The Courtship of Harry Potter

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Summary

Another teacher's interest in Harry Potter forces a reluctant Snape to compete for the young man affections.

Notes

Challenge: This story is based on a challenge from DarkLady, to wit "Suppose it were a usual thing in Wizarding culture that a young man take an older man as a lover/mentor. Mix in a flashy and ill-intentioned rival, and Snape's machinations to ensure that he is Harry's choice. Extra bunny - a clear period and ritual to the courtship, with the rival managing smoothly while Snape's gestures all appear to fall flat. Of course, our Harry is a better judge of character than that..."

Notes: A lot of the information I am using here comes from "Education and Pederasty in Ancient Greece", which can be found at http://www.truthtree.com/pederasty.shtml . I've chosen to go with the Athenian traditions, rather than those of Sparta or Crete, as I felt that they worked better for this story.

ADDITIONAL NOTES: This story was written during the Great Hiatus - i.e., before we had confirmation on Lily's house, Snape's parentage, their friendship, Sirius' death, and a number of other things. So you can consider this as diverting from canon just before the Order of the Phoenix.
See the end of the work for more notes.
"Well, Severus, I expect you've been waiting for this term to start for a long time, haven't you?"

Snape looked up from his stack of papers with a frown. His gaze landed on the only other occupant of the Staff Lounge, not that he wouldn't have preferred to see just about anyone else, including Famous Harry Potter. The current DADA instructor was leaning against the doorframe, smirking in that appalling "we know something no one else does" way that made Snape want to hex him into next week. Only the knowledge that Albus Dumbledore would be upset with him if he did kept his itchy fingers from reaching for his wand.

Maximillian - "Max to my friends" - Spindley-Worme had the dubious honour of being the only Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher in recent history to have survived his first year in the position and return for a second. He was also, in Snape's opinion, barely more competent than Lockhart and nearly as conceited, and it was a miracle that he hadn't managed to kill himself or any of his students. Yet. Although if he kept smirking in that infernal way, Snape just might fix that problem for him.

"What are you going on about, Worme?" he asked, irritated at being pulled away from his work. He had planned on finishing these last sets of essays before the staff started drifting back from the Christmas holidays, and the deserted staff room had seemed the ideal place. But if the DADA instructor was going to loiter about chattering, he thought he'd be better off returning to the dungeons.

"It's Max," the DADA teacher reminded him reproachfully, coming further into the room. "And young Malfoy is a Seventh Year, correct?"

"Yes," Snape said, and allowed himself to relish the thought for a long moment. This was the last year he would have to teach Malfoy, Potter, Granger, and the Weasley boy. Six more months and they'd be gone. One more year after that, and the last Weasley would be out of his hair - at least, until the younger generation started breeding. Given the way Granger and the Weasley boy looked at each other, that wouldn't be long. "And?"

"You are intending to Court him, aren't you, old boy?"

Snape blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

Max smiled engagingly. "Don't mean to pry, of course, but we've all assumed..." At the continuing puzzled look on Snape's face, Max's smile widened. "By Jupiter, you haven't the foggiest idea what I mean, do you?"

Snape looked at him crossly and snapped, "I usually don't. Nor do I wish to be enlightened. In case it has escaped your limited intelligence, I am occupied at the moment."

Max ignored him, straddling a chair as he sat down across from Snape. "The Erastes Rites, man! Don't tell me you've forgotten?"

Snape closed his eyes. He had forgotten the tradition, deliberately. It brought up certain...unpleasant memories, ones he'd just as soon keep buried. He absently rubbed his left arm. For as long as he was allowed, at any rate.

"Not surprising, I suppose. After all, there are so few of our social standing here, unlike back at Beauxbaton." Max sighed, sounding decidedly nostalgic, and Snape considered throwing up. On Spindley-Worme, if at all possible. "And if old Barty Crouch taught us nothing else, it was the folly
of taking on someone outside our class. I heard that at the funeral, the boy actually threw himself on the grave, crying and tearing out his hair." He shuddered delicately. "Which proves that the Weasley family may be old, but they're definitely not Our Sort."

"No," Snape said absently.

"Not that you'll have to worry about any excessive emotionalism with young Malfoy," Max said briskly. "I'll warrant that young man has been brought up to know his proper place." "Yes," Snape said, still wrapped up in his own thoughts. Then he shook himself and glared at the DADA teacher. "I fail to see what interest you could possibly have in my personal life. Or is it that you are interesting in pursuing Draco?"

Max laughed and gave him a hearty backslap, nearly knocking Snape face-first into the table. "Hell, no! Your way is clear, old man," he said, winking at Snape. "I have other game in mind."

Snape blinked, rapidly scanning through the list of Seventh Years in his mind, trying to determine who among their class might have caught the other man's fancy. None of the Slytherin boys: with the exception of Draco Malfoy, there wasn't a decent-looking, intelligent one in the lot, although the Nott boy was tolerable. Gryffindor - total loss there, all half-bloods or middle class. There was one Ravenclaw boy and two of the Hufflepuffs, but he hardly thought they were Worme's type. The Entwhistle family wasn't even five hundred years old, after all. Despite Snape's personal opinion of the man, the Worme family was nearly as old as the Snapes, Malfoys, and Dumbledores, and he couldn't see "Max" settling for one of the newer wizarding families. Not unless there was something in it for him.

"Young Potter, of course," Max said impatiently, when Snape didn't respond quickly enough.

"Potter!" Snape exclaimed. "Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Just the opposite," Max said, winking at Snape. "I expect he'll be quite the favourite when he leaves school, and I intend to lay claim before then." He quirked an eyebrow at Snape. "Don't tell me that you have aspirations in that area?"

"Don't be imbecilic," Snape snorted. "I can barely tolerate the little snot."

"Well, then," Max said, sitting back with a satisfied air, as if the matter had already been settled with the boy.

"You don't understand," Snape said impatiently. "The boy's been raised by Muggles; he won't have the slightest idea what you're suggesting. And if he did have an idea, he'd probably be disgusted."

Max waved away the suggestion. "He's a Potter, old boy. In the long run, blood will tell."

"It didn't with his father," Snape retorted. "The man married a Muggle-born witch straight out of school. Which is another thing - despite the Potter name, Harry's not a pure-blood."

Max shrugged. "In his case, I'm willing to make an exception." He leered at Snape. "Shall we place a wager on which of us gets our boy first?"

"Don't be obscene," Snape snapped.

