Summary

His mother's wedding gift to his father finds its way to the love of Harry's life. Another (but not-so-epic) journey of a ring. Written from Snape's and Portrait!Snape’s POV.

Notes

Inspired by Phoenix Acid's Draco, willyoumarryme?. I also seemed to have given all the OCs names from Sharpe characters... Thank you to my betas, DelphiPSmith and CassieBlack.

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1 November 1981

In the year since I had left her behind, I had been able to convince myself that she'd meant nothing. And I was almost successful...during my waking hours. In the light of day it was easy to forget her with everything else going on around me. But when the Dark Lord told us of his plans for the night following the snivelling Pettigrew’s turn of heart, I knew I had to be there. I needed to be there for her. I wanted to see her one last time.
I hadn’t been asked to go, and I didn’t volunteer. I stayed out of sight, hiding silently in the garden, and watched as the green light flashed through the windows.

This lot wouldn’t care about what they left behind; they abandoned bodies where they fell as warnings. That strategy worked well for me. But I could count on the other side to arrive the next moment after news got out – I knew I didn’t have much time. They would know that too. So why were the Dark Lord and Death Eaters still in the house?

Oddly, there was no victorious cheering. Instead there was confusion — shouting and cursing and a pulse of magic so strong, it reverberated against the bricks and mortar, the echoes reaching me where I hid in the hedges. At last they fled the scene.

But so intent was I on my errand, I didn’t notice they numbered one fewer.

Was it hard for me to see her? No, strangely enough. She looked peaceful — not a mark on her, as was the norm — just a young woman lying asleep on the floor. Ignoring everything around me, I went to her and held her hand. Even now, I was convinced she would know I still loved her.

The loud squalling in the room was a painful reminder that nothing in this house belonged to me. That would soon change. I wanted something — anything — by which to remember her.

Stroking Lily’s hand, it came to me — their wedding rings.

I gently pulled the ring from her finger. I did not kiss her goodbye, did not do anything but lay her arm back down on the floor, and gave not one look to the screaming child as I passed by on the way to Potter’s body. Touching him as little as possible, I yanked the ring from his hand and quickly left.

The knowledge that these gifts had been given in love only contributed to the terrible jealousy I refused to consciously acknowledge. But knowing that these rings would now be kept in my possession felt supremely like having the last word.

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10 January 1996

I’ve become very good at blending in with the shadows and was therefore able to observe, without being detected, the short study in pink that was Dolores Umbridge as she trespassed in my office in the dungeons. Specifically, she was supervising Filch, who was busy going through my things. They’d had no trouble accessing my rooms and had been equally successful in finding every box or container they thought might hold something interesting. They wouldn’t get much further in their snooping from this point, though. Or so I thought. Like everyone else, I underestimated Umbridge’s tenacity.

As Umbridge pored over the titles of the books on my shelves, Filch discovered the small glass phial that held the two Potter wedding rings. He turned it over and over in his dirty hands, the rings jingling noisily within.

“Can’t get the cork out of this,” Filch said as he roughly tugged at it. A small blue light flared around the phial and he dropped it, cursing, his fingers burned. Rather than shattering on the cold flagstones, however, the bottle rolled away as if Summoned, until it was out of his reach.

Filch’s cursing attracted Umbridge’s attention and she turned in time to see the bottle moving on its own accord. When she tried to approach the object, it rolled away again. She followed it several feet across the floor and then stopped, withdrawing her wand from her tweed-covered sleeve and training it upon the bottle.
“Silly man,” she chided Filch with a small laugh. “You should know better than to attempt to intimately handle anything of Professor Snape’s. Not only is it likely to be cursed, it’s probably just as poisonous and vile as he is.” She ended the sentence with another of those small irritating squeaks that passed as a laugh.

She uttered a spell I’d not heard before. The bottle shattered into sparkling fragments and the rings tinkled against the flags. Umbridge waved her wand over the rings and then nodded to Filch who bent and picked them up. He held them out for her inspection.

“I must say, Professor Snape doesn’t look the type to be sentimental about wedding rings. Do you suppose they’re his? I don’t remember anything about a Mrs Snape in his file.”

I sniffed sharply but not loudly enough to be heard. The nerve of the woman. But of course she’d be the type to keep records on everyone around her. Filch’s face wore an ugly sneer. “I can’t imagine anyone wanting to marry that bat,” he said.

