

Alone and Palely Loitering

by Squibstress

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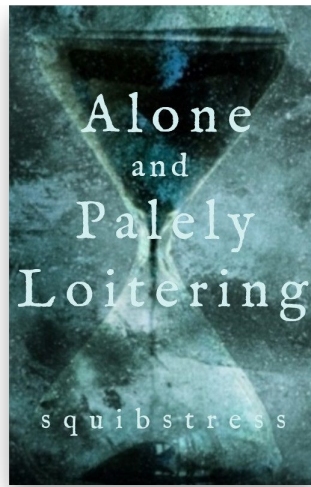
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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: *Written for the 2013 Dysfuncentine Fest on LiveJournal. The prompt was: "La mort c'est seulement la mort, mais l'amour, c'est l'amour" (Magnetic Fields - Underwear). I admit, I'd never heard of the band before (but have since enjoyed it), the quotation was so delicious that I couldn't resist.*



It seemed the fashionable thing, and if the Muggle king could do it, why not him?

Not a nice, professional beheading, of course; it would need to be subtler. And it would be nice if it were more painful.

No, no, he thought. *Henry had the right of it. The woman has shared my bed for 186 years. He tried not to add, and snored for 175 of them.*

Immortality had seemed a grand idea at the time. He only wished he'd discovered the Stone a little sooner. While he never got any older, he didn't get any younger, either, and quite frankly, 150 years, give or take, of gout and piles had made him think more than once of chucking the bloody thing into the Thames.

But then some entrancing young thing would catch his eye, and he'd swallow the Elixir, trim his beard, straighten his doublet and waistcoat, and pursue her as if she were an alchemical riddle to be teased out of hiding. Invariably, though, his fancy of the day became an old slag, and in the end, there was Perenelle.

Always.

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For the first hundred years or so, he'd loved her. Or as much as one could love a wife he'd only met for the first time when she was six and for the second time on their wedding day. But they'd gotten on well enough after the initial period of adjustment, and when he'd needed someone to test the Elixir, he'd naturally turned to her. Testing an untried immortality draught on an apprentice would have been very bad form, and frankly, people would have noticed if a twelve-or thirteen-year-old boy never grew taller or sprouted his man's beard.

So it had been Perenelle. Not that she'd known, of course. But after ten years of slipping her the Elixir with no ill effects, he'd started taking it himself, and that's when he'd told her about it, although not about his little test period. There were some things that must be kept to oneself if one is to enjoy a harmonious home life. He'd learnt that over four decades of marriage.

She'd demanded that he share the Elixir with her...the Stone made enough for two, but only just...and he'd acquiesced. It would be nice, he'd thought, to share eternity with someone.

Even if it was his wife.

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Thoughts of murder cropped up a few times over the next centuries...of course they did! What husband did not occasionally dream of ridding himself of his wife? Especially one who snored and never once in three hundred years missed an occasion to mention the fact that he'd been unable to perform on their wedding night.

When they moved back to Paris in 1649...London had become altogether too depressing to tolerate, what with the theatres closed...he became terribly taken with an actress of Molière's.

Her voice was so much more melodious and her bosom so much whiter than Perenelle's, and she never snorted when she laughed or yawned when he was speaking about something important.

She was perfection.

"Come away with me, my Rosebud," he'd say to her and mean it. Visions of eating grapes from her delightfully rounded belly on some sun-drenched Mediterranean isle danced through his head at disturbing intervals.

But she'd laugh, tossing her pretty golden curls, asking, "And what would you tell your wife, monsieur? And I my husband?"

He began slipping her tiny amounts of the Elixir, watering Perenelle's monthly dose, but not so much that she'd notice. Eventually, his wife would succumb to the inevitable, and his Rosebud would tire of the life of the stage, and when that happened, he wanted to ensure she would remain as dewy-skinned and golden-ringed as she'd been when he first set eyes on her at the Comédie Française.