Max stood up and stretched. "Starting to develop middle class morals, Severus? Sounds like you've been socializing with the wrong crowd. Young Draco should be just the ticket to fix you up." He winked at Snape. "I'll let you know how my progress with the Potter boy goes, shall I?"
Max walked toward the door, a swagger in his step, and only Snape's promises to Dumbledore kept him from throwing a hex at the vanishing figure. Instead, he swore out loud and in three languages, as his mind desperately raced to find a solution to this new threat to the Potter boy.

Dumbledore, he thought. Of course. Albus would be just the one to stop the Worme from getting his hands on the boy.
Announcements

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do, Severus."

Snape stared at Dumbledore, dumbfounded by the Headmaster's statement. "Don't you understand anything I just said, Albus? That - that slimy Worme intends to seduce Harry Potter!"

"Spindley-Worme," Dumbledore said absently. "And I quite understand what you said. Maximillian intends to invoke the Erastes traditions and Court young Harry. Would you care for some more tea, Severus?"

"No, I would not!" Snape said, irritated. "I would like to know what you're going to do about this!"

"What would you like me to do about it?" Dumbledore asked, refilling Snape's teacup anyways.

"Stop. Him." Snape's words were so clipped off that they barely made it past his teeth.

"I can't," Dumbledore said simply. "The Erastes Rites are older than Hogwarts, deeply ingrained into our oldest Wizarding communities, and a tradition sanctioned by the Ministry itself."

"Tradition?" Snape snorted. "Sanctioned paedophilia, you mean."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "Pederasty, which is hardly the same thing. I, myself, was eromenos and look back on the time I spent with my erastes with great fondness. He taught me a great many things - and the majority of them were not in the bedroom. We remained friends for many, many years afterwards. I doubt that I would be the wizard I am today without his influence."

"Some of us were not that lucky."

Dumbledore must have seen something in his face for his eyes softened and he reached out toward him. "Severus - "

Snape waved away his concern. "I had a choice, Albus. The fact that I made the wrong one is neither here nor there. Potter needs to have choices as well, and he won't with the Worme breathing down his neck."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "I could ask Max to wait till Harry finishes school, so that he will have a wider selection of candidates to choose from."

Snape felt relieved. "Yes."

"Of course, he would also be away from our watchful eyes, and who knows what kinds of...undesirable friendships he would form. Is it not better to have him here, where we can keep an eye on him and ensure that no one presumes too much or presses him into acceptance?"

Snape could feel Dumbledore's knowledgeable eyes on him and snarled, "Potter is not me, Albus!"

"You are right. Harry is far more trusting than you ever were and far more likely to be taken in by paper promises. Do you see why I cannot risk that happening? Why I must let Max, and any other suitors, Court Harry here?"

"Others? You can hardly throw open the gates of Hogwarts and invite in other suitors," Snape snapped, "so how in bloody hell are you planning on obtaining them? The only men from the proper background here at Hogwarts are you and Worme and, as you informed me twenty years ago, it
would not be proper for the Headmaster to display such favouritism toward a student."

"You are also from the 'proper background', Severus," Dumbledore reminded him, and his eyes twinkled as he watched Snape's eyes widen in horror.

"You cannot be serious. Potter and I loathe each other! We can hardly be in the same room together without coming to blows. To suggest that I - Court him, that I offer to mentor him, that I attempt to bed him - " Snape broke off, an unaccustomed flush spreading across his cheeks. "Albus, have you completely lost your mind?"

Dumbledore considered this for a moment. "No, I don't believe that I have. Lemon drop, Severus?"

Snape pushed himself up out of his chair and began pacing. "Me? Guide Potter into Wizarding society? Offer to teach him the finer points of good citizenship and morality? Voldemort wouldn't have to kill Potter - he'd laugh himself to death!"

"You underestimate yourself, Severus. I believe you can teach Harry a great deal."

"One hundred and one curses to use on your friends and enemies?" Snape asked mockingly.

"I was thinking more along the lines of integrity, loyalty, and courage."

Snape paused in his pacing and gave Dumbledore an incredulous look. "You make me sound like a bloody Gryffindor. I admit to nothing but enlightened self-interest."

"You can lie to others, you can even lie to yourself, dear boy, but you can't lie to me," Dumbledore said, holding Snape's eyes with his own. "Isn't it time that you forgave yourself?"

Snape's face shadowed. "Perhaps when I'm as old as you, Albus." He had a sudden thought. "You could talk to Potter. Explain the tradition but remind him that he doesn't have to follow it. In fact, discourage him from following it."

"Severus, he's a seventeen year old boy. Do you remember what it was like to be seventeen?"

Snape closed his eyes, remembering all too well what it was like to be a seething mass of hormones, ready to explode at a moment's notice. He remembered, too, how flattering it felt to be the focus of an older man's attention, how tempting the offer to have someone guide him through the world outside these walls. And all he had to do was surrender his body...

"His father didn't follow the tradition," Snape said, forcing back the memories again. "Tell Potter that."

"His father was already in love with Lily Evans," Dumbledore reminded him. "He wasn't interested in anything - or anyone - else."

"Were you - " Snape broke off what he'd been about to ask, suddenly certain that he didn't want to hear the answer.

He felt a gentle hand grasp his shoulder. "I have only been tempted to make an offer once since I became Headmaster," Dumbledore said quietly. "And it was not to James Potter."

Snape nodded, unable to say anything through the tightness of his throat. Dumbledore squeezed his shoulder once more, then moved back toward his desk.

"Well, we can't do anything about the past, but as for the future, isn't it time you allowed yourself to
enjoy life?"

Snape looked at him suspiciously. "If you even hint that I should find some nice witch and settle down..."

"Nothing of the sort!" Dumbledore assured him cheerfully. "However, it would do you a world of good to get out of the dungeon for awhile. Mingle with young people. More tea, Severus?"

"I am not going to Court Harry Potter," Snape said warningly as he resumed his seat and watched Dumbledore refill his cup. "So you can stop trying to manipulate me into doing what you want - again."

"Wouldn't dream of it, dear boy." Dumbledore held out a plate. "Scone?"

Snape sighed as he took one. Some days he wondered why he even bothered.
Harry entered the Great Hall in his friend Ron's wake, pausing for a moment to look around him. It was good to be back at Hogwarts, even if he had just had the best Christmas of his life. This year, Dumbledore had finally given into the entreaties of Arthur and Molly Weasley and Harry had been allowed to spend the holiday with them. He'd had a wonderful time, but Hogwarts was home and he was glad to be back. He didn't even want to think about leaving here for good in six months.