*Pot, cauldron, black* was the first thought to cross my mind. I wanted to tear those rings from his hand and rip his hand from his arm while I was at it.

Umbridge picked up Lily’s ring and my anger reached new heights. “Hmmm...” she said, squinting, apparently trying to read the inscription.

“Surely, Dolores, that wouldn’t fit your delicate finger,” Albus Dumbledore said as he walked into my quarters. I pushed myself further back into the shadows, never more grateful to see the old man.

Umbridge looked up from her inspection of the ring and directly at Dumbledore. “I fail to understand,” she said, ignoring Dumbledore’s comment, “why you continue to allow Professor Snape free run of this castle. He could have any number of cursed possessions which his side could use to infiltrate our ranks.”

“And whose ranks would that be, Dolores?” Dumbledore asked, idly picking up one of my poisoned quills (it made the reader see the opposite of what the writer intended). “I thought there was no need to be worried about the return of Voldemort. After all, as the Minister has repeatedly told us, such a thing is quite impossible.”

I could see Umbridge stiffen slightly at the mention of the Dark Lord’s name, but she recovered quickly and stood erect and as unflappable as ever.

“It pays to be cautious, Albus. You let down your guard once around ...these people, and they’ll slit your throat.” It was amazing how sweetly someone could speak about such violence. It belied a heart that had no business in this place. Some may say that I mistreat my students, but as much as it galls me to admit it, I want nothing more than to give them a Voldemort-free future. I would fight to the death to provide it, for all of them. Even for James Potter’s son.

I suspect that Umbridge doesn’t care about anyone’s future but her own, and no doubt she could happily twist her own agenda to that of the Dark Lord’s if it suited her. It is one thing to be a traitor to your blood status, but to be a traitor to yourself over delusions of grandeur? That is pure stupidity. I knew. I’d seen it.

Umbridge let the rings fall onto a table in an unconcerned manner. “Come, Argus,” she said as she strutted from my room. The rings rolled from the tabletop to clink once again on the stone floor.

Dumbledore stooped to collect them and replaced them on the table, his back to me. “Severus,” he said quietly, “we will all need to guard our possessions more carefully for the foreseeable future,
don’t you agree?” And with that, he turned and left the room in a swirl of robes.

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14 July 1998

I believe I’ve been here for some time, though there’s nothing with which to mark its passing. I thought I might see her. I thought I might have another chance to look at her face instead of having to rely on my memories. I could still see her clearly in my mind’s eye, although I couldn’t smell her anymore; the scent had long since disappeared once my senses were assaulted on a daily basis by potions and the dankness of the dungeons.

I never did see her. Instead, I drifted along in the currents of...wherever I’d been thrust. Not in pain – that was long gone – but bored and lonely. Yes. Me, lonely.

Then a light.

I saw it and felt myself drawn inextricably toward it. This is it, I thought, my final resting place. How cliché. Hell, perhaps? Surely not heaven. Not that I believed in either of those places. No, for me it would be an eternity spent in Purgatory, neither happy nor sad, damned nor redeemed, nothing but an endless afterlife filled with tedium and what might have beens.

It was a great surprise then to find myself staring into the face of a friend.

“Hello, Severus. Welcome to our home.”

Then it became clear; it had never occurred to me to wonder how it felt to be pulled into one’s portrait: a bit like Apparating, but very gently and slowly.

“Lucius.” I nodded.

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16 August 1998

From my position on the wall I had a good view of the main salon – as portraits go, I suppose it could be considered prime real estate.

He went through my things while I pretended to be asleep. It was rather heartbreaking, seeing the few items I treasured in the hands of my godson. But at least I saw them again, and from this odd perspective — through Draco’s eyes — I once again felt each object’s personal significance, just as I did when I made the decision to keep it.

He held James Potter’s ring up to the light, looking inside the band to read the inscription. I closed my eyes, knowing what he’d find. I cringed inwardly, not at the discovery of my weakness, this foible for the collection of sentimental keepsakes, but knowing how that single word — said as a promise — still caused me such pain.

“Forever,” I heard Draco whisper into the large room. I opened my eyes and saw him frown slightly. I quickly shuttered my lids, but it was too late.

“Whose is it?” he asked, turning the ring in his hand. “It’s a man’s.” The last phrase was said as a statement. “Your father’s?”

