Summary

When Lucius Malfoy calls on an old tradition to claim Harry as Draco’s future bride, only Severus can stop him!

Notes

Written for the Severus Snape Fuh-Q Fest (3rd Wave), in response to the scenario, "Sirius must ask/beg Snape to marry (and consummate the marriage) with Harry."
Harry Potter was surprised to return to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to find that a new course had been added to the syllabus. The note came flying in the window on the train, of all things, one for each sixth and seventh year student, and his eyebrows flew up into his hairline when he read his. “A life skills course?” he asked incredulously. “What on earth does that mean?”

“Ah, we had them in our Muggle school,” Dean Thomas replied from across the way. Ron and Hermione were up in the prefects’ car, of course, so Harry had hunkered down with Dean, Seamus, and the Patil twins. “It’s like a course that helps you pick a career, learn how to balance your finances, stuff like that.”

“The Ministry of Magic believes it is of the utmost importance that students are prepared for life after graduating from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Harry read aloud. “Therefore, Hogwarts will now be offering a Life Skills Training Course for sixth and seventh year students. There are no required texts for this course; additional supplies may be required during the semester.” He stopped reading as the letter moved on into more mundane things.

“It’ll be a fluff course, Harry,” Dean said. “It’ll be easier than Divinations.” The Patils shot him a dirty look, but he just grinned.

Sixth year Gryffindors didn’t have to wait long to find out what Life Skills Training would entail - they had it first thing Monday morning, with Slytherins, of course. Harry groaned. From what Dean had described from Muggle school, Life Skills sounded a lot like group therapy, which was not something he was looking forward to doing with Draco Malfoy.

Their teacher was a short, plump witch named Practicalla Prepara. She stood in front of the classroom, beaming at the students as they walked in. “No, no, no,” she said as they started to take
their seats. “There’ll be no sitting in houses in my classroom. That may be the way things are divided here in Hogwarts, but this class is about the real world. I’ve created ‘neighborhoods’ for you to sit in - they were randomly designated, don’t worry about any bias on my part…” she began to list off names.

All in all, it wasn’t too bad. Harry ended up with Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson, and Lavender Brown. Ron was with Hermione, Gregory Goyle, and a pale, quiet Slytherin girl named Avila. Seamus ended up in Draco Malfoy’s group, but it could have been worse. **Thank god it wasn’t Neville!** Harry thought, before returning his attention to the teacher.

“Now, we’re going to go on a journey into our own futures in the next eight months, but first I want to start by delving into our pasts. Therefore, your first assignment will be to construct your family tree.” Harry felt a sinking sensation - the first assignment, and already he couldn’t do it. He had no idea who his family was, beyond his parents. Professor Prepara seemed to be aware of this, however, because she hurried on. “Of course, I recognize that some students may have more personal knowledge about their families than others. Therefore, I have procured copies of the Ministry of Magic Official Registry for each student.” She circulated the heavy books around the classroom. “For those of you who are muggle-born, your roots are just as important. I have arranged for a special trip to the Oxford Library, where there is a similar registry for Muggles, on Wednesday evening. You may begin, of course, with the family with which you are most familiar.” The professor finished explaining the assignment, and then told the students to get to work.

Harry opened his voluminous book, flipping to the P’s. There it was, written in black and white: Potter, Harry, with information on his birth date, education, and major accomplishment (“defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Opened Chamber of Secrets, Won Triwizard Tournament”) were listed under his name. Magical lines coursed along from his page to the next pages, “Potter, James” and “Evans, Lily”. His mother’s page was the end of her lineage, because, as Professor Prepara explained, the Registry did not record information about Muggles. The Potter line, however, went on and on.

He hardly noticed the time go by and didn’t even look up from the book until Ron punched him in the arm and shouted, “Oy, Harry! We’re going to be late for Charms, let’s go!” He followed his friends dazedly, not wanting to shut the book. His family. He was learning about his family. Suddenly, Life Skills Training seemed like a very good idea after all.

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That evening, Hermione didn’t even have to nag him to get him to do his homework - at least not his Life Skills homework. He inhaled his dinner and headed for the study hall without a glance back, and was soon immersed in the Registry again. “At least you only have to do one side of your family,” Ron complained, flipping through pages and pages of Weasley’s. Harry grinned.

“I think you should come with us to the Oxford Library on Wednesday and research the Evans side, Harry,” Hermione put in. “It would much more thorough that way.”

”Can’t. Quidditch.” Both boys grunted, and then laughed. Hermione harrumphed. Harry turned back to his book, feeling unbelievably good, and found his place, going backwards along his family tree.
“Oh my god,” he breathed. “It says here that Meritisa Potter was engaged to be married - to Adramelech Malfoy.” He shuddered. Ron shuddered. Hermione leaned over curiously.

“But she didn’t marry him?”

“No, she married Ishtar Longbottom - huh. Sirius was right. All the pureblood families really are related in some way.” Harry flipped the page.

“When was that?” Hermione was asking.

“1809.”

“Probably an arranged marriage, then.” She stated. “At that time, it would have still been the tradition, though people were beginning to object to arranged marriages and choose their own partners. Most arrangements were made at birth, and didn’t suit the parties involved once they got older. Looks like Meritisa Potter was bucking the system, Harry.” She finished, matter-of-factly.

Ron didn’t even bother to ask how Hermione knew all that. He just clapped Harry on the back good-naturedly. “Good thing, too, Harry. You know, you owe a lot to that girl - you could have had Malfoy blood in you otherwise!” They all laughed.

The next week, they handed in their assignments, after making a presentation to their neighborhoods about what they had discovered. Harry couldn’t help but throw in the Malfoy story; Blaise didn’t react, but Pansy Parkinson narrowed her eyes and glared at him, and Draco Malfoy flushed deep red when Harry announced, “I guess a Malfoy wasn’t good enough for Meritisa Potter; no, she much rather wanted a Longbottom,” in a very loud voice. Professor Prepara defused the situation by telling Harry to quiet down and threatening to take away house points from Gryffindor for disruptive behavior.

“You better watch it, Potter,” Malfoy hissed at him, furious, after class.

“I’m sorry, it’s beneath me to speak to Malfoys,” Harry replied pleasantly, breezing by him (although he kept his wand ready in case any curses came hurling at his back). **Life couldn’t get better**, he thought. Learning about his family, getting the best of Malfoy - this year was shaping up to make up for all the other ones combined.

Of course all good things must come to an end, and Harry’s good thing ended sooner than he’d expected. Less than a week later, a student interrupted his Potions class to say that Dumbledore needed to see Harry right away. Snape snarled and dismissed him, muttering something about making up the missed assignment during Quidditch practice, but Harry was too worried to care. The year had been quiet so far, but he knew that Voldemort was gathering strength, and dread settled into
his stomach. Whatever it was, it could only be bad news.

**Please don’t let Remus be dead**, he prayed silently as he walked toward the Headmaster’s office, **or Mrs. Weasley, or Mr. Weasley, or Moody or Tonks, or...** the gargoyle jumped aside before he even had a chance to speak the password, and he took the stairs two at a time, not waiting for them to begin moving. “Professor Dumbledore?” he called, anxiety evident in his tone as he flew through the door…

And stopped in his tracks. Standing next to the Headmaster, looking resplendent in Slytherin green, was Lucius Malfoy. “Hello, Mr. Potter,” he said silkily. Harry crossed his arms and chose not to reply.

“You wanted to see me, Headmaster?” he said pointedly.

“Actually, it is Mr. Malfoy who requested your presence, Harry. I’m afraid he has some rather unsettling news.” There was no sign of twinkle in his blue eyes. Lucius, on the other hand, smiled widely.

“Mr. Potter,” he began, “Have you ever heard of the practice of arranged marriages?”

