



this valley of *dying stars*  
by femmequixotic

*Severus's fingers brush against my forehead, smoothing my hair back. The gentleness of the gesture surprises me. His eyes are dark and shadowed as he strokes my forehead. After a long moment, he shifts, and his knuckles graze my cheek lightly before his hand settles on my shoulder. "Do you remember," he murmurs, "all those years ago when I Vowed to your mother that I would protect you?"*

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## **Written December 2010**

**Summary:** "I know I'm dying," I say at last. "I don't expect miracles from you." Severus looks at me evenly. "I don't have any to offer."

**Warnings:** Serious illness, semi-epilogue compliant, bisexuality

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Photo by harry harris

*There are no eyes here  
In this valley of dying stars  
–T.S. Eliot, The Hollow Men*

The sudden light hurts my eyes.

I shift on the sofa, and the most recent volume of the *British Journal of Pharmaherbology* falls to the floor with a muffled crash. My wife turns from the window, her hand still on the velvet drapes. She watches me carefully, as she has for the past four months.

"I'm fine," I say, voice hoarse. I try to sit up, but I'm tired and weak. The most I can do is struggle to a half-raised position, and then Astoria is there, tucking a cushion behind my thin shoulders.

She sits on the tufted ottoman next to me, long legs crossed neatly at the ankles, her dark red skirt just barely above her knees. Her fingers are cool against my forehead as she smoothes my pale hair back. "You're not," she says quietly.

Late afternoon sun filters through the vines half-covering the lead paned windows, casting a green-tinged glow across the floor. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Two hours," Astoria says. "Perhaps a bit more."



I nod. The small movement hurts my head more than usual. It's been one of my difficult days; I'd known it from the moment I'd swung my legs over the edge of my bed this morning and been overtaken by a wave of dizziness.

My eyes flutter closed. The gentle stroke of Astoria's hand against my hair is calming. My headache eases slightly.

I'm nearly asleep again when Astoria speaks, her voice light. "There's a specialist in tomorrow," she says. "From Baden."

"Germans," I murmur. "None of them know a damn thing."

Astoria doesn't say anything. I open my eyes. Her hair's a golden halo in the sunlight.

I touch her cheek. "They don't."

"Nevertheless." She catches my hand, her fingers curled around my bony wrist. She presses her mouth against my knuckles. "I want him to see you."

There's no sense in arguing. Since February Astoria's insisted upon Healer after Healer reviewing my case. Once we'd exhausted my colleagues at St Mungo's, she'd begun to stalk the Continent, tracking down anyone who might have any interest in undiagnosable magical illnesses. I haven't the heart to tell her to stop. I know what's happening to my body, even if the others don't. I can feel it weakening from within, slowly but surely as one seizure after another sends me convulsing on the floor.

I'd been terrified once. It seems like an eternity ago. Now my only regret is that I won't live to see my son earn his OWLs.

"How many days?" I ask.

Astoria knows what I mean. "Two still," she says. "The Express will arrive on Saturday." She hesitates, tracing a fingertip along my eyebrow. "Your mother and I will meet him at King's Cross."

Scorpius knows about my illness; we'd both decided against hiding it from him. But it wasn't until Easter hols that he'd understood. He'd hurtled into my room as only a twelve-year-old boy can, shoes clattering against the polished wood floor, then drawn up short at my bedside, his eyes narrowing. He'd spent the remainder of the week with me, lying beside me, reading to me, telling me stories of Hogwarts and the Potter spawn he calls a friend and laughing at my depiction of young Albus Severus's father as a boy.

I miss Scorpius. I'm determined to last through the summer, and I'm determined to crawl my way out of bed. My son's last memories of his father won't be of an invalid, of that much I'm damned certain. The elves walk through the garden with me every day, following behind as I push myself to go a few more steps. There's a river at the bottom, clear and cold and stacked with trout. I'll make it there before Scorpius comes home, I tell myself, and in the afternoons we'll go down together, sitting on the bank with poles and worms, waiting the way Father and I had on lazy summer afternoons before the Unpleasantness had begun.

My father's been gone for three years. He was felled by a heart attack. Malfoy men have a worse mortality rate than Blacks do, and the combination of both bloodlines in me guarantees a short life. I had hoped to make it to forty though.

Astoria stands and walks to the sideboard. She takes a flagon of water from the shelf and pours a glass before removing a phial from the drawer. I watch her add two clear drops to the full glass. They're an anticonvulsant potion, one of three prescribed to me, and not a damn one of them does any good. We pretend still, though, and I smile at her as she hands the glass to me.

"You'll eat dinner?" she asks.

"I'll try," I say over the rim of my glass. I've lost my appetite in the past few weeks. The Healers haven't determined if it's a symptom of my illness or of the potions. It doesn't matter. Food for the most part makes me want to retch, and I can only keep the blandest meals down. I've lost flesh lately. Too much. I've never been large, but now I can't bear to look at myself in the mirror. The pale skin of my throat is marred by a pink rash that sweeps across my clavicle up to my ear. Pansy had stopped by last week with my goddaughter in tow. Violetta had cried upon seeing me. There's little more demoralising than an eight-year-old's tears; her mother's had barely been better.

The worst part of dying is suffering the grief of those who love me.

Astoria takes the empty glass from me, and I lie back against the cushion. Her lips brush the receding hairline that had utterly appalled me upon its unmistakable arrival last year. Now it seems unimportant.

"Sleep," she whispers.

I do.



I'm in the garden when the specialist from Germany arrives. Nippy has left me in my favourite section, on a surprisingly comfortable wooden bench curled around a giant oak. Roses tumble across the stone wall across from me, bright pinks and oranges and whites against dark green leaves. Their scent hangs heavy in the air, sweet but not cloying.

The house here is small by Malfoy standards, only three floors, with a peaked slate roof and myriad gables. It'd belonged to Grandfather Abraxas's brother Perseus once: a cosy little Dorset getaway from the annoyances of London--and of the Manor. I entirely understand Great-Uncle Perseus's desire to retreat now. As much as I love my birthplace, it's cold and empty at the moment. When I took ill and it was obvious there was no ready cure, Astoria'd insisted upon settling here; she'd been certain it'd lift my spirits. She'd not been wrong. I have fond memories of delightful childhood weekends spent here in the spring and summer. Adder's Green had been the one place Lucius Malfoy could--or would, I suppose--put aside his arrogant, stiff demeanour and become simply my father.

I'm grateful to my wife for bringing me here. To be honest, I've no desire to share my father's deathbed. It's enough that I'll be buried next to him.

"Draco," Astoria calls from the conservatory door. I can hear the crunch of her shoes on the pale, pebbled gravel before she turns the curve in the path.

With a start I take in the dark-haired figure behind her, his neat black robe as stark as a vicar's. She wouldn't have, surely--Astoria's many things, but cruel is not one. And yet it cannot be anyone else. He is instantly recognisable. My stomach churns with anxiety.

"Mr Malfoy," Severus says quietly.

I wrap my dressing gown tighter around my thin frame, fingers shaking as I tighten the knot in the slippery belt. My eyes flick towards Astoria; she avoids my gaze, a flush spreading across her cheeks. She knows the tremor in my hands isn't caused by the illness.

She knows about Severus.

I haven't seen him in years, fifteen at least. I'd been young and foolish then, just barely twenty-three. For two years I'd been apprenticed to him, learning the intricacies of pharmacological potion-brewing. That course of study had been abruptly terminated the night I'd kissed him.

I don't know what I'd thought I was doing. At the time I had tried to pass it off as a moment of madness brought on by a thirty-six hour shift in the lab with no sleep. He'd just looked at me, face shuttered, and told me that our association was over.

Not that he'd cast me out in the street, mind. I'd found myself the next day in the care of the notoriously difficult E. A. Winikus of St Mungo's laboratory. Euan has been my mentor ever since, and upon his retirement two years ago I was given the post of Senior Pharmabrewer.

I miss the cool quiet of my lab, the soft bubbling of the cauldrons in the corner, the conflicting scents of disinfectant and blood. It's a small fiefdom in the political structure of St Mungo's, but until my illness I ruled it with an iron fist. It was the one area of my life in which I'd been content.

"Severus," I say finally, rising to my feet. I pray my body doesn't fail me at this moment. Some deity hears me and I barely sway. "I wasn't aware you'd taken Healing courses."