The Hall was half-full of people as students wandered in and out, chatting with their friends and classmates about the holidays, munching on the sandwiches and fruit the house elves had laid out for a casual supper. A glance up at the Head table confirmed that nearly all the teachers were there, most of them chatting among themselves. Except for the Potions master, of course, who sat silently watching the students. Harry felt Snape's eyes meet his for a minute and hastily looked away.

" - there's Hermione," Ron was saying as Harry caught back up with his friend. "Seamus is here, too - they must have taken the early train. Let's sit with them - oh, God, will you look at that?"

Harry glanced around in the direction Ron was indicating and wasn't surprised to see that his friend was glaring at Draco Malfoy. The blond Slytherin was surrounded by a group of his cohorts and he was displaying a handful of large, gold-coloured cards to them.

"Should have known he'd follow that tradition," Ron said disgustedly, turning his back on the Slytherin table as he sat down next to Hermione. "It's obscene."

"I don't know about that," Seamus said as Harry sat down beside him and across from Ron. "I'm a bit envious. Not likely that I'll be getting any offers, Dad being a Muggle and all."

Ron grimaced. "How could you even think about doing something like that?"

Seamus shrugged. "Granddad did and he said it wasn't so bad. Gave him a leg up in local politics."

"But - "

Seamus pointed his fork at Ron. "Better than working for years in some dead-end job at the Ministry, now isn't it? Worth putting up with a bit of slap-and-tickle for that, right? It isn't as if you've got to marry the bloke."

"Didn't do much for Percy in the end, did it?" Ron retorted. "He had a nervous breakdown and spent six months at St. Mungo's."

"Didn't expect the old man to die on him, did he?" Seamus returned. "Wasn't supposed to fall in love with him, either."

"What on earth are you two talking about?" Harry asked, bewildered about what Draco Malfoy's mail could possibly have to do with Percy Weasley.

"The Erastes tradition," Ron said impatiently.

"Oh, I've read about that!" Hermione said, and leaned across the table towards Harry. "It's derived from the Athenian traditions, started in the late seventh century B.C., and was considered an important part of a Greek boy's education. Older wizarding families have practiced it for centuries - "

"Not all of them," Ron said darkly.
"Hush!" Seamus said suddenly, and they turned to look in the direction he was staring.

At the Head table, Professor Spindley-Worme had risen from his seat and smoothed down his robes. As they watched, he picked up a large gold-coloured square and headed towards the student tables.

Towards the Gryffindor table.

Towards Harry.

Harry looked up, dumbfounded, as the DADA professor stood across the table from him and gave him a dazzling smile.

"Mr. Potter - Harry," the man said, loud enough for everyone at the surrounding tables to hear him. "I would be honoured if you would consider my poor supplication when you make your choice."

"Choice?" Harry said blankly.

Professor Spindley-Worme held out the gold-coloured envelope and winked at Harry as if they shared some kind of secret. Automatically, Harry reached out and took the envelope. The Professor retained his hold on it for a moment, and as their fingers brushed against each other Harry couldn't help blushing. Then the DADA teacher released the envelope, bowed to Harry with a flourish, and returned to his seat.

"Harry!" Seamus gasped, peering down at the envelope in Harry's hands with a combination of awe and envy. "Professor Worme - you are so bloody lucky!"

"I -"

A sudden movement at the Head table interrupted whatever Harry had intended to say. Professor Snape stood up and, with a swirl of his robes, was stalking towards the student tables. Harry glanced over at Draco Malfoy and saw him sit up straighter, preening as he watched the Potions Master approach...

And pass right by him.

Every eye was focused on Snape. Circling the tables like a large, predatory bird, he moved around the end of the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables, then around the back of the Gryffindor table as he turned back towards the Head table. Not wanting to turn his head to follow Snape's progress, Harry couldn't see him but he could track his progress by watching the other students' eyes following the man. And he knew when Snape had stopped by the sudden gasp from Ron and the widening of Hermione's eyes.

"Mr. Potter."

The deadly silken voice came from behind him and Harry closed his eyes, feeling suddenly faint. Fabric brushed against his cheek as something was placed on the table, then the overwhelming presence was moving away and Harry reluctantly opened his eyes.

Another golden envelope lay on the table in front of him, his name scrawled on the front of it in Snape's distinctive handwriting. Harry's stomach flip-flopped and he lifted his eyes to see the stricken looks on the faces of both of his friends. And, over their shoulders, he could see Draco Malfoy glaring at him from the Slytherin table.

With a little moan, he leaned over and thumped his forehead on the table.
Why did bizarre things like this always happen to him?
Ron, Hermione, and Seamus hustled Harry out of the Great Hall and up to the Gryffindor tower before anyone else could recover from the double shock. They didn't stop until they were in the Seventh Year boys' room with the door locked and warded behind them, and then the three turned and stared at Harry. He groaned and flopped on his back on his bed.

"Harry, are you all right?" Hermione asked, worriedly eyeing the lump on his forehead.

"I'm fine," Harry said irritably. "Why wouldn't I be? I've just had two of my professors propose to me in front of the entire school!"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a proposal," Hermione began.

Ron looked just about as shocked as Harry, his legs wobbling as he sat down on the floor by the bed. "Snape. I just can't - it's impossible - I mean - Snape."

"Would you stop saying his name over and over like that?" Harry snapped. He looked down at the envelopes still clutched in his hand and then at Seamus. "You seem to know a lot about this - this - whatever it is. What are these?"

"Letters of intent," Seamus said, sitting down on the floor next to Ron.

"Intent to do what?" Harry asked blankly, looking over at his best friend. Ron flushed and refused to meet his eyes, and Harry looked down at the envelopes in his lap, aghast. "You have got to be putting me on."

"Nothing like that," Seamus said, impatiently. "For one thing, they're not allowed to make any sexual advances until you've accepted their gifts, and they can't do that until the second offer. Those," he said, gesturing at the envelopes, "are just the first offer. Go on, open them up and see what they say."

"I don't want to know what they say. Can't I just burn them? Pretend I never saw them?"

"You can," Seamus allowed. "If you want the poor sots following you about the place."

Harry looked horrified at the idea of two love-struck professors following him around Hogwarts, and Hermione said practically, "You're just getting him all confused, Seamus. Better start at the beginning so that he knows what's going on."

"And just what would you know about it?" Seamus asked, a slightly belligerent tone to his voice. "Girls aren't part of the tradition."