“Hardly,” I barked before I saw sense and drew my lips tightly together. Draco knew nothing of my
past. He knew nothing of me at all, save the impressions formed from our contact at school, and even those experiences he had often misinterpreted. His haughty demeanour, fostered by privilege, allowed him only to see what he wanted to see.

What he wanted. His whole life was built upon that concept — or so he thought, until it became painfully clear he was nothing short of a chess piece in someone else’s game.

But then, weren’t we all?

At least he had a family who loved him, and he had known love. I never had, until her. But by then it was far too late to acknowledge it. Embarrassingly, I had tried. Tried and failed. Never again. Particularly now, I thought bitterly.

Although in quieter moments, I could almost put my bitterness to one side for the sake of my godson. For I did love him, in my own way.

I would not have him become the bitter adult I had been.

“It was a gift,” I said, not entirely lying.

Indeed, Lily had kept her promise to the ring’s recipient; she was his forever. I swallowed painfully, envisioning husband and wife lying side by side, mouldering together, still loved by both the living and the dead.

Draco dug deeper into the carved wooden box and found the ring’s mate. He held it up and read the identical inscription, then once again looked back at me.

“They’re Potter’s parents’ wedding rings,” I said simply.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. I daresay that was the last thing he expected to hear.

“Why do you have them?” he asked finally.

“I took them the night they died, the night Voldemort disappeared. I thought it…prudent to have evidence of the Potters’ death in case anyone questioned the Dark Lord’s interpretation of the Prophecy.” Again, not entirely a lie.

Draco nodded slowly. He knew of the Prophecy. Lucius had ensured his son had had at least that piece of the puzzle before sending him into the fray. Draco carefully replaced the rings in the box. The rest of the trinkets and documents were summarily glanced at and then dismissed. He nodded to me on his way out of the room.

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“I think I should give the rings to Potter,” Draco said to me the next morning.

At first I felt panic. No! I could not lose my only tie to Lily, even if it was a wedding band given to her by a man I detested. But I would not tell Draco of the rings’ significance; he would not understand. He had not suffered in love as I had, never experienced that adolescent tragedy.

Yes, his name may now be sullied, and he could not now sail easily into any union his mother chose to arrange, despite his sexual preferences (one is not a godfather and Head of House without discovering some secrets about one’s charges). But he was young and allegiances changed often at mere whimsy. Someone suitable would no doubt be found. If he was lucky, he would love.
Had he spoken to Lucius about the rings? Unlikely. If he had, he would have been full of questions. I might have excelled at hiding my feelings from myself, but I was never good from hiding them from Lucius.

The bitterest pill would be to see this treasure given to one so undeserving of such a gift. Yes, Potter’s offspring – undeserving! Born and bred to be nothing more than a tool; a weapon with which the world rids itself of Voldemort. Never in my mind had he even been a person, and it was easy to forget to treat him as such.

I looked down at my godson and my eyes softened. Not a person, indeed. Perhaps it was time for these boys to begin living their own lives.

“As you wish,” I growled.

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30 September 1998

I could tell Draco was uncomfortable as he stood before the Headmistress in her office; the slight shake of his head to flick his hair from his face gave his nerves away.

“Mr Malfoy,” McGonagall said from behind her desk. “Is there something I can do for you?”

I wondered if Draco felt as nervous as I had inexplicably become. He flicked his hair back from his eyes again and cleared his throat. “I found these at the Manor. I think they may have belonged to Potter’s parents.” He carefully deposited the rings on the desk and let his arm fall to his side.

“Harry Potter’s?” McGonagall’s tone rose as she reached down to inspect the rings. If any thought of the rings being cursed or impregnated by dark spell-work crossed her mind, she gave no indication of it. She picked them up and held them closer to her face, adjusting her glasses as she did so.

“Yes. You know how V — Voldemort collected things.” Draco stammered through the sentence and I almost felt sorry for him.

“Yes, I’m aware of his use for such items,” McGonagall prompted.

“I thought you might return them to Potter,” Draco said, not looking at her. His cheeks turned slightly pink as he spoke.

McGonagall made it easy for him, not asking why he didn’t return the rings to Potter himself, nor making any kind of patronising comment about the Malfoy family’s continuing efforts at redemption or reparation. She simply looked at him and said “Thank you, Mr Malfoy. I’ll see that Mr Potter receives them.”