He studies me with a diagnostician's keen eye. "Not in the manner you assume." At my inquiring glance, he shrugs a sloped shoulder. "My research in recent years has focused on neuromagical disorders. I've amassed a modest trove of specialised knowledge."

"I've explained about your seizures," Astoria says. She twists her wedding ring, as she always does when she's nervous. "Severus thought he should examine you."

"Because of course you'll find something that all the others have missed."

Severus just looks at me, unblinking. "It has been known to happen."

"Please, Draco," Astoria says. The weary concern in her voice is apparent.

I haven't the energy to fight her. This illness has taken far too much from both of us. My gaze falls on the valise in his hand. "You're staying the night?"

"At my request." Astoria gives me a look that brooks no argument. She lifts her chin.

I try to tamp down my irritation with her. She's only doing what she thinks best, despite what she knows about my finer feelings. "My workroom then. I'm certain Nippy or Astoria would be more than happy to show you to your room first."

They're both silent as I walk past them, my steps slow and uneven on the gravel path. I keep my shoulders stiff, my back straight. It doesn't matter how painful the posture is. Futile though it may be, I'll be damned if I'll willingly allow Severus to see me weak.



He announces his presence with two firm raps on the door to my workroom and walks in without waiting for my acknowledgement.

I'm sitting on the stool at the worktable, trying to quell my swiftly mounting irritation. It's taken him twenty minutes to come downstairs, and I'm quite certain he's taken his time on purpose. *Bastard.*

"It's been some years since I've been here," Severus says, closing the door behind him. He looks around, curious. "This was once a larder, as I recall."

"Yes." My voice is clipped and sharp. "I expanded it after Father died."

Severus just looks at me, his eyes dark and unreadable. "My condolences." He sets a small bag on the tabletop and begins unpacking it, setting aside phials—some empty, some filled with liquids of various colours.

"You didn't bother coming to the funeral."

"I didn't assume I'd be welcome." He pulls out a shallow bowl, its porcelain gleaming white. "Lucius never entirely forgave me for my betrayal."

I look at him. "The war, you mean."

He nods and doesn't meet my eyes. Instead he takes my wrist, pressing his warm fingertips against my pulse point. I repress a shiver. He's silent for a moment. "He made his opinion quite clear afterwards."

I can see the vicious twist of scar tissue from Nagini's bite just above his high white collar. It's paled over the years—no longer pink and shiny and puckered. Instead it's a raised knot of once-torn skin, just the faintest bit creamier than the olive skin of his throat. "He didn't object to my studying with you," I say finally.

Severus doesn't answer. He drops my hand and reaches for a small notebook and a quill. "From what Astoria's told me, your seizures are quite frequent—every few days?"

"At least." I watch his quill scratch across the parchment. "Last week I didn't miss a day."

He looks up at me. "Any unusual behaviour? Physical strain?"

"No." I flatten my hand against the worn wood of the tabletop. Scorpius had been conceived here—or so I prefer to believe. Astoria thinks I'm mad. I don't recall her objecting as she dragged me onto the table, though. "But I was more worried than usual."

"About?"

I give him an incredulous look. "What do you think, Severus? I'm not a fool, and while I may not be a trained Healer, I've worked at St Mungo's long enough to know the signs. No one knows what's wrong with me, and my body is shutting down." My voice rises. "All they can determine is I've some sort of secondary vasculitis, but they've no idea what the underlying cause is. They're worried about my kidneys now, and the subject of dialytic magic has come up more than once in recent days—"

"Quiet." His voice hasn't lost lecturing sense of command. I fall silent, breathing hard. I hadn't even realised how I upset I was.

Severus's fingers touch my jaw, lightly, tilting my head from one side to the other. I wince as he presses them hard against my throat. "That hurts."

He raises an eyebrow. "Sharp or dull?"

"Dull." I hesitate. "I've had patches of numbness on my left hand. It alternates between that and tingling."

Severus takes my hand, turning it gently as his fingers slide across my skin. I lick my bottom lip, trying not to pull away. He still makes me *feel*. I've never been comfortable with that, although I'm thankfully too weak to display the most obvious sign.

When he drops my hand, I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed.

"Your shirt," he says.

I don't want to remove it. He turns away in a rare gesture of tact, and his hair falls across his cheek. It's still black, but there are thick streaks of steel grey throughout, and the light from the small window makes them gleam.

The shirt buttons feel too small. I fumble with them, finally getting the damned thing open, and as I draw it off, he glances back to me, his eyes coolly appraising.

Gooseflesh rises on my forearms. I tell myself I'm just cold.

"Your wife seems devoted," Severus says. One hand curls around my arm, lifting it, as the other feels beneath it. His fingers are warm against my skin.



"She certainly gives that impression." I feel a rush of guilt at my sharp words. Astoria's stayed with me when she needn't, and I damn well know that. I press my lips together, angry with myself and angry with her, irrational though that may be. Sometimes I think it'd be easier if she had just walked away when she had the opportunity; fortunately, I suppose, Astoria--unlike myself--is made of sterner moral fiber. When my illness came, when we'd realised exactly how severe it was, the shame and the distance and the secrets that had eaten our marriage away hadn't mattered to her. Her sister had told her she was mad, all things considered. Astoria had laughed in her face. I was her son's father, she'd said, and she'd no intention of either of them abandoning me--not while I was ill, at least.

Bloody Ravenclaws.

"It's complicated," I say finally.

Severus just raises an eyebrow and moves to examine my other arm.

I don't look at him. "We'd meant to divorce." I stare at the iron hook set deep into the wall across from me. A heavy cauldron had once hung from it--back when I'd the energy to stand for hours in heat and steam, waiting for the potion bubbling within to turn just the right shade before I pulled it from the heat. "Before..." I trail off, gesturing weakly.

"Oh." Severus stills for a moment before his fingers move across my shoulder, towards the wide rash on my throat. He probes it gently, and I wince. He ignores me, his fingertips skimming lightly across abraded skin.

"It's not public knowledge." It's almost a relief to say the words. "Mother knew. And Scorpius." I tilt my head back as his hands push at my jaw. "It was mostly amicable. Just..." I don't want to admit the truth. There's nothing entirely like your wife informing you that she's quite certain that you're more interested in having a cock up your arse than in her spreading her legs for you. I lick my bottom lip. "It was for the best."

Severus writes in his notebook again. "And yet she's here."

"My first seizure was in the lawyer's office." At his inquisitive look, I sigh. "Yes. Every Healer I've seen has speculated it was brought on by stress." I close my eyes. I can still feel the horrifying lurch of my body that day; the unexpectedly surreal wave that crested over me without warning, sending me tumbling from my chair into convulsions on McMurtaugh's Axminster. I hadn't even been aware of the mediwitches Flooing in and carrying me back to St Mungo's.

I swallow hard and my eyes flutter open.

Severus is just watching me. Inscrutable, as always.

"Mother can't care for me," I say after a moment. "She hasn't the temperament, and even if she had, since Father's been gone..." I trail off.

"Your wife stayed." With a caliper he measures a lesion on my chest just below the faint trace of the scar Potter gave me in sixth year. He frowns.

“For now.” I look at him calmly. “It won’t be long.” It’s the one gift I can give Astoria. After all she’s had to put up with from me over the years, the grief and the hidden--or not so--affairs, at least my death won’t be terribly drawn out. I can spare her that at least.

Severus just sniffs. “We’ll see.” He scrawls in the notebook, then hesitates. “Trousers.”

I slide off the chair and unbuckle my belt. “Is this necessary?”

That earns me a glare. I slip out of my trousers, folding them over the back of a chair. I’d wanted desperately for him to see me like this so long ago. How ironic that he finally would but so differently to how I’d fantasised .

He’s silent as he finishes examining me.

I lean heavily on the stool for balance, staring at the wall over his head as he squats, poking gently at the spotted purple rash across my lower thigh. I fight back a wave of humiliation. After all, Severus doesn’t care how horrible and loathsome my body has become.

Severus stands up. He washes his hands at the basin in the corner and dries them on a cloth. “How many stone have you lost?” he asks, not turning around.

“Nearly two.”

“And how many were you before?”

I hesitate, then resume pulling up my trousers. “Twelve. Or thereabouts.”

He looks back at me. “Over or under?”