"Which doesn't mean I haven't read about it," Hermione said, impatiently. She turned her attention to Harry. "Technically, it's called pederasty, and there were several different variations practiced in Ancient Greece. The one that wizarding society follows is based on the Athenian variation - yes, Ron, I know that not all wizarding families approve of the practice."

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"It has to do with social structure, family expectations, and so forth," Hermione explained. "The socially elite families like the Malfoys have always followed the Erastes Rites. They have more leisure time to devote to taking on a protégé, as well as having the necessary prestige and connections to offer to a prospective eromenos. Draco's father undoubtedly followed the traditions,
so he was raised to expect it as well. Middle class families rarely participate, and as Mr. Weasley probably didn't - "

"Not bloody likely!" Ron growled.

" - Ron has a certain unfavourable opinion about the tradition."

Ron gave Hermione an incredulous look. "Don't tell me that you *approve* of this?"

Hermione frowned slightly. "I don't know whether I do or not. There are certain benefits to the mentor/protégé system, but there is also opportunity for abuse."

Harry sighed. "It would help if I knew exactly what this 'tradition' is all about."

Hermione nodded. "Well, to go back to the beginning, you need to understand the Athenian traditions. The higher classes sent their sons to school to study maths, drama, music, history, and athletics. Spectators came to watch the athletic competitions, which were always performed in the nude."

"Might make an interesting twist to Quidditch, that," Seamus said with a snicker.

Hermione ignored him. "These spectators were the young Athenian elite, rich enough to have the free time, and too young to have wives. If he took a fancy to one of the boys, he would woo him, teach him the things he needed to know to be a good citizen, introduce him into higher society, and give him expensive gifts. He became the boy's erastes. In gratitude, the boy - the eromenos - would allow his erastes to, um, satisfy himself." Hermione began blushing at that.

Seamus rolled his eyes. "Oh for...she means he'd allow the guy to fuck him."

Harry flushed himself but glared at Seamus. "I'd figured that out, thanks. Go on, Hermione."

"Yes, well, once the boy became a man, the sexual aspect of the relationship usually ended. The two might part, or they might remain friends for the rest of their lives. The older one would usually marry and raise a family, while the younger might in turn become an erastes to a young boy."

Harry frowned a little. "All right, I think I understand that. It was a sort of...experimentation phase of their lives."

"Exactly," Hermione said. "In wizarding society, things developed somewhat differently. There were two priorities: the need to remain hidden from the Muggle world, and the need to pass on knowledge and traditions. Before places like Hogwarts existed, parents would teach their children what they knew which was enough for the general population. However, scholars needed to be able to share their knowledge and leaders needed to train the ones who would lead when they were gone. The mentor/protégé system was ideal for this. The brightest and best among the young wizards would be selected by older wizards who would then spend years teaching them all they knew."

"I suppose," Harry said slowly, "that living and working together like that, they would tend to become...intimate. Not much time for a wife and kids."

"Exactly," Hermione said. "As you can imagine, there was quite a bit of competition for the best mentors and the best students, and the International Wizarding Council of 483 established the first guidelines, called The Erastes Rites. As formal schools such as Hogwarts were established, the guidelines were modified until they reached their current format."

"And that would be?"
Hermione began to tick points off on her fingers. "Eromenos candidates must be at least seventeen years old and not older than twenty. Candidates still in school may only be Courted during the months between Christmas and Easter holidays, so as not to interfere with their NEWTS. Suitors must be known to the candidates, or must be personally introduced to the candidates by someone who is known to them."

"Thank God," Harry muttered, having imagined an avalanche of offers descending on him once word got out.

"All supplications and gifts must be presented in public. Candidates and Suitors may not meet privately until after the gift stage, if the gifts are accepted. A Suitor may not have sex with a Candidate until he has been accepted as erastes. A Suitor may not promise anything to the Candidate that is not within his ability to bestow. Should a Suitor violate this rule, the contract will be declared null and a severe fine will be levied upon the Suitor to compensate the Candidate. A Suitor cannot promise anything illegal or immoral, either, like the answers to the NEWTS. Once a Candidate has selected an erastes and become his eromenos, all other Suitors must end their Courting or face a severe fine. A Candidate is not obligated to select any of his Suitors -'

"So I could just ignore these," Harry said, gesturing at the envelopes again.

Seamus snorted. "Only if you want two shadows, mate. See, until you actually select an erastes or turn twenty, a Suitor is allowed to 'stalk' you. They can't talk to you privately or touch you, but until you've at least allowed them to go through the Courting ritual, they're allowed to, um, worship from a distance."

Harry tried and failed to imagine Snape worshiping him either close up or at a distance.

"Your best alternative is to let them Court you," Hermione said decisively. "Once they've gone through the steps, if you still refuse them, then they have to leave you alone."

"Thank God," Harry said fervently.

"Of course, once you leave school, others will be free to Court you until you turn twenty or choose an erastes," Hermione reminded him.

Harry groaned and pulled his pillow over his face. "Maybe I'll just find a deserted island for the next three years, or join a monastery."

"It's not all that bad," Seamus said cheerfully. "The right mentor can help you with your career."

Ron snorted. "Like 'Harry Potter' is going to need that kind of help."

"You never know," Seamus said practically. "Harry could off old You-Know-Who tomorrow, and then where'd he be? Looking for a new line of work, I think, and it wouldn't hurt to have someone easing the way."

Harry pulled the pillow off his face and said, with a grin, "Not to mention the great sex." Dead silence fell and, to his surprise, none of the three would meet his eyes. "What?"

"Harry, the sex is for the other bloke," Seamus said frankly. "His reward, so to speak."

Harry frowned and sat up. "So, what? I'm not supposed to enjoy it?"

"I'm sure your partner would make sure you weren't, um, hurt," Hermione said, hesitantly, "but this isn't a romantic relationship, Harry. It's, well, it's a business arrangement."
Harry sat stunned for a moment, thinking that this just got worse and worse. "So I'm expected to whore myself for the sake of tradition."

Ron snorted. "Got it in one, mate."

Hermione glared at Ron. "It's not like that, Harry," she said earnestly. "Most of the people who've been in this kind of relationship remember it fondly, and often remain friends for life."

"But you're not supposed to fall in love, and you don't stay together that way for life, is that what you're telling me?"

"Good thing, too," Seamus said with a grin. "Can you imagine having sex with Snape forever?"

Ron muttered, "I don't even want to imagine the greasy git naked, if it's all the same to you."