Draco raised his eyes to hers. “Thank you, Headmistress,” he muttered and turned to leave. In the doorway, he paused. “You won’t tell him I returned them, will you?” Draco had had enough of Potter’s legacy to contend with and I believe he imparted that fact well with his tone. And just as he had kept my secret, he relied on another to keep his. He was learning trust — a hard lesson for one with his experiences.

I was proud of him.

When the heavy door had closed behind him, McGonagall looked up at my portrait. “I don’t know if you had a hand in the Malfoy family’s return of stolen property, and I know how you feel about Mr Potter, but thank you, Severus.”
I heard the words but did not acknowledge them. My eyes never left the rings in her hand.

6 October 1998

Rolanda Hooch nodded to the portraits as she, Potter, the male Weasley, Draco, and Harper made their way into the Headmistress’ office.

“The usual scrapes and tussles, Minerva, but with greater vitriol than usual. I’m worried that the Slytherins might be being bullied off the pitch. They—” she cocked her head at Draco and Harper “— seem to be getting far more of a beating in the literal sense than usual.”

McGonagall looked at the two green-clad boys and then at the boys in red.

“It’s not us!” Weasley cried.

“Shut up, Ron,” Potter said quietly. “I’m sure she knows that.”

“Is this true?” McGonagall asked the Slytherins.

“No, ma’am,” both Draco and Harper said.

McGonagall turned her attention back to Hooch “Was it just in this game that you noticed it?”

“Well, no other House would have the—” she paused as she appeared to be searching for a more refined word than the one she had intended to use “— audacity to use the game as a form of revenge.”

“Mr Weasley, Mr Potter, I’m holding you personally responsible for the actions of your fans and your teammates,” McGonagall gave her charges no quarter. “I trust you will remind them that the war is over and we’re all here to learn and play. Is that understood?” It was clear that the Slytherins were embarrassed and resentful that they needed protecting; the two Gryffindors looked angry and put-upon.

“You can’t hold us accountable for the actions of everyone,” Potter whinged. “We don’t have any control over our House.”

“Then I suggest you exert some,” McGonagall said and I saw Draco smile. That was something he knew all about – excelled at, in fact. Potter may be the Golden Boy of Gryffindor, but it would behove him to remember there was still a Prince of Slytherin.

McGonagall nodded her head at Weasley and Potter. “That is all, boys, you two may go, Although, Mr Potter,” she added, “I should like to speak with you after supper tonight.”

Potter nodded at the Headmistress, and Madam Hooch escorted the dismissed Gryffindors from the office.

It was not lost on anyone that Potter jostled Draco as he left. Draco refused to acknowledge the gracelessness of the Gryffindor Seeker when confined to the ground.

Once the three had left, McGonagall addressed the two Slytherins.

“How are you doing this term, Mr Malfoy? How are you finding your accommodation? Are you being...” she paused, evidently searching for the appropriate word, “harassed by anyone?”
“No, Headmistress,” Draco replied formally. “Our accommodation is fine, and no one is bothering us.” Clearly she didn’t believe him, nor did I. I knew that the few remaining Slytherins were housed in a corridor near the Great Hall which had been spelled and rearranged into a small dormitory while renovations to the dungeons continued. A small part of me felt grief at the loss of my domain. It must have been hard for the Slytherins to return to so many changes – their lodgings, their status. Not to mention their loss of friends and housemates.

Although I imagined little out-and-out violence was being meted out to the Slytherins (aside from on the pitch), undoubtedly they were subjected to gibes and taunts. Though verbal abuse was nothing new to them, up until now it had usually been they who were the source of the acerbic remarks. The Slytherins no doubt had found the Gryffindor’s displays of grudge-holding to be both absurdly obvious and clumsily executed. At least they would be able to see anything truly dangerous coming a mile away...

 Later, Potter kept his appointment with McGonagall. As eavesdropping made the passage of time bearable, I indulged awhile longer.

“Mr Potter, I understand how hard you may be finding this term. After all, your previous year had so little to do with the everyday trappings of school. And I appreciate that you need some time to readjust—”

“Professor, Malfoy started it, honestly. I wasn’t bothering him at all; he just flew into me,” Potter interrupted.

_Probably true_, I mused.

