

In Transit

by *diabolica*

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Chapter 1 of 1

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This story was written for Kribu, who did me a good turn. Her prompt was *something Snape-centric would be lovely. Preferably with an alive Snape, post-DH.* With much beta love to Catsintheatic for the above and beyond sanity check.

The stranger arrives on the first of July, in funereal black, with a list. It must be July, because the sky is an unbroken blue, yet Lake Peipsi reflects it in emerald green. The vortex in the middle is visible to any eyes with magic to see. The lake is a boundary, a place between worlds. Later, the apothecary wonders whether this is why he has come.

After that, he continues to arrive at her shop, always on the first of the month, handing over his list without a word of greeting. The list is never long, but it is specific. He will accept only certain items: Abkhazian Billywig or Petseri yarrow-root, four days old (never six or more—he can tell). And Caucasus pomegranate—concentrate and seeds—in prodigious quantities. While other ingredients rotate on the list, pomegranate is constant. Either he is recovering from a poisoning, or he's supplying an army with Strengthening Solutions. The apothecary does not mention this last observation out loud. She is under the impression that her discretion, as much as her willingness to supply certain non-tradeable substances, is why he returns.

He has never introduced himself, not even after nearly a year's worth of visits, as if he is only passing through and will not stay long enough to become acquainted. A foreigner with a permanent line between the eyebrows that comes from scowling furiously and near-perpetually and a voice rough with disuse. Though his translation charms are good, they cannot help him roll an 'r'. From the subtle rise and fall of his accent, she decides he must be an English speaker. Not an American—too taciturn. English perhaps. Except the Englishmen she has known had their own curious system of manners—all *pleases* and *thank yous* and *may I trouble you?*, so that even the simplest requests made them sound like beggars—which this one doesn't seem to follow. Knowing the recent history of England, the apothecary speculates on what her peculiar customer must have seen. Or done.

A few others in the village have met him—the bookseller, the grocer—but no one seems to *know* him. They all regard him with the interest inevitably aroused by a stranger in their midst, but he seems unmoved to explain himself, and they don't ask. It is the grocer's nosy daughter who mentions that the scowling possibly-Englishman lives in one of the crumbling dachas on the shore of the lake. "Perhaps he's here to take the waters," she says and smiles.

On the first of May, the lake's surface is smooth as glass despite a ferocious wind, the vortex quiet. The apothecary waits. At dusk, when it is time to close and the stranger hasn't entered her shop, she locks up for the night thinking that his transition to the next world must be complete.