remus' burning desire to say something, and he was grateful his lover kept silent.

Finally Tobias sighed. "You're—you're not going to start listening to Barbra Streisand and nancing off to the ballet, are you?"

Severus stared at him.

"Right, stupid question, eh?" Tobias gave a gruff, uncomfortable chuckle. "Have a bit of pity on your old da, Sev. I—bloody hell, this is a pisser of a thing to take in. I'm trying here, all right?"

A cupboard door slammed in the kitchen. They all turned to look this time.

"You've upset your mam. Not that—I mean..." Tobias sighed. "Look, you're still my son. This will take a bit of time to get used to, but I'm not about to shout at you or disown you or anything." He shook his head. "I'd better go talk to Eileen." He pulled Severus into another hug, which served better than any words to make Severus feel better. Then he turned and, stiffly, hugged Remus, too. "If you make my son happy, well..."

He shrugged and went into the kitchen. Severus and Remus stood in the living room for a minute, during which they could hear Eileen's stringent voice rising and falling. "Unnatural! It isn't...don't give a toss what you think...if they're going to...grandchildren!"

"Come on," Severus muttered. "They'll be at it for hours. They argue a lot."

They Disappeared.



The summer of 1983 passed too quickly. It was the first summer not spent fighting the war or rounding up rogue Death Eaters, and though Remus was working a lot, he and Severus still had evenings together, and the nights—

Oh, the nights were good.

The cottage Remus lived in was small, and the cooling charms were faulty, so summer nights were hot and sultry, but that just made Severus want to touch Remus more. He liked the sweat-slicked sex, the wide-flung windows that let in a breeze but were shielded by silencing spells so they could be as loud as they wanted. He liked it when Remus came to the potting shed in the back garden, which Severus had converted into a potions laboratory, and interrupted Severus' research with a small, polite cough, only to be standing in the doorway completely starkers, with a smirk on his face that said he knew Severus wouldn't be able to resist.

Severus never was.

They had nights of hard shagging, nights of slow, tender love-making, nights of impatient, frantic fucks. They spent hours lying awake in the humid darkness, touching, talking. Severus had never felt so whole. He had not, before Remus, been aware of great gaping holes in his life; but somehow his life, with Remus, felt more complete, more real.

But the summer nights were trickling away from them; Severus could feel the tide coming back in, and soon he would have to return to Hogwarts and the wretched little brats who refused to learn and passed the time by lobbing dungbombs into boiling cauldrons. He dreaded the end of the summer. Despite the fact that his masterwork was nearly finished, he spent less time in the potions laboratory and more time in Remus' bed, clinging

to his happiness. His one consolation was that Remus obviously felt the same. They never talked about it, but Remus never complained about the nights spent without sleeping at all as August drew on.

Their last night at Number Eight Goldenrod Lane, Severus stripped and climbed in bed with Remus, holding his naked lover close. They spoke only in murmurs and touches, and they didn't make love. Severus' throat was tight, and he kept feeling as though he might throw up. Why it was harder this year than the two years he'd already been teaching, he didn't know—perhaps because this was their first summer of reality.

As the window began to show the paling sky, Severus rolled fiercely against Remus.

"Promise me you'll still be here when I come back."

Remus didn't smile. He looked as though he were clenching his jaw. "I'll wait right here for you. Come home on the weekends, if you can."

"Every weekend," Severus promised. He kissed Remus with lips and teeth and tongue. For a while they concentrated on that, and the looming reality of September First slipped away.

But that was the year Dumbledore asked Severus to take over as Head of Slytherin House, and suddenly he found himself needed in the Slytherin dorm at all hours, to deal with homesick first years or mischievous third years or amorous sixth years. He spent less and less time visiting the house on Goldenrod Lane and more time writing notes to Remus, inviting him to the castle for the night or promising they'd have an uninterrupted night soon.

That was the year Dumbledore asked a wizard by the name of Herodotus LeFlange to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts. Severus didn't like the smelly little Frenchman, and he complained frequently to Remus that he ought to apply to Dumbledore to teach, because a werewolf would be a better teacher of Defence than a man who had never battled anything Darker than a pixie. Remus always laughed and said he was happy with his job at the junk shop. Severus didn't see how that could be possible, but he didn't bother arguing.

That was also the year that Severus began suffering heart-stopping nightmares of the Dark Lord. At first it was just the soft, sibilant voice, high-pitched in the dark-

ness. Then it was the red glow of slitted eyes as the Dark Lord's voice expressed his disappointment in Severus. Often there was torture. After the third time Severus woke Remus up—this time by hitting him in the eye as he flailed—he stopped going to Goldenrod Lane for the weekends.

The nightmares worried Dumbledore (and Remus, Severus knew, though Remus never said, just watched him with slightly narrowed eyes), but they didn't interfere with Severus' finishing his masterwork for the European Potioners Institute. His refinements on the Dreamless Sleep potion were enough to earn him his mastery.

Belby claimed to be proud of him, though Severus suspected it was more relief to be rid of him. Dumbledore, he believed, truly was proud, if his joke about Severus being "twice a master—once at Hogwarts and once in potions" was anything to judge by. But Remus gave him the best congratulations. When Severus turned up at the cottage, his letter and certificate in hand, Remus said, "Congratulations. I always knew you would become the youngest potions master in England." He'd served a very nice meal and they had celebrated with enthusiastic sex. Later that night, Severus had dreamed of Voldemort again, but Remus just wrapped strong arms around Severus and refused to let him leave.

Then it was June again, and the school term was ending, and Severus could finally return home to Remus for the summer.



"Remus, you are the best person I have for this job. None of our recent Defence Professors are skilled enough to track down the rumours and remain above suspicion themselves. But you—I have heard from many sources how tenacious and subtle you are. You have never failed me—"

"Never?" Remus burst in. "I couldn't stop Sirius from betraying us! I got myself captured by the werewolves! How can you say I never failed you?"

Dumbledore sighed and placed a hand gently on Remus' shoulder. "My boy, you always put your best effort into everything you do. That is all anyone can ask."

"If I'd just got to Peter after the attack, if we'd gone after Sirius together—" Remus broke off.

"Life cannot be lived through 'if only', Remus."

He shook his head and sighed. "What do you need me to do, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore poured them both more tea. "I don't know if Severus has mentioned to you that he still suffers nightmares about Voldemort."

Remus nodded. As if Severus had needed to tell him; he woke Remus with his thrashing sometimes. "He says Voldemort isn't dead. He says Voldemort will be back."



Dumbledore sighed. "I very much fear that he is correct. It is entirely possible that he destroyed himself, of course—but I have been hearing things that distress me, of a new monster walking the steppes. My friend Yvgenie, the Headmaster of Irkutsk School of Magic, has written to me, and I feel it only right to send someone to investigate."

Remus thought about the three weeks left in August, of Severus sleeping alone in their bed. It wasn't fair! They were physically apart so much of the year! He nodded and smiled pleasantly at Dumbledore. "Should I leave right away, sir?"

"Oh, no, I think that won't be necessary. You will need to arrange an absence from your current job, to prepare your house....let us say September, I think."

Remus had been made redundant at the last full, but if Dumbledore didn't know, Remus wasn't going to correct him. "That sounds good."

Dumbledore nodded, smiling. "Very well. Thank you, Remus." He stood and clasped Remus' hand. "I know I can depend on you."



1 September 1984

The Orient Express

Dear Severus,

I miss you. I have a feeling I'm going to start every letter to you that way. It doesn't feel right, being away from you. It's different, knowing you're in England and I'm...well, wherever I currently am. I wish you were with me. You would find fault with the service, of course, and you wouldn't like the little

carriage I have, but you would amuse me with your piss and vinegar remarks.

I'll write more when I have more to say.

Love,

Remus

17 September 1984

A Backwater village in China

Dear Severus,

Are my letters boring you? The same thing every night, I love you, I miss you, I wish you were here. I'm afraid I've little else to say. I'm reporting all the rumours I come across to Dumbledore, and he said he would keep you apprised, since you are our resident expert on Voldemort, so I shan't spend any time copying what I've already written to him.

You can address your letters to me here, for the time being. If you're writing. If you miss me. Do you miss me? (Just kidding, I know you do. All the same, it would be nice to have you reassure me of that.)

Love,

Remus

10 October 1984

Still in the Chinese Backwaters

Dear Severus,

I had an encounter with what I think must have been a lethifold yesterday. I didn't see it, of course, but I could sense something nearby, and hear movements. I was listening to an old woman talk about the monster that has been eating poultry and stealing milk. There were three children playing in the room, and behind us a small girl was napping. I had a vague sense of unease, and then something made a small shuffling noise. It was very strange. I cast spells to detect Dark magic and protect us, and something near the sleeping child disturbed my magic, though we saw nothing.



Shortly after, the girl awoke and said she'd dreamed she couldn't breathe.

The old grandmother was frightened enough to throw me out of the house without answering any more questions. She said the monster must have known she was talking about it, and decided to punish her for speaking.

I can't agree with her; I do think it was a lethifold rather than anything more sinister, but all the same, I've cast a few wards around her house, to keep her safe.

I love you.

Remus

24 October 1984

Another Chinese Backwater village

Dear Severus,

It looks as though I shan't be home for Halloween. I've some leads, but I've been on the move tracing them for several days. I have a local guide, a boy of about twelve or thirteen named Xiao, who tells me we are getting close to dangerous territory. He doesn't seem to be afraid, though. His family sends him out hunting in this territory all the time.

It's startling how different life is here. There is little formal schooling, and boys become men much earlier than we do in England. The Magical villages in China have escaped the regime, which means families aren't limited to one child, and girls are still valued here. It's a relief, I admit, because I was highly uncomfortable during the week I spent in Muggle Beijing.

I miss you, and I love you.

Remus

2 November 1984

I'm not sure where I am right now.

Dear Severus,

I miss you. I continue to be frustrated in my search for rumours about Voldemort. It seems that he isn't lingering long in any one area, though I have been following tales of blood-drinkers for the past fortnight. I can't say I really want to encounter him, even if he is, as you and Dumbledore suspect, currently lacking a body. If all he needs is a body, who is to say he won't simply pick one that suits his purposes, possess it for a time, and then release it? And then I might find myself in the position of killing an innocent person.

It is bitterly cold here, and I am told it will grow colder yet. I wish I could return to England. I have seen enough snow to last a lifetime.

Love,

Remus

18 November 1984

The arse-end of nowhere

Dear Severus,

I miss you. I'm bloody cold. Still alive, still found nothing. Too fucking freezing to write more.

Love,

Remus

29 November 1984

Yep Infirmary

Dear Severus,

I miss you. I have been sdown for the past week with a nasty illness of some sort. I've no idea what it is, but it's got into my lungs and

made breathing difficult. I spend a great deal of time coughing and gasping for breath.

Don't worry, I'm fine. The Healers here at Yep Infirmary are skilled and very well versed in non-traditional methods, which means I've been taking a lot of foul-tasting potions, but they work less invasively than some of our own. I really must buy you a few books on Chinese Potions before I come home.

I'll write to you again when I'm better.

Love,  
Remus

6 December 1984

Travelling again

Dear Severus,

Thank you for writing to me while I was in hospital. I am feeling much better. I miss you desperately, of course. I can't believe it's been over three months since I last saw you and held you in my arms. I wish this were over so I could come home to you.

Love,  
Remus



The third year Hufflepuff girl was in tears, and Severus' voice was a low deadly hiss. He was just getting warmed up.

"—And if you cannot brew this potion adequately by the end of this class, you will come to the front of the room and read the note aloud, so we all will know what is so much more entertaining than learning about Shrinking Solutions. Is that understood?"

"Professor Snape?"

He whipped around to face the door, enraged at the interruption. A Ravenclaw prefect stood there, shifting her weight nervously from one foot to the other as she watched him.

"What?" he demanded, and everyone in the classroom flinched.

"The Headmaster asked me to come fetch you. He says it's urgent, sir."

Severus glared at her for a long moment, then swept his glare across the class. "Finish the Shrinking Solution. Applesby, report to your Head of House for a detention and be glad you have been spared my punishment." He slammed his book shut and activated the spell that would shriek aloud if any of the students tried to cheat.

Then he swept out of the room and past the Ravenclaw girl.

"Sir," she said, much more timidly than she originally had. "Sir, the Headmaster is in the hospital wing."

What the deuce was he doing there? Severus nodded curtly. "Get back to your class now," he ordered. He could find the bloody hospital on his own.



Why would Dumbledore be sending for him? Had one of his Slytherins been injured? Severus hoped it was one of the older ones. He couldn't help but feel a bit responsible for his younger ones. The ones who had been students here before he began teaching, though—he didn't care about them at all. They had tested and tried him every day since he came back, perhaps remembering the time Potter de-pantsed him in front of the school, or having older siblings who remembered he had been called Snivellus. He loathed the ones who dared be any reminder of what he had been—and he made them pay.

But when he flung open the door to the school infirmary, Pomfrey, Dumbledore, and McGonagall were all there—and there were no students in sight. Severus glowered at them. "You felt the need to interrupt my class for some reason?"

They turned to look at him, and Dumbledore's expression was grave. McGonagall looked angry.

"Severus..." Dumbledore folded his hands and sighed. "I am concerned, because I have heard nothing from Remus for several days. I would not have interrupted your class, but we received word of possible dragon unrest in the area he is visiting."

Severus' nightmare of the previous night suddenly returned to him—red glowing eyes and cold, high-pitched laughter, and flames. He was no Seer, but perhaps his Occlumency lessons with the Dark Lord had established some level of vulnerability, at least in his subconscious mind.

"You think something has happened to Remus."

Dumbledore held his hands to either side, palms up. "I can say nothing for certain. But I feel a lingering unease in my mind. He had been owling me a brief note every evening, as I requested, and now—there has been no word for six days."

"You shouldn't have sent him," Severus said, clenching his jaw. "He hasn't been your kept assassin for years. He works in a bookshop. You shouldn't send him into danger."

McGonagall and Pomfrey stared openly at him, their expressions appalled that he would dare to criticise the Headmaster. Dumbledore simply looked steadily back at him, unfazed.

"Don't look at me as if I were a stupid child!" Severus bit out. "And don't act like you don't know anything about it. I need him! You know I need him! And you sent him to chase down rumours involving Vol—FUCK! the Dark Lord!" He was nearly shouting.

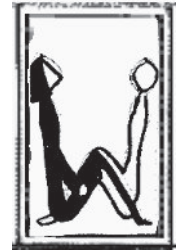
McGonagall gasped and he turned on her. "Shut up!" he spat. "You let him do it. You let him pull Remus in, turn Remus into a killer. My Remus, innocent, gentle Remus, who disliked conflict so much he wouldn't even stand up to his mates. You both always told him he wasn't controlled by the werewolf inside him, but you made him a monster—"

Severus realised suddenly that he was ranting, and he was spouting off about things they had no business knowing. He clamped his teeth together, glared at them for a moment, then stalked away.



His Portkey took him to Beijing, where he had to register his visit with the Chinese Ministry. He was met by a pretty witch named Su Li, who issued him papers and permits. He explained to her that he was looking for a colleague, who had been here collecting old wives' wisdom—it wouldn't do, after all, to tell her the truth, that they thought a mad spirit who had once been the Dark Lord was flitting about corrupting people.

Su Li pointed him in the direction of several helpful wizards, two of which were names Severus recognised from the messages Remus had sent to Dumbledore. By good fortune, the first man, a folklore and Dark Arts scholar, was very excited to see Severus.



"It's good you have come," he said. "Your friend is injured. The dragons came several nights ago and attacked the village. He fought very valiantly—thanks to him, two children and their mother are still alive. But he was injured. Come, he'll be glad to see you."

Severus followed the man, nearly treading on his heels in his impatience. He led him to a long, squat building made of stone. It was full of beds, most of which had people in them. The man pointed, and in one of the beds was a bandaged white man.

Severus pushed past his guide and the rest of the beds, dropping to his knees next to the Englishman. "Remus?" he murmured. The nose looked familiar, and the lips, but the rest of his face was swathed in white gauze.

The man shifted and moaned, then sighed. After a moment, his eyes flickered open, and Severus felt a jolt of relief hit him in the gut. He knew these eyes that stared at him and filled with tears.

"Yes, I'm here," Severus whispered. "Dumbledore sent me to fetch you home."

"Thought...I was going to...to die alone."

"You're not dying at all!" Severus ordered him. He lifted a hand and rested it gently on Remus'. "I have Portkeys. Pomfrey's waiting for us."

Remus smiled faintly. "Yes, take me home."

Severus bent over him, letting his breath hit Remus' face. "I kept all your letters," he whispered. "I missed you so bloody much."

"I didn't find anything," Remus said. His eyes were fluttering closed again. "Rumours, but no proof. Never any proof."

"Nevermind," Severus said. He wanted to kiss Remus, but there were too many people about. He just shifted until he could get an arm around him. "I'm going to key it in a moment. Hold on, Remus."

And then they both felt the jerk behind the navel, the whirling confusion, that went along with a Portkey. Severus had time to hope it wouldn't make Remus' condition worse—and then they were in the hospital at Hogwarts, and Pomfrey was hurrying towards them.

Severus didn't want to let go. He'd nearly lost Remus. He waited until Poppy's cold fingers clutched at his wrist, then settled Remus onto a bed. Poppy shooed him away from the bed, and he settled in to wait.



Dumbledore arrived soon after they did, and Severus eavesdropped openly on Remus' report, such as it was. Nothing but smoke and rumours, no matter where Remus went. Mysterious deaths, but nothing that really pointed to foul play. And fear—thick, choking fear.

"But nothing I can prove, nothing I could touch," Remus sighed. The bandages on his face had come off, and Poppy had his burns nearly healed. There was still the broken ribs and wrist to deal with, but those would be healed by the end of the evening. Severus had edged closer until Remus reached out and clutched his hand, and they were sitting like that.

Dumbledore shook his head. "I am sorry you were injured, Remus," he said softly. "But I do appreciate your work. Your information is invaluable to me." He studied their hands for a moment. "Severus has informed me that the two of you are in a relationship."

Severus managed not to flinch at the look Remus gave him, but then he realised it was mostly surprise, mingled with relief. "Yes," Remus murmured. "We've been in love for three years now."

Dumbledore nodded. "I fear there would be little support for such a relationship, were it to become public," he said, "but I am always glad to find a little more love in the world. I shall attempt to make more accommodation for the relationship in regards to Severus' duties."

Remus didn't say anything, just closed his eyes. But Severus could tell he was smiling.



Still drying his hair, Remus came out of the bath—and who knew Hogwarts professors had en suite baths, anyway? He hadn't until he'd started visiting on the week-

ends. He expected Severus to have got a breakfast tray from the house-elves already, so he was surprised to find him sitting where Remus had left him. The post had fallen to the floor, scattered around Severus' feet. Remus went over to sit next to him.

"Let me guess, you've inherited a million Galleons and you're trying to figure out how to tell me you want someone younger and prettier," he teased.

Severus looked up slowly. "It's from my dad." His voice was hollow. "He's in hospital."

Remus sat up. "What?"

"He—his liver is shutting down."

"Oh, fuck, Severus. I'm sorry." Remus put his arms around his lover, holding him even though Severus was tense and stiff. Severus didn't like emotions, but Remus always forced him to acknowledge them. It was better that way, in the long run, Remus thought.

Severus sighed and leaned into Remus. They didn't speak for a long time. Remus could feel Severus gathering his control.

"What hospital?"

"Halifax Royal Infirmary." Severus swore. "I have a detention to supervise today. I can't go."

"Dumbledore would let you."

Severus sat up and pulled out of Remus' grasp. "No. I'm not going to ask. It can wait until tomorrow."

Remus stared at him. "Severus, this is your father—"

"He'll still be dying tomorrow!" Severus snapped. He stood up and strode out of his quarters.

Remus stayed where he was for a few minutes, trying to comprehend and imagine how he would feel if it were his father dying. He didn't know. It was beyond his grasp.

Finally he stood and walked over to the window, staring out at the dreary December day. He had been looking forward to this weekend; it was the first they'd been able to spend together since Halloween. Dumbledore's accommodation for Severus' relationship was no more lenient than the accommodation given for Sinistra's marriage, or Flitwick's. Remus appreciated that at least the Headmaster was supportive, but he would feel more grateful if that support extended to inviting Remus to live in the castle, for instance.

He sighed and shook his head. There was little he could do to help Severus through this, but he would do whatever he could.



Every time Severus looked at the pickled mandrakes he thought of his father. The rat spleens were smaller and didn't bother him as much. But the mandrakes—they made him think of pickled livers.

Someone knocked timidly on the laboratory door. He spun away from his contemplation of the jars. "What?" he snapped.

It was Vance, a fifth year, looking apprehensive. "Professor Snape, could I ask you some questions about the Draught of Peace?"

"Don't you own a textbook, you stupid girl?" he demanded.

"Y-yes..." she faltered. Probably wasn't used to being snarled at; the Ravenclaws so rarely received a teacher's ire.

"Then use it and stop annoying me!" He glared at her until she turned and left the room. He could hear her first sobs before she got out of range. Good. At least he was still capable of making other people hurt as much as he did.

His father wasn't the man he had been.

Severus had been assigning fewer detentions over the past month, simply to give himself more time to spend in Halifax. He Flooed to his parents' home, then Apparated to an alley behind the hospital. Bloody St Mungo's still refused to lift a wand to save a Muggle, even one married to a witch. So here Tobias sat, in a ward full of terminal patients, his skin yellow with jaundice, his once-sharp features bloated.

Eileen visited in the evenings, too, but she usually didn't arrive until later, when the pain medications were kicking in. Severus, at least, had time to talk.

"You're happy with your bloke, then?" Tobias asked that evening. His eyes were fixed on the football scores, which Severus had picked up at a corner shop. It was appropriate. Snape men didn't discuss emotions.

"Yeah," Severus said. He slouched back in his chair, arms folded over his chest. "He—makes me like myself more."