“I’m well aware of that, Mr Potter, but that does not warrant retaliating in such a…violent fashion.”

“I didn’t do anything he didn’t do to me first,” Potter argued. “And anyway, it didn’t affect the outcome of the game.”

“Yes, Mr Potter, I appreciate that, but I will ask you to show a bit more decorum in the future, if you please.”

Potter just looked at his shoes.

“Believe it or not, I did not call you here in order to chastise you further.” She opened a drawer in the large desk, reached inside, and placed two gold bands on the polished surface in front of Potter.

Potter looked at them and then back at her. “I thought you should have these,” McGonagall said quietly. “They were found at the end of the war.”

I released the breath I’d been holding.

Potter picked up the rings. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he looked at them closely. “Are these...?”

“Yes, Mr Potter,” McGonagall said gently. “They belonged to your parents.”

“How...where...?” he began, then his voice trailed off as he examined first one and then the other before closing his fist tightly around them. His eyes glistened behind his spectacles.

“I don’t know where they were found, Mr Potter. They were given to me to give back to you. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” She looked away from him and made to sit behind her desk – a dismissive
gesture.

“I...thank you, Headmistress,” Potter said, and with that he left the office.

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2 December 1998

Yet again, Draco and Potter were back in front of the Headmistress, the third time in as many months. It looked as though with this encounter, their animosity hadn’t been confined to shouting abuse in the Hall or overenthusiastic contact on the Quidditch pitch. It appeared they hadn’t bothered with hexes — they’d gone straight to blows.

Although thrown prematurely into the roles of adults, and as hard as they tried, when it came to each other, they still seemed to have the self-control of twelve-year-olds: their hair was mussed, their robes askew, their faces puffy, and both had bruises on their throats.

I could have told McGonagall that a detention supervised by Filch was no detention at all. He obviously hadn’t been able to keep them from fighting.

I looked down my nose at the pair, unimpressed. So did McGonagall.

“Boys, I thought I had made it clear that there would be no more of this nonsense. It seems that I cannot even assign you to work together under supervision without the two of you resorting to —” she looked them up and down — “bodily harm.”

A loud cough sounded from the frame beside mine, followed by a graceless hacking, as though someone had choked whilst taking a sip of tea. McGonagall turned her head and Draco and Potter looked up.

“Do excuse me,” I heard the portrait of Dumbledore mutter, stopping to cough some more. “Cockroach Cluster went down the wrong way.”

I rolled my eyes, though of course he could not see me. Still…the old man wasn’t given to unnecessary outbursts for no reason at all. I knew his mannerisms too well. What was he up to?

McGonagall was speaking again. “…can see I’ll need to think of something else if you two can’t get along.”

All of these attempts at a forced harmony were clearly not working. I felt it was time to speak up for the value of a healthy antagonism. “Perhaps they don’t want to get along,” I sneered. “They never liked each other before the war, why is it so important that they be friends now?”

The response to this comment was another round of coughing from Dumbledore’s portrait and a disapproving look from the Headmistress. The two boys looked at the floor, seemingly trying to avoid eye contact with anyone in the room, portrait or otherwise.

“It is important, Professor Snape,” McGonagall said firmly, “because these two represent the conflict, as it were. Hogwarts must show itself to have moved beyond that — to be united — if we are to return to our former glory, let alone regain our student numbers.” She turned back to her wayward students. “Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy, I’m not asking that you become friends,” attempting to outdo my own patronising tone, “just that you get along without incident. Now, is it possible for the two of you to be together in the same room without... manhandling each other?”

CRASH!
“Sorry, sorry!” came Dumbledore’s apologetic voice. “Dropped the teapot. Terribly clumsy of me.”

What was the old coot trying to say? I digested the Headmistress’ last words and looked again at the two boys shuffling in front of the large desk. Musset hair, robes askew, bruises on throats…

Oh, Merlin. Those weren’t bruises.

The not-unexpected but angry attacks they’d engaged in suddenly made sense. I closed my eyes and shook my head. As if being dead weren’t bad enough.

“…so for the foreseeable future, unless you’d like me to treat you like the two First Years you’ve obviously become—” McGonagall continued.

“Minerva,” Dumbledore interrupted and the Headmistress swung her head round to look at us, as did the two boys. “I think perhaps they might get on better helping Professor Slughorn with his ingredients cataloguing, don’t you? Much more educational than scrubbing floors and dusting portraits, eh? As Mr Malfoy is no doubt aware, the dungeons were terribly damaged and it’s only now that the classroom and storerooms are in a position to be re-stocked.”