"Harry," Hermione said hesitantly, "there aren't many gay wizarding couples, if that's what you're asking. With the population so low, a wizard is expected to get married and have a family. He can still have the occasional eromenos, but his first commitment is towards his family."

"See, Ron, it could have been worse," Harry said, attempting to smile. "Lucius Malfoy could have put in a bid."

Ron made a gagging sound. "Thanks for that mental picture, Harry."

"So, what do I do with this lot, then?" Harry asked, gesturing towards the two envelopes.

"Well, unless you want Professor Spindley-Worme and Professor Snape following you about," Hermione said, "you're going to have to read those letters and send a reply encouraging them to continue their Courtship."

"But not too encouraging," Seamus warned. "Playing 'hard-to-get' is definitely called for in this game. Make it too easy for them, and word will get around that you're a slut, and you don't want that kind of reputation." He stood up and stretched. "Sorry to have to run, but I promised Dean I'd meet him after dinner."

"And I've got to get to the library, to look up something for my history essay," Hermione said, getting up as well. "While I'm there, I'll see if I can find something to help you with this, Harry."

Harry sat for a long moment after they had left staring at the unopened envelopes, then looked down at Ron, still sitting on the floor. "Ron?" he asked, hesitantly. "Are you going to be okay about this?"

Ron shrugged. "It's not like you've got a lot of choices, is it?"

"No," Harry said, sighing. "But I'd rather put up with them following me around if allowing them to Court me is going to make you uncomfortable."

Ron grinned. "Not like Snape doesn't follow you around, anyways, is it? What made him do this, d'you suppose?"

"Who knows why Snape does anything," Harry retorted.

Ron laughed. "You're right." He gestured at the envelopes. "So, are you going to read your love notes?"

Harry smacked Ron on the head with them. "I'd rather see if I can beat you at Wizard Chess."
"Dream on," Ron scoffed, but Harry was relieved to see that he was wearing his usual grin as he pushed himself to his feet and went to fetch his set. Harry looked at the envelopes one more time and then stuffed them under his pillow. There'd be time enough to read them later.
Confrontations

Snape settled back in his seat at the Head table with a smug feeling of satisfaction. The Gryffindor Three and one of their cohorts had raced out of the Hall as if a Grim was on their heels. The rest of the students were in an uproar. It was a toss-up as to who would hex him into oblivion first - Draco or the Worme. The other staff members were evenly divided between stunned disbelief and appalled anger.

His day's work was nearly complete.

With that thought, he rose from the table and headed for the quiet of his dungeons. As he had half-expected, he didn't get very far before someone shouted his name.

"Snape!"

He stopped and turned, sneering at the DADA instructor as he approached in a swirl of scarlet robes. "You have something to say to me, Max?"

Max glared as he caught up to him. "You said that you weren't interested in the Potter boy!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Did I? I must have changed my mind."

"Damn it, Snape! This isn't bloody fair!"

"Surely you don't doubt your ability to woo and win the boy?"

"Of course I don't," Max said defensively. "It's just - dash it all, man! You could have warned me first."

"I prefer the element of surprise." Snape crossed his arms over his chest and gave Max a look of sardonic amusement. "It should make the chase more...interesting for you. Unless you don't feel up to the challenge?"

Max bristled. "You're not the least bit interested in the boy!"

Snape discovered a microscopic piece of lint on his sleeve and removed it. "Actually, Harry Potter is quite attractive. I have you to thank for bringing that to my attention."

"And what about Malfoy?"

Snape's lip curled. "Malfoy Senior and I have some...ideological differences that make a relationship with his son unwise, not to mention unhealthy for my continued existence. Besides," he added with a smirk, "with all the wizards that are competing for young Malfoy, the odds for obtaining young Potter are better."

Max's eyes glinted. "I wouldn't be too sure about that, old man. I intend to win this competition."

"Perhaps you'd be interested in a small wager?"

Max grinned widely at that. "So eager to part with your money, are you, Severus?"

"Or to see you part with yours."

"Right. Fifty galleons that I win him, and another fifty that I have him in my bed before the Easter
holiday."

Snape's expression hardened but he merely said, "Accepted."

Max slapped him heartily on the back. "By Jupiter, Severus, this will be fun! You're right - it does make the chase more interesting." He winked at Snape and said, "I'd better go plan out my next Offer, then. Don't want you to get a leg up on me.' Whistling merrily, he headed off towards the Hall.

Snape stood for a long moment, clenching his fists, then turned away from the dungeon staircase and headed upwards instead.

"So help me, Albus, if he winks at me one more time, I'm going to put out his eye!"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his fingers steepled together as he watched the Potions master pace back and forth in his office. "Dear me. And here I thought it was Harry he was interested in."

Snape turned to glare at Dumbledore. "Don't be idiotic, Albus. You know what I mean. The man insists on acting as if we were bosom friends, when it must be clear that I loathe and despise the man."

"Come now, Severus; you'd despise anyone in that position, and you know it."

Snape scowled. "What I despise is slip-shod teaching methods. The man molly-coddles the students. He prefers to be their friend rather than prepare them for what is out there, and he's going to get one of them killed some day."

"I don't believe it's as bad as all that," Dumbledore said mildly. "There is the old adage about catching more flies with honey than vinegar."

"Thank you, Albus. When I want to catch flies, I'll be sure to keep that in mind," Snape said. "Right now, I have more important things to think about, like how I'm going to persuade Potter to choose me instead of that imbecile."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Severus, do you know, I don't believe I've seen you this cheerful in quite a long time. It does my heart good to see you so interested in something other than your potions. although I'm not quite certain why this sudden wish to win."

Snape's scowl deepened. "The Worme actually had the effrontery to wager that he would get Harry - Mr. Potter - into his bed by Easter holidays. It will give me a great deal of pleasure to take his money away from him."

"As well as Mr. Potter."

Snape sighed and sat down in one of the chairs. "However, I am not certain what to do with him once I have him."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Being a little presumptuous, aren't you, Severus? You don't know that you'll win."

"Oh, I'll win," Snape said. "Sniggley-Worme is entirely too honest, and I intend to...bend the rules a bit."

"You wouldn't be a Slytherin if you didn't," Dumbledore said fondly. "As to what to do with the boy
- I would think that would be obvious."

Snape glared at the Headmaster. "You know my feelings on that subject, Albus. Deflowering innocents is not to my taste."

"What about Harry's feelings?"

"I'm certain that Mr. Potter will be relieved to discover that he will not be required to warm my bed."