“Of course,” Harry replied, glad now that Hermione knew everything and wasn’t afraid to share it. “But they went out of fashion more than a century ago.”

Lucius nodded, but his smile did not dim. “Out of fashion and out of law are two different things, Mr. Potter.” He strode forward, his cloak billowing out behind him. “It seems that your family has done my family a great injustice, Mr. Potter.”

Fear made Harry’s eyes go wide, and his ears began to ring. It felt like he couldn’t catch his breath. “W-what do you mean?” he asked, unable to keep his voice from catching.

Lucius Malfoy’s smile grew positively predatory. “It seems that Meritisa Potter broke an arrangement of marriage with Adramelech Malfoy. He is a direct ancestor of mine, and she of you. The Potters owe the Malfoys one bride, Mr. Potter, and I have come to ensure that debt is repaid.”

“B-but - But first of all I’m not a girl, and second of all, that was 1809!” Harry exclaimed.

“Oh neither of those things is of any consequence, really. Same-sex marriages have been legal since the Middle Ages in the Wizarding world. And law is law, regardless of time. You owe me a marriage, and I have come to collect.”

Harry’s knees felt weak. “You want me to marry you?” he gasped.
Lucius sneered. “Don’t be ridiculous, boy. I’m already married. My son, however, is in need of a
good wife…” he let the sentence sink in. Harry’s eyes went even wider. **Draco?** He thought,
horrified. **He’s going to make me marry Draco?**

“Can he- can he do this, sir?” He asked Dumbledore desperately, praying that he’d say no.
Dumbledore could barely meet his gaze.

“I’m afraid so, Harry,” he said softly. Harry felt tears build up in his eyes. He was aware of his hands
shaking, his breath tearing in and out of him. All the Gryffindor courage he’d shown so many times
in the past left him, and he fled.

By the time he reached the Gryffindor tower, Harry was full-out crying. Hermione and Ron were
waiting for him in the common room. “Good lord, Harry, what happened?” the bushy-haired girl
exclaimed upon seeing him.

Sobbing and gasping, Harry told them the whole story, finishing up with a hysterical, “He’s going to
kill me! He’s going to marry me off to Draco, and then they’re all going to march me straight to You-
Know-Who and have a picnic lunch while I’m tortured to death!” He broke into fresh wails.

“There’s got to be a way out of it,” Ron said desperately, but Harry shook his head.

“Not even Dumbledore can stop him!” Harry replied.

Hermione harrumphed. “I’ll find a way,” she said determinedly, standing up. “Ron, why don’t you
take Harry down to the kitchens for some chocolate. I’ll be in the library.” Her face set, she marched
out of the room.

Harry and Ron were only on their second cup of hot chocolate when Hermione appeared at the
kitchen door, the Registry in her hand. “I’ve found a loophole,” she announced immediately,
plunking the book down on the table. “The repayment of a marital covenant is null and void if
another party has a prior claim on the family in question.” Harry and Ron just looked at her, and she
rolled her eyes. “Honestly! What it means is, if another marriage arrangement was broken, and it
happened before Meritisa Potter’s, then you have a prior obligation to someone else, and Malfoy
can’t claim you.”

“I don’t want to marry anyone,” Harry objected.

Hermione sighed. “I know, Harry, but with the way the Ministry is right now - they’d love to marry
you off and get rid of you, even if they have to use some obscure law to do it. And you can’t hide
forever, you’re too important. You need to get an education and you need to be a part of the Order.
So you’re going to have to marry somebody. Let’s just hope it’s someone good.”
“Hey, it could be Cho, Harry, didja think of that?” Ron added, trying to encourage his friend. Even though Harry didn’t particularly feel like being cheered up, the idea of marrying Cho Chang was appealing.

“What if there aren’t any prior obligations?” he asked anxiously as Hermione began flipping through the Potter pages.

“Harry, this kind of thing was happening all the time back then. I’m sure there is one.” She went back to flipping. Half an hour later, however, she had gone through the entire list of Potters, as far back as it went, and couldn’t find a single severed marital arrangement prior to the Potter-Malfoy one. Harry moaned, wrapping his arms around his chest. He was doomed. “Wait,” Hermione cried suddenly. “Of course! How could I be so short-sighted?” She pulled out her wand. “Search ‘Potter’ and ‘Engagements’,” she told the book.

“What is it Hermione?” Ron asked, patting Harry’s shoulder in sympathy.

“I forgot that they list broken engagements in the woman’s family tree - only if she actually married would she end up in the man’s. There’s a whole set of Potter marriages that we haven’t even looked at yet.” Harry held his breath, daring to hope, as the search completed. “17 matches found,” Hermione announced, “And yes! Look at that, there’s one for 1805!” She eagerly flipped the page, running her finger along it as she scanned. Then she suddenly deflated.

“For god’s sake, woman, what is it?” Ron snapped. “It’s not because they died or something, is it?”

“No,” Hermione replied, her voice catching oddly. “No, it’s exactly the situation we were looking for. Josephus Potter was engaged, but broke off the engagement. It’s just that - ”

“Broke off the engagement to whom? Who was the girl?” Harry interrupted, nearly tearing his hair out in frustration.

“Well,” Hermione replied, looking frightened and apologetic, “Well…” she couldn’t say it. Wordlessly, she handed over the book. Harry took it, scanned the page… and fainted dead away.


There in black and white on the page, was the name of the girl to whom Josephus Potter had been engaged, and with whom he had broken his pact in 1805:

Heretica Snape.
Sirius Black was adjusting rather well to his new status as Hogwarts ghost. Nearly-Headless Nick had immediately taken the former Gryffindor under his wing, and once he’d figured out the ins and outs of ghost-hood and gotten over his initial squeamishness about flying through solid rock and people and such, he’d found that it wasn’t such a bad existence, after all - he could stay connected with Remus, keep an eye on Harry, and torment Snivellus Snape all at the same time. It was as good as living; hell, it was better than Azkaban!

**Mind you, everything is better than Azkaban,** he thought as he glided along the corridor. He was heading toward the Gryffindor tower to say goodnight to Harry when he thought he heard a noise coming from the kitchens. It was a thump that sounded suspiciously like someone falling over.

He whooshed through the kitchen portrait, nodding to the odd house elf, and turned the corner to find Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger leaning over a very pale, unconscious Harry Potter. “Merlin!” he exclaimed, worry spreading through him like a poison. “What happened?”

Hermione looked up and smiled in relief. “Oh, Sirius, thank goodness you’ve come,” she exclaimed. “I can explain everything…”

Ten minutes later, Ron, Hermione, a revived Harry Potter, and the ghost of Sirius Black were ensconced in Albus Dumbledore’s office. Having explained the situation to the Headmaster, they were now impatiently awaiting the arrival of the last invitee to their impromptu meeting.

He billowed in presently, black robes circling him like a whirlwind. Severus Snape. “Headmaster,” he hissed. “I trust there is a reason for disrupting me at such a late hour. I have precious little time to spare these days, I might remind you.”

Dumbledore stood, twinkling. “Severus,” he said pleasantly, as if the other man hadn’t spoken, “Do have a seat. Would you like some tea?”

“I would like an explanation of what was so urgent that it could not wait until dinner time to be discussed,” Severus replied, although he did sit, having learned that it was pointless not to - Dumbledore, he knew, would simply keep insisting.

“Yes, of course,” Dumbledore replied, steepling his fingers. “You have heard, of course, of Lucius Malfoy’s claim on Mr. Potter?”

“Serves him right for opening his big mouth,” Severus replied, earning a glare from Sirius Black.
“Now you wait a goddamned minute, Snivellus,” the dead man began, but Severus just sneered.

“I don’t take orders from ghosts,” he said.

Albus held up his hands for order. “Severus, you know what will happen to Mr. Potter if this marriage goes through.”