Surprise flitted across Tobias' face. "Why wouldn't you like yourself? You're a teacher, a good respectable job. Not working in the mills like your old man, are you? Took honours in your field, Remus says, and from the way yer mam talks, you're a war hero in that Voldething war."

Severus stared at his father, shocked. "I didn't know you thought that," he managed finally.

"How would you?" Tobias agreed. "But this is it for me, Sev. You ought to know now. I'm glad to see you happy. I'm proud of you."

Severus swallowed several times, trying to dislodge the choking sensation he felt. His father was proud of him. Finally he ducked his head in a jerky nod.

Some time later, as he was preparing to leave, he paused and looked full into his father's face. "I love you, Dad," he forced out. It was difficult to say, not because it was untrue, but because Severus wouldn't have said it at all unless his father were dying.



Remus' shoulders still ached from the weight of the coffin, though he'd shared it with seven other men. Tobias Snape had been a tall, heavy man, and popular. The funeral had been well-attended by men he'd worked with, families from Spinner's End and the surrounding streets, and Tobias' drinking mates. Remus glanced across the pub at Severus, who looked inappropriately ravishable in a well-cut black suit. Severus had an arm around his mother, who was wearing an emerald green backless dress, because "he always liked me in this dress". She was leaning against him, and his head was bent down towards her; from this distance it looked like he was speaking, but the noise of various people drinking to Tobias' memory made it impossible to hear.

Remus hadn't been to a funeral since his granddad died eight years ago. Tobias' funeral was worse, largely because Severus hadn't spoken more than ten words at a time to Remus since he came home from the hospital three days ago and announced his father was dead. His skin seemed paler, his eyes burned more fiercely, and there were dark smudges under his eyes, which made his nose stand out more proudly than usual. There was an almost-frightening intensity to Severus' grief, and it made Remus feel unable to touch him.



Remus had had to go to Marks and Spencer for a suit, because he'd never had need of one before. He knew he didn't really look good in black, not the way Severus did, but he'd overheard at least two people speculating about "that handsome young man with Severus." He wondered if they knew he was Severus' lover, if people were questioning his right to be one of the pallbearers, if they thought him a distant relation.

His thoughts kept returning to the wake. There were no lights, just the flickering candles around Tobias, laid out in his coffin. Remus' granddad had looked smaller in death, to a fifteen-year-old boy, but Tobias just looked like himself, dead. It was frightening. Severus shouldn't lose his father when he was twenty-five. It just shouldn't happen. The priest had led them in the Glorious Mysteries for the soul of the departed (the departed, the priest kept saying, as if he hadn't shared a drink with Tobias every Thursday). And they had added, at the end of every decade, *Réquiem ætérnam dona ei Dómine; et lux perpétua lúceat ei. Requiéscat in pace. Amen.* The mirrors had been shrouded, he remembered.

Catholics, he thought, were much closer to wizards than either party realised.

"Are you Severus' bloke, then?"

The question caught him off-guard, and he turned slowly to regard the man who had spoken. He was tall, with a craggy face and a crooked nose, and black hair that was cut short. The nose was familiar.

"Bernard Snape," the man explained. "Toby's brother. He told me about Severus, and I've been through the lists, and you're the only one I can't place. You must be Severus' bloke."

"Yeah," Remus said cautiously, wondering if he were about to be thrown out of the pub.

Bernard nodded. "Call me Ben. What're you drinking?"

"I—I've been drinking orange juice," Remus admitted, looking down at his empty glass. "I wasn't sure...I mean, Severus..." He trailed off, but Ben was nodding, an understanding look on his face.

"Have one glass of whiskey, for Toby's sake," he suggested, "and I'll buy you a glass of orange juice, for after."

"Thank you, sir."

Ben pressed a glass into Remus' hand. "To Toby, a man who loved his family and did right by his friends."

Remus wondered if he were meant to add to that. And who always treated me like another son, once he'd got used to us, he thought, and drank.

Ben clapped him on the shoulder and ambled off. When Remus looked across the room to where his lover stood, Severus was watching him. His eyes seemed to beckon Remus, so Remus made his way across the crowded room, murmuring polite apologies to those he passed.

"Take me home," Severus breathed, once Remus had a hand on his elbow and they were standing close.

Remus nodded and touched Eileen Snape's shoulder, very lightly.

She turned and looked at him for a moment, then offered him a small smile. It ought to feel more like a triumph, if it hadn't taken Tobias' death to make her truly accept Remus. He nodded gravely back.

Severus skated his lips across his mother's cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mum."

Then they were making their way out of the pub, away from the prying eyes and the boisterous tributes. Remus guided Severus into an alley, looped his arm around Severus' waist, and they Apparated.

The cottage was dark, but neither of them moved to light it. Instead they undressed each other by touch, dropping clothes were they stood, and fell into bed together. Remus wrapped his arms around Severus, who went very still.

It was a long time before either of them slept.



Remus groaned and rolled away from Severus, breathing heavily and still shivering from orgasm. Severus shifted onto his side and pressed against Remus' back, snaking one arm around his middle. Remus smiled, though Severus couldn't see. He liked how physically close Severus always wanted to be, after sex. Since Tobias' death, Severus had needed more snuggling than usual. Remus could understand that. He'd been thinking more and more about his own relationship with his father, since Severus lost his. It had been nearly a year since Tobias died, and Severus still, sometimes, talked as if Tobias were still alive, then caught himself.

Remus covered Severus' arm with his own. "What would you think of my telling my parents about us?" he asked.

Severus' response was slow in coming. Finally he said, "You know I've wanted you to for years." He paused, his breath hitting the back of Remus' neck. "Why now?"

Remus gave a little sigh. "I've been thinking a lot about it, since your dad."

Silence from Severus, but he hadn't tensed up, so Remus took that as a good sign.

"I reckon my dad ought to know the real me, that's all," Remus said.

"Yeah, I think so." Severus' voice was quiet, but fortunately empty of any resentment or hurt. Another pause. "You going to just tell him at work some day?"

Remus blinked, startled at the thought. He had been working for his father over the past year, doing odd carpentry jobs and projects that could be worked around the full moon. "I'll tell him and Mum at the same time," Remus said decisively. "D'you want to come?"

"Mm, just did." Lips made themselves known on Remus' upper back. Remus shivered and laughed.

"I meant, do you want to be there when I, you know, tell them?"

"I suppose it might seem more believable to them if you show up with me. Then again, I don't think your dad has ever liked me much."

"He found out about that time in the Shack, you know? Once he got that I'd nearly killed someone, he wouldn't rest until he'd learned who." Remus stretched and rolled onto his back, pulling Severus close.

"What, so you just told him?" Severus scowled a little but pressed against him anyway.

"He got it out of Dumbledore. I had a lecture off him that was strong enough to strip the skin." Remus began to sigh, then turned it into a laugh. "But I wouldn't speak to Sirius for weeks after, or let the Marauders help me at full moon any more."

"Help you?"

Remus sighed for real. He ought to tell Severus the truth. What did it matter now, that they'd never registered? After all, Sirius was in prison already and the others were dead. But that had always been Their Secret. He couldn't say the words. You didn't give up a secret just because you were the only one left living and free.

"You know, how they always used to help me get ready and that."

Severus sniffed. "Pretentious wankers."

Remus wasn't sure what Severus was referring to specifically, but it was true, they had been pretentious wankers, all of them. He pulled Severus in for a kiss.

"I don't recommend telling them the way I told my parents," Severus said dryly after a while. "Perhaps your dad won't be as bigoted as my mum. Wouldn't count on it, though; I reckon it's a trait most purebloods share."

Remus nodded. If he were completely honest, he wasn't certain how he was going to tell them. He wasn't even sure he wanted to tell them, but he was bloody tired of lying. He had enough lies in his life as it was.

Severus traced a finger down Remus' cheek. When Remus looked at him in surprise, Severus' expression was thoughtful. "You don't have to tell them. I don't mind being a secret."

It startled Remus. "I'm not ashamed of you!" he exclaimed. He stared at Severus. "You know that, right?" It occurred to him suddenly that it probably looked like he was, like he wanted to keep Severus hidden.

"It's just because we're queer, then?" Severus didn't look away from Remus' face. Remus hoped he looked as sincere as he was.

"I don't really want people knowing I fancy blokes. It doesn't make life any easier, does it? But I'm not ashamed of being with you." The odd, half-hopeful expression on his lover's face both strengthened his resolve and broke his heart. Why hadn't he thought sooner about what Severus might think? "I'll tell them. Tomorrow, after Dad and I close the shop. I want them to know how important you really are to me."

Severus kissed him hard, wrapping wiry but strong arms around him. Remus' body sprang awake again at that. He pulled Severus close, growling low in his throat and sliding a hand down to the hardness he knew he would find.



Severus wasn't surprised at how late Remus was in coming home the next day. What did surprise him was that, when Remus came home, he was carrying a large box in his arms.

"Fucking wanker!" Remus exploded the minute he got in the door. "Bloody bastard!" He slammed his box down on the table and Severus could see it contained an assortment of junk—old comic books, a prefect badge, a Gryffindor tie, three books, and various other oddments of the sort he had left at the house on Spinner's End years ago.

"Remus?" Severus wasn't sure whether to put his arms around Remus or pour him a glass of Firewhiskey and let him rant.



"The bigoted wanker told me he didn't want any fucking homos hanging about his shop. People might get the wrong impression. Might think he'd not raised his son right. He won't have you back, ever. I told him he could go fuck himself, then, and find some straight boy to help

in his shop."

Severus stared at him. "You—what?"

"I told him to sod off," Remus snarled. "And I told mum her crying and begging wasn't going to do any good, I wasn't coming back. They can just go hang, for all I care."

"Remus—"

"No! You're part of who I am. From now on, that's what matters most. If people don't like that I'm in love with you, then I don't have any use for them. That's final."

Severus had a feeling he ought to be feeling grateful that Remus' attitude had changed so drastically towards him, considering the way he'd acted in school. Instead he found himself mildly distressed that Remus would be willing to walk away from his parents. It shouldn't be that easy, should it?

He opened his mouth, then hesitated. "Remus, I..." He trailed off, not sure what to say.

Remus grabbed his shoulders. "Don't you understand you're more important to me than anyone?" He kissed Severus hard and Severus found himself completely unable to argue. How could one argue against a love like that? He pressed against Remus, forcing him back against the wall, where Severus rubbed his hips against Remus', making him groan.

"I'll stay with you forever," Severus promised, knowing he might not be able to keep the promise, but planning to do anything in his power to try. "I'll always love you."

Remus moaned and clutched at Severus, feeling sort of limp against him. "I need you," he admitted. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

"Good," Severus murmured. "I don't want you to do without me." He pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses down Remus' neck, sucking and licking. "Want you to always need me." As much as I need you. More than I need you. He slid a hand inside the back of Remus' trousers, massaging his arse. They'd been together six years now, and sometimes it seemed like a lifetime. But other times, like now, it seemed like they hadn't had much time together at all, and that perhaps someday Remus would tire of him. He bit Remus' neck, feeling possessive.

Remus let out another strangled noise of pleasure and hooked one leg around Severus'. "Need you," he gasped. "Please, now."

Severus didn't believe in waiting for a second invitation. He divested Remus of his trousers and pants, leaving his shirt on as he began circling his pucker with a questing finger. Remus' needy noises were driving Severus mad with desire. He managed to get his own trousers shoved down, and by the time he'd done the preparation spells and pressed a finger inside Remus, he was practically whimpering himself.

He pressed inside Remus slowly but steadily, eliciting a long groan from Remus and letting out a hiss of breath himself. God, but it was good to shag Remus. It was good to feel as though Remus belonged to him. Severus loved it. And more surprising, he loved the flip side, the feeling of belonging to Remus. Remus ruled his heart, but he did it so much more gently and simply than Severus had ever imagined possible.

Urgency was building quickly for both of them. Remus had a leg wrapped around him and was urging him on, so Severus began thrusting, hard and fast, wanting Remus to know and feel just how desired he was. Soon they were both crying out with each thrust of Severus' hips, his cock buried deep inside and wringing pleasure out of both of them. When the tide of sensation became too much for him, he lost control entirely and thrust with abandon until he came hard, kissing Remus and stroking his cock.

Soon after Remus let out a sharp cry and tensed, then shot over Severus' hand. His muscle contractions massaged the last of the hardness from Severus' cock, making Severus whimper. They fell against the wall, holding each other up, panting and sweating.



"Merlin," Remus breathed after a while. "I don't need anyone but you, anyway. Not ever." He ran his fingers through Severus' hair and kissed him.

"Good." Severus wrapped his arms more tightly around Remus and guided them to the sofa, where they draped together. "I love you, Remus."

Remus smiled, letting his eyes droop almost closed. "I love you, too."



Remus seemed excited the day he came home and said he was going to be working as a bailiff and magical fugitive retriever for the Ministry.

"Mad-Eye put in a good word for me with Amelia Bones. She's the one who handles all that." Remus grinned. "She hired me. She said my test results were impressive."

"What sort of tests do you have to take to recover property and criminals?" Severus wanted to know.

"Mostly you have to be quick at dodging hexes and punches, and know a lot of shielding spells."

Severus frowned. "It sounds dangerous."

Remus snorted. "I was a trained assassin for the Order. Fugitive retrieval can't be more dangerous than that."

"You thought that about China, too."

"Yes, well, dragons are a different story entirely."

Severus shook his head. "Idiot Gryffindor."

Remus grinned.



A few weeks later he wasn't as glib about the job, but he could boast a ninety-four percent retrieval rate, which he said was better than the other, fully human, bailiffs. Severus had to admit, the pay was decent, and Remus seemed content. He'd also dropped several pounds off his stomach, and his muscles were more impressive. Severus was noticing that this job had benefits to him, as well—Remus was more focused and intense in bed these days. It made Severus wonder what it would have been like to shag Remus-the-Assassin.

"God, yeah, like that!" he would gasp, and Remus' eyes would glint with the golden light they gained around

the full, and Remus would thrust like that again and again, his expression concentrated as he watched Severus' face. It was wonderful and maddening and Severus had more powerful orgasms than he had in ages. Not that the sex had ever been bad, of course, but now...now it was just bloody perfect.

He wasn't quite so pleased about it the day Remus came home with an eyebrow and his fringe singed off and two black welts across one cheek. He looked up from his work in time to watch Remus limp across the kitchen, pour himself two fingers of Firewhiskey, and bolt it back.

"Fuck," Severus said, and quit dicing mandrake root in order to find a healing potion. "What happened?"

"Oliveras Flatley was supposed to stand trial before the Wizengamot for Assault with a Dark Artefact and Concealed Carrying of Cursed Items, with Intent to Sell." Remus hissed as Severus dabbed some potion on his cheek. "Bones sent me to retrieve him. He didn't exactly want to be retrieved."

"No wonder they had you tested on your reflexes and shields." Severus frowned. "There's not much to be done about the eyebrow, but I expect it'll grow back after the full."

"Fuck off," Remus said tiredly, but there was no heat in it.

Severus grinned and kissed him, because it was always easy to distract Remus with sex, and the way Remus had been lately, Severus was always horny. For that matter, Severus just needed to look at Remus, dressed in dangerous black, with his wand in a wrist holster and magical restraints looped over his belt, in order to get hard.

Remus growled and wrapped an arm around Severus' waist, and Severus found himself being fucked over the kitchen table.

Things like that made it all worthwhile.



"It's so big!"

Severus snickered, but Remus just kept staring in awe at the Sphinx.

"I just...I never imagined it would be like this. It's so grand."

"And the ten thousand Galleon question is, did they use magic to build it?" Their guide looked pleased at how impressed Remus was.

"How could they not have?" Severus said. "They didn't have all the techno-whatsit to lift heavy stone like that, not back then. It had to have been magic."

"They had levers and pulleys and ramps," Remus objected. "If there's one thing I learned from working in my dad's shop, it's that you can do loads of unexpected things with Muggle tools."

Severus snorted.



"Do not be so quick to scoff," said their guide. "There are many things the Muggles have done better than we wizards. For instance indoor plumbing. We have adopted the use of water closets, have we not? It is because Muggles can be ingenious in order to cope with their lack of magic."

Remus grinned at the guide and turned to Severus with a triumphant expression. Severus folded his arms across his chest and shook his head.

"I maintain it must have been magic," he said. "Egyptian potion-makers were incredibly advanced and Egyptian curses are much more difficult and deadly. Their wizards must have been taking a hand in the advancement of Egyptian society."

"Ah, it is true that Egyptian curses are the best in the world," their guide agreed. "Hassan ibn Nazir is our most powerful curse-breaker, and even sometimes he cannot lift the curses without help. It is dangerous to travel here alone."

"But safe enough for you to guide loads of tours every day?" Severus asked, not bothering to hide his cynicism.

"But of course!" the guide agreed. "For I have learned the placement and the conditions for each curse. I am able to lead you through this dangerous area."

Severus snorted again and shook his head. "Potions are more impressive than curses. Potions are silent, insidious, deadly—curses announce themselves. There are defences against curses."

The guide shrugged his shoulders. "You are entitled to believe what you want, English. But you are foolish if

you write off Hassan ibn Nazir's talent. He would be able to teach you some tricks."

Remus must have seen that Severus was about to dig in his heels and argue back, because he grabbed Severus' arm. "Yes, well, that's very interesting. But I think we shall say Severus was impressed with your claims and bid you farewell."

That evening an owl swooped in through the open window and dropped an envelope on Remus' lap while they were sitting together and enjoying the evening breeze from the gardens. Remus exclaimed and sat up straight, Severus' arm falling down around his waist instead of his shoulders.

"What is it?" Severus asked lazily. Between a frighteningly delicious dessert and whatever they'd been smoking earlier, he was feeling very relaxed.

Remus unrolled the scroll and read it over twice. "It's a note from this Hassan ibn Nazir. It would appear that our guide ratted on us."

Severus sniggered, then peered at Remus. "Wait, what?"

"Our guide, from earlier. He told ibn Nazir that there were two English gentlemen wanting to meet him, staying at the Hotel Abbat."

"Bugger," Severus said.

"Oh, I don't know, he seems quite polite. He invites us to lunch with him tomorrow, at Shepheard's—apparently some bloke has made a restaurant themed around the old British hotel. Anyway, he says he's looking forward to meeting two esteemed colleagues."

"Esteemed colleagues?" Severus snorted.

"Well, perhaps he knows Dumbledore."

Severus shrugged. "Doesn't matter," he decided. He tightened his arm around Remus' waist and pulled him down for a kiss. Remus let out a little moan against his mouth that got the attention of Severus' cock. Severus wrapped both arms around Remus, rolling them over so Remus was trapped under him. "God, you're fucking sexy," he murmured, and kissed Remus again. Remus' mouth was hot and wet against his, his body rising against Severus'.

Hassan ibn Nazir was forgotten for the night.



Hassan ibn Nazir was a tall, lean man with dark skin and a hawk nose. His dark eyes glittered. He reminded Remus of a combination of Severus and Dumbledore. He sat calmly at the table with them, eating with small, precise motions. When he spoke, he gestured with his hands, but not with too much energy. It fascinated Remus, how much like Severus he was. And yet he had an aura of calm, of peace, that was very much at odds with Severus.

Severus seemed intrigued by him, particularly when he began talking about the methods Egyptian wizards had used to prolong their lives. He touched on the Philosopher's Stone and Nicholas Flamel and seemed delighted when he realised they were friends with Flamel's alchemical partner. His discussion of Horcruxes and Daging Potions was completely derailed by his effusive praise of Albus Dumbledore and his accomplishments.

"We fought together against Grindelwald, half a century ago," ibn Nazir said, smiling fondly. "I was here in the desert, of course, while Dumbledore was working with Churchill, but it was a great partnership. We used Patronuses to communicate, when necessary. He has taught you that, yes?"

Remus grinned. "Yeah, we've used Patronuses, too."

"And you fought with him against this upstart, Voldemort? You helped bring an end to his reign of terror?"

"We did." Severus' voice was curt.

Ibn Nazir didn't seem put off. "I am beyond pleased that Shahoub told me about your visit here! You must come to my home. I will show you my potions laboratory and my garden. Please, I ask that you give up your room here and join me at my home."

"Oh, we wouldn't want to be an imposition," Remus began, but ibn Nazir laughed and shook his head.

"You will be no imposition. Please, Mr Lupin, Mr Snape, it would be my honour to host two friends of Albus Dumbledore. I will tell you more of Dumbledore's actions in the great war against Grindelwald, and you will tell me about the Voldemort uprising. I will take you to the Valley of the Kings, and we shall visit the source of the Nile. You are in Egypt for how much longer?"

"Another fortnight," Severus said. He looked torn between suspicion and enthusiasm. Remus suspected it was the mention of the potions laboratory that had caught his attention.

"Yes, then it is settled!" Ibn Nazir clapped his hands. "You shall come and be my guests."



It was both a relaxing trip and a whirlwind tour at once. Remus and Severus saw many more things than they could have taken in, had they continued travelling on their own. Ibn Nazir was a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide, and he enjoyed imparting his fascination with all aspects of his country's history. He and Severus discussed potions, and Remus joined in during discussions of the Dark Arts and how to defend against them.

At the end of their fortnight with ibn Nazir, Remus and Severus left Egypt with a fast friend.

"I'd envisioned a month of shagging and sightseeing," Remus confessed, as they stood in the lobby of the International Floo Hub. "But I must say, I've enjoyed the past fortnight much more than I'd expected, when we were interrupted by this so-called Dark Arts expert."

Severus gave a low laugh. "And sneaking in shags in ibn Nazir's courtyard and the baths at Luxor had nothing to do with that," he murmured.

Remus grinned at him. His lover had lost the dungeon pallor, his skin deepening to a healthy olive. His hair had been dried out some by the desert heat, and he was wearing it pulled back in a queue. Remus found it irresistible; he had a hard time keeping his hands off Severus.

"It's agreed with you," Severus said, glancing down at him. "You're looking fit and relaxed again."

Remus cocked his head. "Was I not, before?"

"You were just...on edge, always. Focused. Intense."

"You didn't like it?"