She aged, as the small amount of Elixir he slipped into her wine...and later, her gin...wasn't enough to prevent it entirely, but her youth was prolonged, to the disgust of her thespian rivals. For Perenelle's part, the difference in dosage seemed to have no effect, much to Nicolas's disappointment. She didn't age perceptibly, so perhaps the preservative effect was cumulative. Or maybe the magical purity of her blood enhanced the effect. Yes, he thought, that was probably the case. He blamed the rheumatism that had seemed to creep up on him despite his faithful adherence to his dosing schedule on his grandfather. Come to think of it, his marriage might be blamed on Gualtier Flamel's eye for the Muggle ladies, too. Nicolas's father had been anxious to erase the blot on the Flamel family name with an advantageous match for his son. And Perenelle's pedigree was without blemish.

While the physiological effects of the Elixir on his Rosebud were almost exactly as he had hoped, the other . . . ramifications were less felicitous, in his view. Far from tiring of her profession, Mlle de Brie appeared anxious to soldier on for as long as audiences would have her as Agnès or Éliante, and so Nicolas waited. He had all the time in the world, after all. But it eventually dawned on him that his Rosebud was being plucked, and by none other than M. Poquelein himself. Her reluctance to give up the boards had less to do with the plays than with the playwright, it seemed.

So he stopped giving her the Elixir and returned, saddened but not despairing, into the waiting and still-firm arms of his Perenelle.

When he heard of Mlle de Brie's passing in 1706, he sent a spray of rosebuds and felt a pinch of regret mixed with soupçon of glee.

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Over the years, Nicolas experimented with other sorts of amusement. In general, he preferred the curve of the breast and the smoothness of a girl's cheek, but several hundred years of succulent feminine flowers left a man somewhat blasé and eager for something altogether firmer against which to test his masculine mettle.

So yes, there was the occasional young man among the sweet young things, Nicolas was not ashamed of it. He took a Greek view of things and enjoyed the occasional tryst with a particularly promising apprentice, and they were almost without exception grateful. Nicolas was a generous man, both with his knowledge and with his Galleons.

He didn't mean to fall in love with the Dumbledore boy.

But there was something so sad in the boy, so fragile and broken . . . when combined with the mind of a modern Aristotle and the power of a new Merlin, both waiting to be moulded, it was an irresistible attraction.

It was this, probably, that made Perenelle notice him where she had largely ignored Nicolas's other boys.

"There is something wrong with him," she said one day.

"He has had a difficult life, my dear."

"I don't wish to have him in the house."

So naturally, Nicolas introduced the boy to the wards and allowed him to come and go as he pleased.

Perenelle said no more about it.

He began to fantasise again about her death.

Unfortunately, the cat had long been out of the bag about the Elixir, and she was well known around London, so her sudden demise would not go unremarked.

Perhaps a disappearance could be arranged. . .

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When Dr Crippen met the end of the hangman's rope in 1910, Nicolas was in the small crowd gathered in the courtyard of Pentonville Prison to witness the event.

He was drawn to the execution because he'd followed the case avidly in the Muggle papers. Nicolas would admit to a grudging admiration for the man; Crippen had had the courage of his convictions and went after what he wanted (or more accurately, didn't want) with two hands and a bag of quicklime. But like so many before him, Crippen had been tripped up by his own stupidity. Well, what could one expect of a man who ignored the real magic all around him and instead believed that water had memory? He'd have done well to apply his homeopathic belief to the water he stupidly added to the lime, Nicolas thought. Now *that* water had certainly remembered what it was about, dooming poor, dim Crippen in the process.

Occasionally, Nicolas imagined himself as Crippen, retracing the story and correcting the man's many errors.

It was this that led him, oddly enough, to his second greatest discovery. (Well, great in the sense of "a great mystery is solved." In the event, Alkahest turned out to be less useful than anyone could ever have imagined.)

In the lab one day, Nicolas was thinking about Crippen and how the old boy wouldn't have been pinched if he'd had a better solvent. Something that would have reduced his inconvenient wife to her constituent parts and rendered the body untraceable. Something that might, coincidentally, perform the same service for Perenelle. The Magical authorities had far better ways of finding a missing person than did Scotland Yard, so if he wanted Perenelle to "disappear," he would have to obliterate her completely and without use of a wand.

Sighing wistfully at the fantasy, he directed his attention back to the mess of potash and wormwood salts in his cauldron. He made yet another incantation over it and consulted his copy of Philaethes before unbuttoning his fly, taking out his willy, and urinating into the cauldron. Best to do it direct, the old man had told him; decanting into another vessel added an extra touch of the unknown to an already-squidgy process. The mixture seethed and bubbled as the yellow stream hit it.