Severus sighed, then acquiesced. “Yes,” he answered. “Malfoy’s going to bring his prize to our Master and Potter will be killed. I’ve been working on delay tactics, but it’s difficult - I can’t appear too pushy or Lucius will get suspicious.”

Albus waved his explanation away. “As it turns out, that won’t be necessary, Severus. Ms. Granger here has been most industrious in researching Wizarding marriage laws, and has found a loophole. Mr. Malfoy will not be able to claim Mr. Potter in marriage if another person has a prior claim on the Potter line.”

“And such a person, no doubt, exists, or we would not be having this conversation.”

“Josephus Potter broke off an engagement in 1805, to one Miss Heretica Snape.” Snape’s face paled at Albus’s words, and he shook his head, scowling. “Please, Severus, I realize that this is not what you expected…” the older man began.

“No.” Severus surprised the whole room with his vehemence. “No! You have asked me to sacrifice my friendships and betray my fellow Slytherins, and I have done that. You have asked me to sacrifice my career as a Potions master to teach your imbecilic children, and I have done that. You have asked me to risk my life to be your spy, and I have done that! You *cannot* ask me to do this!” Agitated, Snape flew to his feet and was out the door before anyone had a chance to react. A heavy silence filled the room. Finally, Sirius stirred.

“That bastard!” he exclaimed. “That selfish bastard!” he floated out the door.

“Sirius, no!” Albus called, but it was too late - the ghost was gone. He sighed, feeling every bit his age as he glanced down at the three youngsters left in the room.

“You will talk to him, won’t you, professor?” Hermione asked timidly.

“You’ll make him do the right thing,” Ron stated, trying to sound confident.

Albus smiled sadly. “Alas, that is one thing I cannot do, Mr. Weasley. Severus is right - I have no right to force this on him, any more than Lucius has the right to force this on Harry. But Severus is a noble man; I’m sure he’ll do the right thing in the end.” Even as he spoke, however, his eyes belied his fear - Severus Snape was a noble man, true, but he was his own man, and this might just be the
limit of his loyalty.

“Severus Snape, you come out and face me like a man!” Sirius shrieked. He had followed the Potions master down to the dungeon, but, being a Gryffindor, he was unable to enter Slytherin territory, and was forced to hover outside the Potions classroom doors, hollering his best, cursing the fact that he no longer had solid fists to pound against the oak doors. “Get out here, you coward!”

“Sirius Black,” a silky voice proclaimed softly, “Why are you disturbing my Head of House?” Black turned to see the Bloody Baron gliding up to him, his face grim and disapproving.

“Your Head of House is a spineless bastard who only ever thinks of himself!” Sirius spat. “He owes Harry, he owes him this! You go in there and tell him to get his skinny ass out here!”

The Baron’s eyes narrowed. “I think not,” he began. “I suggest that you leave, Mr. Black, before I am forced to remove you.”

Black whirled on him, enraged. “You might be able to intimidate Peeves with that sneer, but I know full well that you can’t hurt me…” he trailed off with a choked cry as the Baron drifted closer and whispered the words of a spell. Suddenly he was cold…so cold… “Ghosts aren’t supposed to f-feel anything,” he ground out between chattering teeth. It was unreal, the sensation, and the world around him was going grey, getting blacker, “Please, don’t!” he said, fear deadening him. It was worse than the veil - it was worse than dying, and what could be worse than dying…

“That’s enough, Baron,” Snape’s voice called out firmly, and all of a sudden the grey cold was receding, and Sirius felt sensation return to him - as much sensation as he had as a spirit, at any rate - as the Baron drifted away from his side. He hung numbly in the air as the Slytherin ghost bowed to his Head of House and vanished. Severus turned to him, his face hard. “I expected that you would at least know better than to cross the Bloody Baron, even if you know little else,” he said derisively.

Black shrugged, regaining his senses and floating down so he could be at eye level with the Potions master. “I know that if you don’t help him, Harry is a dead man,” he replied.

Severus sneered. “And if I do…help him - do you really think that would protect him?”

“Well, of course,” Sirius began, a bit uncertainly. Snape cut him off with the wave of one hand.

“You are a fool!” he exclaimed. “You think that were I to agree to this marriage, Malfoy would magically disappear, and everything would be well. Your Gryffindor optimism has made you - and everyone around you, I might add - completely incapable of being realistic.” He began to pace about the corridor. “Let me tell you exactly what would happen if I were to step forward with a prior claim on Harry Potter. One, I would make an enemy of Malfoy, upset the current hierarchy of Death Eaters, call attention to myself and possibly get murdered over in-group politics. Two, I would be expected, just as Malfoy plans to do, to deliver Potter to the Dark Lord, and if I failed to that, I would
be killed. Slowly and painfully, I might add. Three, either way, I am dead, which leaves Malfoy in the clear to bring his claim forward once again, leaving Harry Potter dead as doornails before his seventeenth birthday, and no one in any better a position than they are now.”

“So you’d rather let Harry die than take the chance of doing anything else.” Black’s voice was hostile and accusing, to make up for the growing dread he felt.

“You imbecile! Potter is dead no matter what I do. If I keep quiet, I at least am alive.”

“You’d sacrifice him to save your own neck. How typically Slytherin.”

“My neck - or rather, the mind that is stored in the head attached to my neck - has saved more lives in this war than I can recall, Black. And if I keep alive, I can continue to do so, as well as providing the Order with important information about the Dark Lord’s activities. It turns out that my being alive is of utmost importance to the Order’s success.” Severus smiled smugly.

“So is Harry’s life, Snape.” Black replied. “Or had you forgotten the prophesy? Only one can live - if Harry dies, there’s nothing that you or I or Albus or anyone can do to stop Voldemort. All your spying will be nothing but prolonging our inevitable defeat. Only Harry can defeat him, and he needs to stay alive until he’s strong enough to do that! And if Malfoy marries Harry, he’s a dead man!” Black stabbed his finger in the air to make his point, staring intensely at the other man. Severus was unusually quiet.

“Yes, there is that to consider,” the Potions master replied after a moment. His face was surprisingly open for a moment, and Black was shocked to see the trapped look on his face. Then Snape’s expression shuttered and he turned away. “Good evening, Black. I trust you don’t require the Baron to show you back to Gryffindor tower.” He vanished back into his classroom, leaving the ghost alone in the empty hallway.

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Breakfast the next morning was, quite possibly, the worst experience of Harry’s life. It was worse than when everyone suspected him of being the heir of Slytherin. It was even worse than when Sirius died (especially since Sirius’s ghost had appeared only a few days later, which kind of took the sting out of the death itself). Anyway, it was bad. For one thing, since it was a secret, the whole school knew that Lucius Malfoy had shown up to claim Harry as his son’s bride. The Ravenclaw table was looking at him a bit snootily, as if disappointed that he’d become embroiled in such an… unintellectual scandal. The Hufflepuff table looked at him a bit in excitement - a few of the younger ones had even dared to congratulate him on his upcoming nuptials, blithely ignoring to whom he was betrothed. His Gryffindor classmates were either plotting Malfoy’s death, looking at him horrorstruck, or mourning his death. All in all, not a welcoming atmosphere.

Of course, what capped it all off was the Slytherin table - where uproarious laughter was emanating, punctuated by fits of humming or whistling “here comes the bride” and toasts to Malfoy’s “good catch - he’ll make a fine little wifey!” Harry’s cheeks flushed bright red, as did most of the Gryffindors’. Ron’s fists were already clenched and he could even see tightness in Hermione’s jaw. Poor Neville was nearly in tears from the tension.
All in all, Harry’s good year was over. He groaned, pushing his uneaten breakfast away. “You have to eat,” Hermione said, her face sympathetic.