"I liked it in the bedroom very much," Severus allowed. "But I worried that you were too close to what you'd been doing during the war. I want you to be happy."

"I'm happy if I'm with you," Remus murmured. He skated a hand down Severus' arm, smiling at him.

"You're so wet." Severus smiled, too.

"London!" called the announcer. "London! Floo to London opens in two minutes!"

Remus' smile was tinged with sadness. "I hope we can come back someday."

"We will," Severus promised.



"Professor, could I ask you a question?"

Severus looked up, surprised that anyone had dared approach him. Oh, it was the Weasley boy. Well, that wasn't so unusual, he supposed. At least Bill Weasley could brew potions adequately, and he kept the Gryffindors in line better than the last few Head Boys had.

"What is it, Weasley?" he demanded. Just because he didn't mind, that was no reason to be kind about the interruption. It might encourage other students to pester him.

"Sir, I was just at my final Careers Advice meeting with Professor McGonagall, and she said you've been to Egypt."

Severus' brow creased slightly, but he nodded curtly. "I was there this past summer."

"Professor McGonagall said you might know someone who could take on an apprentice. Or perhaps help me find a job there, somewhere."

"In Egypt?" Merlin, Severus had seen Molly Weasley; she would have his guts if he helped her eldest boy move to Egypt. She had always struck him as the sort of fussy, clingy mother that he would have been tempted to murder, were she his own mother.

"I've read about it, and all the curses and amazing potion work they do there. I'd love to work there for a while."

Severus hated doing Careers Advice. He was always seized with an unholy desire to say, When I was your age, I decided to dedicate myself to the service of a psychotic Dark Lord. Instead he studied Bill for a moment, then said, "How well have you thought this through?"

"Well, sir, I have about fifty Galleons saved up. I know it isn't a lot, but it's the best I could do over the past three years. My parents have a few other children to worry about, after all. I know there are work visas and permits required, but McGonagall says she and Dumbledore can arrange those. I know the areas it would be best to live in, considering my age and nationality. All I need is a job. I'm willing to be a street sweeper or rubbish collector if necessary, but I'd far rather use my skills."

Severus cocked an eyebrow at the boy. That was pure bull-headed Gryffindor stubbornness; he recognise it

well. All the same, it frequently served well enough, in situations like this. "I have a friend named Hassan ibn Nazir. He is a curse breaker, and extremely talented in potions. I have no idea if he needs an apprentice, but I will write to him and mention you."

Weasley's face lit up. "Thank you, sir! I don't know how to—"

"Don't thank me, Weasley. You've worked hard enough to earn decent marks in potions, so you merit it. That will be all."

Bill was smart enough to recognise a dismissal when he heard it. "Yes, sir!" He went.

Severus shook his head. He was getting soft. Just because Bill worked harder at potions than most Gryffindors did, he had agreed to trouble his friend for a position. And where did McGonagall get off thinking she could suggest such a thing? The interfering old bidy. He shook his head and shoved his work into his desk. It could all wait. He wanted Remus.



"I don't know why you won't just listen—"

Remus glared at his lover and snapped the sheet up over the mattress. "Because I said years ago I was shut of him, and I'm not going to change my mind!"

Severus let out a sigh that Remus imagined was meant to make him feel guilty. "You said that years ago, yes—but why not change your mind? He's your bloody father, Remus! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Remus turned away. Of course it did—but his father had shown, three years ago, where he stood on the issue of his queer son, and Remus wasn't going to back down before John did. Backing down, seeking peace, would feel like a betrayal of Severus.

"You're so sodding stubborn!" Severus shouted. Remus heard a pillow being thumped down on the bed. He ought to help Severus finish making up the bed, but it was difficult to do when you were arguing. He went to lean against the window.

"I won't have him treating you like you don't matter. I won't have him acting as if you're just a mate, or some bloke I share a house with for economy. You're my lover. You're my other half. You're the person who partners me in everything." Remus sighed. "I won't let him take that away."

"How the bloody fuck can he take it away?" Severus demanded, his voice quieter but no less intense. "You twat, I know you're committed to me. I know your father's opinion isn't going to make you chuck me. Making peace with your dad isn't going to somehow destroy what we have together."

Remus was marginally surprised to hear Severus attempting to talk sense into him. Usually it was Severus who was judgmental, hasty, and harsh in his opinions. It seemed odd that Severus wasn't still gloating over the fact that Remus had chosen him over John and Maggie Lupin.

"It would feel that way to me."

A strong hand grasped his shoulder. "Do you care so little about me? Is your love that weak? Bloody Gryffindor, you give up too easily."

That stung. Remus lifted his head and glared at Severus. "Oi. Of course that isn't it. I've never—"

Severus shut him up by pressing his mouth against Remus'. Ordinarily Remus hated to be shut up like that, as if a bit of arse would make him abandon serious issues, but today his cock sprang to life at the hard heat of Severus' mouth. Why were they rowing when they could be shagging instead? On the bed they'd just finished making up, even.

He wrapped his arms around Severus.

"You're the most stubborn, pig-headed, idiotic, sentimental man I've ever known," Severus whispered between kisses. The tone, if not the words, made Remus feel warm. "I love you madly."

"Mmm, love you, Severus," Remus murmured. He slid a hand down to grope Severus' arse. Why had they been arguing, anyway?

"I'll go with you to visit them," Severus offered, and Remus sighed. Oh yes. That. Making peace with his parents.

"You don't have to," he said uneasily. "I'll just..." He trailed off. He wasn't sure how best to broach the topic with his father. Or that matter, he had no idea what had been going on in the lives of John and Maggie Lupin. He should have been visiting more with them than he did. "I'll write him a letter first."

"Better to visit," Severus advised. "That way he'll have to throw you out, if he doesn't want to reconcile. That's much better than just having your letter ignored."

Remus kissed him. "You have a funny way of looking at things."

"You're just now noticing this?" Severus smirked and pressed his groin against Remus', sliding a hand down to pull Remus closer.

"Mmm, no, just observing it again." Remus rubbed against Severus and grinned.

"You're a sex fiend," Severus said. "And no, I'm not just now noticing that, either."

"You like it."

Severus groped his arse. "I do."

Remus grinned wickedly and silenced him with a heated kiss.



Remus paused at the doorway to the carpentry shop. His father looked older. There was more grey in his hair, and his forehead was scrunched in concentration as he planed a board. Several unfinished projects stood around the shop. Remus wondered if his father wasn't doing well enough to afford an assistant. He watched for a moment, observing the way John's muscles moved as he pushed the plane along the board. He still seemed strong and healthy, at least. Remus remembered how, when he was young, John had shown him how to use a plane, standing behind him, his arms curving around his son and guiding the instrument. He had done that with every tool, showing Remus how to use it, then helping Remus use it, and finally letting his son try it on his own.

John lifted an arm to wipe sweat off his forehead...and saw Remus. He went still, staring at him. Remus stared back, unsure what he should say.

"Is that...really my boy?" John asked at last.

Remus swallowed. "Yeah, Dad," he muttered. "I..."

No further words were needed. John Lupin dropped his plane—he never dropped his tools—and strode across the room to fold Remus into his arms. "My son," he whispered. "My son."

Remus clutched at the back of his father's shirt, just as if he were still a boy. He didn't know what to say. He hoped his father didn't think he was suddenly fixed of being queer. He breathed in the smell of sweet pipe tobacco

and swallowed hard again. His father was shaking. He didn't understand until he felt the first drop of moisture against his neck. God, he'd made his father cry! Remus tensed slightly, ready to pull away, but John held him more tightly.

Remus wasn't sure how long they stood like that. When they finally drew apart, John's nose was running, and Remus' eyes stung.

"I'm sorry," Remus whispered.

"Oh, my dear, dear boy," John said. "I'm the one who should be sorry. I thought you would never speak to me again."

"It was Severus' idea for me to come," Remus admitted. "I missed you so much."

"Severus." John went still and looked at Remus. "He's... you—you're still...you and he..."

Remus had always wanted to hear his father say the word, but now he found it wasn't necessary. "Yeah," he said, nodding. "For all our lives, Dad."

John nodded finally. "Your mother," he said. "Your mother will wonder..."

"I'll come home with you," Remus offered. "I don't know anything about the past few years, for you."

"Yes. Yes, come home." John turned and picked up the plane, placing it carefully on the work bench. Then he picked up his jacket and locked the front door.

Remus didn't remember ever seeing his father close up shop early, except for the night of the full moon. He swallowed hard again and followed his father out the back door towards the house.

Maggie Lupin was fixing tea, her dark auburn hair caught up in a plait down her back. From behind she didn't look much different—perhaps a tad plumper, that was all.

"Maggie!" John said, and she turned.

Her hazel eyes were as sad as always, but Remus was surprised at the lines beside her eyes and mouth, the way her expression was no longer automatically smiling. He watched her anxiously. When she saw him, her eyes lit and she dropped the saucer she was holding. He seemed to make people drop things a lot, he reflected.

"Remus," she whispered. "Oh, my baby, my baby, Remus." She, too, crossed the room to put her arms around his

waist. Remus bent slightly to enfold her, and he realised he was taller than his mum. When had that happened? Had it been seventh year, or in the years following? He buried his face in her neck and held her as she cried.

It was late that night when Remus finally parted with his parents again. "I want to bring Severus next time I visit," he said, part in warning and part in promise. "He should meet you."

"We have met, at King's Cross," Maggie said, but she was smiling. "I look forward to seeing him again."

Remus glanced at his father, but John's face was inscrutable. Perhaps he had realised that to have one, he had to take the other. Perhaps he had truly resigned himself to it. Remus didn't really care, as long as his parents weren't horrible to them. That was all that mattered.

"Bring Severus," John said finally. "Does he watch Quidditch?"

Not unless football counted, Remus reflected. There were still times when Severus displayed a Muggle mannerism or habit that surprised Remus. Cheering for Manchester United was one of those times. Remus shrugged. "He keeps up with team scores," he said. "He's good at brewing. Had an apprenticeship with Damocles Belby."

"Ah, Belby. Good man. Had a nephew got bit, I think it was." John nodded.

It was sad that it took a werewolf bite to make his father approve, these days. Remus nodded and bade his parents farewell.

Severus was still waiting up when Remus got home. The lights were low in the front room, but Severus was sitting in the wing chair, his feet up. He had a glass of brandy in one hand.

"How did it go?" he asked, and it was obvious he was braced for the worst.

Remus smiled and went over to sit in Severus' lap. "I think it went very well. We caught up on the past four years, and you're invited to go with me next time."

"I don't really want to go," Severus offered.

"You don't have much of a choice," Remus said. He gave Severus an apologetic smile. "I've finally got them to accept us, so you have to go with me. But I promise I'll make it up to you."

"In sexual favours, I hope." Severus leaned back enough to display the bulge in his trousers.

Remus grinned. "I already give you sexual favours. You're not being too creative."

Severus snickered. "Well then, why don't you give me some ideas? I'm open to suggestion."

Leaning over to whisper in Severus' ear, Remus slid a hand down between them to massage Severus' cock through his trousers. "Let me do something about this," he suggested. "And we'll think of something to make up for your visiting my parents later."

He knew Severus wouldn't argue.



Remus groaned.

Severus' hand stilled as he dabbed pain potion on another gash. "I suppose I don't need to ask how you feel, then."

"Bloody awful," Remus muttered. "Someone used my head as a Bludger last night."

Severus frowned. If there were anything he disliked about their relationship, it was that every month he had to watch Remus suffer through this. And Severus was unable to do anything for him except brew him pain potions and healing potions and tea. It wasn't that Remus complained, because, except for his first few unguarded moments, he bore it with quiet stoicism. But Severus hated seeing his lover in pain.

He finished with the healing potions and brushed Remus' hair away from his face. He needed to get it cut; he never wore it this long. Remus sighed and turned to nuzzle Severus' hand. He would sleep again.

Severus went over to his desk and wrote up his notes on Remus' condition. The gashes weren't as bad this month, but Remus had a severe headache, which wasn't usual. When Remus was more alert, Severus would ask if he remembered any of last night.

Every month Belby adjusted their test recipe just a bit and Severus sent his observations and results. Sometimes it felt like they were no closer to a cure than when they had begun.

He fixed a breakfast of beans, eggs, toast, sausages, and potatoes, then woke Remus to make him eat. They

ate in quiet companionship, Remus sitting up in bed, Severus in the chair next to the bed. Once their plates were empty Remus settled back down into the bed. Severus crossed his legs and opened a book.

"I found one to amuse you," he told Remus. "Wanderings With Werewolves, by Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Really? He wrote a book on werewolves?"

"How can one bloke do all that?" Severus said. "Gilderoy Lockhart is probably a code name for a team of people."

"Still—werewolves. Read to me."

Severus obliged, reading until the pain potions made Remus sleep again. By that time he was fascinated, so he read on by himself to learn what happened.

When Remus woke again, Severus had nearly finished the book.

"What'd I miss?" Remus asked, his voice gravelly from sleep. Severus put a finger in his place and leaned over to kiss him, because it was utterly impossible to not kiss Remus when he sounded like that.

"Lockhart traced a load of sheep killings to a town called Wagga Wagga, where all the residents were dodgy and nervous. They were obviously covering a secret, so he dug a little deeper and found out the mayor's son was a werewolf. The whole town was conspiring to hide him, because he was a decent enough bloke twenty-seven days out of twenty-eight."

Remus snorted and poured himself a cup of tea.

"Anyway, he tracked the werewolf to where he was hiding, and he's about to confront him."

"Read out loud," Remus ordered. He was sitting up against the headboard, the blankets bunched up around him. He sipped at his tea.

Severus cleared his throat. "It was obvious from the way the werewolf hunched over that he was guarding a kill. Regretful that I hadn't been given the chance to help him before the moon rose, I nonetheless raised my wand. Something had to be done, and I was the only one who could do it.

"Prepare yourself,' I warned the werewolf, though the poor soul was obviously beyond understanding. 'This may sting a bit.' And I began chanting the incantation of the Homorphus Charm. An incredibly complex piece

of magic, it is designed to return any cursed human to his original shape. There are, as always, some drawbacks: if an individual has cast beautification spells on himself, for example, the Homorphus Charm will reverse them, as I learned to my chagrin when I tested it on myself and my hairstyle fell down. Nonetheless, a man is never afraid to make sacrifices in the effort to better the lives of his fellow wizards. What mattered most to me was that I knew I would be able to change his unfortunate soul's life for the better forever.

"The werewolf hunched over further, then threw his head back and howled, fighting the return of his humanity. The sad truth is that werewolves, though under a curse, grow to enjoy the power and carnage that their condition brings."

Remus snorted derisively and set his teacup violently on the bedside table. "Keep reading," he said.

Severus shook his head but continued. "The werewolf's body bucked and twisted; I could hear the snapping of bones and popping of ligaments. I felt for the poor bloke, but there was no room for mercy, if I were to truly help him; true kindness required that I not relent. I chanted the incantation again, more loudly. The words seemed to echo in the air around me— Oh, God, Remus, this is utter rubbish. Don't make me read this."

Remus gestured for Severus to go on. Severus sighed and skipped ahead. "When the last of his contortions ended, a young man with red hair that was greying prematurely lay naked and sweating before me. He was panting from the exertions of his transformation, his fingers twitching feebly. I conjured for him a flask of water and a blanket; the latter I settled onto his shoulders. He accepted the flask and downed it in one long swallow, then stood slowly, pulling the blanket around him.

"Thank you, Gilderoy," he said, knowing me again now that he was free of his curse. "Thank you for my freedom."

"And then he turned to the mouth of the cave to stare up at the still-full moon. Tears streamed from his eyes." Severus let out a loud noise of disgust and threw the book across the room. It thudded against the wall with a satisfying noise.

Remus frowned. "Perhaps the Australians know something we don't."

Severus stared at him. "There's no possible way this could be true."

"Have you ever heard of the Homorphus Charm?" Remus asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean it's at all possible," Severus said. "It probably just makes things look like humans."

"But we don't know for certain," Remus persisted. "Where was it he went? Wagga Wagga? We could go there. We could see if it's true."

"You want to go to Australia," Severus said in disbelief. "Remus, this is ridiculous. Why are you getting your hopes up like this?"

Remus frowned. "Why not? It's possible, isn't it? Anything's possible. I'd be stupid if I didn't at least look into it."

Severus sighed and didn't reply.



The sun was hot, but Severus didn't mind that as much as the dust that coated him. Even his teeth felt like they had a fine layer of grit on them. He licked his teeth and wished he could spit somewhere.

"Thank you, I'm sure we'll be able to find it," Remus said, smiling at the leathery-skinned woman behind the counter. They had train tickets, they had provisions, and they had reservations at some hotel in Wagga Wagga. Severus still couldn't believe they were in Australia. Less than a month and a half after reading that farcical book, they were three continents away from home and looking for a werewolf who had supposedly been cured. Why had he agreed to this?

Remus turned to Severus and gave him a brilliant smile. Oh, yes, that was why. Severus sighed and offered him a slight smile in return. "D'you have any fags left?" he asked.

Remus shook two out of the box and lit both, then passed one to Severus. He was still watching Severus warmly, and that, combined with the cigarette, worked to mellow Severus' annoyance. Remus jingled the keys to the Range Rover and led the way out to await their train. Melbourne was a real city, with a Wizarding High Street and a shops where Severus could buy potions ingredients. He wasn't sure if he could really sustain such high hopes for Wagga.

All in all, Wagga Wagga ended up surprising him. They were staying in the Wizarding quarter of town, where



two out of three dogs lying on the side of the road had two tails; a brown shingle hanging beside a door had a goblet surrounded by a golden circle—the League of Potioners symbol; and several broomsticks were mounted horizontally on walls instead of being propped on the tail straws.

They traced the Wagga Wagga werewolf to an area south of the Murrumbidgee River; as it turned out, he was one of the Wiradjuri people. Several of the people they talked to had heard of Gilderoy Lockhart, though he didn't seem well-liked. There were mutterings, but no actual complaints.

"Not exactly friendly, these Outback types, are they?" Severus muttered.

Remus frowned. "Lockhart did say they were rather protective of their werewolf. Perhaps they're worried we'll cause trouble."

Severus snorted.



*Belby,*

*You bastard, why are you still sending me these ridiculously conservative draughts? Can't you think of anything better than extract of chamomile to add to this brew? I have a werewolf who is volunteering his time as a test subject, and your pathetic attempts at formulae are dashing his hopes every month. He even went down to Australia to see if there was any truth to that charlatan Lockhart's claims. Needless to say his hopes were dashed and I had to waste a great deal of time assuring him that we would do better. Give me something worth brewing this month.*

*Snape*

My dear Severus,

I appreciate your enthusiasm for the werewolf draught. I am certain your werewolf finds it admirable. However, we are potioners. We don't run about tossing in ingredients willy-nilly.

There is a proper process, and we must follow it in order to achieve the proper results. I have included the latest revision to the draught.

Best of luck.

D. Belby

*Belby, you are an ass. A dull, unimaginative, incompetent ass. What good is a potioner skilled only at brewing who is unable to create new potions? You've done nothing to be proud of; you've merely messed about with a bog-standard pain potion and tossed in some things you think will help. I used to invent spells and potions for fun as a schoolboy. Why aren't we seeing further progress on this?*

*Snape*

My dear Severus,

Perhaps your brain has been added by your werewolf. I realise he is a special friend of yours, but he cannot be thinking clearly if he sought a cure in Wagga Wagga. Whatever became of the werewolf Lockhart exploited, by the by? If he is interested, I am certain he could find a proper brewer in Australia.

Belby

*The Wagga Wagga werewolf was a con. Whoever it was pretending to be a werewolf, he certainly couldn't have been a real one. The Homorphus Charm has no incantation that we were able to locate. I've written Lockhart a number of times attempting to learn it and he has answered none of my letters. As for my werewolf friend, I can't believe you would think I could be influenced by his emotions. You tit, have you ever thought of using Monkshood in the werewolf draught?*

*Snape*

Monkshood? Severus, are you out of your mind? Using Monkshood would only serve to poison the werewolves we are attempting to cure. Enclosed please find the most recent recipe for the potion.

Belby

*Yes, Monkshood! We use digitalis in potions to treat heart problems, though it is a poison. You of all people should know that small dosages of poisons can sometimes be the best treatment. My God, Belby, were you dropped on your head as a child?*

Severus,

Your letters continue to grow increasingly more insulting. Perhaps you do not respect me, but at least you should respect my rank. I have attempted a brew with Monkshood. Perhaps you will deign to look over it and offer your input.

*Congratulations, Belby. My werewolf was nearly uninjured this morning, and he remembered everything that happened last night. He was not precisely calm, but he was able to keep from injuring himself. I consider this a great improvement.*

My dear Severus!

You are truly an inspired young man. I shall be testing a refined recipe for the draught this coming month.

Belby,

HOWLER from Severus Snape to Damocles Belby

**BELBY, YOU SODDING BASTARD! I SPENT TWELVE YEARS WORKING ON THIS POTION WITH YOU, AND YOU FUCKING PUBLISH IT WITHOUT TELLING ME! ISN'T IT ODD HOW I READ THE ENTIRE PAPER THROUGH FOUR TIMES AND FOUND ABSOLUTELY NO MENTION OF MY NAME OR OF THE LONGSUFFERING PATIENCE OF MY WEREWOLF COLLEAGUE. YOU THIEVING TWAT!**



“Bloody fucking hell!”

Remus jolted upright in bed at the sound of Severus’ voice and the crash that followed. It was less than a week before the school term would start, and Remus had just been moping, anyway. He tugged on a pair of shorts and clattered out to the kitchen. Severus was glaring at the Daily Prophet, his morning coffee dripping down the far wall to puddle around the shards of his mug.

“Wha—” Remus got out, and then Severus saw him.

“Fucking bastard! Fucking backstabbing traitor! Twelve years I give him, and you sodding volunteer your time and misery, and this is how he repays us? Bloody cunt! I worked like a bloody house-elf for him during my apprenticeship! Even after I achieved journeyman I helped him with that potion! And it credits him with the idea to put the Monkshood in it! Graaah!” Severus threw the paper across the room. It came apart midair, the pages fluttering down in a shuffle of newspaper.