I groaned and shook my head. The old meddler; I should have known his idea of fostering House unity would differ somewhat from that of the Headmistress.

“And I’m sure Severus would make a much better supervisor than Filch,” Dumbledore went on. “You never know, he might enjoy the change of scene.”

My hands clenched into fists and I resisted the urge to walk into his portrait, unravel the hat he was knitting, and wrap the yarn tightly around his neck.

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5 December 1998

Now back in my academic domain, I thought it best to begin with a threat. “If the two of you so much as lay a hand on each other, in anger or —” I shuddered, “— anything else, I will personally report it not only to the Headmistress, but also the rest of the staff, students and the portrait of Algernon Hakeswill.”

“Who’s that?” Potter asked.

“He is, or rather was, one of the most devious and loathsome photographers the Daily Prophet ever employed. I’m sure you can imagine in whose office his portrait currently hangs.”

“Are you threatening us with Rita Skeeter?” Draco asked smoothly. “She knows we’d have no reason to get along; so what if she caught us having a fist-fight?” Draco tried his best to sound nonchalant, but that never worked on me. Ever.

“I daresay Rita Skeeter wouldn’t be at all interested if she caught you in a fist-fight. But she’d have Kneazles if she caught you in flagrante delicto”.

“What are you talking about?” Potter asked, his eyes narrowing behind those ridiculous spectacles.

Draco turned to him. “He means if she caught us shagging.”

Potter’s mouth formed a silent “Oh.” Then his countenance hardened. I’d seen that expression before — on two faces — and it meant business. “I don’t care,” he said.
Draco looked like he’d been slapped. “What?”

“I’m not afraid of Rita Skeeter. And I’m not going to be threatened by a portrait. If I want to shout I fancy Draco Malfoy from the top of the Astronomy Tower, you certainly aren’t going to stop me.” Potter glared directly at me whilst I digested the reference at his choice of location.

“My hero,” Draco said sarcastically, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms. “Your adoring public would love to hear that.”

“I don’t care what my adoring public thinks, Draco,” he said, focussing that green gaze on my godson. “I do care about you.”

Draco gaped.

Could it get any worse? “Touching, I’m sure,” I mocked. “I still don’t want to see it.”

“That’s too damned bad,” Potter spat, as he caught Draco’s face in his hands and kissed him soundly. Draco didn’t even pretend to be embarrassed; he grabbed Potter by the hair and kissed back just as enthusiastically.

“Bravo, Harry!” Freesia Harris (Potions Professor, 1909-1912) called from the portrait beside mine.

If Harry heard her, he gave no sign of it. Indeed, I think he’d forgotten that generations of Potions teachers were now sitting up and taking note of the goings-on under their noses.

Obviously neither boy had the remotest intention of carrying on any further coherent conversation, or any cataloguing of ingredients and restocking of shelves, either, as Draco now walked Potter backwards until his back met the wall. Potter took his hands from Draco’s face and wrapped them around his waist, grabbing handfuls of his shirt.

Draco grunted and pushed a thigh between Potter’s legs.

Obviously, I’d been unable to convey my disgust with mere words. I coughed loudly.

“Shut up, Severus,” Freesia stage-whispered to me.

I hastily turned my mind to thoughts of where I could escape to. If I suddenly appeared in my frame in the Headmistress’ office, McGonagall and Dumbledore would no doubt question why I had abandoned my post as the boys’... I snorted. I could hardly say chaperone — detention supervisor. My only other option was the Manor, but if I were to encounter one or both of the Malfoys in the large sitting room, I might have difficulty in responding to the inevitable first question: How is Draco?

I risked another glance at my godson. Potter had pulled Draco’s shirt from his trousers and his hands now disappeared under the material. With that, Draco’s hands dropped to Potter’s waist and he awkwardly began unbuckling his belt whilst evidently seeing how far he could push his tongue into Potter’s mouth. No, quite clearly there would be no way I could answer his parents’ question in anything approaching an accurate fashion.

Beside me, Freesia cheered them on as heartily as if she were at a Quidditch game.

“Woman, don’t encourage them,” I bellowed.