“Yes, you have to eat,” Draco Malfoy mimicked. He’d snuck up close to the table without them realizing it. “I wouldn’t want you fainting on our wedding day.” He leaned in close, whispering in the other boy’s ear. “I’ve asked father to buy you a white dress, because I know you’re a virgin.” He made kissing noises as he backed away.

“Sod off, Malfoy!” Ron hollered, jumping to his feet. Seamus and Dean weren’t far behind, and even Neville stood up. “You stay away from him or you’ll have us to deal with!”

Malfoy just regarded him coolly, one eyebrow raised. “You, Weasley? What are you going to do, make yourself eat slugs again?” Ron went the deepest shade of purple he got and pulled out his wand.

“Ten points from Gryffindor,” hissed a new voice, and Harry looked up from where he’d been contemplating the table to see that Snape had arrived on the scene, followed closely by Professor McGonagall, “For threatening another student.”

“Put your wand down, Mr. Weasley,” McGonagall emphasized. Reluctantly, Ron did so, and with the two teachers present, the situation defused. Malfoy and his Slytherins slinked off, smirking unpleasantly. Satisfied that things had calmed down, the professors turned toward the Head Table.

“Professor Snape?” Hermione called. Severus turned, barely checking his impatience. A credit to her house, the bushy-haired girl continued under his fierce stare. “I was wondering if you’d put any more thought toward that extra work I did.”

Snape’s eyes flicked to Harry, who looked at him with a held breath. He seemed to consider the boy for a moment before looking back at the young woman. “This is hardly the place or time for such a discussion,” he replied derisively, and continued on his way.

Harry slumped in his chair. “He’s not going to do it,” he whispered.

“He might, just,” Hermione whispered back, but her smile held very little hope in it, and her eyes gave her away.

Harry was doomed.

Hermione and Ron insisted on accompanying Harry to Dumbledore’s office when he was called out of Transfigurations. They spoke the password, “sugar quills” with one voice, and marched determinedly up the stairs. “Time to find out I’m going to die,” Harry murmured as he entered the
Dumbledore was waiting for them with three steaming cups of tea. “I suspected Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger might wish to accompany you,” he explained.

“I take it Snape’s decided, then?” Harry asked straight away.

“Professor Snape, Harry,” Dumbledore corrected automatically, unwrapping a candy. “And yes, apparently he has.” The Headmaster’s eyes were somber.

Harry swallowed and looked away. “I guess he said no, then,” he whispered around the lump in his throat.

“I have no idea, my boy,” Dumbledore’s response surprised the young man. Harry looked up at him, eyes wide. “He wouldn’t tell me. He only said that he wished me to arrange for your presence in my office at this time…ah, here he is now, I suppose we’ll know in a moment!”

There was a grating noise as the stairs rolled up, and then Severus Snape, looking pale and severe, stepped through the door. Dumbledore poured another cup of tea and gestured for the man to sit down. The Potions master ignored both. He paced up and down in front of the hearth for a moment, then came to a stop before the Headmaster’s desk. “I have reached a decision,” he announced. “I will exercise my right to claim Harry Potter as my spouse.” He nodded sharply at Albus, then turned and disappeared out the door before anything else could be said.

There was a moment of silence. Then Albus clapped his hands. “Excellent!” he cried. “I’ll make all the necessary arrangements.” He beamed at the children and waved them away with his hands. “All right, then, children, back to class with you,” he continued, ushering them out the door.

They found themselves standing in the hallway, staring at each other with identical dumbfounded expressions on their faces. “Well,” Ron said at last.

“I guess that’s that,” Hermione added.

Harry made a face. “I guess so,” he replied. The other two smiled at him sympathetically.

“It’s going to be all right now, Harry, you’ll see,” Hermione said, touching his arm.

Ron nodded. “Yeah, mate, better a Snape than a Malfoy!” he added, trying his best to be positive. Harry looked green.

“Right, well, we should get back to Transfigurations or McGonagall will take house points,” he
mumbled. He started walking, missing the worried look that passed between his closest friends. Ron might think that Snape was the better of the two, but Harry’d been in his pensive. He knew Snape hated his father; he knew without a doubt that Snape hated him too. And even though logically he knew that Snape wouldn’t turn him over to Voldemort right away, he wasn’t that confident that being Snape’s husband was going to be less hellish than being slowly killed by a dark lord.

In fact, knowing Snape, it would probably be worse.
The First Dance

Albus made the announcement the next morning. His eyes at full twinkle, he banged his fork on his goblet until he had everyone’s attention, and then shouted, “I have marvelous news!” The Great Hall grew silent. “It is my pleasure to announce that Hogwarts will be hosting a wedding. One of our sixth year students, Mr. Harry Potter, is getting married!” He waited, clearly allowing time for applause, but everyone was too stunned to clap, except for a couple of Hufflepuff first years who were quickly hushed up. Dumbledore didn’t seem at all phased by the lack of response. “The wedding will be held this coming Wednesday, here in the Great Hall, at 8 p.m., reception to follow. Dress robes are required. Thank you, that is all!” He sat down again and dug into his food as if oblivious to the humming of voices that grew up around him.

Harry looked down at the table, not wanting to see anyone’s faces. In order to protect both Snape and Harry, they had all agreed to act as if he was still getting married to Malfoy. Therefore, the looks that he was getting were ones of horror and sympathy, even from the teachers - except of course the Slytherin table, which was hollering in joy and singing the wedding song as loudly as they could.

“Only two days of freedom, mate, that’s poor luck,” Ron commented.

Hermione nodded. “It makes sense, though. Look at Draco - he knows something’s not right. How long before he tells his father and the little ruse is up? He can’t put it off for too long or Malfoy will come after Snape.”

“He’ll come anyway,” Harry replied darkly. “Ever since he got out of Azkaban last summer, he’s been itching to make his way back into Voldemort’s good graces. Sirius told me. He won’t let this chance slip by him that easily.” He let his eyes drift up to the Head Table, where he inadvertently met Severus’s own. Before he looked away, however, he had time to realize that Snape looked just as worried as he felt. **We’re nowhere near out of this,** he thought.

 Lucius Malfoy did, indeed, hear about the wedding plans directly. He stormed into Albus’s offices first thing the next morning, firing off a hex at the gargoyle when it failed to jump aside fast enough. He was livid as he demanded to know what was going on. “Surely I should be involved in my own son’s wedding plans?” he yelled, leaning so close to the Headmaster that spittle sprayed from his lips onto Albus’s beard. Fawkes trilled a warning, but Albus just smiled.

“Of course, Lucius,” he replied graciously. “However, the wedding in question isn’t being planned for your son.” That brought the blond man up short.

“So Potter isn’t to be married tomorrow, then. Good.” He said abruptly, smoothing out his robes.

Albus’s smile grew. “I didn’t say that,” he replied. “Harry is, indeed, to be married tomorrow. He is not, however, marrying Draco.”

“But the Malfoy family has a claim on him!” Lucius cried, his face beginning to redden with rage.

Albus reached over and patted the other man’s hand endearingly. “That is true. However, another family has stepped forward with a prior claim.” He twinkled his very best twinkle, watching with great amusement as Malfoy’s eyes bulged out.

“Who?” the other man croaked out.
Albus thought his face might crack, so wide did his smile get. “Well, Mr. Malfoy, you’ll find out tomorrow,” he replied, not so subtly steering the other man toward the door. “You are, of course, invited to the ceremony!”

The wedding was, to no one’s surprise, a grand affair. The house elves must have been working overtime to get the decorations done, but the result was fantastic: sparkling silver bows and ribbons adorned the walls, bouquets of bright wild flowers covered the tables, and a large archway made up of vines twined around wooden carved hearts had been placed at the end of the aisle that separated the four tables.