“Under.” I fasten my belt.

Severus walks back to the table. He picks up the porcelain basin and his wand. “And you’re six feet, yes?”

I nod. His look is reproachful. “I eat,” I say defensively.

“How often?”

“You sound like Astoria.” My voice is petulant. I don’t care. At his quirked eyebrow, I sigh. “When I’m not nauseous.”

“Which is far too often I assume.” Severus takes my arm. “Hold still.” He casts a quick Diffindo across my skin. I hiss. Blood seeps out, and he levitates the basin beneath, gathering a small sample. “You’re too thin.”

I don’t say anything. He presses a piece of gauze against the cut, pushing my arm up as he sets the basin aside. A flick of his wand and the skin knits back together. I watch as he carefully pours the blood into a phial.

“I’ve had every blood test known to wizardom run on me,” I say dryly. “I doubt you’ll find anything.”

Severus just caps the phial, pressing his wand tip into the soft wax. It sparks, leaving behind a small serpentine indentation. “Most likely not.” He sets it aside. “Astoria tells me your workroom here is on par with a medical laboratory.”

“More or less.” I glance around the small room. “I’ve done my St Mungo’s work here before.”

“Good.” Severus picks up a phial filled with a dark purple liquid and shakes it. “I don’t care for the anti-convulsant they have you on.” He uncaps the phial and pours a small amount into the lid. “Take this.”

It’s bittersweet, like chocolate gone slightly stale. I hand the cap back to him. The faint tremble in my hands—constant for the past two weeks—settles. Severus looks pleased with himself.

“My own concoction,” he says, pressing the cap back on to the phial. He hands it to me. “We’ll begin with once a day for now.” He scrawls the dosage in his notebook.

“What’s in it?”

He looks up at me, his quill still scratching across the paper. “You don’t wish to know, believe me.”

I frown at him. “I rather think I would.”

“Skullcap, blue vervain and wild carrot,” he says after a moment.

“Interesting.” I consider the list. “I assume you mean American skullcap.”

“Of course. And I needn’t describe its qualities as a nervous tonic or antispasmodic. It’s compounded with a bit of ginseng to control the effect. Blue vervain is well known as an antiepileptic for difficult cases, of course. And even Dioscorides lists *Carrota sativa* as an antispasmodic.”

“There’s angelica in here as well,” I say as the odd, airy taste appears on my tongue.

“Yes, for luck and also digestive purposes. If you don’t die before I leave, I’ll make certain to leave the formula with you.”

Oddly enough, his brusque frankness cheers me. I’m tired of being coddled by Healers and family. A faint smile curves my lips, and Severus stills, watching me. A flush rises on his throat. He looks away.

“Dress.”

I’m not entirely certain what to think. I reach for my shirt, sliding it onto my arms. I leave it unbuttoned. Severus arranges his equipment on the worktable.

“I’ll require a day to test your blood,” he says, not looking up. “I assume you won’t object to my making use of this room?”

“As you wish.” I stand up, and it hits me then, a familiar wave of dizziness that makes me grab for the stool. “Fuck,” I say, and as I hear Severus shouting for Astoria, his hands reaching for me, I fall, my body twisting into a black nothingness.



I'm not entirely certain how I make it upstairs.

I've a vague memory of Severus leaning over me, his fingers warm on my face. Of being held close. Of his voice murmuring in my ear, telling me to *step up* or to *watch the corner*. I think I can recall the faint scent of Astoria's perfume, the worried lilt to her questions.

The bed is warm and soft. My eyes open slowly. It hurts. My whole body aches as it always does after these spells. I can barely move my head.

Severus is sitting beside me, his notebook open on his knees. His head's bent over it, hair falling across his cheek. A lamp floats beside him, casting long shadows across his pale skin.

I swallow.

He looks up and sets his quill on the notebook. His face is sober.

“Not—“ My voice catches, raspy in my throat. I cough. “Not any good, that potion of yours.”

“Obviously.” Severus doesn't take offence. “The level of the Skullcap is at issue, I believe. Which would indicate that your illness is not merely neuromagical at the root. I think it overwhelmed your vascular system.”

“It might have been the ginseng,” I lean back against the pillows. The room is dark and the drapes are drawn. “It's been known to have adverse reactions in patients with blood pressure issues.”

Severus closes his notebook. “You don't have any hallmarks of high blood pressure. If anything, your pressure is far too low.”

“Perhaps you should try passiflora,” I suggest.

He frowns at me. “Perhaps you should close your mouth and rest.”

I know he's right. Still. I stare up at the plaster moulding on the ceiling. “Where's Astoria?”

Severus stands. The light moves with him, coming nearer to the bed. “Sleeping. I assume.” The mattress dips as he sits on the edge. “She required a sedative.”

“My seizures upset her.”

“With good cause.” With a *Lumos*, Severus examines my eyes, shining the bright tip of his wand into my pupils. I try not to blink. He sits back, and the light dims back to the flickering flames of the lamp. “It was rather disconcerting.”

I rub at my stinging eyes. "Surely you've observed one before."

"Not of that magnitude," Severus says quietly, and I look at him, surprised. "You don't recall them, I take it?"

I shake my head. "Only fragments."

"I see." Severus doesn't say anything for a moment, then he glances away. "It was...extreme."

"Oh." I pick at the duvet, my fingers rubbing over the white embroidery. It's summer and I'm bitterly cold.

The silence stretches out between us. I feel nauseous and weak. I want to sleep again. My body's so bloody exhausted.

"I know I'm dying," I say at last. "I don't expect miracles from you."

Severus looks at me evenly. "I don't have any to offer."

"Don't tell Astoria."

"She loves you," Severus says. He turns away, staring across the room.

"In her own way." At his sharp glance, I sigh and press my face into the pillow. "We're neither of us sentimental, Severus. I'm not her great love. She's stayed out of a sense of responsibility--and love too, yes," I add, cutting him off. "You can't be married to someone for nearly fourteen years and not share some modicum of affection. Still..." I can smell the faint scent of lavender and mint in which the house elves rinse the linens. It reminds me of my childhood, and my throat tightens.

Severus's fingers brush against my forehead, smoothing my hair back. The gentleness of the gesture surprises me. His eyes are dark and shadowed as he strokes my forehead. After a long moment, he shifts, and his knuckles graze my cheek lightly before his hand settles on my shoulder. "Do you remember," he murmurs, "all those years ago when I Vowed to your mother that I would protect you?"

I nod slowly. I don't want his hand to move; I'd miss the heavy warmth through the cotton of my night-shirt. The touch makes me feel oddly safe--the way it had in my first year when I'd had nightmares about leaving the Manor and Severus had come from his quarters, brusque but oddly careful as he'd pressed a Calming Potion upon me. I half-expect him to do the same now.

Instead his thumb strokes across the sharp jut of my collarbone. It's an intimate touch that sends a shiver through me. Fifteen years, an entire life and a son later and he still affects me as though I were a teenager. Or perhaps impending death has made me merely maudlin and overly sentimental. Far more likely the latter, I expect.

Severus's eyes hold mine. "I'll do everything I can to keep that Vow, Draco."

"You don't have miracles," I say softly. I allow my hand to settle over his, a tiny indulgence that I allow myself only because manners seem less important the closer I move to death. His fingers are slightly gnarled beneath mine. It's odd to think he's nearly sixty now. He's never quite looked his age: he was old for a young man and is now young for an old man. "Remember?"



A faint smile crosses his thin lips. "A miracle is far from what I'm promising," he murmurs. He hesitates. "Do you trust me?"

"Always." There's no question of that fact. We both know it. He'd kept me alive during the war and I've never doubted his protection of me.

Severus nods, slowly. "Then I'll do whatever's possible."

I can't quench the flicker of hope that sparks in me, and I hate myself for it.



My son arrives with pounding feet and flying robes, his blond hair ruffled by the same breeze that rustles the leaves outside my bedroom window.

"Father!" Scorpius leaps up onto the bed, cheerfully kicking his shoes off and struggling out of his green-lined school robe. I pull him to me, breathing in the sweaty, musty boy scent of him. I've loved my son desperately since I first held him in my arms. He's the reason Astoria and I had determined to make our separation as civil as possible when we'd decided to divorce. The last thing either of us has ever wanted is to cause Scorpius distress.