“Severus, I’ve spent the last eighty-six and a half years watching nothing but dull Potions classes,” she responded gleefully. “With only the cold embrace of the icy north Atlantic as a final physical
memory, you’re sadly mistaken if you think I’m going to miss this.”

“Here, here,” the voices from several other portraits chorused. I scowled in disgust. I had no idea I hung in such... lecherous company.

Not for the first time I lamented the fact that the artist had not seen fit to paint me holding a book.

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1 August 1999

“Severus, to what do I owe this visit?” McGonagall looked over her spectacles at me, one corner of her mouth rising in a poor imitation of a smirk.

“No reason. I simply wanted to spend some time in my old...” I let my eyes linger on the walls of the room, “office.”

“Poppycock,” she said rudely.

“Very well, if you must know, I was dangerously close to losing my mind in the Potions classroom,” I admitted.

“And the Manor?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Not with Lucius and Narcissa away for a fortnight,” I said, unable to keep the shudder from my voice.

“Have you truly been scarred for life after seeing what those two boys were getting up to?” An amused chuckle followed Dumbledore’s query from the portrait next to me.

“Being scarred for ‘life’ is not much of a problem at this point,” I said acidly. The old man was referring to two earlier visits that I had made to the Manor. It had not been my intention to disclose what I saw but, as usual, the combination of dour Headmistress and loony ex-Headmaster had somehow forced it out of me. They had asked how the boys were getting on. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell them they were both in Azkaban or had emigrated to South America, but in the end I felt that the truth might be more shocking – and therefore more fun – to relate.

During that summer, I had kept to myself, refusing to be drawn in by the petty arguments and hackneyed discussions held daily by my fellow Potions Masters, or pestered by banal chat with the previous Heads of Hogwarts about the upcoming term. Instead, one afternoon, I had decided to call at the Manor; perhaps to speak with Lucius or converse with my godson. Draco now lived at home, and whilst his parents lamented the fact that he had no suitable marriage arranged, he did make them happy with his announcement of his desire to work in the Ministry. To the general public (and to the _Prophet_), he was a bureaucrat-in-training, one of those faceless government employees who exact a large salary and a suitable amount of prestige whilst doing very little. I, however, and precious few others, knew that was not to be his real career. I had suspected for some time that his choice of coursework and tutelage his final year at school was more suited to his working for the Ministry in a completely different capacity. Of course, this was not something he could discuss with me, or indeed with anyone.

Regardless, his being seen to work and play well with others was going a long way to restoring the Malfoy name.

Unfortunately, _working and playing well with others_ was exactly the scene upon which I stumbled
when I arrived at the Manor. Potter sitting trouserless on the expensive leather sofa whilst Draco, equally naked from the waist down, writhed atop him was not an image easily erased from my memory. But gods know I tried.

I can only assume that Lucius and Narcissa were away from the house that afternoon. I didn’t stop long enough to find out.

The next day, before Florian Pyecroft (Potions Professor, 1782-1815) could expound his theory of the superiority of damselfly wings over those of dragonflies in blood-letting potions, I thought to try the Manor again, sure that at this time of the morning only Lucius would be awake, reading the newspaper and sipping tea.

In case I was wrong, I kept my eyes closed as I entered the canvas. I was greeted by what sounded like silk wafting in the wind. Perhaps the shifting of the curtains in the French doors which had been left open to catch the cool early-morning breeze?

Then I heard Potter’s voice, absurdly low and grating, “Do it, Draco – come inside me.” This statement was followed by my godson’s harsh grunt.

The damselfly debate suddenly became of intense interest to me, and I fled.

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Was I appalled? No.

Was I disgusted? A little.

Was I jealous? Oh, yes.

My youth had not been completely celibate. But none of the few lovers I had taken ever felt moved to shout her feelings from the tallest tower at Hogwarts, nor had I ever felt comfortable enough to speak in such a blunt fashion, as arousing as it was embarrassing.

Looking back, and being completely candid, my lovers had shared a singular beauty, but all had lacked the true essence of the one I loved, no matter how hard I had tried to replace her. Somehow the eyes weren’t green enough or the laugh lacked the right lilt.

Draco had those now. How could I not be jealous?

It was upon reflection after those rather unsavoury events at the Manor that I finally understood how these two boys were, and had been, inextricably linked through their stormy past to their amorous present. Yes, and into their future, as well – one to become the face of the new order, the other tethered to the old traditions.