Albus stood underneath the arch, twinkling merrily, his robes flashing silver and gold whenever they caught the light. He had spelled the ceiling to reflect a cloudless summer day instead of the dismal rain that had been falling for the past week, and was in great spirits. “Friends and loved ones,” he called, holding up his hands for quiet. “We are gathered here today to witness the binding of two of our own. May this day bring the love, light, and joy that both so richly deserve.”

He paused as cries of “hear, hear!” came from the Hufflepuff table. Everyone else was too curious, shocked, or unbelieving to speak. Harry Potter was marrying… someone (by that time, the whole school knew that Draco was not the husband-to-be, since it was supposed to be a secret). There was great speculation regarding who that someone was, and try as though they had, no student, nor staff member, had been able to find out the identity of the mysterious groom. Albus grinned. Well, they’d know soon enough.

“Friends, please join me in witnessing the binding of Harry James Potter…” he paused for effect, looking around the room. The Slytherins were watching him intently. Lucius Malfoy sat with his son, dintical expressions of malice on both of their faces. The Hufflepuffs were on the edge of their seats with excitement, and the Gryffindors looked as though they were braced for battle. Fiercely loyal, those Gryffindors. The Ravenclaws of course were not really paying attention; most of them had books open underneath the table. He shook himself from his reverie as he realized that the whole room was still waiting for him to finish his sentence. “Right,” he said out loud, shaking his head. “Where was I? Ah, yes… witness the binding of Harry James Potter… and Severus Eracius Snape.”

Harry stood off to the right, the traditional place of the bride, as Dumbledore began the ceremony. To say that he was nervous would have been an understatement. He’d already thrown up twice, Ron sitting outside the stall and asking him repeatedly if he was “okay in there, mate?” while he lost his dinner, and then subsequently the glass of water he’d drunk to clear out the taste of his own vomit. He’d nearly been late because he’d insisted on going back to the dorm to brush his teeth (again). If wizard marriages were anything like muggle marriages, he was going to have to *kiss* Snape. He shuddered. **Gods, why does this stuff always happen to me?** He thought for the umpteenth time. He cast a glance around the room, wishing desperately that he could be just another one of the students, witnessing some incredible going-on instead of participating in it. “Right, where was I?” Dumbledore was saying, still in his formal tone of voice. Harry looked over his shoulder at Ron and Hermione, his official witnesses, who were hanging back slightly and whispering amongst themselves. They looked up when they realized his eyes were on them, and smiled awkwardly. “Witness the binding of Harry James Potter,” Dumbledore was saying. **Okay, here we go,** Harry thought, getting ready to walk out into the hall, like the Headmaster had told him to. “And Severus Eracius Snape.”

The hall exploded. There was such a racket that Harry froze in his steps,
Severus rubbed his temple, willing the headache that had assaulted him shortly after he’d announced his willingness to engage in this particular bit of foolishness to go away. He really should have taken a pain potion, he supposed, but he wanted to have his mind as clear as possible during the next few hours, just in case someone tried to hex him. It was 50/50 whether the inevitable curse came from Gryffindor or Slytherin, he figured; both would hate him equally, for different reasons.

Albus was, of course, drawing things out as usual. He supposed the Headmaster was only trying to get the Ravenclaws’ attention, but it was pissing the Slytherins off; they were impatient enough as it was. Finally, the old man got around to announcing their names. “Harry James Potter,” he said, and Severus snorted, because of course James would figure into this somehow, and then Albus moved on to “and Severus Eracius Snape.”

The hall erupted; a great roar rose from the Gryffindor table, echoed by the Slytherins. Snape lifted his chin and walked calmly into the room from the left side. Potter was, of course, frozen to the spot, looking for all the world like the foolish child he was. Even the Ravenclaws were paying attention now, he thought, and it gave him a grim sense of pleasure to know that no matter where he went, he still captured people’s attention.

“This is an outrage!” Minerva McGonagall was storming up to Albus, her face red, her lips pressed into a thin line. “He cannot marry a student!” Severus met her furious gaze calmly.

“This union was arranged by Albus,” he pointed out in his best teacher-voice, “and Albus has the authority to override school policy.”

Minerva sputtered, “But, but, but - Severus this is completely inappropriate!”

“I couldn’t agree more, Professor,” a new voice, silky soft, added. Severus half-turned to see Lucius Malfoy standing just a little too close behind him. “I should very much like an explanation.”

Minerva’s anger turned to disgust as she regarded the blond man. “Perhaps I spoke in haste,” she bit off, staring him down. “On second thought, congratulations, Severus. Best wishes to you and yours.” She drew the Potions master into a firm, meaningful hug, which he returned awkwardly, surprised.

“Yes, yes, indeed,” Albus murmured. “However, we haven’t quite gotten to that point, have we?” He turned to the right, and gestured at the Boy-Who-Lived. “Come on now, Harry, you’ve missed your cue. Mr. Malfoy, unless you plan to act as a witness to Severus’s binding, I suggest you sit down.”

The wedding went fairly smoothly after that, and within the hour, Severus had a husband. **Harry-Bloody-Potter, ** he groaned internally, regarding the young man who sat nervously beside him. They had both been forced to dance far more than either of them appreciated, and to top it all off, his new husband kept staring at him as if he were going to turn into a bat at any moment. “For crying out loud, Potter,” Severus finally said, “I’m not going to do anything. Quit staring at me.”

“It’s Snape, now, sir,” Potter replied impudently. “And I was wondering…”

“What?” His headache was raging now, and Severus could not wait for this stupid reception to be over so he could quaff something strong and mind-numbing and go to sleep.
Harry looked discomfited. “Well, er… it’s just that Hermione has been doing some reading up on arranged marriages, and she said that new brides had to provide proof that the marriage was consummated - otherwise it could be annulled according to wizarding law.”

“I’m aware of that,” Severus snapped. This was not a conversation he wished to have right now. Potter - Snape, whatever - did not seem to take the hint.

“Well, are we?” he asked.

“Are we what?”

“Going to, you know, consummate it?” Severus sighed. How the hell was he supposed to answer that question? Regardless of what else Harry might have done, he was still a child in Snape’s eyes - only sixteen, too young to be having sex with an old man like himself, even if he was of the age of legal consent. Add to that the fact that Harry was a student, and a Gryffindor, and a goddamn Potter, and it wasn’t difficult to see that Severus had no interest whatsoever in the boy… but he was right. Without proof of consummation, Malfoy could petition to have the marriage annulled. Snape sighed again, looking over at the boy who was patiently awaiting an answer to his question.

“Don’t worry, Potter, I have no intention of forcing myself on your delicate sensibilities. I will think of something.”

Potter flushed. “I wouldn’t call them delicate,” he replied, looking down.

Now that was intriguing. Up until this point, of course, Severus had assumed that the Boy-Who-Lived was a virgin, but perhaps he had been mistaken. “May I have this dance?” A silken voice said just then, interrupting his thoughts. He looked up and wished again that he were anywhere but here. Lucius.

“Of course,” he replied smoothly, taking the proffered hand and letting Malfoy lead him out onto the floor. “Might as well get it over with, hmmm?” Lucius’s responding smile was positively feral.

“So what is it that you think you’re doing, Snape?” Malfoy asked as he spun the other man about the room. Severus smiled, trying to ignore the death-grip the other man had on his hip.

“Exactly what you intended to do. You should have done your research more thoroughly, Lucius. I was intrigued when you announced your intent to marry Draco to Potter, and for fun I had a go at the Wizarding Registry. Imagine my surprise to find out that my family had a prior claim on the boy!”

“How Slytherin of you,” Lucius still smiled, but his teeth were clenched, and he was hissing.