He falls silent when he realises I'm not alone, his open face shuttering. He and Severus study each other silently, and I stifle the urge to laugh at the seriousness of the moment. After a pause Scorpius nudges me. "Who's he?" he asks under his breath.

"An old profess—" I break off, looking at Severus. "An old friend of mine."

Severus nods. For a moment I almost think he's pleased. "Mr Malfoy," he says to Scorpius.

"Darling," Mother calls from the hallway. I can hear her boots, light on the stairs.

Severus sets aside the tattered, dog-eared book he's been reading me since Astoria left for King's Cross and stands as Mother enters the room. She stretches her hand towards him, a warm smile curving her mouth. Even at her age you can barely see the faint wrinkles that pucker the sides of her lips. She's still a beautiful woman and I can't stop the flare of jealousy that sours my happiness when Severus bends and lightly kisses her hand.

"Astoria told me you'd come," Mother says softly as Severus lets her hand go, stepping back. His white shirt sleeves are rolled up his wiry forearms. Green spatters stain the otherwise pristine cotton on one cuff. The first two buttons are undone, and I can see the faintest wisp of dark hair on his chest. I've spent the past half hour studying it as he read. Foolish of me, I suppose, but if anything allows one liberties, imminent death should.

"It seemed prudent," Severus says. "Draco was always my favourite student."

The admission surprises me, and my eyes flick to his face. Severus steadfastly refuses to look at me, but Mother's smile widens curiously.

“I know,” she says, and then she turns to me, leaning across the bed to kiss my cheek. Her lips are dry and warm. “How are you, darling?”

I’m all too aware of Scorpius as I answer, his hair soft and slightly damp beneath my fingertips. “Better.” My quick glance towards my son lets her know I’m lying. The excitement in Mother’s eyes dims a fraction, but her small smile doesn’t waver. “Where’s Astoria?”

“Downstairs instructing the elves on dinner. Shall we leave you to sleep?”

Severus cuts her off with a shake of his head and a cough. “No. He sleeps too much.” He reaches for the book. “Read to him instead.”

Mother takes the proffered book from his hand. “*The Magician’s Nephew?*” She looks at me, eyebrow raised.

I shrug. “Severus says my lack of familiarity with Muggle literature is appalling.”

“Without doubt,” Severus says dryly. “Even the Dark Lord had heard of Lewis.”

Mother gives a delicate shudder—whether from the mention of His Sodding Lordship or Muggle literature, I’m not certain—and drops the book on the bed. Scorpius reaches for it.

“What’s it about?” he asks, and he looks up at Severus.

I’m surprised. Scorpius is generally reserved around strangers, preferring to listen rather than to make his presence known.

“Two children,” Severus says with far more warmth than I’d expect of him around a child Scorpius’s age, “who help create a hidden world.” He hesitates, a curious look on his face. I’d almost say he was pained, but surely I’m wrong. It’s just a trick of the light, I’m certain. “My grandmother read it to me when I was younger than you. She was a Muggle, and she thought I might enjoy it. It’s stayed a favourite of mine.”

“Even with a talking lion and a Saviour?” I give him a small smile. “How very Gryffindor of you.”

Severus scowls at me.

Scorpius turns the worn book in his hands. “May I borrow it?”

“Only if you agree to read to your father,” Severus says. His voice is stern. Professorial. For a moment I’m back in the Slytherin common room again, listening to Severus dress down Blaise, or console Pansy.

“I’m not a child,” I say crossly. “I’m perfectly capable of reading to myself if I wish.”

Scorpius rolls his eyes and opens the book, setting aside the leather tassel Severus has used to mark his spot. “I’ll read to him,” he says to Severus, who gives him an approving nod that oddly disconcerts me.

“Excellent. We’re on chapter four.” Severus turns to Mother. “A word, if you will,” he murmurs, and with a worried, backwards glance at me, she follows him out of the room.

“Quiet,” Scorpius says when I start to protest. He gives me an almost comically stern look, and it’s clear he’s found a hero, as I had at his age. “And don’t fall asleep.”

“Wretch.” I sink back against my pillows, my hand on my son’s back. He pushes his glasses up his nose and clears his throat.

“There was no doubt about Magic this time.”

I close my eyes, my son’s halting voice soft in my ears.



Dinner is a quiet affair.

Severus refuses to allow me to take it in my rooms, despite Astoria’s protests. Instead he helps me downstairs, chiding me the entire time about sleeping another two hours. I’m still tired and far too weak from the potions he’s testing on me, but I dress properly with the help of an elf and take the stairs one at a time, leaning heavily on Severus with each one.

The lamb stew is thick and warm. I eat it slowly. It exhausts me to sit up tonight.

“You look blue, darling,” Mother says, fretting across the table. “Severus, doesn’t he have a bluish cast? His mouth...”

Severus sets his spoon down. “Of course he does. His blood circulation is utter shit.” He reaches for his glass of wine. I’ve been denied one, much to my annoyance. Severus has decided alcohol might interfere with the potions. “No wonder, the amount of time he spends lying down.”

“I met you outside,” I snap at him. Scorpius looks between us, a furrow between his brows. “I should like to point that out.”

Severus sniffs. “Only because you didn’t wish me to think you weak. I haven’t seen you properly up since.” He drains his glass and reaches for the bottle of Château Rauzan-Ségla Margaux ’05.

He has a point. It irritates me. “Don’t be ridiculous.” I try another spoonful of the stew and can barely manage to choke it down. “Rincan,” I say, and the elf is there, taking my bowl away.

“Don’t,” Severus says, and Rincan freezes, looking between me and Severus. “Put the bowl back. Master Draco hasn’t finished his meal.”

“Severus,” Astoria says quietly.

He doesn’t look at her. His dark gaze is fixed on me. “The both of you have coddled him far too much, Astoria.”

“I haven’t any appetite.” All I want is to lie down, not argue an idiotic point with Severus. He’s always been so terribly certain he was right. I don’t have the energy to battle him at the moment.

Rincan sets the bowl back down in front of me. “Master Draco is being far too thin—”

“Master Draco is *dying*, you stupid creature!” Furious, I knock the bowl aside. It trembles on the edge of the table for the briefest second before falling, lamb and potato and carrots scattering across the floor as bone china shatters into fragments.

The room’s silent.

Scorpius stares down at his plate, his shoulders hunched.

I’m breathing hard. My cheeks are warm. Rincan flinches away from me as if I’d raised my hand to him as Father so often had. I clench my fists in my lap.

“I’m not hungry,” I say after a long moment, my voice tight.

Severus picks up his spoon. “I see.”

“Of course you do.” I stand, wobbling slightly. I lean on the back of the chair, steadying myself. “I think I’ll have a lie-down, if there are no objections?”

Severus shrugs disinterestedly and sips at his wine. Scorpius refuses to look at me. He drags his spoon through the stew, blinking hard.

“Fine.” I make my way slowly towards the doors, gripping the chair backs. None of them move to help me. Mother presses her napkin to her mouth. Her eyes are bright. Astoria bites her lip, looking as if to rise, but a sharp glance from Severus stops her. I don’t know what he’s said to them, but I quite recognise the signs of Slytherin machinations. Severus has never been entirely subtle, I must say.

At the door, I glance back. Severus watches me, his eyes inscrutable above the rim of his glass, and I look away.



“He’s not wrong,” Astoria says, and I snort.

"Severus has always been a pompous overbearing bastard at the best of times." I'm all too aware of how petulant I sound, but I'm damned tired and frankly don't care at the moment.

Astoria sits on the edge of my bed and takes my hand. “Perhaps your mother and I have been—”

“It’s not as if I’ve a case of the dragonpox, Astoria.” I shift beneath the blankets piled on top of me. I still can’t get warm enough. “We don’t even know if I’ll last through a week at this point.”

"Don't," she says. Her voice is strained. Her thumb traces a small circle across my palm. "Severus says you talk too much about your death. It's not..." She trails off, not meeting my eyes.

"Not what?" I snap. "Civilised? Would we all prefer to ignore the obvious? Should I pretend I'll be around for Scorpius's next birthday? What the bloody good will that do any of us, Astoria?"

She's silent, staring across the room at the heavy leather chair Severus has been using. His slippers are next to it, where he'd left them earlier in the afternoon, the black toes scuffed and worn. She pulls her hand away.