“Thinking about how times have changed again, Severus?”

Hells bells! How did the old man do that? I grunted to cover my astonishment. “Leave me alone,” I mumbled and closed my eyes.

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5 June 2000

This wasn’t right.

I knew Weasley and Granger had been in Malfoy Manor before but that didn’t make it any easier to
comprehend. Of course, the circumstances would have been very different for them the last time; now, Weasley looked as though he wanted nothing more than to plonk his large shoes on the antique coffee table in front of him, and Granger shouldn’t be talking to Narcissa in such a conspiratorial way. The sight became even more surreal when Narcissa laughed daintily at something Granger said, then leaned in, looking like a teenager gossiping with a classmate.

No, it wasn’t right.

It had been years, I was sure, since this large airy room in the Manor had been used for the purpose of a truly social gathering. Music played from somewhere, house elves were circulating with trays of food and drink. (And although Granger embarrassed herself by thanking the obnoxious little things profusely, she still took the proffered canapés and wine.)

“If the sole reason you asked me here was to watch a collection of ex-students, none of whom I’m terribly fond of, mill about drinking your expensive champagne, I shall call it a night, Lucius,” I said to him from my frame. “I thought this was supposed to be a birthday party.”

“Quiet, Severus. It is, but Draco had to stay late at the Ministry. He should be here any minute. And you won’t want to miss this.” Lucius gave me a devious smirk.

“Miss what?” I was suddenly suspicious. Never did a comment such as that, uttered from the lips of Lucius Malfoy, bode well for anyone.

The Floo activated and my godson stepped from the flames, brushing off invisible soot from his cloak and charcoal-coloured suit. I saw he still retained some trace of House pride, wearing its colours in his tie, though in my opinion, taking up with Potter negated any allegiance he might have once had to Slytherin.

“Tough day at the office, dear?” Potter quipped and I nearly groaned in disgust as everyone chuckled.

“Hilarious, Potter. You know I can’t tell you,” Draco said sardonically as he removed his cloak and handed it to a house elf that had appeared at his side.

This much was true. No one knew in which area Draco worked – my Galleon was on the Time Chamber – and it was refreshing to see that even the great Harry Potter wasn’t privy to the secrets of an Unspeakable.

“Well, now that you’re here, we can start celebrating properly,” Potter smiled.

Draco glanced around the large sitting room and scowled. “It looks like everyone’s already started,” he observed.

“Yes, but it’s not the same without the birthday boy,” said Zabini, strolling over with his third – or was it fourth? – drink in hand.

“I don’t know why you’re making such a fuss,” Draco eyed his parents. “It’s just a birthday.”

His mother gave him a peck on the cheek, which made Draco blush in front of his friends and ex-nemeses. “No, Draco, it’s more than that.”

Draco looked perplexed. Then I saw Harry take something out of his pocket. Part of me knew what it was before I saw it; I had held this and its mate in my memory, just as I had held them in my hand so many years ago. As he offered it to Draco everyone in the room stilled. The music stopped. Even the house elves remained motionless.
Potter went very red and shuffled nervously from foot to foot. It was amusing to note that he looked almost as uncomfortable now as he had when I called on him in class. “Er... Draco,” he began, and then looked at the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Granger grasp Weasley by the arm and grin hugely – a most unsavoury image.

Not that the one in front of me was much better.

“This was my father’s, and I’d like... to... uh...”

As Potter once again got his tongue tied round his native language, Draco looked directly at me.

Potter found his voice again. “I know it’s not great as engagement rings go, but... I...er... oh, hell...” he finished, his much-vaunted Gryffindor courage seemingly having fled completely.

Draco’s eyes slid from mine to Potter’s and he smiled warmly, something I hadn’t seen in a very long time. “You’re doing great, Harry. Keep going.” Everyone laughed and the tension in the room shattered.

“Thanks,” Potter said, laughing himself. He clumsily pushed his glasses up his nose. “I – I love you and I was wondering if... er... Draco, willyouumarryme?” Potter blurted out. Finally.

“Of course I will, you prat.” Draco said, but with affection clear in his tone of voice. “Now, put that on my finger.”

The room erupted with cheers as another generation of Potters made plans to marry someone I loved. This time, though, I may have felt the better for it.

The End

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