“Did you really think I didn’t know, Severus? Dumbledore isn’t the only one with spies. Draco tells me that you get Poppy Pomfrey to heal you when you return from Dark Revels. I started wondering why she would keep her mouth shut time and time again, when she must have discovered the dark mark by now. And then I realized, she hadn’t. She isn’t the type to. She would have told Dumbledore every detail of your injuries. The thing of it was, Dumbledore didn’t care about how you received them; no, he wasn’t surprised at all, was he? Because he already knew. Because you’ve been working for him.” Lucius’s eyes bore into the Potions master’s. “You can deny it if you like, Severus, but I know the truth. I know, because your heart is beating far too fast for me to be mistaken.”

Severus, lost in his racing thoughts, belatedly realized that Lucius had placed on thin hand against his
chest, over his heart. He tried to jerk away, but Lucius still held him a tight grip. Severus dropped his hands from the other man’s shoulders and went for his wand.

He never got there. Lucius had his out in a flash, and before anyone even knew anything was wrong, he’d pointed it at Severus’s dark mark and shouted, "Mosmordre!" The two men disappeared.
Till Death

Harry was still looking at his feet, his face flushed red, feeling embarrassed by his question and strangely rejected by the fact that Snape obviously had no intention of having sex with him, when he heard the shout. He looked up in time to see his new spouse vanish in Lucius Malfoy’s arms. Then the Great Hall erupted in chaos once again. A few students screamed. Albus came running, wand in hand, followed by Remus Lupin. Prefects were shouting at students, faculty were calling to one another… a group of older Slytherin students had all drawn their wands and started hexing and cursing everyone in sight, from first year to faculty, adding to the confusion.

Harry stood, pulling out his wand. He had no idea where Hermione or Ron had gotten to, Albus was busy talking in hurried tones with Professor Flitwick, trying to figure out how the men had vanished through the anti-Apparition wards, and the rest of the faculty were rushing over to deal with the Slytherin problem. Harry was just going over there to add his strength when he felt something sharp poke into his back.

A wand.

He turned slowly.

Draco Malfoy stood there, grinning like the devil. “Come, my sweet,” he said graciously. “Put your wand down and come with me. We have a wedding to prepare for.”

“I’m already married,” Harry ground out, suddenly pleased that he could say that.

Draco’s smile grew. “You won’t be for long, my dear,” he replied. “Soon you’ll be a widow. An available widow.”

The blond boy’s face grew hard, and he looked uncannily like his father for a moment. “Now move.”

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He supposed Draco must have stunned him, at some point, because there was a great gaping black hole in his memory, from the time that they had left the Great Hall, to this time now, when he sat up suddenly with a groan, shaking his head to clear it. He had no idea where he was, but he could feel immediately that he was still inside Hogwarts somewhere. The place seemed eerily familiar.

“The Chamber of Secrets!” he realized with a jolt. From behind him, he heard a laugh, and Draco came into view.

“Indeed,” he replied. “You were very cooperative. I was surprised how easy it was to put you under the Imperius curse, given how much Moody had bragged about your ability to throw it off back in our fourth year. Of course, that wasn’t really Moody, but one mustn’t quibble about the details. No, don’t get up,” the Slytherin hurried on, pushing Harry down onto his back as he attempted to raise himself to his elbows. “I want you to have a nice long nap - you’re going to want to see this…”

Harry had no idea what hit him, but suddenly the world was tilting away, and he was falling, falling…

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He didn’t wake up, exactly, because as he regained awareness he knew immediately that he was dreaming. But it wasn’t a dream of the playing-Quidditch-naked variety; it was a scar-burning, Voldemort-watching dream - and right now, Voldemort was torturing somebody. Harry could hear their hoarse, involuntary screams.

Voldemort was screaming too. “Traitor!” he screeched in his odd, high-pitched voice. “You will pay for your deception.” With a sudden, sickening jolt, Harry recognized what he was watching.
He was witnessing the death of Severus Eracus Snape.

Snape lay on the ground in a heap, blood running down his chin from where he’d bitten through his lip, convulsing under the Cruciatas curse, cries tearing from his throat like wild, frightened animals. His hands were clenched into tight fists, and Harry could see blood soaking through the left arm of his crisp white shirt, the shirt that he’d worn specifically for his wedding. The Dark Mark was bleeding out, it looked like. Severus’s thrashing grew less and less violent, as if his energy was running low. His cries became whimpers.

He did not try to speak, or beg for his life, only raised his bloodshot eyes up and stared straight at Harry. Harry’s mouth went dry. “Professor,” he cried, and Snape’s eyes widened, as though he could hear him.

“Help me,” Severus whispered hoarsely. The Death Eaters laughed and cursed him again. He gasped in pain, curling into a little ball.

Harry took an involuntary step closer. “How? What do I do?” he asked. But Severus wasn’t looking at him anymore; he was looking above him.

“Help me, Sirius. Take me home,” he begged. Harry looked up and saw Sirius’s ghost floating above his head. As he watched, the ghost knelt beside the Potions master’s prone form, and began stroking back the other man’s hair. The Death Eaters appeared to take no notice, and it occurred to Harry that they couldn’t see him.

But he could… which meant that maybe Sirius could see him. “Sirius, Sirius!” he cried, running forward. His godfather looked up, startled, his face falling.

“Oh, god, not you too!” he cried, and Harry was shocked to see him nearly in tears.

“No, no!” he replied, tripping over his words. “I’m alive; I’m dreaming. Draco has me in the Chamber of Secrets. Please, Sirius, you have to go back to Hogwarts and tell Dumbledore where I am. You have to get me out of there!”

Sirius nodded, and stood. “Of course,” he replied immediately. He leaned over and touched Severus’s face one last time. “Hang on, Snape,” he said, and then vanished.

Snape began to shriek. “No, no! Don’t leave me, don’t go!” he begged, and then the Death Eaters closed in on him, forgoing curses for abuse of a more physical nature, kicking and punching at the broken body before them…

Harry experienced a horrible sucking sensation, kind of like using a port key. With a gasp, he woke up.

Severus stood. The field was empty, save his broken body, cold and pale in its tattered robes. Well, that was that, he supposed, staring down at himself. He felt a pang of regret, knowing that if he was dead, it meant that Malfoy would get Potter, which meant that Potter was dead, and therefore the Dark Lord would rule the universe. On the other hand, he no longer had to participate in that universe, and he found that he wasn’t as bothered by the chain of events as he thought he might be.

**Gave it the ol’ college try, ** he said, stepping away from his corpse. It was hard to feel bad about dying, especially after living a long, painful, lonely life and dying a torturous death. In fact, being dead was the most relaxing thing that had happened to Snape in years, and in true Slytherin style, he decided he was simply going to make the best of it.
First, he’d apologize to Albus for failing him. Then he’d spend a bit of time terrorizing people - Neville Longbottom came immediately to mind. Then maybe he’d look up Evan Rosier and find out if ghosts had sex. It had been too long since he had a really good lay, and no one had been better than Rosier.

With an almost peaceful little smile, Severus stepped over himself, and walked away from life.

Harry woke and thrashed against the arms that were holding him, screaming his godfather’s name. “It’s all right, Harry, it’s all right, I’m here!” Sirius’s worried voice came down to him, and he opened his eyes to find himself staring at (and kind of through) the Animagus’s ghost.

“Oh, thank god!” Harry nearly sobbed in relief. “Where’s Draco? What happened?”

“Draco has been dealt with,” Dumbledore replied, and Harry turned to see the old wizard sitting by his bed. “Sirius came to me as soon as he’d spoken to you, and together we went down to the Chamber of Secrets. Luckily, I had invested a little time in learning Parseltongue since your last visit, so I was able to open the room. We had to take you to the infirmary and get a potion from Madam Pomfrey to wake you up.”

By the time, Harry had recovered enough to sit up and look around the room. Students recovering from curses occupied most of the beds. “Your wedding reception will likely be one remembered for years to come,” Dumbledore said with a bit of a twinkle.