"I'm sorry," I say finally. "It's not exactly fair, forcing you to wait on me to die. You've a life to live--"

"That's not up for discussion," Astoria says, turning on me. Her eyes are dark with anger. "You know I'm not going to walk away now, and I damned well resent the implication that I should."

I don't say anything. I know I should.

Astoria pinches the bridge of her nose. I've upset her. Guilt twinges through me.

She sighs. "You *are* a bastard, Draco. I love you, and fool that I am, I'll still love you whether you leave me a widow or a divorcée. But I've been married to you for nearly fourteen years now. I know you better than your own mother does. And you don't want to die. You've just bloody *accepted* it." She wipes the back of her hand across her eyes and blinks hard. "You're so..." She huffs, her mouth a tight line. "Pigheaded."

I touch her wrist. She looks at me. Tears are welling in her blue eyes, and her dark lashes are wet. "Don't," I whisper. She knows I can't bear it when she cries. I never have been able to.

Astoria looks away, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. "Your mother and I agree with Severus. We're in the way, the both of us, at least for now. A week at the Manor will be best. You'll have time here without us hovering."

"You don't hover," I protest, but we both know that's a lie. Astoria gives me a wet, rueful smile.

"Darling, I've known you long enough to recognise a lie." She squeezes my hand. "You'll be fine. Scorpius will be here. Consider it a chance to spend time with your son."

I'm hesitant. My fingers curl around hers, tightly. I'm suddenly scared, though I'll never admit it. Astoria's been with me all this time. "What if I need you?" I murmur.

"There are such things as Floos," Astoria says dryly. She leans in and kisses my cheek. "And you know your mother. And me. We'll probably be firecalling five times a day to make certain you're fine. You'll be furious with us in no time."

"Not terribly difficult." I let her hand go, and she stands. "You're leaving me with Severus, after all."

Astoria gives me a long look. "Somehow," she says after a moment, "I think that might be exactly what you need at the moment."



When she closes the door behind her, I turn my head, staring out at the oak tree branches framing my window.

I'm utterly panicked.



I miss Astoria immediately.

Severus's bedside manner is gruff on the best of days. Greeted with my sullenness, he becomes positively churlish.

I refuse to leave my bed the first day, even sending Scorpius away when he stops in to read to me. Severus comes by after dinner.

"You're perfectly capable of coming down to eat," he admonishes me, pouring a capful of vile-smelling potion from a small glass phial and handing it to me. "Drink."

I can barely swallow the cack. "What is this?"

"A new brew," he says, capping the phial again. A tap of his wand seals it with wax. "To build your strength back up."

I lean back against my pile of pillows, pulling the blankets up over my shoulders. I refuse to ask him what's in it. "It's not working."

Severus eyes me grimly. "It will."

On the second day, Severus informs the house elves that my meals are no longer to be brought upstairs. Rincan passes this information on in a tremulous whisper when lunchtime arrives.

With gritted teeth, I push myself out of bed, allowing the concerned elf to lead me down to the dining room. When I arrive--after having to pause three times on the stairs to catch my breath--I find Severus and Scorpius, their heads bent together. My son laughs at something Severus says, and a surge of rage rises in me.

"Enjoying yourselves, are you?" I lean on the table as Rincan helps me into my chair next to Scorpius. Severus falls silent, watching me.

Scorpius looks up at me, worried. "Are you feeling better, Father?"

My annoyance seeps away at the sincerity of his concern. I smile at him and resist the urge to ruffle his hair. "Some." I'm surprised to find it's true. I'm not quite as exhausted as I was yesterday, despite the fact that I slept intermittently last night. I don't particularly want to admit that to Severus, however. I ignore his steady gaze. Instead I take the plate of roast chicken and glazed carrots Rincan puts in front of me.

"Severus says if we go down to the river this afternoon," Scorpius says, seemingly oblivious to the contest of wills, "we might have trout for dinner."

My head jerks up. I glare at Severus, eyes narrowed. "Did he?" The bastard is quite aware I've been trying to walk that far and failing.

"Scorpius mentioned his desire to fish." Severus spears a carrot and bites into it, chewing slowly. "You might join us if you'd like." He meets my eyes. "Walking out, of course. You need the exercise."

He knows as well as I do I've not the strength yet, potion or not. My jaw tightens. "Perhaps another time."

Scorpius looks at me and then at Severus, confused and not a little disappointed, but he doesn't protest.



I can see the riverbend from my bedroom window with an old pair of mother's opera glasses. Severus stands on a flat rock next to Scorpius, teaching him patiently how to cast a fly into the roiling water. My heart wrenches. It should be me holding my son's wrist, showing him how to snap the rod just enough to send the line skittering out over the river's choppy surface.

With a twist of my mouth, I drop the curtain and lurch back to my bed, dropping heavily onto the mattress.

Scorpius won't need me when I'm gone, I realise. Someone else will take my place. The thought leaves a sour taste in my throat and my heart aches.

I ring for Rincan.

"My potion," I say tightly, "the new one." The elf gives me a worried look, but snaps his fingers and hands me the small phial. I down a capful in a single gulp, then push myself to my feet. "I need my heavier robe, Rincan." I glance back out the window. "And some assistance outdoors, if you will."

I take a deep breath as Rincan rummages through my wardrobe. This is for my son, I tell myself.

I almost believe it.



Scorpius looks up in delight as I move towards the riverbank. At my insistence (and utter defiance of Severus), Rincan has charmed an armchair to carry me through the garden and over the rolling green lawn. My fingers are clenched tight around the arms, certain I'm about to be tossed on my ear as the chair glides down the grassy incline under the house-elf's magic. I find this manner of travel undignified but I'll do anything not to be left out of these moments.

"You came down," Scorpius says, splashing through the water. Despite his trousers being rolled up to his knees, they're still wet. "Severus said you might."

I look over at Severus. He holds the fishing rod with ease, his lanky body poised for the next cast. The breeze ruffles his hair, the sunlight catching on the grey streaks. "I didn't realise you were an angler," I say waspishly.

A faint smile curves his thin lips. "I grew up on the River Calder." With a flick of his wrist he sends the bright line soaring through the air. "My grandfather taught me. Not that we could eat anything we caught, mind. Too damned much pollution from the mills."

There's so little I know about him, I realise, and I'll not have the time to find out.

Scorpius drops onto the grass next to me. His pale hair flops into his eyes, and he brushes it back impatiently. "Are you cold?" he asks as I pull a soft woollen blanket around my shoulders.

"A little," I admit. "Nothing a warming charm won't fix, though."

"I can do that." Scorpius pulls out his wand.

Severus stops him with a scowl. "I think not, Mr Malfoy. The Trace, remember."

Scorpius sulks as he slides his wand back into his pocket. "Why is it no one cared when I bounced that time I fell from the apple tree, but now I'm at school and actually *learning* interesting things I bloody well can't *do* any of them?"

"Language," Severus says mildly. He bends over to pull a trout from the river. I do my best not to notice the way his trousers stretch across his flat arse. My interest surprises me. I haven't wanted to think about sex since March. I avert my eyes quickly when Severus straightens back up and turns towards us. He drops the flopping trout next to another two. The *Prophet's* spread out beneath them, ink smeared by wet fish scales. "And the entire point of the Trace is to make certain you're using magic under proper supervision." He gives Scorpius an even look. "There *are* dangers, as your father can attest."

Scorpius rolls his eyes and I bite back a laugh.

"Best watch yourself," I say, my hand smoothing Scorpius's hair. "You're in the presence of a former Hogwarts headmaster."

Severus meets my eyes. "I wouldn't put myself in that company," he says quietly as he casts a warming charm on me, then turns away, picking the trout up and tying them together.

I feel strangely unsettled.



The kitchen elves broil the trout for dinner.

I eat nearly an entire fish without realising, so caught up am I in Scorpius's quick chatter. When I put my fork down, Severus nods at me, his approval evident.

I'm appalled at how that pleases me.

When I go up to my room, I'm almost blind with exhaustion. I can barely disrobe before I fall into bed, but I sleep more soundly than I have in months.



Astoria firecalls the next afternoon. I'm sure there's been a secret sign of permission sent to the Manor.

"How are you?" she asks me, her brow furrowed. "There's been no news of a Dorset homicide in the *Prophet*."