Remus stared from his ranting lover to the Daily Prophet and back. Obviously it had something to do with the potion they’d been working on since before they left school, but he was buggered if he understood.

“Wha—” Remus started again.

“Damocles Fucking Belby!” Severus shouted. He waved his arms and stomped around the kitchen table to glare at the mess he’d made of his coffee. “That bloody cunt took my suggestion and passed it off as his own! He fucking published! Without even telling me he was about to! Without asking for any input on the article! And I had to learn about it from Rita Bloody Skeeter!”

Remus gingerly picked up the paper. Nothing on the front page looked suspect, so he glanced over the rest of that section, then reached for another.

Severus watched him for a moment, then bent and picked up another page and stalked over, flourishing it in Remus’ face. “There!”

## NEW HOPE FOR WEREWOLVES

Damocles Belby is a Master Potioneer with little to distinguish him physically from others. He has a crown of white hair, and a white moustache he chews when he is nervous. His green eyes are friendly but unremarkable, and his style of dress is rather more 1950 than 1990 (tailcoats, I wish to tell him, are

out). But despite the unimposing image he presents, Damocles Belby has single-handedly done what no one else has ever done:

Damocles Belby has nearly cured lycanthropy.

He is quick to tell me that isn't true, but his new potion, called the Wolfsbane Potion, is the first to ever allow a transformed werewolf to keep his human mind. This may not mean much to werewolves who are so deep in the grips of their curse that their minds have degraded, but to newly bitten werewolves, this potion is a way for them to keep their sanity and lives nearly intact.

"I have been working on this particular potion for several years," Belby says. "A recent inspiration gave me the break-through necessary to complete the potion." He hastens to add that no potion is ever truly finished; he will continue studying the potion over the course of the next few months.

Belby has been nominated by the League of Potioners to receive the Order of Merlin for such an inspired draught.

Remus was staring at Severus by the time he finished reading it. "That—that's bollocks!" Remus cried. "That's utter shite! You worked harder on it than he did! You even did research while we were in Australia! You should be getting the credit for that!"

Severus made a bitter face and threw the paper back to the floor, where it turned brown as it soaked up the spilled coffee. "Fucking Belby. He'll hear from me on this. I ought to file a complaint with the League of Potioners."

"Yes, you should," Remus said. "I'll go on record as your test subject. You deserve the credit for this." His heart was thumping as soon as he made the offer, but despite the fact that his knees wanted to give way, he knew it was the right thing to offer.

"You—what?" Severus turned and stared at him. "Remus, you can't—they'd penalise you for not registering."

"I don't care. You deserve the credit for that potion. I'll take the punishment they set, as long as they let me witness for you that you worked on it and that you were the one who talked about using Monkshood first."

Severus' expression was working in disbelief. Remus wondered if he was trying to keep from calling his lover a lot of names. "I...No," he said finally. "I can't let you do that. I just can't."

"Severus—"

"No." Severus' tone was final. He came and put his arms around Remus, holding him tightly. Remus took a shallow breath. "No. It doesn't matter. I just won't file a complaint. It doesn't matter who gets the credit; you'll have the potion every month from now on. That's what matters."

Remus got his arms around Severus' waist. "That isn't only what matters," he protested. "Severus, I want you to file a complaint. I want you to be given your due. Even if you don't mention me."

"How can I file without mentioning you?" Severus muttered. "You've been my only test subject. Belby's the one who tested on werewolves from Ministry custody."

"Yeah, he's the one who abuses werewolves who were given no choice," Remus said bitterly. "You at least took a subject who volunteered."

"Look, the League won't care about that. They don't have any requirements on ethics or anything. Even if they did, werewolves are about on the same level as house-elves, in their minds. They wouldn't care."

Remus snorted. "I care."

"I know." Severus sighed and the sound was so discouraged that Remus felt guilty, even though he knew it wasn't exactly his fault.

"I know it won't make up for this," Remus said slowly, "but I'd like to thank you. It won't be an Order of Merlin." He slid one hand lower on Severus' arse. "What about an Order of Orgasm instead? I'm afraid there's nothing you can hang on the wall with that, though."

Severus snorted, and for a moment Remus wasn't sure whether Severus was amused or disgusted. Then Severus pushed him backwards until his back was against the kitchen wall, kissing him hard. Remus lifted his hands to cradle Severus' face, parting his lips and surrendering control to his lover. Severus' full weight came against him, his hips pressing into Remus'. Remus gave a low moan and bucked against him slightly, letting his hardening cock slide against Severus'.

Severus broke the kiss, panting. "God, Remus," he whispered. He rested one hand on Remus' collarbone, the other working Remus' pants down off his hips. Severus shuddered. "Need you more than any stupid award."

Remus felt his pants slide down his legs and pool at his feet. He gasped and arched, undoing the tie of Severus' dressing gown. He glanced over and saw that the kitchen drapes were open, but he didn't particularly care. Let the world see.

Severus pulled away just long enough to shrug out of the dressing gown, then he pulled Remus against him again. Remus groaned, running his arms up and down Severus' lean back. He loved Severus' skinny-but-muscular build, and he Oh God! especially liked Severus' cock. He lifted a leg to sling around Severus' hips, pulling him closer, and Severus let out a low moan.

Teeth were nipping at Remus' throat and shoulders; he arched his head back, giving more access. One hand was buried in Severus' hair. "God, yes, Severus!" he gasped, shifting his hip to gain friction against his cock. Severus responded by whispering the preparation spells. Remus let out a needy noise as he felt himself stretched and slicked inside. Then Severus' cock was pressing into him, filling him.

"You're the only one who cares about me," Severus muttered, reaching down to fist Remus' cock. "You're so gorgeous. Need you, Remus."

It broke Remus' heart just a little, hearing those words. He wanted to march into the League of Potioners and demand they fix this blatant thievery, but Severus was willing to give that up because he loved Remus. He gave a strangled moan and began a rhythmic tightening and relaxing of his muscles. It made Severus groan, so he did it faster. He was stroking his hand up and down Severus' wiry back, glutting himself on touch.

When Severus hit that spot, though, Remus cried out and clutched at Severus to keep from falling as his knees weakened. Severus made a satisfied noise and thrust harder, hitting that spot every time. Remus' body felt like it would explode from the pleasure that was suddenly filling him, flooding every limb with tingles. He rolled his head to the side, then back to stare at Severus. Severus was watching him avidly.

Severus' hand tightened on his cock, stroking faster, his thrusts increasing in speed and force, and finally Remus could take no more. He yelled and tensed and arched and came, spurting over Severus' hand. Severus stroked him relentlessly, milking the last of his orgasm out. When Remus was making little whimpering noises with each stroke, he finally took his hand away and used it to pull

Remus even closer, thrusting harder, faster, hips pistoning against Remus.

There was nothing Remus could do to help, other than lift his hands to play with Severus' nipples. He circled and tweaked and pinched gently, and whether that made the difference or not, soon Severus was groaning and pulsing deep inside Remus, flooding him with hot come. He slumped against Remus, kissing his throat and jaw and panting, whispering things like, "love you," and "so beautiful".

It was several minutes before either of them had the strength to relocate to the bed, where they collapsed, holding each other close.



"You've met him!" Remus looked so bloody eager to hear about the Potter brat that Severus felt a twinge of jealousy. Then he felt like an idiot for being jealous of an eleven-year-old child.

"He's a little terror!" Severus flung himself onto the sofa and glowered at the floor. "Breaking rules right and left, thinking he can get away with anything just because he's the famous Boy Who Lived. Sod that." He wanted a drink, but he wasn't willing to get up again to get anything. He'd made it through the first week of the term and he only wanted two things, to shag Remus, and to sleep for ten hours straight.

Remus was smiling. "Takes after his dad, then, does he?"

"Too right," Severus snarled. "And if you'll recall, I bloody hated his father." He didn't really want to talk about this. He knew it could only lead to an argument, and he didn't want to argue. He wanted to shag.

Remus sighed. "But surely he respects his professors?"

"Oh, wouldn't that be a treat? Of course he doesn't respect his professors. Remus, you were the only Marauder who respected professors."

"There has to be some bit of Lily in him, though."

Severus glanced up. "His eyes," he said grudgingly. "Brilliant green, just like hers. Little bastard. Every time he turns those eyes on me, I feel like Lily's watching me. Makes me want to throttle him."

Remus chuckled. "You deal with regret very uniquely, Severus."

"I deal with everything uniquely," Severus retorted. "Come here, I want to touch you."

"Can't argue with that." Remus scooted closer, smirking at Severus. Severus caught Remus up in his arms and pulled him over onto his lap, leaning in to nuzzle Remus' neck.

"Mmm." Remus angled his head and threaded his fingers into Severus' hair. "Merlin, I love you so bloody much."

Severus growled something he knew Remus wouldn't understand, because it was more emotion than words. He wrapped his arms around his lover and held him close, loving the way Remus felt in his arms. He'd missed him all week, and judging from the way Potter was behaving—and Malfoy, who had apparently been spurned by Potter and was out for revenge—he wouldn't have nearly as much time for visiting as he had had in the past.

"Missed you," Severus muttered. He kissed Remus' neck. "Let's go to bed."

"Bed?" Remus asked, wriggling slightly. Severus gasped at how that interested his body. "Or here? We haven't shagged on the sofa for a while."

Severus chuckled and stuck one hand down the back of Remus' trousers. "Here, then."

That was the last conversation they had for some time.

Later, lying in bed, Remus rolled over and rested his head on Severus' shoulder. "D'you think he remembers anything about any of us?"

"He wouldn't remember me anyway," Severus said. But he knew what Remus was asking, and he hated having to say it. "Face it, Remus, the boy was just over a year old. He wouldn't have any memories. Perhaps images or scents buried deep in his subconscious, but that's all. He certainly wouldn't remember names or faces."

Remus sighed. "I miss them so much sometimes," he murmured. "When I think about what should have been, how they should have taken Harry to Kings Cross for his first Hogwarts Express, how proud they would be that he's been sorted into Gryffindor...And Sirius should have told him all the tricks we used to get into trouble."

"God help us," Severus muttered. "He doesn't have Black helping him and he's already doing just fine getting into trouble on his own. Well. Him and that youngest Weasley boy. The dynamic duo." He snorted.

Remus laughed. "I know he's causing you headaches. Thank you for watching over him, despite that."

Severus swallowed a sigh. "How could I do otherwise? I know the dangers that are still in this world for him. And I believe Dumbledore when he says the Dark Lord will be back. Potter defeated him once; we'll need him to grow up and do it again."



"He was really there." Remus' voice was a whisper in the darkness. Severus tightened his arms around him.

"Yes. I should have seen it sooner. I knew Quirrell was after the Stone, but I hadn't any idea why. And what Potter describes...he knew when Potter lied. He could always do that."

"You could lie to him," Remus said. His nose pressed against Severus' shoulder.

"You saw how long it took me to learn that," Severus pointed out. "I've been telling Dumbledore that we need to start Potter on Occlumency. He's not disciplined enough at this age, he can't even hide how much he bloody hates me. He'll have to do better than that if he's to face down the Dark Lord again."

"What does the Headmaster say?"

Severus sighed. "He just shrugs and smiles that annoying twinkly smile of his. It makes me want to hex it off his face."

Remus let out a laugh that turned into a sigh. "We'll have to convince him, somehow."

Severus pulled Remus close and kissed him again. He couldn't help but feel this was the beginning of the next decline. The Dark Lord and Potter had faced off now, and the Dark Lord would have Potter's measure. He would know the biggest obstacle right now was his inability to touch the boy. Good on you, Lily, Severus thought, admiring her even more. She knew what she was doing when she chose to die for her son.

Remus stroked a hand down Severus' bare chest. A flash of white told Severus his lover was smiling. "I love you, Severus. If anyone can convince him, it's you."

Severus gave a bitter laugh, but his response was interrupted by the tapping of an owl at the window.

"That's odd," Remus said. "What a funny time for anyone to be writing."

"Perhaps it's international post." Severus sat up and disentangled himself from Remus. He got out of bed and padded across to open the window. An owl swooped in and landed on his shoulder, offering a leg.

"Lumos." Severus inspected the address and frowned. "It's for you. It looks like your dad's handwriting."

"Really?" Remus sat up and reached for the letter. He read it, and even in the dim light Severus saw him go pale. He gripped the parchment more tightly, making it crinkle, and read it again.

"Remus?" Severus asked softly.

"My mum. My mum's been killed." Remus choked on the words. He clenched his teeth and looked away, obviously fighting tears. "She—it was raining hard, the motorway was slick..."

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, then put his arms around Remus. He'd liked Maggie Lupin; she was always sending him biscuits made with dark chocolate chips because she knew he liked them.

Remus shuddered and hunched into Severus' embrace. "How can—it just can't be possible! It—I saw her yesterday!"

Severus swallowed hard. He remembered thinking the same things when his father died. It had been nearly seven years since Tobias died, and Severus still missed him. He tightened his arms around Remus.

"Her birthday is in a few weeks. I can't..." Remus shuddered again and let out a quiet sob that broke Severus' heart. "Mum...Mum..."

Severus held Remus close to his chest, trying to make his arms as tight around Remus as possible. His chest felt tight, his throat ached.

Remus finally let go and sobbed against Severus' shirt, his body shaking and shuddering, his fingers grasping impotently at Severus' skin.

Severus just closed his eyes and absorbed Remus' grief.



"I'll owl you as soon as I get settled in," Remus promised. "It'll only be for a few weeks, until Dad's feeling better."

"Yeah." Severus kept his hands shoved in his trouser pockets, watching Remus and wishing it didn't hurt to swallow.

"It was just so unexpected, you know?" Remus' eyes were bright. Severus hoped he wasn't going to cry again. He was used to Remus' emotions, but he was tired of the crying. He nodded.

"And I can Floo back to see you."

Severus let out a short, huffy sigh. "Right, I know you don't want to go any more than I want you to go. But you've made your decision, so will you just bloody get out of here and stop prolonging the agony?"

A hurt look crossed Remus' face, but Severus didn't care anymore. He'd been listening to these same justifications for the past week, and he was tired of it. It wasn't as if he didn't understand. He hadn't actually moved in with his mother after his father's death, but he had certainly visited her more often.

"Right. Well." Remus shuffled his feet, then leaned up to kiss Severus. "I love you," he said quietly.

"Love you, too," Severus said, hoping it sounded as genuine as he meant it.

Remus Apparated, and Severus was suddenly left alone in the cottage. It was the first time in ages that he'd been here alone. It made it difficult to breathe suddenly.

Severus left the house, locked it and warded it carefully, and trudged up the long path to the castle.

*Dear Severus,*

*I miss you dreadfully. Dad sleeps a lot. He goes to bed after several glasses of wine every night and from what I can tell he sleeps peacefully enough. But he is still in bed when I get up. I've been fixing him breakfast and leaving it on a tray by his bed, but even so I've been opening the carpentry shop by myself for the past week.*

*I wish I knew what to do. It's like living with a ghost. He doesn't read, he doesn't speak, and he barely eats.*

*Love,*

*Remus*

Remus,

*Life here at Hogwarts goes on despite the fact that I have been in a strop since you left. I don't like rattling around that cottage alone, and coming back here only made me feel as though I rattle around in my suites. We have, as always, a new Defence Professor. I had to restrain myself from punching him on the nose at our first faculty meeting. It is Gilderoy Lockhart. He is very blond and very annoying.*

*Miss you.*

Severus

Dear Severus,

Please tell me you aren't serious. Dumbledore hired Gilderoy Lockhart to teach Defence? I know the job is cursed, but if he's that hard up, he could ask me to teach.

We're falling behind on the work. I don't know what to do to make Dad start getting up earlier. I've been going about this all the wrong way, I'm sure, but I'm at a loss.

I miss you.

Love,

Remus

Remus,

*I wish I could help you in some way. Would you rather I tell Dumbledore I need a year's leave so I can come to Edinburgh? I feel useless.*

*Have you forgotten that the last Defence Professor ended up dead? I shouldn't like to think of you taking this position, thanks to the curse.*

*Love,*

Severus

Dear Severus,

There's no reason for you to take a year's leave. I am ridiculously grateful for the offer, of course, but I couldn't allow it; there's no reason for you to give up a perfectly good job just to come hold my hand while I take care of Dad. It's horrible here. He drinks himself to sleep every night, and sometimes he makes it to bed, but sometimes I find him sprawled in his chair where I left him the night before. I know he misses Mum. I miss her, too. But he's making this harder on everyone.

I miss you.

Remus

Dear Remus,

*Logically what you say makes sense. My heart still urges me to come to you. Perhaps at the Christmas holiday I'll come to Edinburgh. Have you tried slipping a potion into your father's drink? Nothing harmful, of course! Just something to help him remember the good things and forget the bad.*

*Love,*

Severus.

Dear Severus,

I miss you. I sometimes can't remember what it's like to have your arms around me. I want you to come to Edinburgh this weekend. Christmas is still two months away.

Love,

Remus

PS - Have you forgotten to whom you're talking? I wouldn't know how to brew or obtain a potion like that. Know any good brewers?

Dear Remus,

*I wish I could come to Edinburgh today. Unfortunately I have a conference I can't miss. I'll try to get out early (the last session is only "New methods for cleaning your home with potions"). I am*

*desperate to remind you how it feels to have my arms around you.*

Love,

Severus

Dear Severus,

I wish you had been able to make the last visit go on a bit longer. Dad seemed more like his old self with you there. It was almost like he wasn't thinking about the accident for a few hours. Just the fact that he cooked, instead of leaving it for me to do, was a vast improvement.

Thank you, Severus. I love you.

Remus

*Dear Remus,*

*I wish I had been able to stay longer, too. The Christmas holiday starts in another week. I'll come then and spend the week with you. If that's all right. I miss you.*

Severus

Dear Severus,

If that's all right? That's more than all right. I have an appointment with you and our bed after you arrive. My cock misses you almost as much as my heart does.

Oops, one of Dad's creditors is coming in. I need to go.

Love,

Remus



Severus flung out an arm to pull Remus closer—and felt only empty sheets. He sighed and rolled over. Remus rose early every morning to work long hours at the carpentry shop. He was worried his father might lose the house. Severus could understand, but he only had a few more days to visit before returning to Hogwarts, and he was beginning to resent the fact that Remus didn't have more time for him.

He grumbled his way through his shower, getting dressed, and going downstairs. John Lupin was slumped at the table, his head cradled in his hands. Severus held in a sigh and wondered if he ought to say something.

He opted instead to shuffle across to pour himself a cup of tea. He leaned against the counter and stared into his cup, wondering if Remus' father were trying to drink himself to death.

"Morning, Severus," John said finally. His voice was gravelly from hard drinking and nightmares.

Severus nodded. "John."

"He spends too much time working and not enough with you, eh?" John said, not looking up. "He'll learn, someday, not to take things for granted."

Like having a roof over your head? Severus thought, but didn't say. He just shrugged and sipped at his tea. Too bitter. He added sugar.

"He's a good boy. Serious, though. Too responsible."

"He wants to help you," Severus said. He tried the tea again and found it better.

"Oh, aye, he means well." John rubbed a hand down his face. "He's still a bloody fool."

Severus bridled, but he happened to agree, in this particular instance. He shrugged and took another sip. "I'll just go and see what he wants for lunch," he said.

John muttered something, but fortunately Severus didn't hear it.

"I've barely seen you the whole time I've been here! I feel like I'm only here for the bloody sex! And the sex is fabulous, but what happened to us talking? You're already gone when I wake up, and aside from meals, you're chained to the bloody shop!"

Remus didn't look up from the chair he was sanding as he weathered Severus' storm. His lack of response sent a chill through Severus—since when was Remus able to keep his temper around Severus? Was Severus boring him?

"I'm trying to keep my dad from losing his business," he said, his voice steady. "The only thing I can think to do is fill the orders myself. I'm sorry if you feel slighted, Severus. I'm glad to have you here, I truly am."



Severus stared at Remus' bent head. He didn't sound glad. He sounded as if he wouldn't be bothered if Severus left now instead of staying the remaining three days. "Well, so glad to know I'm inconveniencing you. I did ask if you wanted me here."

"And I said yes." Remus glanced up at him. "Of course I want you here. I just don't have a lot of time, that's all."

"Time for sex but no words!" Severus retorted, and immediately his face went hot. He sounded like a bloody girl.

One of Remus' eyebrows lifted, but he just looked back at a snag on the wood. "I apologise for hurting your feelings."

"Hurting my feelings! What do you think I am, a bloody girl?" Severus glared at him. "You can't make your father live his life, Remus. You can't live it for him. All you're doing is prolonging the whole ordeal. Tell him he's cocking up his business and that he needs to start acting like the man your mum married in the first place! That ought to straighten him up."

"Don't talk about my dad like that," Remus said. His voice was still quiet, but there was a definite edge to it.

Severus drew in a breath. So Remus' dad got more emotion than Severus did? "It's only the truth, Remus. He's turned into a drunken sot, spending all his time trying to drown his sorrows. Well, sorrows can swim, and he'll be the one who drowns in the end."

Remus' face went pale, then flushed. "He just needs some time to deal with it and get back on his feet. I told you this wasn't going to be easy. What he needs are people who support him, not people who call him names and say he's ruining his life."

"I suppose that means you want me to leave, then!" Severus felt a flash of heat and then cold run through him after he said those words. He didn't mean it, he didn't want to leave! But he'd never been good at taking back his words. He clenched his fists.

"Fine," Remus said tightly. "I know this is too hard for most people."

"It isn't that it's too hard!" Severus growled. "It's that you're bloody ignoring me, and have been the entire holiday."

Remus frowned. "I'm trying to put food on the table."

"You're trying to avoid the truth."

"Fine, maybe I am!" Remus said, his temper finally defeating him. "Maybe I need a break! Maybe I need some time to myself, to sort out everything that's happened in the past two years. Maybe I'm just bloody tired!"