Harry chuckled. **That figured, ** he thought. **Couldn’t even have a normal wedding. Wait a minute… wedding? Snape** “Where’s Professor Snape?” he asked suddenly. If Snape were dead, then Malfoy could claim him anyway… and, he privately admitted, he had been quite upset to see Snape suffering because of him.

The room became tense and quiet. “We haven’t heard anything,” Albus finally replied, a note of sorrow in his voice.

“They’ll kill him, if they haven’t already,” Harry said querulously.

Sirius nodded. “He was very close,” he confirmed. “That was why he was able to see me.”

Dumbledore’s face fell, and Harry realized that the other man was crying softly.

“My dear boy,” the old man whispered. “My dear, dear boy.”

Harry turned to Sirius. “He could see you.” He stated. Sirius nodded. “So maybe you can help him,” the young man continued.

Sirius looked doubtful. “Harry, I’m a ghost. I don’t see what I could do.”

“You could try,” Harry pushed.

Sirius sighed. “All right, I’ll try. I don’t think I’m the best person for this, but I’ll see what I can do.” He popped out of sight as Harry struggled to maintain a little hope.

“It’ll be all right, sir, you’ll see,” he whispered, patting Dumbledore’s hand awkwardly. After a moment, the old man lifted his head and managed a smile. “It’ll be all right, it’s got to be.” Harry felt his own tears begin to overwhelm him, and didn’t protest when the Headmaster slid up beside him, taking the boy into his arms.
Severus was less than impressed with death thus far. He’d managed to walk around in a couple of very large circles, but he kept ending up in the graveyard where his dead body lay. All he wanted to do was get back to Hogwarts. He’d tried Apparating there, which was totally useless, since dead people couldn’t Apparate. He’d tried concentrating really hard on his destination, thinking he might will himself there, but that hadn’t worked. So he’d given up and started walking, but no matter how far he walked, or how straight he went, he always ended up in the same place - right back where you started. “God damn it!” he shouted, feeling doubly frustrated because he couldn’t even throw anything to relieve his frustration.

“It’s because you’re not quite dead yet,” a voice said behind him, and he whirled around to come face to face with Sirius Black.

“What are you talking about?” Severus spat. “Of course I’m dead.” He gestured impatiently at his prone form.

Sirius shook his head. “No, your body is dead, but the magic isn’t. It takes a while for the magic to die - and you must have a lot of magic hidden underneath that snarkiness, Snape, because you’ve hung on for almost two hours. Either that or you just really want to live.” He met the other man’s eyes firmly.

Snape was the first to look away. “I want nothing more than to be dead, good and dead, and left alone,” he replied bitterly.

“Well, you’re going to have to wait, then,” Sirius replied. “Care for some company?” He sat down on the grass, reaching out to smooth a strand of hair away from the corporeal-Severus’s face.

“Don’t touch me,” Severus groused.


“It’s my body,” Snape sat down grumpily. Much though he was loath to admit it, he was glad for Black’s presence, simply because he had no idea how to go about being dead.

“Nope. If you really want to be dead, you’re going to have to give up your attachment to the body. It’s one of the things keeping you here.” The Potions master harrumphed but did not reply. Sirius kept stroking the corpse’s hair. “Tell me something, Severus,” he said after a moment. “Are you going to miss making potions?”

“Of course,” Severus replied immediately, startling himself with his honesty. “It was the only thing worth living for.”

“The only thing?” Sirius was surprised. Snape turned and fixed him in a glare, captivating him with those obsidian eyes.

“The *only* thing,” he confirmed. Silence prevailed again, for a time.

“Were you very lonely, when you were alive?” Sirius asked finally.

“Why do you care?” Severus replied. Sirius said nothing, just looked at the other man and waited. After a moment Severus sighed, and replied, “Yes. Yes, I was lonely. The only person I could call a friend was Albus, and he was sending me out to risk my life day in and day out, making all sorts of
demands of me that were impossible to meet, and jovially expecting me to meet them. It wasn’t a relaxing friendship.”

“Yeah, I could see that. You know, maybe if you had stayed alive, you would have found what you were looking for.” Snape laughed.

“Someone who respected me for who I was, not what I could do for them? Someone who could see past the snarky bastard on the outside to the slightly-less-snarky bastard within - and who could love me in spite of my cruelty? Who forgave me for the horrible things I’ve done? That person doesn’t exist, Black. Believe me, I’ve been looking.”

“Maybe you just haven’t been looking in the right places,” Black replied.

Severus narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, Black?” he demanded.

“Well, there are lots of people who respect your potions skills just because you are skillful, not because you can make anything in particular for them. And there are lots of people who find your sarcasm refreshing rather than insulting. And I know there are people who can empathize with where you’ve been and what your life has led you to do.”

“Name one.”

“Harry.” Severus stilled, his face hardening.

“I should have known,” he said coldly, turning away. “Here I thought, perhaps, that in death you and I could have a civil conversation. I thought that I might finally be free from my entanglements in everybody else’s needs, in all the schemes and plots and strategies that I have been forced to put ahead of my own happiness for my entire life. But do I get peace in death? No, of course not! Instead I get Sirius Black, lecturing me on how I shouldn’t have died, because it places precious Harry-Fucking-Potter at risk. God damn you, Black! God damn you to hell!” He stood and began walking briskly away.

“I’ve already been there,” Sirius replied, floating along beside the other man. “And so have you.” He pushed himself ahead of Severus, reaching out to stop Snape’s movements.

“Get your hand off of me, mutt,” Severus growled.

“One moment, Snape. Listen to me for one moment, and then I promise I’ll leave you alone. I’ll even tell you how to get out of here.” At this, the Slytherin stopped trying to get around the other man and stilled.

“Go on, then,” he replied.

“You’ve been to Hell. You’ve been sorely used. You know that if you live, you will continue to be a pawn in this stupid war. But that doesn’t mean you can’t find some measure of happiness, Severus. Look, Harry is a pawn too - his whole life has been ruled by some stupid prophecy he didn’t even know about until last year. He’s lost anyone that ever could have loved him. He’s facing all the fears and confusion and insecurity of a sixteen year old, plus the added burden of literally having to save the damn world! He needs you.” Sirius cut off the protest Snape was going to make with an angry hand. “And you need him too. Harry respects you. In time I have no doubt he could learn to appreciate you - he just needs to get to know you. I know you’re lonely, Snape. Imagine, having someone young and beautiful there to hold you every night… imagine never having to be alone again. Believe me, it’s better than being a ghost.”

Snape stared at him impassively for a long time, so long that Black began to fear that it was all for
nothing. Then, the other man’s shoulders slumped. “It’s the right thing to do, isn’t it?” he whispered. Sirius nodded, holding his breath. Severus sighed. “But it’s too late, Black. I can feel it - the magic is drifting away…” they looked at the body; sparks of white light were leeching out of it, flying off in the late night breeze.

“It’s not too late, Severus. You can get out of this place,” Sirius replied.

“How?”

Black led him back to his body. “Are you willing to live again, Severus Snape?” he asked formally. Snape nodded, a resigned expression on his face. Black smiled. Without warning, he grabbed the other ghosts arms and pushed him backwards. “Then live,” he said emphatically.

Severus stumbled, falling, and landed on top of himself. There was a strange sensation, as if he’d been caught in a spider’s web…

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He swam up to consciousness and began screaming in agony. **It hurts, Gods, it hurts,** he thought desperately. Then, thankfully, everything went black.

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Harry was still sitting, talking with Dumbledore, when Minerva McGonagall came flying into the infirmary. “They’ve found him, Albus, and he’s still alive,” she cried, breathless. Dumbledore stood up so fast that he knocked his chair over.

“Severus?” he asked, barely daring to hope.