"Not yet." I'm sitting in the library, close to the hearth. The windows are open--on Severus's insistence that fresh air would be good for me--and the sheer ivory curtains billow slightly, the lush scent of roses and Abyssinian gladiolus wafting in on the breeze. I set my book aside. It's nearly two hours after lunch, and I still haven't fallen asleep. "At the moment I believe Scorpius is in my workroom with Severus. God only knows what he's teaching him to brew."

Astoria laughs. "Given his marks in Potions this year, anything would be an improvement."

I can't object. We've both been horrified by Scorpius's lackadaisical attitude towards his studies. While he's top of his class in History of Magic and Defence--a proper respect for the Dark Arts has been instilled in every Malfoy from birth--he doesn't seem to care about the more fundamental subjects such as Potions and Charms, much to my dismay. I can't fathom how my son has such disdain for potion-brewing. I can't stand not having the energy to work on my own potions.

"It gives me a modicum of quiet, whatever they're doing." I shift on the sofa. My hip aches, most likely from being jarred during my excursion to the river yesterday. "It's remarkable how exhausting they both are."

Astoria just smiles. She knows me well enough to see past my complaints. "You sound far more content."

"I suppose I am. You know I enjoy Scorpius."

"And Severus," she says slyly. At my stunned silence, she sighs. "Really, Draco. We both know how you felt--"

I cut her off. "Mother's well?"

Astoria hesitates, but she follows my lead. "We're going into London shortly for shopping. I thought I'd pick up new dress robes for Scorpius."

"Black," I say. "He'll need them for the funeral."

She's silent, biting her lips in irritation.

"You were supposed to laugh."

Astoria meets my gaze. "I didn't find it amusing."

Neither of us say anything for a long moment.

"I'm scared," I say finally.

Her expression softens. "I know."

I glance away, my throat tight. "I'm not ready to die," I murmur. It's the first time I've said it aloud to her. My heart thuds against my chest. A thread hangs from the cuff of my sleeve. I twist it around my finger, tightening it until it bites whitely into my skin.

"No one ever is," Astoria says. She pauses. "I'd rather you not be, you realise."

The thread breaks. Blood rushes above my knuckle, flushing the skin.

"After all I've done." I sit forward, shivering as I wrap my arms around myself. I can feel my ribs through my cotton shirt. "After Oliver—"

"Don't." She shakes her head, pain twisting across her face. Humiliating her with him is the one thing I've done that we truly cannot discuss. "Please."

We look at each other.

"I'm so sorry." I can barely choke out the words. I want nothing more than to fall against her, to feel her fingers soft against my temple as she tells me all will be fine. I don't deserve that, or her, and I know it.

Astoria draws in a deep breath. "I should go," she says quietly. "I'll firecall later."

The hearth falls dark. Outside I can hear the soft twitter of the swallows.



Scorpius presents me with a small glass phial at dinner.

"I brewed it myself," he says proudly, and I give Severus a sideways look.

He snorts. "It won't kill you; I've made certain of that." Severus touches Scorpius's shoulder as he takes his seat across from me at the too-large table. The small gesture of affection surprises me, as does the beaming smile Scorpius casts his way. Severus shakes his napkin open and reaches for the potatoes. "Although the brat is utterly wretched at potion-brewing."

Scorpius's chair shudders as he drops into it, mindless of the scrape of legs across the polished floor. "I only exploded one cauldron."



I can imagine Severus's response to that. "And he didn't string up by your toenails? He's growing soft," I tell my son as Severus harrumphs.

"He threatened to." Scorpius takes a roll from the plate next to him and smears an unholy amount of butter across it before biting into it. He smacks his slick lips. "I told him you'd be horribly sad if I was hurt, and he'd hate upsetting you."

Impressed with my son's instinctive grasp of manipulation, I glance across the table at Severus. "That's never stopped him before."

Severus rolls his eyes, but I almost think I can see his cheeks pinken in the candlelight. "Drink the damned potion," he says gruffly, and he hands the bowl of potatoes across the table to me.



"You're fond of Scorpius," I say later as Severus kneels beside the hearth, stirring the fire with an iron poker.

He doesn't look back at me. The firelight warms the side of his face, casting long shadows over his shoulder. He sets the poker against fireplace. Despite the time of year, I've complained about the chill in the air. I'm still cold despite my increasing energy and activity.

"He's not entirely unbearable," Severus says slowly.

Scorpius had disappeared up to his room shortly after dinner. An owl had arrived for him, one he'd gleefully announced was from Albus Potter, and he'd dashed off to firecall from his own hearth. There are moments I think Astoria may have been right in her insistence that he was far too young to have his own Floo connection, even after we'd taken off travel capabilities.

"He's twelve," I say, curling up against the arm of the sofa. "They're all unbearable at that age."

"True." Severus stands. He brushes off his trousers. "You were a perfect little beast as I recall."

I frown at him. "You try living with Lucius Malfoy."

Severus sits beside me. He lifts my stockinged feet and settles them on his lap. I don't protest. I'm not a fool: his fingers press into my arches gently and I sigh in relief. My entire body aches.

The fire crackles in the hearth. I close my eyes for a moment, enjoying the peace, the intimacy, the sureness of his hands. This seems so normal, I think. As if it could have been my life. Once.

"Am I a beast now?" I look at Severus. His face is shadowed.

His thumb slides lightly across my heel. "No."

I relax and the words escape me, almost against my will. "I've always regretted that night, you realise." At Severus's silence, I shift, suddenly uncomfortable. "You don't remember."

There's a soft, quiet breath from his end of the sofa. His hands are warm against my feet. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Oh." I finger the cable-stitching on my cardigan.

Severus is silent.

"I've never forgotten it," he says at last.

"You sent me away."

Severus sighs. He moves my feet and stands again. I watch as he walks to the sideboard and pours a glass of whisky, drinking half of it in one swallow. He tops his glass again and turns, leaning against the sideboard, the whisky glass clutched tightly in one hand. "I was twenty years older than you," he says.

"You still are."

The whisky shines in the firelight as he lifts it to his mouth. "Yes."

I watch him. "I wanted you," I say quietly. "I lied when I said it meant nothing."

He nods. "I know."

I stare into the flames of the fire. They burn bright and strong, flickering against soot-stained brick. I pull my knees to my chest. They're sharp and bony. I've never been stocky, but I'm fairly certain I haven't weighed this little since Hogwarts. "I married Astoria after you transferred me to Winikus's supervision," I say. "Father arranged it."

Severus doesn't say anything. He just watches me over the rim of his glass.

"I wasn't ever faithful to her." I look up at him, expecting censure. To my surprise, there is none. "I never meant to hurt her. But..."

"You preferred men."

I stare into the fire. "Yes."

Severus drains his glass and sets it aside. "She knew."

"Yes." I draw in a deep breath. "I never gave her a choice, and she just accepted it. Until Oliver Wood."

"A Gryffindor." Severus's nostrils flare.

I give him a rueful half-smile. "Stupid of me. I thought his talents would make up for his idiocy, but..."

Severus sits on the sofa again. He doesn't take my feet. "He told."

"There'd been rumours in the *Prophet*, and then the *Quibbler* interviewed him." I rub my face. "We'd fought the night before." I look at him. "Astoria could take the infidelity. She couldn't accept being made a fool of in public."

"So she asked for a divorce."

I nod. "I can't help but wonder if this is my punishment. For that and everything else. The Dark Lord. The war. Vince."

"You're an imbecile," Severus says, but his voice is soft.

We sit silently together with our ghosts. It's strangely comforting.



I wake to moonlight spilling across my bed.

Something's wrong. I can feel it inside of me, twisting through my bones and muscles. I try to speak, but my mouth opens with just a croak. It takes all I have to push myself from the bed.

I stagger forward, stumbling over *The Magician's Nephew*. Severus had nearly finished it last night, but he'd insisted we set it aside when I'd begun to drift off, reaching instead for a book of poetry. I can remember him helping me upstairs, his hand firm and steady against my hip as I leaned on him.

Severus. I need him. My hands tense, claw. They hurt excruciatingly. I try to speak again, but my throat's too tight. Somehow I make it to the bedroom door, jerking it open as I lurch forward.

I catch myself on hall table, hitting my hip painfully. I can feel the seizure coming on. Everything seems so far away. I see myself in the mirror above the table, deathly pale, my hair mussed, my eyes shadowed, my body near skeletal.