Nicolas was about to take up the silver knife and add the prescribed three drops of blood when a cry arose from the table at the back of the room where the Dumbledore boy was mucking about with that dragon's blood he'd brought back from Hungary.

"Merlin's bloody bollocks!" Dumbledore said.

"Language," tutted Nicolas, who was fastidious in matters of speech. "What's the trouble?"

"The Horntail blood ate right through my gloves. Circe, but that smarts!" the boy said, pulling his long, nimble fingers from the glove.

"Let me see," said Nicolas, going over to him. Examining the finger, he saw a small red welt but nothing more. Really, the boy was soft as mud.

"Don't be such an infant. It's only a minor burn," Nicolas said, blowing gently on the finger. He took his wand and cleaned off any residue of the blood, then took the finger into his mouth and suckled it for a few moments. When Dumbledore withdrew it, Nicolas said, "There now. All better?"

"Yes, sir," said the boy. "All better." This last was said very softly, and Nicolas could see that his wonderful eyes were heavy and half-closed.

He was thinking of abandoning his experiment in favour of bending the boy over the table and availing himself of the velvetiest rump he'd ever had the pleasure of knowing, when a stroke of genius...yes, that's what it was...assailed him.

"Bring that phial over here," he told Dumbledore.

"Which one?" his dutiful assistant asked.

"The Horntail blood."

When the blood hit the mixture in his cauldron, the gold mist that emanated from it told Nicolas that he had found the formula at last. It had been right under old Philaethes's hooked nose the entire time! In retrospect, it was so obvious that Nicolas was a little disgusted.

Over the weeks during which he and Dumbledore experimented with the stuff, Nicolas thought about Perenelle. She'd made no more noise about Dumbledore, but she was always infuriatingly underfoot whenever the boy was there, bringing them trays of the elf-made aquavit Dumbledore liked so much, or plying them with savouries, saying brightly, "How is the work coming along, eh?"

He wanted to strangle her.

The paper was a bit of a mess, there was no denying it. But Nicolas had been distracted. He invited young Dumbledore to accompany him to Paris to present it to the International Alchemical Conference, hoping to enjoy a leisurely romp or two in his rooms at the beautiful Hôtel des Mages. But when he arrived, Perenelle was already

there.

"Hello, chéri! I came ahead to surprise you," she said, and he wanted to pry every one of her too-big teeth from the infuriating smile.

The presentation was not a success. Nicolas Flamel, it was whispered, was losing his touch.

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Nicolas thought of his own death for the first time in 1917.

Dumbledore had left him to study advanced Transfiguration, and Nicolas hadn't the heart to find a new assistant or paramour.

He and Perenelle lived quietly in their little house in Devon...they'd moved yet again to avoid the Zeppelin attacks that terrorised London...and he thought of chucking the Stone into the sea.

But he didn't. It was a gift from Dumbledore...or a curse...that he still thirsted for knowledge. He'd been tapped out, or so he thought, weary at last of life's pleasures after 600-odd years. But Albus Dumbledore had a hunger such as Nicolas had never seen. To Dumbledore, everything was a fascinating question: *What? Why? How?* and Nicolas found himself wanting desperately to provide the answers for this sad, beautiful young man.

So he kept the Stone and made the Elixir because of the tiny kernel of hope that one day, he would have them, and his brilliant young assistant would return and fall gratefully at his creaking knees.

But Nicolas found himself increasingly unable to work. Oh, he puttered around, attended a conference or two...always with an eye out for the tall, auburn-haired young man who so occupied his thoughts...but his mind seemed to have slowed. His thoughts and ideas were like quicksilver...slippery and elusive. There were to be no more strokes of genius, it seemed.

He watched from afar as Dumbledore made a name for himself. While Nicolas had been chasing after the universal solvent (and dreaming of dispatching Perenelle), the young man had been working with dragon's blood, something Nicolas had thought a *bêtise*, but which he indulged because it seemed to make the lovely boy happy. When Dumbledore's seminal paper on the twelve uses of same...each and every one more practical and less illegal than anything Nicolas had dreamt up for his Alkahest...came out, there was a ball in Dumbledore's honour.

Nicolas and Perenelle received an invitation, and the man of the hour himself danced with Perenelle while Nicolas looked on, hoping like a schoolboy that his erstwhile assistant would speak to him.