"And how, precisely, do you intend to explain your interest in him otherwise?" Dumbledore asked, looking at him over the top of his glasses. "Your attitude towards him to this point has been entirely negative, so it is doubtful that he'll believe you are suddenly interested in assisting him in his academic career."

"Albus, are you actually suggesting that I bugger the brat?" Snape snarled.

"Not in those terms exactly, but I would suggest that you consider that Mr. Potter is a seventeen year old boy who will be required to make an exclusive commitment for three years. While you may feel comfortable with celibacy, I doubt that it holds many attractions for him."

Snape rubbed his face with his hand. "This situation becomes more appalling with every moment."

"Then perhaps you should concede to Max."

Snape stiffened and glared at him again. "Let that insufferable bore win? I think not!"

"Well, then, I believe you have some strategizing to do," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling at Snape. "I won't keep you any longer."

As Snape found himself heading down the stairs towards the dungeons, it occurred to him to wonder just how Dumbledore always managed to get the last word.
Harry sat staring at the parchment in front of him, blank except for the nervous doodling he’d done in the corners, and his mind felt equally blank. The part of his mind that wasn’t trying to run away, gibbering. What in bloody hell did you say to two professors who’d just propositioned you? And in public!

A book thumped down on the table right in front of him and he jumped, startled. Hermione flopped down in the chair across from him, gesturing at the book as she started talking.

"The library didn't have anything - well, actually, it did, but I didn't think a four volume treatise on the Council of 483 with a detailed analysis of the Rites and subsequent changes would be your thing."

Harry managed a smile at that. "No, it doesn't sound like it would be."

"It was actually quite fascinating. Did you know that in 1193, a codicil was added to the Rules outlining what sorts of pets were permissible as gifts? It seems that the year prior, one of the Candidates was given a young chimera and it ate him."

"Loverly," Ron said, sitting down next to Harry. He picked up the book. "What is this, then?"

"The Erastes Rites, What Every Eromenos Should Know," Hermione said. "Madame Pince special-ordered it, Harry. She said it would help sort things out for you." She noticed the cards lying on the table and pointed. "That's them, then?"

"Yes," Harry said heavily. "Go ahead, have a look. There's nothing personal in them, just a request for permission to Court me. Maybe you can help me come up with a reply."

"Whoa, look at this, Harry," Ron said, flipping through the book. "It's got pictures and everything." He stared at one page, rotating the book in his hands. "I didn't think that was even possible."

Harry glanced over and, getting a glimpse, hastily pulled the book out of Ron's hands and shut it. The illustrations would be wizarding pictures. "I thought that sort of thing disgusted you."

"What, blokes with other blokes?" Ron shrugged. "I hear it's a phase some guys go through. Come to think of it, the Twins are still going through it. It's all right, I suppose, just not my cuppa." He gestured towards the cards Hermione was perusing. "That disgusts me. The whole idea of it."

"And I think it's rather intriguing," Hermione said, setting down the cards and looking over at Harry. "Have you decided what you're going to say?"

He gestured at his parchment. "Does it look like I know what I'm going to say?"

"I suppose 'bugger off' wouldn't be appropriate," Ron said, picking up the cards. "Well, at least Professor Max's sounds human. Snape's reads like he had a poker up his arse while he wrote it. Probably did, the perverted git."

"I think Professor Snape's is lovely," Hermione objected. "It's dignified, and shows a remarkable sensitivity towards the situation and Harry's feelings."

Ron snorted. "Right. Catch Snape feeling 'sensitive' about anything, much less caring what Harry felt."
"He must care or he wouldn't have approached Harry," Hermione argued.

"Probably just horny," Ron retorted. "Bet it's been decades since he last got any. What's wrong with Professor Max's note, then?"

"It's," Hermione hesitated. "It's too familiar, too casual. As if he's asking for a quick snog in the Charms cupboard, instead of a life-changing decision."

"Probably is," Ron said, grinning. "Speaking of which..." He suggestively flexed his eyebrows at Hermione.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, for Merlin's sake! Harry needs our help."

"That's all right," Harry said morosely. "I'm thinking about crawling back in bed and pulling the covers over my head."

"That won't solve the problem at all," Hermione said practically. "Look, why don't you just say something like you're honoured to be considered, and that you need more information because you hadn't expected this."

"You're telling me," Harry muttered, obediently writing on the parchment. "Can I send the same thing to both of them? I couldn't possibly come up with a different way to say this for each of them."

"I think that's a good idea," Hermione said, nodding. "Keeps the playing field level, so to speak."

"Now can we go off for a quick snog?" Ron asked plaintively.

"Go on," Harry said, continuing to write. "I'm just going to copy this over, then read a little before bed." He didn't look at the reference book but the flush in his cheeks probably told them what he was intending to read.

Hermione let Ron take her hand and pull her over to a shadowed corner of the Common Room. Harry watched them wistfully for a few minutes, wishing that he had something like what they had, then resolutely turned his attention back to the parchment.

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**Professor Snape,**

*I am honoured that you think I am worthy of your consideration. I admit I had not imagined such a possibility for my future, nor am I certain that it would be in my best interest to accept such a relationship. However, I am intrigued by the idea and, should you wish to discuss this matter further, I would be willing to listen.*

*Sincerely,*

*Harry Potter*

Snape studied the parchment delivered by Potter's owl, an amused curl to his lips. The boy must have gotten Granger to assist him in the writing of it. It was highly unlikely, based on his past class work, that he could have put thoughts of any complexity on paper. There was also a stilted manner to the wording, quite unlike the boy's usual insolent forthrightness. Oddly enough, he missed that. At any rate, he thought, glancing at the parchment again, the boy had a decent hand when he put his mind to it. Perhaps he'd be useful copying things out for Snape. He'd have to have *something* to keep the boy busy for three years.
"Snape! Take a look at this and get ready to pay up."

Snape looked up as the DADA professor swept into the staff room and tossed a parchment on the table in front of him.

"'Intrigued by the idea', he says, although he hadn't considered it before. What d'you think of that?"

Silently, Snape handed Max his own parchment to read. The look on the man's face as he read the identical words was priceless, and Snape was almost grateful to Potter for that.

"Well. Well, of course the boy had to send the same message to each of us, so we wouldn't know which of us he favours. Very clever of him, that, in case we compared notes."

"Very lazy, is more likely," Snape said, taking back his own note. "Used his quota of multi-syllable words for the week and couldn't be bothered to look up others."

Max frowned. "You don't think much of the boy, do you?"