I look like a corpse.

A thump of my hand and the vase of flowers goes flying, crashing against the wall. I fall on my knees, the tremors beginning as I sink to the floor.

Doors slam; I can hear feet beside me. Scorpius cries out, and I hear Severus shout at him to get back in his damned room.

His face looms above me, pale and tense. His mouth is tight, and his hair falls into his eyes. He doesn't touch my jerking body. I can see his mouth move, can hear his voice as if through a fog, but I don't know what he's saying.

*This is the way the world ends, I think, Severus's poet whispering in my head. Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Darkness, when it comes, is a relief.



Severus sets the phial on the table across the room and looks at me, his arms folded across his chest. There's no sign of the gentleness of last night.

"Take your potion," he says.

I sit up in bed, pushing aside the tray of uneaten eggs and dry toast Rincan had brought up at my orders two hours ago. I hadn't felt able to make my way downstairs this morning. "Bring it to me," I say. I hurt. Even the slightest movement sends pain shuddering through me.

Severus doesn't move.

"I take it that's a no." I lie back down, pulling the covers over my shoulder. "Let it wait."

The duvet flies off me, leaving me shivering beneath a sheet. "Get up," Severus says, not entirely unkindly.

I ignore him.

"This is it then?" Severus's anger is barely under his control. "You'll just give up again, waiting to die?"

"What's the use?" I feel empty. It never gets better. It never will. I roll over, pressing my face into the pillows. "You can't even fix me."

I hear Severus swear behind me, and then the mattress shifts as he sits. His hand settles on my shoulder, heavy and warm. "Draco."

I don't answer.

He sighs. "You don't think I've tortured myself because I can't determine what's wrong? It's an affront to my professional skills."

"Brilliant," I say into my pillow. "I'm so very thrilled you see me as just another puzzle to solve."

His fingers brush my hair lightly, then trace across my cheek. "You know that's not true."

"Do I?" I turn my head then, looking up at him.

"Yes." His eyes bore into mine.

"Why did you come here?" I ask softly after a moment.

Severus's hand traces my cheek. "You know why."

“I don’t,” I whisper. I catch his wrist with my fingers.

His thumb sweeps across my bottom lip, and I shiver. “I couldn’t bear it,” he murmurs, “if you died.”

“Why?” I can barely get the word out.

Severus’s mouth is soft and dry. He kisses me, gently, hesitantly, his hair brushing across my cheeks. I press a foot into the mattress, my aching body arching into the subtlest press of lips against lips.

He pulls back long before I’m ready for the kiss to end. His eyes are dark and his face is guarded, but a faint flush pinks his cheeks. I look at him and he looks away.

“Severus,” I say, but he’s standing already.

“Your potion,” he says. He swallows. “Take it.”

The door closes behind him. I press my fingertips to my mouth, still stunned, trying to hold the moment of a kiss stolen from time.



The potion makes me sleep.

I wake up to a rose and orange sunset setting the sky outside my window on fire and to a swollen prick just beginning to tent my sheets.

The latter is far more astounding to me. I haven’t had an erection in months. My interest in sex has been nil for the first time in my life. The one time I tried to half-heartedly wank, I’d given up after five minutes.

I touch myself hesitantly, half-afraid my cock will soften in my hand. It doesn’t.

Breath held, I stroke my prick, featherlight at first. It hardens more, wetness seeping from the tip. I quickly learn to change my usual technique—somehow pressing too close to my balls causes searing pain. Instead I twist my fingers around the tip, smoothing back my foreskin, sweeping my thumb across the damp head.

When I come, it’s to the thought of Severus, of his long fingers and his soft mouth, and my entire body shudders and I cry out as spunk spatters warmly across my concave stomach.

I fall back, gasping for breath and utterly stunned, my body hurting horribly.

After a long moment, I laugh and marvel that I’m still alive.



Severus is alone as I make my way slowly down the stairs.

He stops in the hallway, watching me. "Careful," he says as my bare foot slides and almost slips on a step.

I catch myself on the banister. My face warms as I look down at him. "Where's Scorpius?"

"Having dinner with the Potter clan," Severus says dryly. "Ginevra firecalled this afternoon with the request. She seemed surprised when I answered."

I make my way down the last few steps. Rincan's helped me dress in black wool trousers and a grey cashmere jumper. I've even combed my hair. Foolish of me, I suppose, but I've an unmistakable desire to look less as if I'm on death's doorstep.

Astoria would be pleased, I think.

"Does it bother you I gave him permission?" Severus asks. The frown that flashes across his face is uncharacteristically concerned. "He and Ginevra assured me that he'd been several times before. You were asleep and I thought perhaps he needed some time--"

I hold up my hand and shake my head. "Not at all. It will do him good to spend the evening with Albus." It's taken me an hour to decide what I want. Well. Ten minutes to decide. Fifty to pull myself together enough to put my plan into place. "I'm glad actually. I want to speak with you."

Severus follows me warily into the sitting room. "About?"

I stop, turned away from him. His papers and books are scattered across the sofa and floor. He's been researching again. My heart twists. "No one wants me to die," I say. "Not Mother. Not Astoria. Not Scorpius." I glance over to him. "Not you."

"Of course not." Severus leans against the door frame, his arms crossed. I've never understood how he can make a simple white shirt and black trousers look so ridiculously sexy. I've tried to emulate him over the years. It's never the same. I'm tall, but I don't have his lanky, wiry frame nor his genuine disregard of other people's opinion. "No one wants you to die but you, infuriating idiot that you are."

I turn. "It would be a proper punishment."

"Really." Severus pushes himself off the door, moving closer to me. He pulls at the collar of his shirt, showing me the twisted scar tissue on his throat. "And would you say you and your father ought to have left me bleeding on the floor of the Shrieking Shack to atone for my sins?"

I can't stop myself from reaching out, my fingers brushing his throat. The scars are slick and puckered. Severus stills beneath my touch. I can still see him there, lying in a pool of thick blood, barely breathing, his eyes open and unfocused. I'd been so terrified, but Father had strode in, ignoring the protests of the Aurors who had been escorting us back to the Ministry, and had picked Severus up as if he were a child, cradling him to his chest.

*St Mungo's*, he'd said to Potter behind us, and Potter had just nodded. The Aurors hadn't dared argue with him.

"Why Baden?" I ask softly. My fingers slide across his stubbled jaw. "You didn't have to leave England."

"Yes," Severus takes a step closer. I don't pull away. "I did." His hand settles on my hip. "You were a distraction."

I breathe out. "And there were none in Baden?"

"None like you." His thumb slides beneath my jumper, brushing lightly across the bare skin above the waistband of my trousers. It sends a shiver through me, distracting me from the naked jealousy that flares up in me at the thought of others. "No one else has been so difficult to ignore."

"Severus," I whisper, and when he leans in, I slide my arm around his neck, pulling him into a slow, careful kiss.

He groans, a soft huff of breath warm against my mouth. "Draco... I shouldn't."

I answer with another kiss, harder this time, my teeth scraping across his bottom lip. Severus pulls me closer, and his palm slips over my stomach, hot against my skin. "Oh," I breathe out, and I can feel my cock begin to swell again. I catch his wrist, flattening my hand over his on my hip. We stand there breathlessly for a long moment.

"Draco." His mouth brushes my jaw. "You're not strong--"

I turn my head, kissing him. "Shut up, Severus."

To my surprise, he does. His lips are warm and wet, and when his tongue slides against mine, my fingers twist in his shirt, slip between the gaps in the buttons. I want to touch his skin, want to feel the heat of his body.

"Please," I whisper.

Severus swears softly, and his hands pull at my trousers, tugging the buttons free. "I want," he chokes out, and I don't let him finish.

"Yes." It's been so long since I've wanted to be touched. I need him. Need this. Severus's mouth claims mine again, and his fingers tug at the silk of my pants. When his hand curls around my cock, I arch against him with a gasp, blindly shocked to my marrow that this is actually happening here, now, and not in the fevered fantasy of my brain. "Oh, God." I grasp his arms tightly to keep from falling. "Severus."

His smooth, long hand slips over my prick, pulling back my foreskin. My eyelids flutter closed -- it takes all of my effort to *feel*. He bites my jaw gently. The scratch of his stubble against my throat makes me tremble with want and the willingness to do anything, to let him do anything to me. Only for this, only for him.