Severus stared at him. "Fine. I'll pack and be gone by teatime."

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the shop, aware that John was no longer sitting at the kitchen table. He wondered if he'd heard Severus call him a drunken sot. He decided he couldn't be arsed to care.

Severus took the steps two at a time and began pulling open drawers and throwing things into his rucksack. He would leave the two Lupin idiots to their own self-imposed misery. He took short, quick breaths as he packed, then gathered up his bags and opened the Floo to his quarters at Hogwarts.

When he got through to his suite, he dropped his bags and stared down at his shaking hands.



Remus swiped viciously at the chair, marring the finish. He swore and rubbed a hand across his forehead. He'd got a lot done today, so the floor was littered with papers and sawdust. He couldn't believe the way Severus had taken on, shouting and throwing accusations. All the same, he felt guilty and miserable over the fact that Severus had gone. He hadn't really meant for Severus to think he was unwelcome here.

Remus' hand slipped and he swore as the rough sandpaper scraped across the back of his hand. He stopped working and watched as the blood welled up on his knuckles.

Why had Severus been so upset? Remus was just trying to help his father. He didn't have a lot of time to spend with Severus, but they'd slept in the same bed every night, and they'd had heated sex several times. True, they didn't have much time to talk, but just because Severus was on holiday didn't mean Remus could be.

He sighed and scrubbed a palm over his face, wishing he'd handled things differently with Severus.

Nothing to be done about it at this point. He threw the sandpaper down on the chair and began locking up the shop. The only people who came around these days were people who had lent money to his father. When

he'd shut down the till and turned out the lights, he let himself out and locked the door behind him, then made his way home.



"You're looking well," Remus said. He sipped at his water and smoothed his hands over his serviette, folding the white linen crisply.

Severus took a long breath. "So are you," he lied. Remus looked ill and tired, and there were more strands of grey in his hair. Severus wondered if there was something wrong with the last batch of Wolfsbane Potion he had sent.

Remus shrugged. "I'm finally starting to get a little more sleep at night. Dad...well, Aunt Polly's been staying with us, the past fortnight. It helps." He moved his knife a centimetre to the right, then aligned the spoon next to it. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." Severus drank some wine and forced himself not to look around at all the Muggles surrounding them. "Mother has moved in with her sister's family in Yorkshire. She sold me the house at Spinner's End." He wondered, after he said it, if that was something he should have discussed with Remus beforehand. Would Remus be hurt? Would Remus even care?

"Oh..." Remus looked down at the table, then back up at Severus. "You aren't living in Hogsmeade?"

Severus tried to shrug negligently. He had a feeling it looked jerky and awkward. "I thought it a better idea to buy my mother's house than let it be knocked down for another factory. I'm still staying in Hogsmeade."

Remus nodded, his brow wrinkled. "Good, good." He looked around the restaurant, then back at Severus. Severus didn't know what to say, though, so he just watched Remus.

Fortunately they were interrupted by the arrival of their food. Remus gave the girl a strained smile. Severus wondered if that meant Remus was tired of this conversation, or tired of him. They ate for some time in silence.

Eventually Severus became aware that Remus had gone still across from him. He looked up to find Remus watching him, his eyes full of unguarded sorrow, but his mouth held in tight lines. Severus stare at him.

"I missed you," Remus whispered finally.

Severus swallowed against a sudden tightness in his throat. "I've missed you, as well." He looked down at the plate, hating that he felt awkward with the man he'd loved for more than a decade.

Remus' hand entered his limited field of vision, surprising him when it closed around his own. Severus released his fork and turned his hand to clutch at Remus'.

"I'm sorry," Remus whispered.



*My dear Remus,*

*I hope you are well, and your father. Severus tells me you have been working with your father in his shop. Severus has been spending a great deal of time brewing at the school this year. Poppy's medicinal stores reached an all-time low this year, after Harry and his friends defeated the basilisk. I expect, however, that you already know all this.*

*I am certain too that you have seen the Daily Prophet with the story about Sirius. I have been able to learn very little, but be assured I am attempting to discover how he escaped.*

*In the meantime, I wonder if you would consider teaching at the school this year. We have an opening for Defence Against the Dark Arts, and with your past and background I know you are more than qualified to teach this.*

*Thank you, and I look forward to your answer,*

*Albus Dumbledore*

Remus gazed down at the parchment in his hand. Poppy's provisions weren't the only thing at an all-time low. He wondered about Severus' brewing habits this summer, but he supposed, since they were hardly seeing each other these days, Severus had to do something to keep busy.

He frowned. Severus wouldn't like it if he accepted the Defence post. He had said so in writing last year, and Remus had no reason to think Severus' opinion on the matter had changed. Then again, he had no real proof—he hadn't seen Severus since early July.

"God, what a fix. What do I do?" he whispered aloud. He missed Severus desperately. His father wasn't doing much better, but he had at least learned to drink slowly and steadily enough that he could function the entire

workday. The debt had been paid down to the point where Remus occasionally treated them to takeaway from a chip shop instead of cooking at home every day.

In short, there was nothing to keep him from accepting the position—except his lover.

After the Christmas holiday, Remus and Severus' relationship had been reduced to tense Floo calls and short, carefully-worded letters and a few tense dinners. Remus, at least, had remained faithful—even to the extent that he thought only of Severus when he wanked. He had sent Severus a hand-made wooden box for his birthday, and Severus had sent him three books he knew Remus had been coveting. They didn't go out for either occasion.

He didn't think Severus would cheat on him. He thought the root of their problems lay largely in their lack of communication, as well as Remus' preoccupation with his father, and Severus' growing preoccupation with keeping Harry safe.

Perfect. This was a chance for Remus to return his father's independence and return to his lover. They could work together to keep Harry safe, for a change.

What if Severus doesn't want you anymore? What if you're too brown and coarse, now that you've been working with your hands?

"I did that before, and he never cared," Remus said. His voice seemed too loud in the empty shop—his father had gone home early with a headache.

"Right," he said. "Right. I'll do it."

He grabbed two pieces of parchment from his father's design and billing desk and scribbled out a note of acceptance for Dumbledore and a note of explanation to Severus.

I'll be travelling first to London, because I haven't anything really suitable to wear teaching, he remarked in his next letter to Severus.

It's been a long time since I've been to London. The last time was with you, do you remember? I was wearing that orange shirt and you were in black, and we'd been drinking. We went to the book shop and a tailor's. You talked me into that tuxedo that was too small for me, and then you nearly ripped the clothes off me once we got home.

God, I miss those times, Severus! I'm sorry things have become so difficult. I promise, when I get to Hogwarts, things will be better. I'll work harder at it.

I love you.

Remus



Severus had been correct. Harry was the spitting image of his father—except for his mother's eyes. Remus had been dozing in the carriage when the children spilled in, and they were making such an effort not to wake him that he took pity on them and kept his eyes closed.

It gave him a chance to eavesdrop, though. He listened as Harry informed his friends that Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban to try to kill him. Remus felt a pang in his chest when he heard that, but he also felt a pride he had no right to feel about the fact that Harry didn't sound afraid. He did take a bit of offence at the Weasley boy's opinion that one good hex would finish him off. Merlin, did he really look that bad after the full moon?

Remus didn't remember the train ride being so long in his childhood. Then again, he was still feeling the after-effects of the full moon last night, and that made everything tedious. He let the train rock him back to sleep, confident that the Hogwarts Express, at least, was safe.

He awoke to pitch blackness and a bone-chilling cold. He realised at once that the train wasn't moving. Fuck. Severus had mentioned in his last letter that Dementors were patrolling the school grounds now, looking for Sirius. Wanting to administer the Kiss.

The compartment door slid open, and then Remus heard two bodies impacting. The children squealed and chattered nervously. He couldn't hear what might be happening outside their carriage, no matter how he strained.

"Quiet!" he ordered. They obeyed and he held his breath, listening. A quick spell had flames flickering in the palm of his hand and he took his first good look around at the children. "Stay where you are," he ordered and stood, intending to look out into the passage.

Before he made it to the door, however, it slid open and the carriage went even colder; a Dementor lingered in the doorway. Remus was shocked when Harry crumpled to the floor of the carriage. He flicked his wand in a

furious Patronus Charm. Dementors, as far as he knew, had no sense of humour, nor any capability to understand sarcasm, but he couldn't resist. "None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks," he informed the intruder. "Go." He could hear the voices starting in the back of his mind—his mother's voice, his father saying real wizards didn't like to take it up the arse and the werewolf curse must have perverted him, the hissing and popping of the charred remains of the Potter house in Godric's Hollow.

"Is he all right?" the girl, Hermione, was asking. Her voice was somewhat shrill and anxious. Remus winced.

"He'll be fine," he promised, leaning down to check Harry's pulse and make sure he wasn't fevered. He suspected it was a reaction to the Dementor—Harry, of all people, would have the worst memories of probably anyone on this train.

"Why'd he fall over like that?" Ron demanded. Remus didn't look up. "Dementors call up your worst memories," he explained. "I imagine Harry can remember seeing his parents murdered." Hermione gave him a sharp look that he felt was unjustified; anyone who read the Daily Prophet would recognise Harry instantly.

Hermione slapped Harry's face lightly to bring him around, which Remus thought was a very Muggle response; a simple Ennervate would have sufficed. He listened absently as they tried to explain to Harry that no one had been screaming; it would be Lily, then, or perhaps James? He ached with the desire to tell Harry he had known his parents, to know what exactly Harry had heard. He resisted, instead offering Harry chocolate to ease the residuals of the Dementor, then going to check along the train. He wanted to be certain there were no other students in need of chocolate.

The rest of the trip to the school was filled with students whispering and muttering about the Dementors. He felt for Harry; the entire third year was going to know he'd fainted, if not the entire school. He simply passed out chocolate as needed and made his way back to his carriage.

When he arrived at the school, Hagrid sent him in the first Thestral-drawn carriage up to the castle, telling him McGonagall needed to see him. She met him at the front entrance and handed him a thick sheaf of parchment, leading him up to the third floor to show him his office.

"Your rooms will be in an out-of-the-way part of the dungeons, next to a staircase," she said. "Dumbledore wasn't sure it was a good idea, but Severus has missed you dreadfully the past year, and I eventually won."

Remus brightened. "Thanks, Pro—erm." He paused, not sure what to call her.

She chuckled. "Severus has been doing an admirable job of calling me Minerva for the past thirteen years—when he's not calling me 'that obsolete bat' or 'bloody Gryffindor!'"

Remus laughed. "All right, Minerva." He looked around his office—his office!—and smiled. "It's good to be back here."

Her gaze softened as she looked back at him. "I think you'll do well here, Remus. You've always had a gift for explaining things, and I know you have the compassion to deal with the students. Just make sure you dredge up some strictness from somewhere, and you'll be all right."

Remus felt his face heat. He knew she was thinking of his behaviour as a prefect, and the way he allowed his friends to get away with cruelty to Severus, in spite of—or probably, in Sirius' case, because of—Remus' friendship with him.



Severus had spent the entire Welcoming Feast wanting nothing more than to drag Remus to his quarters for some long-overdue catching up. He had managed to look appropriately furious when Remus was introduced—couldn't have rumours getting out that Severus wasn't interested in the Defence position, after all. He loitered at the Head Table long enough for Remus to finish speaking with Dumbledore, then tilted his head in invitation. Remus nodded, a small smile quirking the corners of his lips, and followed.

Severus wondered about that smile. It wasn't Remus' usual expression of happiness. Did that mean he wasn't as happy to see Severus as Severus was to see him? Or was it just that Remus was making an attempt at discretion? He hoped it was the latter. He realised it probably was, but despite all their years together, the past year and a half had been so rocky that he was no longer confident of Remus' feelings for him. The fact that Sirius Black was out of prison and on the loose only made it worse.

He knew Remus wouldn't help Black. He knew all too well how much Remus hated Black. But he still wondered what would happen when push came to shove and they were confronted with Black. For Severus had no illusions—Potter was a meddlesome, trouble-seeking boy. He would go looking for Black, and someone would have to pick up the pieces.

He only hoped the pieces were Black-shaped, and not Potter-shaped.

They reached Remus' rooms and Remus spent a moment keying the wards to himself and Severus, then he closed the door and turned to face Severus.

The expression on his face immediately wiped away all of Severus' doubts.

"God, I've missed you so bloody much," Remus whispered, practically pouncing on Severus and holding him close. "You've lost weight."

"So have you," Severus observed, closing his arms around Remus and breathing in the scent of Remus' hair. "I imagine we both have things to worry about."

"Just a few things," Remus admitted. He kissed Severus' neck. "I feel better now. I've been looking forward to tonight for ages."

"I could have taken a year's leave," Severus said, knowing it was a bad idea to bring up an old argument, but unable to keep his mouth shut. He felt Remus sigh.

"I know," Remus said. "It just didn't seem fair for me to ask you to put your life on hold for me. And I kept thinking he would get better. That one day he would wake up and be my dad again, you know?" Severus tightened his arms around Remus.

"Yeah, I know."

"And that never really happened. I mean, when you visited last autumn, it was better for a while. But the Christmas holiday was bad again—you know, when he went shopping for presents, he saw things he wanted to buy her, he told me that. He gave up shopping and came home and drank."

"I remember." Severus had been there that day. Remus had come home from working all day in the carpentry shop, seen his father, and gone back to the shop, his shoulders tensed.

"I miss him."

Severus made a quiet noise and kissed Remus' hair. "I've missed you," he murmured. "What if we both move to Edinburgh over the summer holidays? We wouldn't have to live with him, unless you wanted to, but we could at least be close."

Remus nodded. "I love you, Severus."

Severus smiled faintly. "I love you, too."

"It's been ages since we had sex." Remus loosened his arms slightly and ran one hand down to grope Severus' arse. Severus made an interested noise and dropped a few wet kisses on Remus' neck.

"We definitely need to rectify that situation," he murmured.

Remus hummed and groped Severus' arse again. "You know what I'd really like?" he said. "I'd like to undress you and have you fuck me." He lifted his head to nip Severus' jaw lightly.

"I believe that can be arranged." Severus' voice was throaty with lust. How had they gone for several months without sex? It didn't seem like it should be possible.

He pushed Remus gently towards the bed, liking the way Remus' fingers were already working at his buttons. In a matter of moments he felt his robe flutter to the floor. By the time Remus reached the bed, his hands were splayed across Severus' bare chest.

"God, Remus," Severus muttered, arching into the touch. Remus laughed softly and flicked his fingers across Severus' nipples again, his mouth against Severus' neck.

In very short order they were both naked and horizontal and Severus was tracing his fingers across Remus' entrance, teasing and preparing. Remus kept groaning eagerly and finally gasped, "Fuck me, Severus!" in a half-amused, half-pleading tone.

Severus was more than willing to obey.



Remus' first session with third year Gryffindors was unfortunate; Neville Longbottom's Boggart was Remus' lover. How could one make Severus less frightening? Remus had once heard Frank Longbottom complain about the outrageous way his mother dressed. It wasn't too much of a stretch to suggest imagining Severus in Neville's Gran's clothes. It was going to be hell getting Severus to forgive him, though.

Sure enough, Severus burst into his office before dinner, glowering. "You!"

Remus didn't even try to pretend innocence. "Sev—" he began, looking apologetic. Severus didn't let him continue.

"If you wanted to see me in a dress, couldn't you have chosen something sexy?"

"Severus, I honest!—" Remus broke off. "What?"

Severus snickered. "You should have seen your face when I walked in here. Idiot." He seized Remus' shoulders and walked him backwards until he hit the desk. "I'm rather displeased at how you've ruined my fear-some image. Perhaps some punishment is in order."

"Pu—punishment?" Remus' mouth went dry—but from lust, not fear. They'd never done anything that might be referred to as punishment, but it sounded good.

"Yes, you've been very naughty. You need to be taught." Severus rolled up his sleeves, which sent a surge of lust straight to Remus' groin.

"Oh, God," Remus groaned. "Teach me, Severus."

Severus smirked and flicked his wand. Remus found himself suddenly naked, his arse pressed against the wood of his desk.

"I hope you locked the door," he managed, staring at Severus' hands, which were stroking his wand.

"Locked the door?" Severus repeated, his tone innocent. "Whyever for?"

"Severus! Someone might come in!" Remus swallowed as Severus squeezed his wand. God, that looked positively lewd. He hoped his cock would get that attention soon.

"Ah, but that's part of the punishment," Severus purred. "You humiliated me in front of the whole school. Perhaps you deserve the same."

Remus stared at him. "You...Severus, you wouldn't."

Severus arched a brow. "Wouldn't I?" He flicked his wand again and Remus gaped in horror as the door creaked ajar a few inches.

Severus gave a low, rich chuckle and took hold of Remus' cock. "Admit it, Lupin," he drawled. "You're turned on by the possibility of getting caught. Who might walk in on this? What will they find? Will they see me stroking

your cock? Will they catch you on your knees sucking me off? Will they walk in as I'm balls-deep in your arse, bugging you so hard you're begging for more?" As he spoke, he began stroking Remus, his dark words making Remus' hips buck.

God, there was no denying it, Remus was turned on by this. So help him, it was a thrill to think of someone coming in and finding them in the throes of passion. He whimpered.

"Oh, you want it," Severus murmured. "But I'm not done punishing you." He took his hand away and folded his arms, watching Remus impassively. "Turn around."

Remus obeyed at once, wondering what his lover had in mind. Would he take him hard? Would he lick Remus' arsehole? Would he fuck him with his fingers first?

It was a shock when the first stinging blow fell across his arse. He cried out in surprise at both the pain and the unexpected surge of arousal that shot through him. He heard Severus' low chuckle in his ear.

"You're such a wanton," Severus said. "You want me inside you, don't you?" As he spoke, his hand cracked down on Remus' arse again.

"God yes!" Remus cried, arching his back. Merlin, he never would have expected this to feel so good.

Another blow, pain followed by fresh-blossoming arousal. "Oh, Severus, please!" he begged. "Please, please, fuck me!"

Severus hummed thoughtfully. "I'm not certain you're ready," he murmured. "Or that you're sufficiently apologetic for the unflattering dress."

"I am! I am! Nothing lacy or dowdy next time!" Remus gasped. "Please, Severus!"

His lover laughed aloud at that, but he whispered and Remus felt the cool slickness inside that went with the preparation spells.

"How do you want it?" Severus purred. "You want it hard and fast, don't you?" There was the rustle of cloth, then he nudged Remus' arsehole with his cock.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Remus babbled. He would say anything, at this point, to get Severus to fuck him.

Severus let out a noise of desire and pushed in fast, not waiting for Remus to adjust. The flash of discomfort turned quickly into a throbbing pleasure. Remus

arched back into Severus, clenching around him. He was satisfied to hear Severus give a loud gasp.

Severus began thrusting with deep, unrelenting strokes, one hand coming around to circle Remus' cock. The hard edge of the desk was cutting into Remus' hips and a wave of distant laughter reminded him that the door was still open, but Merlin! He'd rarely been so aroused in his life.

Severus' rhythm grew stronger and faster. Remus took him deep, tensing and mewling with pleasure. It felt so good to have Severus using him like this.

In a matter of minutes he could feel Severus losing control of his thrusts. Soon his lover let out a long, low groan, and Remus was flooded with hot come. He cried out, arching and straining for his own release, but Severus' hand had stopped moving, and the shallow thrusts of climax weren't reaching Remus' sweet spot.

Before he had time to complain, though, Severus had pulled out of him and was turning Remus around. He kissed Remus sloppily but fervently, then dropped to his knees. The next moment his lips were stretched around Remus' cock, glistening against the blood-engorged flesh. Remus groaned at the erotic sight, clutching the edge of the desk to stay upright.

Severus drew off his cock with a wet, smacking sound, making Remus whimper and buck his hips again. Severus' expression was simultaneously smug and hungry as he gazed up at Remus and took him in his mouth again. He sucked hard enough to hollow out his cheeks, making noises of enjoyment.

"Fuck!" Remus gasped, burying fingers in Severus' hair. He gripped hard, holding Severus' head still as he bucked his hips again, fucking Severus' mouth. He let his eyes fall half-closed and thrust into Severus' willing mouth, liking the way his lips were stretched over his cock.

"Now who's the slut?" Remus demanded breathlessly.

Severus blinked and groaned, his hand flying to Remus' hips, pulling him closer. He took Remus deep and groaned again and that was it—Remus let out a shout and came, spurting hard inside Severus' throat.

Severus moaned with enjoyment, sucking and swallowing, massaging Remus' arse with his hands. When he finally pulled off, Remus let his knees buckle and he slid down to join Severus on the floor.

"Someone could have heard," Severus said.

Remus grunted. "Who bloody cares?"

Severus smiled and flicked his wand. The door slammed shut



"You gave it to him!"

"Severus, I swear I didn't!" Remus frowned and wished he knew some way to convince his lover he was telling the truth.

"Why did you do it? Did you just want to humiliate me again? Bad enough you put me in a bloody dress in front of your fucking Gryffindors. You didn't have to lie to me and make me look like an idiot in front of Potter and his little friends!"

"Severus—"

"You know that parchment he has!"

Remus was fairly certain Severus didn't realise exactly what it was, but he still felt bad. He had made a serious error in judgement when he took Harry's side in the confrontation over the Marauder's Map. He hadn't thought Severus would understand. Unfortunately Severus understood all too well that Remus was lying to him, and the map itself had made very obvious that it was a relic from their past.

He sighed. "It's a map."

"A map." Severus stared at him.

"An enchanted map of the castle. We made it when we were at school. It's how we sneaked around so much without getting into trouble. It shows where everyone is in the school."

Severus stared at him. "You knew he had this?" His voice had dropped into the quiet almost-whisper that indicated a high level of rage.

"I didn't!" Remus hastened to assure him. "I had no idea until you called me down to your office. I confiscated it. It will be far more useful as a tool to find Black than as a toy for Harry to sneak about."

"I'm glad you have such a mature attitude about it," Severus retorted.