Snape contemplated his steepled fingers. "On the contrary. I think Potter is of above-average intelligence, although he chooses not to use his brains more than once a year. His courage is unlikely to be equalled, as is his blind recklessness. If he somehow manages not to kill himself on one of his hare-brained adventures, he will undoubtedly become one of the finest wizards of his generation." He paused. "Not that that is saying much."

"Why, Severus!" McGonagall said, coming into the room in time to hear this speech. "I do believe that is the nicest thing you've ever said about Mr. Potter."

"Please do not repeat it in his presence, Minerva," Snape said. "I do not wish to inflate his self-image."

McGonagall gave him a look he couldn't interpret. "I don't think you have to worry about that, Severus."

"Minerva!" Max said, crossing the room to take her hands in his. "Dear lady, you have come at a most opportune time. I will need a chaperone for my meetings with young Harry, and I can't imagine anyone better than the Head of his House. Will you do me the honour of favouring us with your presence?"

McGonagall looked over at Snape questioningly and he nodded. "Very well."

"You have made me supremely happy," he said as he lifted each of her hands to kiss them. "Farewell for now. I must go cudgel my brains and prepare my strategy."

"That won't take long," Snape muttered as the man hurried out, and he lifted an eyebrow at McGonagall's amused snort. "Minerva, I get the distinct impression you don't care for our esteemed colleague."

"He's a decent enough teacher, but I trust him about as far as I could throw him."

"You don't trust me, either," Snape pointed out.

"Ah, but I know you, Severus," she said tranquilly. She settled in the chair next to him. "Are you sure that you're comfortable with me chaperoning his meeting with Harry? The Rules forbid me from chaperoning for you as well."
Snape gave her an amused half-smile. "I have made prior arrangements. The Headmaster will be chaperoning my meetings with Potter."

McGonagall chuckled. "I'd forgotten just how devious you can be, Severus."

He inclined his head graciously. "Thank you."

"I have a class in a few minutes, but I wanted to give you this." McGonagall handed him a small notebook. "Harry's Transfiguration journal from his First Year."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Why on earth would I want his journal?"

"Because Harry kept appallingly bad Transfiguration notes...but he wrote about a great many other things, not expecting anyone would read this. Some of those notes might give a person ideas about just what young Mr. Potter wants most in this world." McGonagall stood up and headed towards the door.

Snape looked down at the small journal and then up at the Transfiguration teacher. "Minerva, you would have made an excellent Slytherin."

"Don't be insulting, Severus," she said, pausing in the doorway to look back at him, an amused gleam in her eyes. "I have ten galleons on you in the staff pool, and I really hate to lose."

The door closed behind her, cutting off the sound of Snape's laughter.
"Harry, are you all right?" Ron whispered to him as they slid into their seats in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. "You look bloody awful."

Harry felt awful. He'd stayed up way too late reading the night before, and then had overslept and missed breakfast. His stomach growled to remind him of that oversight. "I'm fine. Someone forgot to wake me for breakfast, though."

Ron flushed and suddenly seemed to have trouble meeting Harry's eyes. "I - we - that is, I didn't get back to the room last night."

Harry gave him a surprised look. He'd been so absorbed in his reading that he'd missed the other boys coming to bed, and he'd just assumed Ron had been with them. "Then where did you..." He broke off as he saw Ron's blush deepen. "Oh. Right." Hermione, as Head Girl, had her own room, although it appeared she'd had a roommate the previous night. They were silent for a minute and then, curious, he asked softly, "How was it?"

Ron's face lit up with a look that made Harry feel peculiar. "It was brilliant," he replied, dropping his voice so that only Harry could hear him. "Not that we got everything right, you know, being our first time, but it didn't seem to matter because it was...us. Probably doesn't make any sense, that," he added sheepishly.

"Actually, it does," Harry said and sighed. He wondered if he'd ever find something like that in his life, especially considering the new twist it had taken. It would have been nice to think that his eventual partner in these Rites would be interested in his pleasure as well. However, while last night's perusal of The Book had certainly opened his eyes in regard to what wizards did together, the descriptions of the eromenos' role as a "passive vessel" had been discouraging, to say the least. His brief fantasies about an older and more experienced lover taking him in hand and teaching him about the pleasures of the flesh had dissolved in the light of reality. And he felt increasingly discouraged about his prospects afterwards, since the other thing last night's reading had confirmed was that he was more attracted to men than women. Not only was he a freak as far as the Dursleys were concerned, he was apparently one in the Wizarding world as well.

He realized that Ron was looking at him quizzically and managed a smile. "I'm happy for both of you," Harry said sincerely. Ron grinned back at him, and then Professor Spindley-Worme entered the room so they turned the attention to the lesson.

"During the next six months, we will be reviewing everything you've learned over the last six and half years, in preparation for your NEWTS," the DADA professor announced. "I would recommend that you pull out all your previous notes and spend at least an hour every night revising. I know," he said as the students groaned, "that it isn't 'fun', but neither would failing and repeating this year."

Harry kept his eyes on his paper as he jotted down Professor Max's instructions, reluctant to let his eyes meet the other man's. Given the circumstances, it felt peculiar to be just going about his classes as if everything was the same.

"So, who can tell me about Red Caps?" Several hands shot into the air. "Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville paled a little but he stammered, "They're small, goblin-like creatures who - who bludgeon their victims and - and use their blood to dye their caps."
"Good, Mr. Longbottom. Five points. Now, who can tell me two things that discourage them? Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked up, startled at hearing his name called out since he hadn't been paying attention. He surreptitiously placed his hand over the picture he'd been doodling on the edge of his parchment and tried to recall the current lesson. "Um..."

"Miss Granger?"

"Crosses and cross-handled swords," she answered promptly.

"Very good, Miss Granger, Mr. Potter. Five points each."

Harry blinked and his mouth nearly fell open. He hadn't even answered, just stammered stupidly, and the professor had given him points. That didn't seem right but he couldn't exactly accuse the man of blatant favouritism, could he? After all, it wasn't as if certain other teachers didn't play favourites, too, but this felt different. It wasn't about Gryffindor; it was about Harry.

Feeling more than a little uneasy, Harry kept his eyes down and his mouth shut during the rest of class.

As they headed off to their next class, Harry regretted that he'd dropped Divination the previous year. Exhausted as he felt, he could have used a good nap. He managed to remain awake somehow during Arithmancy, and was relieved to finally head to the Hall for lunch. The only thing that reduced his appetite was the knowledge that his next class was Double Potions.