"Do you like this?" His touch is careful. Light.

I barely manage a nod.



"Tell me," he says. "Tell me what you want." His fingers tighten around my shaft and it's nothing like the routine of my own hand.

I swallow, taking a shallow breath. "Please," I say.

"Please what?" His voice is authoritative but raspy with need. I take strength from this.

"I want you to wank me, Severus. To rub me against your body. I want you to make me come undone." My cheeks are flaming; he is utterly silent and his hand stills. "I want to come all over your fingers. "

I've gone too far. I'm sure of it. He's going to walk away, as he did fifteen years ago, and I will be left with nothing.

And then his teeth are in my neck and he is pressing against me and muttering into my skin. "Draco. The things you say. You've no idea what you do to me. You never have." He strokes me, in frantic, rough movements that make me press against him, desperate for more as I shudder against his lips, my hands on his shoulders. I'm shaking, leaning against him, barely able to hold myself upright. After so many involuntary fits, it feels incredible to give up control of my body for pleasure, to let him do what he will.

Then Severus's fingers slide over my balls and hit the sensitive area, and I hiss, pulling back. Pain wracks my body, sharp and quick, nearly doubling me. I try to breathe. It's nearly impossible.

He freezes, his hand still in my trousers.

"Does that hurt?" His voice is clinical and careful.

I nod, pressing my forehead against his shoulder. "Brutally." My fingers curl around his wrist, tugging his fingers gently up my softening prick. "The head--"

Severus's hand slides down again. He squeezes my balls, hard, rolling them between his fingers. I jerk away with a loud cry. My erection wilts entirely.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" I ask when I can speak again, doubled over and leaning against the sofa for support, but Severus is already turning away, reaching for a pile of research.

"Testicular pain," he says, as if I will understand, and he throws the papers aside before grabbing another stack. With a quill, he scrawls something in his notebook, flipping through pages.

I stand there, trousers still open, watching him. "You're mad."

Severus just grunts and makes another note. "How long have you had this pain?"

"I don't know." I do up my fly, wincing slightly. "I just wanked for the first time in months--"

That earns me a sharp look. "Raised libido?"

"Something along those lines." I can feel my face warm. "Bloody potion of yours."

Severus' mouth quirks. "Among other things, I hope."

"Mmmm. Keep hoping." I'm feeling particularly uncharitable. I look over his shoulder. "Do you have any intention of sharing whatever epiphany you've had?"

He shoves his notebook at me, pointing to a page. My symptoms are listed in nearly illegible handwriting. I squint at it. "What?"

"The Healers weren't wrong about the vasculitis," Severus says. He sounds far too pleased with himself. "Cerebral, I'd say, given the way it's presenting. I've suspected that's caused your seizures. It's restricting the bloodflow in your brain--"

"I'm not an idiot," I snap. "I do work in Pharmaherbology, Severus."

He ignores me, clasping his hands behind his back as he paces in front of the sofa. I've seen him like this before, when he's made a breakthrough with a potion. "Polyarteritis nodosa. Most likely centered around your neuromagical system—not in it, precisely, but twisted through. It fits. It wouldn't have been easy for those fools in St Mungo's to catch--it masks itself as any number of diseases, but in men it often causes testicular pain--"

I just look at him. He's a liar - he had just performed a miracle. He has an actual diagnosis.

Severus turns to me. His brows are drawn together; he takes a deep breath. "There's no cure."

Numb, I sit on the sofa, my legs finally giving way. "Oh." It's not until this moment that I realise how much hope a name gave me. Whatever I might have thought before, I've not truly been ready to die. The notebook falls from my hand, pages scattering across the rug. "So."

"No," Severus says. He sits next to me and reaches for my hand. "I can brew a potion--"

"Don't." My fingers tighten on his. "Don't give me false hope, Severus."

His eyes narrow. "Damn you," he says, and he jerks me closer, his mouth finding mine. The kiss is angry, rough, and I cling to him.

We pull away slowly. Severus' mouth is swollen and wet. I touch his lips with my fingertips. He catches my wrist and kisses my palm.

"It's incurable, yes, but there are ways to put it in remission," he says quietly. "Potions which might reduce the symptoms and slow the progression."

"I'll never live to be an old man." The thought makes me ache.

Severus doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. I lean my head against his shoulder, and he cups my cheek, his thumb smoothing across my skin. "I promise," he says after a moment, "I will do everything I can to keep you here and help you have as long a life as possible." He hesitates, then looks at me, his eyes defiant. "With me."

"Damn well better be with you," I whisper. "After all I had to do to get your attention."

Severus snorts and presses his face into the curve of my neck. "Trust me, Draco." His breath is warm against my skin.

"I have no choice." I say. "I always have."



King's Cross is filled with Muggles, many of them casting curious glances at Severus as he strides through the station, his robe flowing behind him. One man sidesteps him with a nod and a *Sorry, Reverend* that makes me bite back a laugh.

Severus just glowers at me. "Not amusing, Mr Malfoy."

"I've always thought you'd make a proper vicar," I say calmly as we walk towards the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten. I raise my hand reflexively in front of the stone, giving Severus a small smile as I slide through.

Steam swirls around me, and the gilt-edged Platform Nine and Three-Quarters sign swings slightly above my head. The train's just arrived: porters are pulling trunks and owl cages from the steps for the first years, and school robes are hastily being pulled off and tucked away in satchels and valises.

"Oh, good God," Severus says with a curl of his lip at the ridiculously young couples pressed together, saying their final frantic and messy goodbyes before the summer hols.

I just laugh. "Just wait a few years. That'll be Scorpius soon enough."

"Over my dead body," Severus mutters. His hand rests lightly on my hip. I've put on a bit of weight in the past year. Not enough, in Severus's opinion, but he grudgingly admits that I no longer look as if I've one foot and half a knee in the grave. Still, the potions are working, three of them twice each day, and I don't complain about taking them because they keep me with Scorpius.

And Severus.

We've stayed in Dorset, both of us. He'd officially kept a separate bedroom until the papers for my divorce were finalised, much to Astoria's amusement. *The only nights you spend away from Draco's bed, she'd said after Christmas dinner, laughing over far too many glasses of wine, are the ones when you've annoyed him. Why on earth don't you just move your things into his room?*

Severus had just snorted, his cheeks flushed, and told her to mind her own damned business.

Astoria never does.

She's happy now and seeing Tony Goldstein at least twice a week, if not more. Severus, of all people, had introduced them in late January, the evening after he'd finally placed the last of his clothes into my wardrobe. I like Tony. He's intelligent and amusing. Not someone I'd object to as my son's stepfather, and

Mother even approves.

Scorpius, however, has reserved judgement. I daresay Tony will win him over this summer, though. He's that sort. Good-natured enough, but far from Gryffindor, thank God. Scorpius has enough of that in his life, being exposed to the bloody Potter clan.

"Father! Severus!"

I catch sight of blond hair through one of the train windows, and then Scorpius is bounding out of the train, Albus on his heels, their Slytherin robes half off their shoulders, their trunks dragging behind them. He's thirteen now, my son, and far taller than he'd been last June. I hate to see him grow up; I can't help but wonder if Father had felt the same each time he'd met the Express.

"Those two." Severus studies his namesake. He's been fascinated with Albus Severus Potter since their first meeting in September. The curiosity is mutual, as far as I can tell. He moves to step away, but I grab his hand, holding him still. He's nervous, just as he'd been when we'd met Scorpius at Christmas. And Easter. "Don't," I say quietly, my thumb stroking his wrist.

He looks at me, and after a moment, his fingers curl around mine. I lean in, my lips just barely brushing his.

Scorpius beams at us. Albus has been left behind. "You're worse than Teddy Lupin and Victoire Weasley," he says.

Severus reaches for Scorpius's trunk. "I should certainly hope so. Your father's much more attractive than a Weasley. Veela or not."

Across the way I can see Potter and his wife, their children gathering around them. He meets my gaze and nods, his hand on Albus's shoulder, before his eyes flick towards Severus. He nods again. Severus ignores him. Instead he looks at me.

"Home then?" he asks.

*Home.*

Scorpius squeezes my hand. With a smile, I pull him against me. "Let's go."

I have my family. All is well.

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*Comment on Livejournal.*

*Comment on Dreamwidth.*