Remus sighed. "I don't know what to say, Severus. I apologise for acting as if I had no idea what it was. I..." He

paused. "I wanted too badly for Harry to like me. I should have had more courage."

Severus snorted. "I should say. Afraid of what a little boy will think of you."

"You know how quick teenagers are to reach a verdict," Remus said. "But I am sorry. I know I shouldn't have helped him lie to you."

"He'll be lucky if I don't put him into detention. I ought to put you both into detention."

Remus frowned. "I truly am sorry, Severus. How can I make this up to you?"

Severus cocked an eyebrow and smirked. "I'll have to give that some thought. I'll get back to you."

"I am watching for Black, you know," Remus said. "I'm trying to help you keep Harry safe."

"Wonderful," Severus retorted. "Of course, my main concern is keeping you safe. Your job is cursed, you dolt. I'm far more concerned about you than Potter."

Remus couldn't suppress the flash of warmth that sent through him. "I do love you, Severus. I know I let you down a lot, but I love you rather desperately."

Severus sighed and put his arms around Remus. "You still owe me," he reminded him, and kissed his ear.

Remus gasped, pleased at Severus' lips. "Just let me know when you want to collect."

"Perhaps I'll collect in instalments," Severus said, nibbling lightly. "Tonight will be the first."

Remus smiled and pulled Severus in for a kiss.



Severus heard the door to Remus' quarters open and then close again quietly, but he didn't lift his head from where it rested in his hands. It felt as if a band were constricting about his head, tightening slowly but inexorably. He closed his eyes and winced at the pain in his eye sockets.

Soft footsteps crossed the room, then gentle hands fell lightly onto his shoulders. Remus' fingers were strong, massaging some of the tension and anxiety away. Severus sighed

"I wish I could help you," Remus murmured. "You always seem so...angry."

"I am angry, Remus," Severus countered, his voice low, but with an edge to it. "That's who I am here. Who I've always been. Now in particular I cannot change the persona I have used for the past ten years. You of all people ought to know that."

Remus sighed, too, and smoothed his hands down Severus' shoulders, trying to push them down from the way he'd hunched them automatically. "I know, Severus. I know."

"God. I'm so bloody tired."

Remus leaned down and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Let's go to bed, then. D'you remember how we used to stay up talking?"

Severus wished he could laugh and agree the way he knew Remus wanted him to. Instead he just shrugged and rubbed at his forehead. "If you want to really be helpful, why don't you fetch me a headache potion?" he asked. His voice came out sharper than he had intended.

Remus drew away, and Severus could feel the sting of hurt, before Remus covered it. "Of course," Remus murmured, his voice calm and well-moderated. He began walking away, which somehow infuriated Severus.

"Of course?" he mimicked. "Of course? Merlin, Remus, why can't you for one moment stand up for yourself?"

Remus turned at that, his expression surprised. "Stand up for myself?"

"Say what you're really thinking for once! Tell me to naff off! Something!"

Remus raised an eyebrow. "What would be accomplished by my telling you to naff off when you need a headache potion?"

"So bloody rational!" Severus snapped. "Are all werewolves like that?"

Remus' brows drew together. "You can cut that right out, Severus," he said, his voice tight, and he got a headache potion out of a cabinet. He stalked over and plunked it down on the table in front of Severus. "There's no call for you to take it out on me. I'm on your side, if you'll recall."

Severus just snorted and drank the potion, then set the empty bottle carefully on the table again. "I'm going to bed," he announced, and stood.



Remus was silent for a moment, but as Severus reached the doorway to the bedroom, he said, "Sleep well."

Severus' pride wouldn't let him turn, but his stride faltered for a moment. He hadn't meant for Remus to leave, but... Well, he didn't want Remus here if he was going to be a prat about it, anyway. He dropped onto the bed fully clothed, then pulled the blanket over his head and tried to pretend he wasn't miserable.



Black's continued efforts to get at Potter were driving Severus mad. Several times he had to talk Remus out of going in search of Black. Remus reasoned that he would be the best person to find Black, but Severus reasoned that Black would be the likeliest person to kill Remus, and Remus' death was the most important thing Severus wanted to avoid.

The Christmas holidays went by too quickly, marred by the occurrence of the full moon in the middle. Severus kept Remus in bed the day after the full moon, though Remus had very little reason to complain. Over the holiday they were able to spend several hours talking, and Severus felt fairly confident that their relationship had been repaired. Remus loved him, Remus was committed to him, and Severus felt the same way. How had it been so easy to forget that?

Everything changed the night Remus forgot to take his potion.

Severus found Remus' office empty—the Marauder's Map spread open and on display across Remus' desk. He saw that Lupin and Potter were in the Shack with Black, and that was all he needed. Full of anger and hurt and hating his lover, Severus dashed to the Shack and confronted them. No matter what Remus said, Severus had seen him throw his arms around Sirius, welcoming him back. The bottom dropped out of his stomach then, and he felt hollow the rest of the night, as he woke and found the children and Black all passed out. He heard his lover howling in the forest. He didn't think Remus would attack him, but he wasn't sure he would be able to protect the others if Remus turned on them. He hurried back to the castle, his heart jumping wildly in his chest.

He thought his outburst with the Minister ought to be overlooked—he was distraught with worry over his lover and furious that Potter had nearly got himself killed yet again.

It was his words to Draco Malfoy that were inexcusable.

"Professor? What's wrong? Why is the castle so noisy?" Draco looked almost innocent and pleasant with his fair hair tousled and his pyjama top buttoned crookedly.

"It's just the bloody werewolf again," Severus snarled. Dear God, had he just said that?

Draco's eyes got big. "Werewolf?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" Severus gave Draco a pitying look. "What a shame that Mudblood Granger was the only one to figure it out."

"Sir?" Draco looked nervous. Good. He should be nervous.

"The full moons? His illnesses? The bloody essay I assigned all the third years to write?" Severus wasn't shouting, but he might as well have been, considering Draco's flinch. The words poured from his lips as if something were drawing them out. "Lupin! Lupin is a bloody werewolf!"

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh GodohGodohGod... Severus stared at Draco, feeling his gut twisting as the words fell together and Draco's expression went from confused to terrified to horrified to disgusted. Oh God, did I really just say that?

"Lupin's a werewolf?" Draco crowed. "Wait until I tell my father! There will be so many letters to the Headmaster that he'll have to bloody fire him. Filthy creature."

Severus wondered if death were truly the next great adventure. Remus was going to kill him.

Draco's face lit up. "Wait until I tell the others!"

Severus went to bed.

By the time they went to breakfast, the news was all over the school. Remus hadn't shown up for the meal. Severus didn't know if it was because he was so badly hurt, or merely from discretion. Eventually he couldn't put off the encounter any longer. He went to Remus' office.

Remus was packing. Severus stood awkwardly in the doorway and watched for a moment before knocking. Remus looked up, his expression unfriendly.

"Come to finish the job?" he asked.

That hurt. "I—I came to apologise."

Remus snorted. "Right."

"I couldn't seem to stop myself. I was so bloody angry at you...the words just sort of spilled out."

"Draco Malfoy!" Remus spat. "You told Draco Bloody Malfoy! Of all the people, Severus." He threw several more shirts into his trunk.

"I'm sorry," Severus whispered, agonised. "I didn't mean to. I really didn't." He hesitated. "Are—how was last night?"

Remus barked with laughter. "Always working, the consummate potions master." He turned his back on Severus.

"I didn't even want you to take this job!" Severus retorted. "We both knew about the curse! With Black hunting you and the curse working against you, what did you think would happen?"

"I thought my lover would be supportive of me and not bloody out me as a werewolf to the entire sodding school!"

Severus glared at the desk.

"I've already handed in my resignation to Dumbledore. He didn't like it, but I also notice he didn't argue."

"He knows how bloody stubborn you are!" Severus snapped.

"Yes, which is why he's given me another assignment," Remus said. "I'm going. Send my cases to the cottage."

"You—what?"

"I'm going," Remus repeated. "Goodbye, Severus."

Severus stared in shock as Remus pushed past him and walked out the door. Those words had never sounded so final.



Remus was tired. So God damned tired. He was muddy, scratched, achy, and walked with a limp. He was still healing from a broken wrist at the last full moon, and he was out of money.

But he was home.

At least, he hoped it was still home for him. He had spent the three-day trek back home telling himself that Severus might even be staying there for the Christ-

mas holiday. He hoped so; he had no desire to look for him at the school, where he might see Dumbledore. Dumbledore would be warm and understanding about Remus' failure to track down Pettigrew. Remus wasn't sure he could handle the Headmaster's gracious reaction just now.

He undid the wards and went inside the cottage. The scents of brewing and cooking reached him instantly. Severus was home, thank God.

A moment later Severus appeared, a wooden spoon in one hand and his wand in the other. He was wearing trousers and a shirt that looked suspiciously like it belonged to Remus. When he saw Remus, he froze.

"Severus." Remus stared at him, drinking in his features. It had been over six months, and that was too long. He vowed he would never be separated from Severus for so long again.

"I got your letters," Severus said. His gaze was guarded. It sent a pang through Remus to know that Severus was afraid Remus would hurt him.

"Good," he said stupidly. After a moment he added, "I would have written more often, but I didn't always have money for parchment or post. I missed you."

"Did you?"

"Yes. Dreadfully." Remus swallowed.

"I missed you, too." Severus glanced at his wand. "I'm sorry I told everyone."

Remus shrugged. "We both knew the position was cursed. It could have been worse. I could've been killed."

"I'm surprised Moody hasn't been," Severus muttered. "Bloody paranoid Auror. I swear if he goes through my office one more time..."

"Moody? Mad-Eye is teaching Defence this year?"

"Yeah. First lesson he did was showing everyone the Unforgivables. I'm told Potter resisted Imperius fairly well, though of course Albus still won't let me teach the little blighter Occlumency."

"I don't understand why Dumbledore won't listen to you," Remus said.

Severus waved a hand. "He says he has his reasons. It frustrates the bloody fuck out of me, but I trust him."

Remus wondered why they were having this inane conversation. Perhaps it was easier than all the apologies and promises that needed to be spoken. His stomach rumbled.

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet." Remus didn't think there was any reason to tell him he hadn't eaten in nearly two days.

"Come have supper. It's shepherd's pie." Severus started to turn.

Remus dropped his bag and lunged forwards, wrapping his arms around Severus. "I love you so much," he gasped. His eyes were stinging. "I missed you. I kept thinking of how we parted, how I left. I hated myself."

Severus made a strangled noise and reached awkwardly back to touch Remus' hip; Remus had pinned both of his arms to his sides. "I hated myself for driving you away," he murmured. "I knew it was my fault."

"It wasn't. It was the curse, and I even knew it, I just couldn't admit it. I'm so sorry, Severus."

Severus sighed and twisted around. He got his arms around Remus and pulled him close. "I'm sorry, too, Remus."

"Take me to bed," Remus whispered.

Severus just nodded.



Remus spent the rest of Harry's fourth year doing research for Dumbledore. He spent several days at Oxford and Cambridge, reading up on certain superstitions and customs. He went to Edinburgh to check on his father, who seemed to be doing much better. Remus was certain his father would never look at another woman the way he'd looked at Maggie, but he wasn't drinking himself into unconsciousness every night.

Sirius owled him occasionally, keeping him updated on Harry. Remus compared what Sirius told him to what Severus told him and split the difference to surmise the truth. Rita Skeeter seemed to be treating Harry rather badly, but the boy was handling the Tri-Wizard Tournament well. Remus was proud of the third-hand account he got of the Second Task; he was the one who had taught Harry how to deal with grindylows, after all.

Severus got him a seat at the Third Task. Remus helped a bit with crowd control when it became clear that the

Diggory boy was dead. Then Moody and Harry vanished, and Severus seized Remus' shoulders.

"Go home," he ordered. When Remus began to protest, he added quietly, "Please. Remus, I need to know you're safe."

Remus looked at him for a long moment, then nodded.

Sirius arrived at the cottage later that evening, saying he was meant to lie low for a while. Remus owled Severus, but got no response.

That was when he knew that the war had begun again in earnest.



"He told me to come to you here," Sirius explained. He was sprawled over the table, his legs splayed out in two different directions. His hair was unkempt, he was down to skin and bones, and he obviously hadn't shaved in several days. And if the way he was gnawing at the left-over chicken was anything to judge by, he hadn't eaten in perhaps as many days.

"How is Harry taking it?" Remus asked. More than anything he wanted to know how Severus was, but he couldn't think of a way to ask. He hadn't, in the past year's exchange of letters, managed to think of a way to tell Sirius that he was gay, let alone that he was with Severus.

"Harry's a real trooper," Sirius said, licking his fingers and looking proud. Remus held in a snort. As if Sirius had anything to do with that. Severus had had more to do with Harry than Sirius had. "He spent some time telling Albus everything that had happened, and then I was in hospital with him for a while. Until Fudge threw his hysterics and Dumbledore sent me here to you."

"Did he have any messages for me?" Remus asked.

"Dumbledore? No." Sirius' expression said clearly that he couldn't imagine why Dumbledore would have any messages for Remus. "He just told me Snape's part of our team this time around, and told me to round up the old crowd." He snorted.

"Severus was part of our team the last time around, too," Remus said. "It's just that most people didn't know it because it would be something of a danger to him, if we'd all known."

Sirius snorted again. "Whatever, mate. Anyway, if I can kip on the sofa here for a while, that'd be much appreciated."

Remus thought of Severus, due to come home from the school term in a few days, and sighed. "Of course," he said. He'd just have to ask Severus to go to the house at Spinner's End for a while. Or you could just tell Sirius, you sodding twat, said Severus' voice in his head. Remus smiled faintly. That was exactly what his lover might say.

"Thanks. You're ace, Moony."

Remus turned away so Sirius wouldn't see his bitter smile. It wasn't that Remus didn't welcome him, exactly. It was more that Remus' life was just settling back into something approaching normal again, and having Sirius here was going to make it that much more complicated. He didn't believe Sirius could have changed that much during those years in Azkaban.

When Remus was spreading a blanket on the sofa for Sirius, he realised he'd left a picture of him and Severus on the coffee table. They weren't doing anything incriminating, just sitting together in the staff room at Hogwarts, but it would be enough to make Sirius ask questions. He palmed the picture and slipped it into his trouser pocket.

Sirius came back from the toilet and Remus was surprised to see that his pyjamas hung off Sirius' frame. It was incongruous; Sirius had always been the bigger of them.

"You're sure you don't mind? Having me here, I mean. I'm not interrupting your private life?" Sirius' voice sounded odd.

Remus shrugged. "What could you possibly be interrupting?" he said, which wasn't an answer at all.

Sirius' only reply was an answering shrug.



Remus woke much later in the night to the sound of raised voices. He sat up in bed, trying to think why someone would be yelling in his house.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Severus' voice was tight with fury, and Remus thought he could hear a certain amount of desperation in it.

"Why the fuck are you creeping about Remus' house?" Sirius demanded, and there was only pure hostility there.

Remus jumped out of bed, clutching his wand, and ran out of the bedroom.

"I'm here on Order business," Severus retorted, "and nothing that concerns you. I have information for Remus, not some washed up has-been of a criminal."

Sirius snarled and raised his wand, but Remus, with an exasperated sigh, hurried out to stand between them. "What is going on?" he asked, knowing he sounded cranky but unable to care. "Your shouting could wake the dead."

"Snape here says he needs to see you," Sirius snarled. "He came sneaking in, got through your wards somehow—you can't fucking trust him, Moony!"

"I confess, I wasn't expecting to see another man sleeping in your house, Lupin," Severus said smoothly, his tone arch. "Perhaps I ought to leave you two your privacy."

"Fuck you, Snape!" Sirius retorted.

"Shut it, Sirius," Remus said, glaring at his old friend. "Come back to the bedroom, Severus. I don't want to disturb Sirius' sleep."

Sirius made a sceptical noise behind them, but Remus ignored it. He led the way back to his bedroom, waited for Severus to follow him in, then placed an Imperturbable Spell on it. The moment they were in private, he spun and seized Severus in his arms.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, pulling Severus against him.

"I am...in better shape than most of my compatriots." Severus allowed himself to lean slightly against Remus' frame, resting his cheek on Remus' head.

"I've been so bloody worried," Remus admitted. He lifted his head to kiss Severus, his lips gentle but searching. "What happened?"

"I can't really tell you much, Remus. Not until the Headmaster decides what to do."

"I know." Remus squeezed lightly. "Tell me what you can."

Severus pressed his forehead to Remus' shoulder. "You know I'm going back."

Remus sighed, but nodded. It didn't make either of them happy, but it was no great surprise. Severus had been watching the Mark grow clearer all year.

"He was displeased at my lateness, but when I explained that I have maintained Dumbledore's trust all these years, he praised me. I have earned a place of honour at his side." Severus' voice was bitter.

Remus drew Severus towards the bed. "So he trusts you, that's good."

Severus shook his head, though he sank down onto the bed with Remus. They lay together, arms wrapped tightly around each other, fully clothed.

"Karkaroff has fled. I imagine he will be dead soon. Mad-Eye Moody has never been the Defence Professor. It was Barty Crouch, posing as Moody."

"Crouch? What, the Ministry bloke who—" Remus was rubbing his hand absently along Severus' back, as much to comfort himself as to impart comfort.

"No, not him, his son. The Death Eater."

"Merlin! I thought he was dead."

"We all did." Severus sighed. "He was mad, utterly mad. But he was able to trap Potter and take him to the Dark Lord." He closed his eyes. "I am so tired, Remus."

"Rest here, Severus. Stay here, where you're safe, tonight." It was foolish, perhaps, with Sirius in the house, but Remus needed to hold Severus, needed to be whatever small comfort he could. Severus could Apparate out later in the morning, before Sirius woke.

Severus nodded.



Remus had left most of his possessions at the cottage in Hogsmeade when he moved to Number Twelve Grimmauld Place with Sirius and the Weasleys. Dumbledore had explained that he would leave Harry with the Dursleys only as long as necessary and then send out a group of Order members to retrieve him. In the meantime, letters to Harry were to have as little detail in them as possible.

The news that Harry had been forced to fight off two Dementors in Privet Drive was alarming. Severus and Dumbledore had an argument that night, something about teaching Potter Occlumency. They were

ensconced in the Headquarters Library, but from what Remus overheard, Severus won that argument, at least nominally. He was finally to be allowed to teach Harry.

"Not until after Christmas," Dumbledore said. "We should give him one last semester of normalcy."

Remus shook his head and spent the next two hours calming Severus down in his rooms on the third floor. Sex that night was rough and fast.



Sirius was bitter about being back in his old home. When the Advance Guard finally did go to bring Harry home, he wasn't allowed to join them, which made him even angrier. The Order members had been working on cleaning up the house, but it was slow going, and Sirius resented having to do so. Once the adults caught on to the fact that Fred and George were inventing things with some of the Dark items they found in the house, Remus caught Sirius giving them tips. "From a Marauder to the next generation," Sirius murmured, with a furtive grin.

With Dumbledore's encouragement, Remus had got in contact with some of the werewolves of Fenrir Greyback's pack. Severus wasn't happy about it, but he knew Remus was uniquely suited to the job. "We'll need a spy among the werewolves soon," Dumbledore told them. They were in a private meeting, just the three of them, after everyone else had gone to sleep.

"Remus is too openly allied with you," Severus said. "He'll never pass as a lone wolf."

"I've been careful not to appear too happy with Dumbledore since the scandal," Remus told him. "It seemed prudent to distance myself. I didn't want to bring the Order down along with me."

Severus shook his head, but it was obvious from his expression that he admired the forethought.



"He's mad! He's a danger to everyone in this house!" Severus was pacing Remus' room at Grimmauld Place, waving his arms and scowling. Remus was leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest, hoping his Imperturbable Spell would hold.

"What happened, Severus?"

"What do you think? That rabid dog of a friend of yours dared to question my authority in front of his precious godson! Bad enough that the boy is insubordinate and rude to a professor, Black has to go and bloody make it worse!"

Remus sighed. Some days he wanted to punch Sirius. "What happened, Severus?" he repeated.

Severus glared at him, then spun and stalked off to look out the window. "I came to tell Potter about Occlumency lessons—Dumbledore has finally agreed to begin them, now that the Dark Lord is aware of Potter's weakness. A fine time to begin!" he added scornfully. "When Black got wind of it, he insisted on being there when I told Potter. First he twitted me about this being his house, then he twitted me about Lucius Bloody Malfoy!"

Remus sighed. "I can't believe you didn't have anything to say back to him."

"As if he cared about being called a coward," Severus scoffed. "It bounced off his thick skull and had no effect." He snorted and turned to face Remus, mirroring his stance. "Bloody imbecile. He'll get himself captured, and then Potter will go into hysterics. We'll end up getting ourselves killed trying to rescue a fucking dog from the Dark Lord."

"Severus," Remus said, his tone disapproving. He didn't dare say anything more, though; he'd spent so many years not defending Severus that he felt no right to defend Sirius, now their positions were reversed.

"Tosser," Severus said. He flung himself down on the bed with a snort. "Come let me fuck you. I'm in no mood to charm you tonight."

Remus wasn't really in the mood for fucking tonight, but he didn't feel like having an argument. He began unbuttoning his shirt. "You said Arthur's home safely?"

"He got home just before I came upstairs," Severus said, his voice a bit calmer. "I suppose it's a good thing he arrived when he did. Dumbledore would've been displeased if I'd hexed Black."

Remus frowned. "What, you don't think I would have been displeased if you'd hexed him?"

"What does that matter?" Severus waved a hand. "I frankly don't care what you think about Black. Your little friendship with him is the least of my concerns."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Remus said, letting his hands fall to his sides. His shirt hung open, letting a draft blow across his chest. "Look, I don't let him say nasty things about you, Severus! Why can't you just keep your feelings about him to yourself?"

"Because he's a bloody menace!" Severus shouted. He sat up, his expression clouding over again. "Always bloody defending him, aren't you? 'Sirius is depressed! 'Sirius isn't used to inactivity'—he ought to be, after thirteen bloody years in Azkaban. Bugger Sirius Black! I'm sick and tired of having to put up with him in order to see you!"