Minerva nodded, her eyes shining. “A group of Aurors found him in a Muggle cemetery. They’ve just Apparated to the forest edge and they’re on their way in now.” Just as she finished speaking, there was a commotion in the hall, and several Aurors burst in, followed by Hagrid, who held Severus’s broken body in his arms.

“Put him over there,” Poppy Pomfrey directed, appearing out of nowhere. The Aurors crowded around him, Hagrid looming behind them, and Albus went running up to the bed to see if he was all right. Harry couldn’t see anything through everybody’s heads. “Get back, all of you!” Poppy finally shouted, threatening to hex the first person who disobeyed. Everyone took a giant step back to give the Medi-witch some room to work.

Harry caught his breath as he got his first glimpse of Severus. The man was pale and bruised, his limbs still shaking with faint tremors, the after-effects of being cursed so many times. His left arm hung uselessly at his side, dripping with blood, and the fingers of that hand looked like they’d been stepped on. Harry swallowed and looked away. Snape had undergone the worst form of torture he could imagine - and he’d done it to protect Harry. An overwhelming feeling of gratitude filled him, fear for the other man’s life following closely on its heels.

“Everything all right, there, Harry?” asked a voice in his ear, and he looked up to see Sirius floating at the edge of his bed.

“He looks terrible,” Harry whispered.

Sirius nodded gravely. “He was hurt badly.”

“He suffered that for me.”
Sirius floated closer. “Yes,” he replied, “and no, at the same time. He suffered for you, but also for the good of the light. I know it’s difficult to accept your fate sometimes, but you are the future of the wizarding world.”

“I don’t want to be,” Harry replied. “People keep getting hurt because of me.” **Or dying,** he added silently, thinking of Cedric Diggory.

“Yes, that’s true.” Sirius replied. “And I wish it wasn’t so. But it is so, and I think you need to have someone around you who understands. You know, Snape is also someone whose life has been controlled by things outside of himself. He knows quite a bit about the difficulties you face in being unable to dictate your own destiny.” Harry had nothing to say to that, so Sirius pushed on. “I know you don’t like him, Harry, but he’s a powerful wizard, and he needs you. I’m not saying you have to be there with him forever. All I’m saying is, you’re locked into this marriage, and it might do you good to accept it and try to find the good in it, if you can.”

Harry thought a moment, then nodded. “That sounded very grown up of you, Sirius,” he teased after a bit.


Harry turned back to the pale man a few beds down, watching as Poppy worked feverishly into the night. Slowly, the others drifted away, and still the Medi-witch worked on. It was nearly dawn when she straightened and found herself staring straight into Harry’s eyes. “Now what?” the young man asked.

Poppy shrugged. “Now we wait,” she replied.
Honeymoon

The next time Severus woke up, the screaming agony had been reduced to a dull roar. His whole body ached from the Cruciatus curse, and his left arm definitely hurt but he no longer felt like death warmed over. This was good, considering that was exactly what he was. He couldn’t help but chuckle a little bit at the irony of it all.

The noise must have alerted someone to his presence, because the next thing he knew, there was a weight at the edge of his bed, and a hand was brushing aside his hair, the fingers cool against his forehead. He opened his eyes and saw, to his surprise, Harry Potter looking down at him with a worried expression on his face. “Potter,” he whispered, dismayed at the weakness of his voice.

Harry smiled. “It’s Snape,” he replied gently. “Don’t strain. You’re in the infirmary; it’s about eleven in the morning. Everyone’s gone down for lunch. Poppy says you’ll be fine.”

“What are you doing?” The touch was soothing, calming, and Severus had to struggle to stay awake. Harry smiled again.

“Just checking up on my husband,” he replied. “You still owe me a consummation, you know.”

“I hardly think I’m up for anything of the sort at the moment,” Severus snorted, and to his surprise, Harry laughed along with him. The older man groaned and sat up slowly.

“Easy, now, you’re still pretty weak,” Harry said, steadying him and moving the pillows around to support his weight. "You've been out of it for nearly two days."

"Two days? Sweet Merlin! I've got to talk to Albus - " Severus started, but Harry quickly hushed him.

"It's all right. No one really knows you're here. Dumbledore even obliviated the aurors who found you so they couldn't accidentally talk. Professor McGonagall transfigured a headstone into a body and left it for the muggles to find, so everyone thinks you're dead right now, so you're safe for the time being. You can take it easy and rest."

"But what about you?" Severus pressed. "If I'm dead, then Lucius will be after you."

"Apparently, I've run away. Ron, Dean, and Seamus came home from Hogsmeade yesterday afternoon to find that I'd disappeared. Not even my dear godfather knows where I've gone." Harry gave the older man a lopsided smile, tinged with sadness.

"I'm sorry," Severus said, genuinely, reaching up to touch the boy's face. "I know how lonely it can be, lying all the time."

Harry was surprised at the gentleness in the other man's voice. "Thanks," he replied, surprised.

They sat in silence for a while. Then Severus sat up slowly and looked the other man in the eye. "Potter - Harry," he said. "I wanted to tell you this earlier, but..." he waved one hand around at the infirmary, as if to say, **all this happened**, and continued, "it's very important that you understand this: you have been forced into a situation that was not your own choosing. I will never force you further. We can find another way to indicate that we have... consummated this marriage, if you prefer."

Harry gazed at him for a long time, considering. Then he shook his head and smiled. "Let's not think
about it now," he replied. "We have a little bit of time."

Severus wouldn't let it go. "For instance, you could find someone more to your liking and... approach them. I'll be sure to add my own... substances to them so that if Malfoy tries to check, it’ll look like we... like we are truly married." He leaned back, exhaustion overtaking him.

Harry looked down at him thoughtfully. His mind was racing. **Snape suffered for me,** he thought, and this time it hit home: Severus Snape had saved his life. Severus Snape had valued his life - and now he was offering him a chance to live it his own way - offering him as much freedom as he possibly could. Harry let his eyes wander across the other man's body. The Potions master's eyes had drifted closed again, and he looked almost handsome, despite the injuries. With the scowl gone and the tension in his face abated, he was actually kind of captivating.

Harry sat back. He wasn't a virgin by any means, and he knew that he preferred men. He had absolutely no idea what he was feeling, quite frankly. All he knew was that he was a Gryffindor, and he didn't think Gryffindors cheated on their spouses. And besides, now that he had time to think about it, he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to. **But what if Snape doesn't want you?** his mind panicked, and he quickly hushed it. There was only one way to find that out, and if he was making a disastrous mistake, at least he had the consolation that Snape didn't really expect any better of him anyway...

After a moment, the younger man nodded. He leaned over and pulled off his slippers, then slid under the sheets, settling his body around the older man's. Snape’s eyes flew open. “What are you doing?” he asked, struggling to turn and look at the Gryffindor.

“Severus,” Harry soothed. “I think I've found someone to my liking.”

“Potter - Harry, that’s not what I…”

“But it’s what I want, Severus. Now hush. You’ll open your stitches.” He wrapped his arms around the Potions master and held him till the other man stilled.

“Harry - I believe I mentioned before that I am in no condition to consummate this marriage at the moment,” Severus said after a minute of silence.

Harry chuckled against the other man’s back. “It’s okay,” he replied. “I don’t mind waiting.”

“Oh, thank the heavens,” Snape replied sarcastically. “I’m glad we’ve got that cleared up. Now would you mind very much removing your arm from my throat before you choke me?”

Harry blushed. “Sorry,” he mumbled, lifting his arm. It hung in the air a moment as he tried to find a good place to put it.

“Oh, honestly,” Severus griped, grabbing the man’s hand and wrapping it under his own arm, placing it against his heart. “There. May I sleep now?”

"Of course." Harry smiled against the Potions master's back as Severus drifted off. He had no idea where this was going, but it looked like it was going to be interesting. Maybe it was going to be a good year, after all.

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