"We must stay in touch," said Dumbledore, delivering a breathless Perenelle back to Nicolas's side. "Your lovely wife tells me you've settled near the coast."

"Yes. Perhaps you'd care to make a visit? Get away from all this . . ." Nicolas waved his hand around the room.

"I would, I would," said Dumbledore. "Perhaps in the summer."

But he didn't say which summer, and so Nicolas waited.

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He no longer thought about killing her.

She still snored, she still snorted, she still made him feel ridiculous at times, but she was still there. And there was no one else who could possibly understand what it was to be immortal.

The past half-century had done what the previous 550 years could not: it made him feel old and obsolete, a thing he'd never imagined. The world had become an incomprehensible place. He could no longer make sense of a place in which Muggles...Muggles!...could unleash such destruction upon one another and upon the Earth.

Even Dumbledore's visits did nothing to cheer him. In fact, they depressed him even more.

When had his sad, beautiful golden boy become a chipper old man?

It was just as well that Nicolas had never managed to be rid of his wife, he admitted to himself. She, at least, was a constant in the constantly changing orbit in which he found himself. Still youthful-looking, still energetic, still caustic, still Perenelle.

He'd made up his mind to be content with her when Dumbledore suggested they give up the Stone.

"For the greater good," he said. "Just imagine if it were to fall into the wrong hands," he said.

Truly, thought Nicolas, *are there any right ones?*

What, after all, had he done with his immortality?

Made a few minor discoveries and chased pleasure. Pleasure that had begun to wear increasingly thin over the past century. Dumbledore notwithstanding, the young things he saw around him were no longer sweet. They were rude, poorly educated, ill dressed, and had terrible taste in music. They were not at all grateful for his tutelage.

Perhaps Dumbledore was right, he thought. Perhaps it was time to . . . move on before matters got much worse.

He broached the subject with Perenelle, expecting her to talk him out of it, but to his surprise, she agreed.

"It is time, my love," she said, putting her arms around him and kissing him sweetly.

So they drank down the last of the Elixir with a bottle of magically preserved 1775 Chateau d'Yquem and owled Dumbledore to come take the stone off their hands.

"You're doing the right thing, my friend," he said as he put it in his pocket.

It was six weeks before Nicolas began to feel . . . odd.

It started with a strange tingling in his fingers and toes, and over the course of a day, it progressed to a distinct aching in his bones.

By the second day, he couldn't stand. By the third, he couldn't eat or make water. By the fourth, he couldn't speak. His skin was like rice paper, and it cracked and bled, and he wept dry tears.

Perenelle tended him. She herself had not yet begun to feel the effects of withdrawal from the Elixir, but then, her blood was pure. It might take more time. He was sorry he would not be there to ease her passing.

"You have a visitor," came her voice softly.

He opened his eyes...oh, so painful...and saw Dumbledore standing over his bed. His face was grave.

"How are you, Nicolas?" he asked kindly.

"Dying." Nicolas's voice didn't sound at all familiar. His smooth baritone had cracked and faltered and sounded full of dust. It was the voice of a very old man. He hated it.

Dumbledore said, "I know. I'm sorry."

Nicolas thought perhaps his eyes had developed cataracts, but it looked to him as if Dumbledore had put his arm around Perenelle.

"I will take good care of her, I promise," Dumbledore said.

Perenelle. His still-beautiful, still-young wife, his companion of centuries, was holding something out for him to see.

When he squinted, she held it closer.

It was the Philosopher's Stone.

"It isn't my time, chéri," she said softly. "Now," she said, "I will live."

"The Elixir . . ." rasped Nicolas.

"Do you really think I am incapable of making the Elixir?" she asked, a hint of the old venom creeping into her tone. "How many years have I lived with you?"

She looked as if she were going to say more, but Dumbledore put his fingers to her lips to silence her.

To Nicolas, he said, "Go gently, my friend."

"Why?" rasped Nicolas. It was the last word he would ever speak.

Dumbledore cocked his head at the ancient figure in the bed and looked at him curiously.

Then he leaned over and kissed Nicolas's parched, cracked lips.

"Because," Dumbledore said, as if speaking to a terribly dim child, "Death is only death. But love is love."

~FIN~