Remus had been growing angrier the longer Severus spoke, but something about the last sentence brought him back to his senses.

"Look, you don't have to," he offered. "I mean, I'll come up to the castle."

"And have Black crowing that he'd finally run me off? I think not." Severus snorted. "I'll come here as often as I like. This is still Order Headquarters, after all. And I am a member of the Order, am I not?"

Remus sighed. "I don't know why you have to make everything so difficult."

"Because life is difficult." Severus frowned at him again, but the heat had gone out of it. "Come here, Remus," he said, his voice taking on a petulant tone that was the closest he would get to asking, tonight.

Remus went.



Sirius expelled a heavy sigh. "Will you quit your bloody pacing and sit the fuck down?"

Remus turned and glared, jealous of the way Sirius was able to sit almost still in his chair, a book propped on his crossed leg. "Will you just keep your nose out of it?" he retorted, though the school-boy insults had grown tiring. Sirius was his age, but mentally, emotionally, there were times he seemed no older than twenty. It brought out the worst in Remus.

"I don't see what you're so overwrought about, anyway. It's just the bloody Death Eaters terrorising Muggles and half-bloods. Nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to—" Remus broke off. "Look, you idiot, Severus is out there! This charade grows more dangerous for him as time passes—"

"So concerned for poor Snivelly," Sirius remarked. "I don't know why you care about him so much."

"Because I love him!" Remus retorted, too angry to care that he'd just blurted it out. "Because I have done for fifteen years, and he puts himself in danger every time he does this! Because I'm afraid someday he won't come back!"

The room suddenly seemed as if it had no air. Remus sucked in a breath.

"You love him?" Sirius was staring at him. "What the fuck, Moony." He shook his head. "A whole fucking year later you finally grow the stones to tell me. Congratulations, d'you want a prize?"

"What?" Remus blinked, suddenly confused.

"D'you think I'm stupid?" Sirius demanded. "Did you think I wouldn't notice the picture of you two together? Or the way your closet has black swoopy robes in it? Or the fact there's two toothbrushes in your loo? God!"

"I didn't—"

"What about the way you pushed me aside the first night I came to you for help, pushed me away and let Snape into your bedroom? Did you think I honestly believed that was about Order business? That was about fucking each other to make sure he was still on our side!"

"What?" Remus stared with growing anger at Sirius. "My relationship with Severus has nothing to do with assuring his loyalties! I love him! He's the only person in this world I couldn't do without! The only one, Sirius, because you haven't been around for the last fifteen years!"

"I was in prison, you fucking idiot!"

"You bloody got yourself thrown in Azkaban! If you'd just trusted me enough to tell me you'd bloody switched, none of that would've happened!"

"Didn't do much to try to keep me out, did you?"

"You fucking murdered the Potters! Or as good as, in my opinion back then." Remus' fists were clenched.

"Yeah, thanks for not even bothering to see if it was true!"

"You'd already proved you were capable of attempting murder!" Remus shouted.

A silence fell between them, broken only by Sirius' bitter chuckles and Remus' angry pants. He felt almost sick to his stomach—look at them! They'd been such good

friends in school, and now that Remus knew Sirius was innocent, they ought to be close again. Instead they were doing a fine job of dividing themselves without Voldemort having to lift a finger.

Finally Remus sighed. "I'm sorry," he began, just as Sirius muttered the same thing. There was a moment of silence, then Remus nodded and Sirius shrugged.

It would do, to be going on with.



Severus flung the door open, expecting it to be the Headmaster. Instead he found himself staring at his lover. "What are you doing here?" he demanded in a low voice. He dragged Remus inside and shut the door. Then he turned to glower at Remus.

"You already know why I'm here," Remus said, folding his arms across his chest.

"Regardless of your persistent ideas to the contrary, I am not a mind-reader," Severus snapped.

"Funny, that's exactly why I'm here," Remus replied. "You quit giving Harry Occlumency lessons? Severus, you spent the better part of five years telling Dumbledore that the boy needed to learn it! You can't just quit!"

Severus swallowed but turned away as if he were unconcerned. "The boy has no aptitude." He went further inside his quarters, fully expecting Remus to follow.

"No aptitude! That's bollocks! He's brilliant when he puts his mind to anything! Do I need to tell him again how important this is? We can get him to apply himself, Severus."

"I don't want him applying himself!" Severus burst out. "I don't want the little bastard anywhere near me!" He spun and faced Remus. Finally, here was someone to whom he could vent all of his rage. And conveniently, here was one of the people who had stood by idly while Severus was humiliated.

"Did Potter happen to tell you why I've stopped the lessons? Or did he just pretend he didn't know, like the coward that he is? He looked into my Pensieve! The little sneak-thief felt he was entitled to see what I chose to keep from him, knowing I didn't want him to see!"

Remus frowned. "He had the nerve to peer into your Pensieve? He should serve detention for that, for a good long time."

"Yes, well, I can't exactly give the brat detentions, with Umbridge about, can I?" Severus glared at Remus. "You shouldn't be here, either, you idiot! If she caught a werewolf in the castle—and in my quarters—if she found out I'm queer—Merlin! I'd be out on my arse."

Remus stepped closer, looking determined. "Don't change the subject. Sirius and I will speak with Harry. What he did was wrong. But he needs to be taught! You've been saying so yourself for years, Severus, don't let this stop you—"

"He saw the day of our Defence OWL!" Severus shouted. "Do you remember that day, Remus? I sure as fuck remember it! Your friends turned me upside down in front of the entire school and stole my pants! And now that bloody arrogant brat Potter has seen it, too!"

"We were stupid children, and you should know that seeing that bothered Harry. He hadn't ever believed you when you told him how horrid James was to you, you know. He saw that you'd been telling the truth. He understands better now, Severus."

"Just what I want, Potter's pity!" Severus snarled. "Why don't you get the fuck out, if you're going to take his side!"

"I'm not taking his side," Remus protested. "I just don't want to see this fall apart because he's done something wrong. You're right, you know you're right, he does need to be trained in Occlumency. Please give him another chance, Severus."

"Sod that," Severus said, turning and stalking across the room.

"No, Severus, please!" Remus said. "He needs you!"

Severus whirled and glared at him. "Get out!" he ordered. "I won't teach him! Dumbledore can teach him himself—he's plenty of talent for it."

Remus frowned, extending a hand, and Severus cut off his words.

"Out!" He reinforced the order by throwing a teacup he hadn't even remembered he was holding.

Remus ducked and hurried out the door.

Severus stared at the wet patch of tea dripping down the stone wall and suddenly his rage drained out of him, leaving him empty again. God, what a mess. Occlumency lessons were ruined, he wasn't joking

about that. He couldn't stand to see Potter in class anymore, let alone think of spending time alone with him. And now he'd run his lover out of the castle by bloody throwing things at him.

He went to the drinks cabinet for a tumbler of Firewhiskey and slumped onto his sofa, staring at the fire.



Severus knocked hesitantly on the door of Remus' bedroom at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place. He had finally been released from Dumbledore's office ten minutes ago, and he'd left the school at once, making the trek down to the school gates so he could Apparate here. Dumbledore and Minerva had both assured him that Remus was uninjured, but he had to see for himself. And he needed to know if he would be welcome, or if Black's death would ruin things somehow.

There was a long silence, so long Severus knocked again. Just as he was about to admit defeat and concede that Remus didn't want to see him (because it might be three in the morning, but Remus wouldn't be asleep, he knew that), the door creaked open. Severus could see the flickering light of a fire, but no lamps were lit.

"Severus." It was a whispered word, but there was a frightening amount of need and relief commingled in it. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Remus, pulling him against his chest and burying his face in greying hair.

"I came as soon as I could get away," he murmured, hoping he really was welcome here.

Remus melted against his embrace, his hands twisting themselves into Severus' robes. "God, I'm so—I needed you to come. I'm so glad you did." He was shaking.

Severus tightened his hold on Remus and guided him over to the bed. "I've been worried about you," he murmured. Remus didn't resist as Severus lowered him to the bed, then began working at the buttons of his shirt. Severus stroked his palms over Remus' skin, not to arouse, but to reassure himself. He wanted to take care of Remus, to help him in any way he could.

"Sirius..." Remus didn't finish that sentence, so Severus ignored it for the moment. He got Remus' trousers off and lifted Remus' legs into bed, pulling a blanket over him. Then he undressed himself and climbed in next to Remus, doing his best to wrap himself around Remus.



Remus sighed and turned his face to press it against Severus'. His cheeks were wet. "I couldn't remember how to cry," he said. His voice was strangely normal. "I kept thinking I ought to be screaming, I ought to be crying, and all I could do was stare."

"It was unexpected," Severus said. He was worried about Remus, but he frankly didn't care about Black. He felt mostly relieved that he was gone. There would be no more fights about how Black and Severus weren't getting on. He didn't like seeing Remus grieving, but he himself wouldn't mourn for Black's passing.

"You're glad, aren't you?" Remus said after a while.

"I'm never glad to see you hurt," Severus said truthfully.

Remus, of course, would know how to translate that correctly. He sighed. "He could be kind, and clever, and he was my first friend."

"He made my life miserable," Severus said. After a moment he added softly, "But I know you loved him."

Remus shifted in his arms. Severus could tell, even in the dim light, that Remus was peering at him. "Not more than I love you." He swallowed audibly. "Thank you for not coming to the Ministry tonight. Thank you for not getting yourself killed."

"I should be saying that to you," Severus protested. The thought that it could easily have been Remus to go through the Veil like that—although Severus knew Remus didn't have the puffed-up pride or fatal recklessness that Sirius had possessed—made him shudder.

"Will you stay with me tonight?"

"I thought," Severus said hesitantly, "that you might come stay at the castle with me. Just for a few days. Dumbledore—I already cleared it with the Headmaster."

Remus was silent for a long time, then he sighed. "Get out of this prison?" He was silent for another minute. "That would be good, I think."

Severus nodded and sat up slowly. "We can Floo to my quarters. The Ministry isn't watching the Hogwarts Floos anymore. Dumbledore got that done straight off."

Remus sat up, too. "Yes, take me back with you." He watched Severus, then lifted his head and kissed Severus clumsily. His lips were warm and wet and hard, and for a moment Severus wasn't sure if this was really

what Remus wanted. But then Severus responded and Remus' lips softened for him, parted for him, and Remus let out a quiet moan. Yes, this was what Remus wanted. Severus pulled Remus onto his lap and kissed him again. They could always Floo later.



Remus knew the rest of the Order members were surprised (and disapproving, most of them) at how well he took Sirius' death, but more than anything he felt a burning resolution to defeat Voldemort once and for all. He wanted to destroy those responsible for ruining his life. His friends had been killed, his lover tainted and manipulated, and his mentor discredited. He wanted out. He wanted to end it. He wanted to live his happily ever after with Severus, and that wasn't going to happen until Voldemort was destroyed.

He went to the werewolves in August.

He had paved his way by making tentative friendships with several of the werewolves. He couldn't say he was particularly fond of camping out in the woods, but the werewolf camp was more comfortable than some of the tenements he'd lived in, and at least the water was clean.

He had to fight his way up through some of the lower ranks to be accepted by the pack in general, but a few bloody noses and black eyes and cracked ribs past August, Fenrir decided Lupin was a decent enough bloke, and worthy to be accepted as a ranking pack member. From then on, Remus was included in some of the pack meetings and invited to eat with Fenrir's group at the campfire every night. He passed along some of the information to Dumbledore, but most of it he shared only with Severus, allowing Severus to determine what should be betrayed and what shouldn't. Severus, after all, was the experienced spy. Remus was fairly new at this.

All the same, their roles were placing a heavy strain on their relationship. Severus turned up in the werewolf camp sometimes, making plans with Greyback, and Remus didn't like the person he saw. Then again, one of the times Severus turned up in camp, Remus was engaged in a lengthy scuffle with one of the other wolves. He'd had to watch as the other man, who outweighed Remus by a good three stone, broke Remus' wrist and bruised a kidney. Remus had come out the victor, all the same, and his lips had been wet with the other man's blood by the time the fight ended.

Greyback had asked Severus to give Remus healing and pain potions, so they'd had a few moments of privacy in the shack Remus shared with two other single men. Remus almost wished they hadn't.

"What the fuck was that?" Severus demanded, his voice a sibilant hiss. He was dabbing ointment on one of Remus' bloodied knuckles.

"Dominance," Remus grunted, equally quiet. "It's how things are done."

"You looked like a bloody animal."

"Yes, well, that's what I am, *Snape*, so glad you noticed." Remus hadn't got over the way Severus smirked and put his nose in the air and dropped thinly veiled insults around him when he was playing the Death Eater.

"Sod off," Severus muttered. "I didn't mean it like that, to insult you. We're both just—"

"Acting?" Remus snorted. "Except we both know you think it's dirty here, and you don't like the fleas or the primitive conditions."

"That doesn't make me a snob," Severus objected. "It makes me someone who wants a little civilisation, that's all."

"We're civilised!"

"Oh, so it's 'we', now, is it?" Severus asked. He lifted a brow and held out a tiny vial of purple liquid. "Drink it all."

"There's no need to give me orders like I'm Greyback or one of your other lackeys!"

Severus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He pointed his wand at Remus' wrist. "*Ferula*." Remus winced slightly at the tightness, but didn't protest.

"Leave it on for at least a day," Severus said, his voice even more curt than usual. "And here's another pain potion for when that one wears off. Mind you don't anger Greyback, or he'll likely rebreak that for you." He stood up, his gaze hooded.

Remus' eyes widened as he realised Severus was going to leave it at that. He opened his mouth to protest, but before he could speak, Severus swooped down and pressed his mouth hard against Remus'. A moment later Severus Disapparated.

"Oh, Severus, there you are. Dolohov said you'd chosen to grace us with your presence, but I hadn't seen you yet."

Severus glanced at Rodolphus, who was sprawled casually in a chair, smoking. "Hardly a pleasure for any of us, I'm sure," Severus said, though his tone was dry with humour, rather than hostile. He didn't care for Rodolphus, but he was better than Malfoy.

"You say the drollest things, Severus," said Rabastan, who walked behind Rodolphus' chair and draped himself over it to steal his brother's drink. "One might almost think you didn't like us."

"One might almost be right," Severus said lightly. He had found, over the years, that it was extremely enjoyable to say unpleasant things in a joking sort of fashion. People never quite knew whether he was joking, but then they never quite realised he wasn't joking at all.

Narcissa's face flashed in front of his mind. It was unfortunate that she had turned into such a damnably likeable woman, once she was left to think on her own while her husband rotted in Azkaban for a few months. It was disgustingly clever of her to have come to him for help; she knew he was rather fond of Draco, and she knew he loathed emotional displays.

"Won't you join us at table, Severus?" said Dolohov, who had already filled his plate. "You so rarely have time for us these days, what with serving both masters and all."

Severus looked sharply at him, but Dolohov merely blinked at him. "I serve Our Lord, Dolohov. Better than you, with your fumbling attempts and failure to kill a school girl. Blast you, I was looking forward to not having to teach that Mudblood Granger ever again." As he spoke, Severus sat between Dolohov and Nott and dished himself small portions of food.

"You should have saved the Mudblood for me, Antonin," Bellatrix said. She raked her fingernails down his cheek and went to sit next to her husband. Rabastan gave her a disgruntled look and took the seat on the other side of Rodolphus.

"You needn't watch me so avidly," Severus said, glancing at Nott. "If you have poisoned the food, I shall, of course, be immune. I've built up a tolerance for every poison you cretins could possibly think of."

Nott gave a nervous chuckle and took a bite of his potatoes.



"Draco won't be joining us, Narcissa?"

Severus glanced up at those words. He hadn't even noticed Narcissa. She was sitting in a chair at the other end of the long table, her robes black. She wore a black lace thing over her hair, and her eyes were rimmed in red.

"Fuck you, Bellatrix!" Narcissa burst out, and she jumped to her feet, then stormed off. The Lestranges glanced at each other, then laughed.

Severus stood, placed his silver precisely, and stalked out after her. It wouldn't stop them tormenting her entirely, but he was the Dark Lord's most faithful. His disapproval would register with the others, at least.

He caught up with Narcissa in the next room. She was standing with one hand on the wall, as if it were holding her up. Her thin shoulders were shaking.

"You take them too much to heart," Severus murmured, stepping behind her. He placed a hand on one shoulder. "I have sworn to protect him, Narcissa. Do you trust me so little? Or do you value my skills so poorly?"

"No, no," she wept, "but my son, my baby boy!"

He bit back a sigh. He was growing heartily tired of her waterworks. "Narcissa, he is nearly a man grown. If you wanted something else for him, you should have made different decisions years ago. As it is, he has made one decision for himself already. I cannot undo it, but I have already promised to do what I can to ameliorate it. You must trust me, Narcissa."

"What do you know of loving someone this much?" she burst out, whirling to stare accusingly at him. "You've never had anyone love you, you've never loved anyone! You can't understand what it's like!"

Oh, if you only knew, he thought. Instead he merely nodded curtly at her. "I have given my word. If you do not mean to call me liar and duel with me, then kindly shut your mouth."

She stared at him, but she shut her mouth.

Severus began to pray even more fervently that some miracle would get both him and Draco out of the school term without having killed.



It wasn't until Christmas that Remus was able to get away from the pack for any extended length of time.

The Weasleys had invited him to spend Christmas at the Burrow; they were worried about Harry, and thought a visit with his former professor and friend might help. Remus, for his part, didn't see why they were so concerned about Harry. He seemed a bit obsessed with this Half-Blood Prince, but aside from that, he seemed to be taking things well. Remus just wished Harry hadn't given up Occlumency lessons.

Molly and Fleur weren't getting along well at all, and it was clear to see the battle lines drawn in the house. Ron and Ginny loathed her. Charlie and Percy weren't around to voice their opinions, and Bill obviously loved her. Remus didn't have any arguments against her. She was French, yes, but he'd never seen in her any of the prejudice the French had against werewolves.

Remus and Arthur had a few pleasant discussions about Muggle things and the way the werewolves lived. Bill had been interested in that, too; he claimed to have a werewolf friend in Egypt. Molly Weasley spent the holiday making digs about Tonks that he didn't quite understand, while Fleur gave him knowing looks. On Boxing Day he went home to the cottage in Hogsmeade, where Severus was waiting for him.

"What's all this shite about Tonks?" Remus demanded, stroking a hand down Severus' chest. They were both still slightly clammy with sweat after their earlier exertions. Severus arched against Remus' hand, humming. "Doesn't she have a family?"

"What, the brown hair and whinging?" he asked. "Don't you know?"

"Obviously I don't, or I wouldn't be asking you. Is she still upset about Sirius?"

"Idiot. She's arse over tit in love with you. You honestly didn't realise it?"

"If I'd realised it, I would've done something about it," Remus said, once the initial horror had worn off and he could speak again. "Honestly she's in love with me? Where did she get that ridiculous notion?"

"He's so brave and noble and self-sacrificing," Severus simpered. "He carries on so stoically after all of his friends are dead. Everyone shuns him, but they ought to be thanking him. He's such a hero."

Remus made a gagging noise. "Stop, or I'll stop you," he warned.

“And he’s so handsome! He has those little laugh lines by his eyes that show what a good sense of humour he has! And his hair is so manly and rugged—”

Severus made a muffled noise of surprise as Remus rolled over and pounced on him, silencing him with his mouth.

Several minutes later, they were nestled together, Remus’ arm across Severus’ stomach, his head on Severus’ shoulder. “I love you so much,” he murmured. “I know we never really broadcast our relationship, but I didn’t suppose it was much of a secret from the Order this time around. I suppose no one really noticed.”

“Of course they didn’t realise, the dunderheads. They wouldn’t notice if we both dressed in drag and held hands at the Order meetings,” Severus said.

“Your opinion of our allies doesn’t inspire much confidence that we’ll win the war,” Remus said.

Severus sighed. “We’ll win,” he said. “Or I’ll die in the attempt.”

“Don’t say that!” Remus tightened his arm around him. When Severus didn’t respond, Remus tilted his head to look up at him. Severus looked grieved. “Severus?”

“I’m going to kill Dumbledore,” he said. His voice was heavy, his eyes shining with sudden tears. “Before the school year is over, he’ll be dead either at Draco’s hand or mine.”

“What?” Remus whispered. “You’re lying.”

“I wouldn’t lie about this. The Dark Lord has ordered Draco to kill Dumbledore. He has failed in two attempts, and our master grows impatient. I made the Unbreakable Vow to Narcissa that I would protect Draco—and that I would complete his task in the event that he failed. I expect he will.”

“Severus...” Remus trailed off. “It...you can’t.”

“He’s already dying, just a little bit at a time,” Severus said. “The curse that shrivelled his hand is slowly working its way up. When it reaches his heart...” He sighed.

“You’re keeping him alive,” Remus guessed. “With potions, aren’t you?”

Severus nodded. “I’m doing what I can to slow it. But I can’t stop it indefinitely, not without truly Dark magic. And I don’t really want to see Draco become a murderer. I have no desire to kill the Headmaster myself, but Draco isn’t a killer. He’s a nasty little prig, but he’s not a killer.”

Remus swallowed and held Severus tighter. “I’m so sorry, Severus. Do the others know?”

“No!” Severus’ voice was fierce. “No one knows but us three! And it has to stay that way, Remus! No one in the Order can trust me, or Dumbledore’s plans will be for naught. If I kill him, I will truly be the Dark Lord’s most faithful servant. He will keep me at his side, he will tell me his plans and secrets. I will be ideally placed to help Potter and pass information along to the Order—through you.”

“Oh, Severus. Will this never end?” Remus felt as if he were choking. He wanted to take Severus away from all this, to give him freedom from the life of servitude that had been imposed on him because of one moment of poor judgment.

“Just promise you’ll always trust me, Remus. If I have you, I have all I need.” Severus’ voice was barely a whisper.

Remus pushed himself on one elbow and leaned over to kiss him passionately. “I promise.”



Remus didn’t have to feign his shock and horror when Ginny announced, at Bill’s bedside, that Dumbledore was dead. He shouldn’t have been surprised. He’d seen Severus dashing up to the Astronomy Tower, had tried to follow and been thrown back. He had known what Severus had sworn to do...and yet, when it came to it, he couldn’t quite take in the fact that his lover had killed the Headmaster.

His mind spun and reeled as they recounted the battle for Harry. Tonks was right, they had been losing. They were so grateful to know Severus was going to help them. He’d had a near miss when Gibbon took the Killing Curse instead of him. It hadn’t stopped him rushing forwards once the barrier fell, but then Severus was back, Malfoy in tow, and he brushed past Remus as if he didn’t even see him.

His mind kept replaying that moment. Severus brushed past Remus as if he didn’t even see him.

What if it had all been a sham? What if Severus had truly thrown his lot back in with the Death Eaters? Remus listened to the phoenix song reverberating in the air and struggled against the unwelcome thoughts creeping into his mind. Dumbledore had been growing weaker since he destroyed the ring Horcrux. Severus

would have seen this easily, with his proximity to Dumbledore. He'd been brewing potions to keep the infection from spreading. He would know how close Dumbledore was to death. He knew the old man wouldn't resist when Severus pointed his wand for the Killing Curse. How easy would it have been for Severus to turn his allegiance back to Voldemort?



The thoughts plagued Remus so that he was only mildly distracted and humiliated by the scene Tonks made. He answered her with a clenched jaw, feeling more anger for Severus than for Tonks. He let her shake him, he made the same, tired old excuses, he brushed her aside. None of it mattered. Dumbledore was dead at his lover's hand. What if Severus had truly switched sides again?

All through the funeral, where he clutched Tonks' hands tightly to keep from coming apart, he wondered. Had Severus betrayed them? Had Severus truly had no time for farewells? Had Severus ever really cared?

But later, when he sent the others on ahead of him to Headquarters and he rested his back against the sun-warmed stone of Dumbledore's grave, Remus could feel life and strength slowly returning to him. Severus had asked Remus to promise he would always trust him. Remus had promised that. He hadn't known, at the time, what a test it would be, to keep that promise.

But he looked back at their relationship—nearly twenty years of defying the logic that would have kept them apart. In all that time, there had only been one time that Remus had questioned Severus' loyalty—and that moment, that confrontation in Slughorn's classroom, had been what pushed Severus into the fold of the Death Eaters to begin with.

What would it do to Severus if Remus stopped believing in him now?

Remus shook his head. No, he had promised to trust Severus always. He would keep that promise.



When Remus arrived at Headquarters, everyone was already gathered in the kitchen. People scooted around to make room for him at the table, and Molly placed a plate of food in front of him. After he finished eating, the Order got down to business.

Harry informed them all that he wasn't returning to Hogwarts. Hermione and Ron would be accompanying him on his Horcrux hunt, though Ginny had agreed to stay on at the school. Remus could read the relief clearly on Molly Weasley's face; she had nearly lost one child to the war, and though she wasn't thrilled about Ron's accompanying Harry, no one could deny him that right. Ginny, though...Ginny was her baby.

"We've lost our spy among the Death Eaters," Minerva said, stirring her tea absently. "If he was ever truly our spy."

Remus saw an opportunity and jumped in. "You still have me," he said. He knew Minerva wouldn't trust him as much as she had before; she would wonder if he'd known about Severus' loyalties. But he'd been included in the meeting, so he had to assume she thought he was trustworthy. "I know the werewolves aren't as good as the inner circle, but Greyback is a Death Eater. And he trusts me. I can get information."

She looked dubious. "You were fighting on our side at the school, Remus. Surely he saw that."

"He thinks I was fighting for him," Remus lied. He hadn't been back to the pack, but he suspected he'd been made. All the same, it was a good cover for where he was getting the information that would actually be coming from Severus.

"It's a good point," Tonks said, smiling at Remus. Lord, the soppish, self-deceiving love he saw in her eyes made his stomach lurch. "Remus can be our spy."

"It's too much to ask," Molly said. "Tonks could lose him."

"We all have to make sacrifices," Tonks said. Remus felt sick.

"I'm going back," he said, his voice harsher than it needed to be. "Tonks doesn't have any control over whether or not I go back. I have a duty to the Order, and that comes before any personal considerations. Always."

Molly looked surprised, and Tonks stared at him. He saw Fleur nodding slowly.

"Eet ees true," she said. "Remus knows theese, as my Bill knows theese. We must bring Voldemort down. He will destroy all that we love. What does eet profit if we stay safely at home, only to be killed by ze Death Eaters once Voldemort takes over the world?"

Minerva gave her an approving look. "Well said, Fleur," she said. "Very well, Remus. Thank you."

Severus' first owl told Remus where to find the next Horcrux. Remus passed along to Harry that Voldemort had werewolves guarding Malfoy Manor. Along with Hermione, Ron, and Harry, he came up with a plan to subdue the werewolves without hurting any of them—a modified version of the Wolfsbane potion would make even untransformed werewolves sluggish and unable to fight back. Draco was a fugitive and Narcissa had gone into hiding; Malfoy Manor was attended only by the house-elves and the werewolves.

The stealth attack went exactly as planned—partially because the werewolves 'guarding' Malfoy Manor were friends of Remus' who had arranged to take this guard shift. Remus had asked them to cooperate by drinking the modified potion and 'falling asleep' at their posts.

The Hufflepuff Cup was destroyed before the sun rose that day.

Remus couldn't help them scour every second-hand magic shop in England looking for the Slytherin locket, but he had been able to tell them the names of several criminal types with whom Mundungus usually dealt. Hermione and Ron looked for the locket while Harry spent time looking through the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. Harry had explained how he'd hidden the Half-Blood Prince's potions text there, and how he was certain he'd seen something with an eagle crest on it, though he couldn't remember exactly what.

The Slytherin locket was found a fortnight before Harry discovered Ravenclaw's writing case. They burned the writing case in a magical fire hot enough to melt the locket.

Severus reported to Remus that the Dark Lord was becoming forgetful and easily confused. Nagini was always by him, and Severus was certain Dumbledore's theory had been correct; the snake was the final Horcrux.

Now it was up to the Order and the Aurors to plan their final attack against Voldemort's stronghold at Riddle House.

The battle was raging around them. Remus ducked another curse and recast his shields. He had to find Severus. He had to learn if Nagini had been killed. Harry couldn't face Voldemort until the snake was dead.

Remus had been caught up in the first skirmish, fighting off werewolves and giants along with some of the goblins that had gone to Voldemort's side. He finally fought free of it and made his way further into the house. Bodies were crumpled on the floor of the entryway and smoke hung thick in the room. Remus stayed only long enough to determine that Severus wasn't among the slain, then he went on to the next room.

He finally found them upstairs, in the room that had obviously once been a library. Now it was reduced to little more than rubble, the books smouldering and the shelves collapsed. Severus was kneeling in one corner, blood streaming from a nasty cut on his temple, his wand raised. Nagini was writhing at his feet. Snake bodies, Remus remembered, continued to twitch for some time after they were actually dead. He hoped that was the case with Nagini.

Harry and Ron was standing over a fallen Hermione, their wands raised. Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy stood at the other end of the room. Bellatrix Lestrange was also there, dragging a surly-looking Draco forward into the fray.

"Let Draco prove himself, my lord!" she shrieked. "Let Draco kill Potter's friends."

"Severus pushed himself to his feet and stepped over Nagini's body. "Leave my godson out of this, Bellatrix!" he ordered. "You've bullied him for far too long."

Lucius looked surprised, Bellatrix astonished. Voldemort never took his eyes from Harry. "Severus has outlived his usefulness, Bella," he announced, his voice conversational. "Kill him."

It must have been the flare of agony that gripped Remus' heart which drew Severus' gaze to him; Remus knew he was too horrified to speak. Severus stared at Remus with a gaze full of love and regret, raising his wand to duel Bellatrix, who was cackling as she raised her own wand. There was no time to think, only to act. She was a rabid bitch, and Remus was well-trained. He did the only thing he could do.

"Avada Kedavra!" he cried. A jet of green light shot from his wand, just as if the past twenty years had never happened, as if he were still Dumbledore's assassin. Lucius made a noise of shock and Draco wrenched himself out of her suddenly limp hand as she fell. Her body made a dull thudding sound on the floor.

Voldemort finally lifted his eyes from Harry.

"Ah, the werewolf," he murmured, his glittering gaze impaling Remus. "I must say, Severus, your lapdog has been astonishingly faithful all these years. How touching. I shall let you die together."

"You aren't killing anyone else!" Harry said, levelling his wand at the inhuman face. "Your time is at an end, Voldemort."

There was a space of disbelieving silence from all the spectators and participants in this battle, then Voldemort began to laugh. The high-pitched noise raised the hair on Remus' neck.

"You fool!" Voldemort spat at Harry. "You can never defeat me!"

"No?" Harry looked at Severus. "Professor, show him what you did." His voice, for the first time in Remus' memory, was somewhat respectful as he addressed Severus.

Severus stepped aside obligingly, revealing the twisted form of Nagini. Voldemort let out an odd cry at the sight.

Harry nodded. "Terminus Est." He flicked his wand in a complicated gesture. A thin rope of golden fire shot out towards Voldemort, wrapping about him and suffusing his form with light. "Amas Complexus."

Voldemort let out a thin, high shriek that rose in pitch and volume, writhing and flailing, but the light didn't dissipate. Rather, it seemed to absorb into his skin, changing him, making his form less distinct. The shriek grew so loud that it seemed to shake the very foundations of the house. Draco staggered and slapped his hands over his ears, but Lucius let out a cry of pure rage and lunged at Severus.

Remus didn't move in time to stop him, but Severus flicked his wand and sent Lucius crashing into the wall. Ron dashed over to train his wand on Lucius' chest.

Remus looked back at the pillar of Voldemort-fire. It seemed to have grown thinner, less corporeal. "Harry!" he cried, alarmed, but Harry just shook his head.

There was a final shriek of denial from Voldemort, and then a flare of light blinded them all. They flinched, covering their eyes, as a deafening roar filled the air. When they looked again, a pile of ashes was all that remained of Voldemort.

He didn't understand. Oh, he understood the words—This is the end. Love combats, love envelopes. "But...but how?" he stammered.

Harry shook his head, his jaw clenching though his eyes never left Voldemort's still-burning remains. "You'd have to ask Hermione. She's the one who figured everything out."

As usual, Remus thought. He crossed the room to stand in front of Severus. He didn't dare pull him into his arms as he wished, not with a group of Gryffindors Severus most likely didn't wish to have witness their reunion. But he stared at Severus with hungry eyes, devouring the sight of him.

"You aren't hurt?" Severus murmured. Remus shook his head. He didn't know what to say back. It was obvious Severus was hurt.

"Your head," he began finally, and was grateful when Severus made a dismissive gesture.

"Nothing you can't fix at home."

A heavy hand clamped on Remus' shoulder. "You aren't going home, lad," said the gruff voice of Alastor Moody. "Not yet, at any stretch."

Remus scowled, but Moody clapped a hand over his mouth and talked over him. "You need to be looked over by a Healer, and then the Ministry will want to talk to you."

Remus pushed Moody away, though gently. "You know he won't run," he argued. "I'll stay with him at all times."

Severus shrugged. "I have nowhere to go," he told Moody.

"I'm not going home without you!" Remus insisted.

"And I tell you Snape's not going home," Moody roared.

Remus and Moody were still glaring at each other when the rest of the Aurors arrived and began taking the remaining Death Eaters into custody. The craggy-faced Auror waited until the Malfoys had been dragged out and Bellatrix's body Portkeyed to the Ministry, then he relaxed somewhat.

"Lupin, you and I both know there's no way for you to win this argument. Not unless the two of you plan to hex me and go on the run. And there's no future in that. I have it on good authority that Snape here was helping the Order all along, but if he doesn't stand trial, no one will ever believe that."

Remus felt a pang in his stomach. "I can't lose you," he whispered, staring at Severus, rather than Moody.

Moody's hand came down heavily on his shoulder. "You also need to work on hiding your emotions, boy. If I weren't an old pervert myself, you'd be in a world of hurt. How do you think the whole bloody Order didn't know you two are queer for each other? There's a reason Nymphadora Tonks spent two years pining after you, you imbecile."

"What?" blurted Remus. He heard Severus' voice echoing his question.

"Well, it was obvious she wasn't going to fancy Snape, wasn't it?" Moody said, his voice ironic. "But you, Remus, the noble, over-worked, under-appreciated, persecuted, long-suffering, kindly werewolf?" He laughed. "You were a shoo-in, boy."

Remus and Severus both just stared at him. Moody snorted and shook his head. "Don't they bother teaching logic at Hogwarts these days?" he demanded. "Aberforth and Albus and I worked hard to keep your secret from reaching the wrong ears. Snape may have been able to lie to anyone up to and including the Headmaster and You-Know-Who, but he could never quite hide the fact that he was only pretending to hate you. For that matter, he wasn't the only one pretending—why do you think I roared so loudly about the Death Eater in our midst? Trying to keep everyone focused on that, and not the way you two looked at each other sometimes." He snorted again. "And all the skill in the world at lying couldn't keep Lupin from admitting he's queer when push came to shove with Tonks."

Remus sighed. "What can we do?" he asked finally.

"You're asking me?" Moody said, pretending to be surprised. "Why should you take my advice?"

"Because you've known right from the beginning, haven't you?" Severus put in suddenly. "Damn you, you sneaky bastard." He sighed. "I'll go with him, Remus. You shouldn't make a fuss unless you want to be incriminated with me."

"D'you think I care about being incriminated if I'm going to lose you?" Remus murmured, stricken.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Lupin! I swear, I was never as melodramatic at your age. You big girl's blouse." Moody flicked his wand. "*Incarcerous*. I promise I'll take good care of him," he growled.

Remus couldn't shake the irony—he had just murdered someone, and yet his lover was the one being led away in chains.



"And that was when I knew Professor Snape must be working as a double agent still, deep under cover," Hermione explained. Her know-it-all tone was a bit subdued, but she glanced at Harry and her resolution visibly strengthened. "It took some time to convince Harry I was right, but when it came down to the final battle, Professor Snape helped us by killing Nagini, the last of Voldemort's remaining Horcruxes."

There was a sharp intake of breath all around the crowded chamber, but despite their dismay at Hermione's insistence upon using Voldemort's name, the audience was hanging on her every word. Remus had his hands clenched tightly in his lap, though he was working very hard not to show any anxiety.

"Pray continue, Miss Granger."

She shrugged. "Bellatrix was about to kill Professor Snape when Professor Lupin acted to save his life. I saw Lucius Malfoy attempt to attack Professor Snape, but Professor Snape—"

"Miss Granger, the man is no longer a Hogwarts Professor."

Hermione paused and raised her eyebrows at the Wizengamot witch who had interrupted her. After a moment, she said, "Mister Snape deflected the attack. Ron stood guard over Lucius Malfoy while Draco watched."

"Did Snape attempt to escape?"

"Escape from what, exactly?" Hermione asked. Remus wanted to laugh. She had learned the imperious act very well.

"Escape from the Aurors."

She stared at the woman for a moment. "Of course not. He had no reason to 'escape' from his allies."

There were noises of scepticism from the gallery.

Harry stood up. "I was there!" he said, his voice echoing in the round room. "I saw it as well. Snape very clearly acted to preserve the Order and the Ministry. He's a bloody war hero and you're treating him like a criminal!"



Murmurs went around the Wizengamot. Then one of the older wizards leaned over the desk. "Mr Potter, you have defied this assembly once before, have you not?"

"There was no defiance about it," Harry said; Remus could tell he was forcing himself to speak calmly. "I was brought before the Wizengamot on charges that never stuck. I'm telling you, I'll vouch for Severus Snape's loyalty." He rubbed at the spot where his scar had once been so vivid. Somehow, during the last battle, it had faded until it was nearly invisible.

"I would also like to speak on behalf of the accused." It was Moody's voice, strident and with a note of belligerence. "First of all you're trying him on the same charges of which he was found innocent twenty years ago. Secondly you're overlooking the fact that I knew he was in deep cover, and I invested a great deal of time and money keeping him alive. Thirdly, you haven't a lick of real proof that he wasn't working for the Order, whereas Hermione Granger and Harry Potter do have proof, which I have seen. Severus Snape is innocent of the charges laid against him, and he should be free to go."

Remus hadn't realised just how much weight Moody's word would have. The Wizengamot members shifted uncomfortably in their seats and cleared their throats. Finally one of the witches said, "What Alastor says has merit. If he has seen the evidence of Snape's innocence and is convinced of it, I recommend this body not contradict his judgment."

Sudden hope seized Remus' heart in a painfully tight grip. If this was a prank, a horrible set-up, he thought the disappointment might kill him. He glanced at Severus, who, to most eyes, appeared impassive; Remus knew Severus was just as poleaxed as he himself was.

"Very well," said an officious-looking gentleman with a walrus-moustache. "We, the wizards and witches of the Wizengamot, find the defendant, Severus Snape, to be not guilty of any treason or conspiracy against the Ministry of Magic. We commend and thank you for your role in winning the war, Mr Snape. You are free to go. Please be advised that you may be called back before the Wizengamot as a witness."

Severus shot to his feet as the clasps holding him in place released. Remus wished he could catch him up in his arms, but the most he could do in public was cross the room and grip Severus' hand to show his support.

Severus drew nearer to Remus and curled his fingers

into Remus' lapel. "Come with me," he murmured. "Come home with me."

Remus nodded.



Home.

For too long, it had just been a word to Severus. He had stayed places, he had used shelters, slept in safe houses. But for the past two decades, if he had ever had a home, it had only been wherever Remus was.

Now he was free, and he wasn't sure he knew what he wanted to do. The only thing he was sure of was that he would be with Remus, and they would have a home. A real home, a place they both liked, a welcoming place.

Dumbledore had left his entire estate to them, with no instructions other than to be happy.

Severus had no idea what would make him happy. It didn't seem normal to pin all his happiness on Remus, and Remus had wounds to heal from, too. Severus wanted them to build a real life together, a life that wasn't a secret, a life that was limited by nothing. For once, he and Remus had discussed this idea, and to his relief, they both agreed.

"We'll give this a try," Remus said, looking up at the sprawling stone cottage. "And if we don't like it, there's always Egypt."

"And whatever we do, we'll do it together," Severus murmured.

Remus wrapped an arm around his waist. "Yes. Together."

## Innerslytherin's Bio

On 30 June 2002 Innerslytherin entered the HP fandom as a writer with six semi-dystopian hetfics. She went on to write a chaptered fic (forever incomplete) featuring her two favourite characters, Snape and Lupin, as the love interests of an OFC. In October 2003 she dipped her toes into the slash pool with Remus/Sirius, and followed that with a very dark Draco/Remus series. On 3 March 2004 Innerslytherin's first Snupin fic was posted. In February 2005 the Remus she RPed in Walpurgis Night began an affair with Severus, forever cementing Lupin/Snape as her OTP. Since that time, she has written sixteen major Snupin fics, some of them one-shots, a couple of them novel-length, and one (Redemption) currently unfinished.

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## xterm's bio

xterm has been a lurker in fandom for more years than she is willing to admit to. Encouraged by a friend, she posted her first fanart, which was Snape, in December 2005. Since then she has sporadically posted work, mostly in her favourite ship, Snupin. HP is the only fandom she is active in, though she peeks in to many others

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## Isildurs\_babe's bio

Isildurs\_babe likes to mess about with art/graphics and is a novice fic writer who discovered the joys of snupin via McKay's Website, 'Chocolate Frog' and the 2005 snupin santa fic exchange.

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## Karasu Idime's bio

Karasu is a mom of 2, wife of 1. Half Japanese and very manga crazy! Misses winters in her Kotatsu, but California living is great! Karasu has enjoyed being active in fandom since 2004 and Lupin/Snape has always been a prominent love.

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## Dancingskeleton's bio

Lydia (aka: Dancingskeleton, Frank-d) is a Las Vegas college student, single and parent to one very insane and slightly violent cat named Hiro.

A big fan of the Japanese Music scene, specifically access and Johnny's Entertainment (Kinki Kids, NEWS, Kat-tun and SMAP) types.

Currently has more manga, books, cds and dvd's than shelves. Much of which are Shounen Jump series. Is also a Japanese Monster (Obakemono) buff.

Definite Japan-o-phile.

Has been in the Fandom since around Junior year 2002, but became a badge carrying (which is really just a keychain that her friend made for her) Snupin Fan since around 2004ish.

Has always and will always view Snape as her absolute favorite character from the series.

- Blog: [dancingskeleton.livejournal.com](http://dancingskeleton.livejournal.com)
- deviantart: [frank-d.deviantart.com](http://frank-d.deviantart.com).

### Special Note:

Isildurs\_babe did almost all the lovely and fun filler art found throughout the book -Thank you!

## Moonycakes's bio

I'm a graduate student from New York City and I like to draw and write in my not-so-spare time. I tend to use traditional black and white mediums like charcoal, pencil, and graphite for figure drawings.

Most of my fanart however has been digital color pieces. I became an HP fan when the PoA movie came out and have been addicted since.

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## Neodandiesrule's bio

French student, I discovered the HP fandom about a year and a half ago. Since then I've been mostly reading and sometimes drawing, snupin being my major source of inspiration. Staying this long (for me) on a particular interest shows how much I enjoy the lupin\_snape com :)"

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## Ebonyserpent's bio

Ebonyserpent is a 20-something who has lived in Florida all her life. Her husband doesn't share her HP addiction, but somehow the relationship still works. She enjoys dabbling in all sorts of artistic mediums, but mostly sticks to pencils, ink and Photoshop. She started participating in fandom nearly 4 years ago, and enjoys contributing to various fests and exchanges. Snape/Lupin was her first shippy love, and it's still going strong!

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## Tagay's bio

Located on page 114

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## Hill's bio

Hill has been a Harry Potter fanartist for two years. She enjoys it immensely!

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