He made sure he arrived in plenty of time for class, taking a seat next to Neville as Ron slid in beside Hermione. The Slytherin contingent arrived a few minutes later but Harry ignored them, keeping his eyes fixed on his parchment again as he copied down the instructions from the board.

"Well, well, if it isn't Hogwarts favourite little catamite," said a familiar drawling voice, and Harry could feel the presence of someone at his elbow. He drew in a deep breath and continued doggedly, ignoring Draco. However, he could see Ron stiffen on the bench in front of him.

"You should talk, Malfoy," Ron snapped. "How many cards did you have? Seven? Ten? Whoring yourself to the entire Ministry, are you?"

"No, I leave that to the Weasleys," Draco said sweetly.

"Yes, I imagine you're very good at handling your - "

Harry sighed and stood up as well, holding out his arm to keep Ron from launching himself at Draco. "Thanks, Ron, but I can handle this myself."

"Oh, yes, I imagine you're very good at handling yourself," Draco said, smirking. Harry glared at him but before he could say anything, the door slammed open and the Potions master made his usual brisk entrance into the room.

"There will be no brawling in my classroom, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley," Snape said, swiftly making his way to the front of the room. "Ten points from Gryffindor. Each."

Ron glared at Snape but dropped back into his seat without a word, having learned the futility of protesting over the past seven years. Harry sat down as well and resumed his copying, oddly relieved that Snape was no different. He was still as blatantly unfair as ever.
Snape reached the front of the classroom and turned around, glaring at the room in general. "Mr. Malfoy, do you require assistance in locating your seat?"

Draco, who was still smirking down at Harry, looked up in surprise. "No, Professor."

"Then I advise you to take your place now, or I will require you to remain after class to reacquaint yourself with it."

*And then again,* Harry thought, *maybe not.* He felt Draco move away and dared to look up at Snape for a brief moment before looking back down.

Snape was glaring at the entire class. "Today we will work on one of the potions required for you to pass your NEWTS at the end of the year. Since I doubt that any of you will actually *succeed* in making the potion correctly, we will be repeating this lesson several times over the next six months. I suggest that you strive to absorb *something,* as I have no desire to teach any of you imbeciles again next year."

Harry could feel Snape's eyes on his face briefly before they moved away. "Miss Granger, switch places with Mr. Longbottom and endeavour to keep Mr. Potter awake. I would hate to have this class' pitiful attempts ruined by Mr. Potter landing face-first in a cauldron. One explosion per class is my limit - I do trust that you won't disappoint me in that, Mr. Longbottom?"

Harry looked up briefly as Hermione and Neville changed places, and he caught Snape's eyes on him. For a brief instant, he thought he saw a hint of concern and sympathy in those dark eyes before the man turned away in a swirl of robes to begin lecturing them about the potion they were about to make. For some reason, that made Harry feel oddly warm inside.
Communications

Harry sat nervously poking at the food on his plate. It had been three weeks since he'd received the cards, two weeks since he'd replied, and according to Seamus, it was time for his prospective suitors to make their next move. Seamus had been vague on specifics, but The Book had said that the traditional next step was a declaration that the suitor intended to continue their pursuit and a request for a private meeting, in the presence of a chaperone. The idea of an intimate (okay, semi-intimate) meeting with the two older men made Harry's stomach do funny things, and he didn't know whether to hope that both men had changed their minds, or hope that they hadn't.

Draco Malfoy had been receiving Owls ever since dinner started, and each time a new one arrived, he aimed a smug look in Harry's direction. The excited exclamations from the Slytherin table and the expectant looks along his own table killed what little appetite Harry might have had. By the time dessert appeared on the table, Harry was so edgy that every movement at the Head table made him jump.

"Look at that one," Dean said, gesturing towards an owl that had just entered the Hall bearing an enormous bouquet of flowers in his beak. He sniggered. "Wonder who sent Malfoy that."

"Don't think they're for Malfoy," Seamus said, watching as the owl headed in their direction. "I think they're for Harry."

"That's against the Rules," Hermione said, frowning. "No gifts until after the second offer and the private meeting."

The owl landed on the table in front of Harry and laid the bouquet on his plate. "Um, thanks," Harry said, giving the owl a few tidbits off his plate. He picked up the flowers and looked for a note or a card. "There's nothing saying who they're from."

"Well, they're definitely not from Snape," Ron said dryly.

Harry set the flowers back down. There was a sudden Pop! that made them all jump, a puff of bright red smoke, and then an envelope sat in place of the bouquet, with a single red rose lying across it. Harry flushed as all of the girls at the table sighed dreamily over the romantic gesture, and reluctantly he opened the envelope. There was a single piece of paper inside and he pulled it out.

Harry,

I received your missive with delight and humble gratitude. Your statement that you had not expected to receive such attentions made me smile. Dare I say that your modesty does you great credit? However, too much modesty can be as great a failing as too much pride, and I look forward to the day when I might be allowed to help you take your place in the Wizarding World as one of its shining lights. Forgive my forwardness if I presume too much - your sweet shyness makes me bold.

Would you do me the great honour of taking private conference with me Saturday afternoon? Professor McGonagall has graciously loaned us the use of her office for the occasion. Lest you worry that propriety be overcome, I hasten to assure you that Professor McGonagall will be on hand to chaperone the meeting.

I wait in hourly anticipation of your reply,

Your Devoted Servant,
Harry felt slightly nauseous, a feeling that wasn't helped by Dean and Seamus smirking at him across the table. He could feel Hermione lean closer and heard her softly ask if he was all right, and he managed to nod. Somehow, he had clung to the thought that the whole thing was some elaborate joke, a prank perpetrated by Malfoy and abetted (however unlikely) by his friends. However, the letter was all too real. Professor Spindley-Worme really was, as impossible as it might seem, lusting over him, and his own Head of House obviously expected him to follow through with these traditions. And Professor Snape - was he lusting over Harry as well? Or had his part in this whole thing been merely another attempt to humiliate Harry? After all, the Professor had yet to send him a Second Offer - something he was certain Malfoy would all too gleefully point out.

Involuntarily, his eyes went to the Head table and, to his surprise, he found that Snape was watching him intently. The Potions master looked away immediately, turning his attention to a house elf standing beside him for a moment before the house elf disappeared...

...And reappeared next to Harry, holding out an envelope. "Professor Snape asks Zepie to give this to Harry Potter, sir."

Harry swallowed hard and took the envelope with shaking hands. "Thank you, Zepie."

The house elf smiled delightedly at him. "Harry Potter is welcome, sir." He disappeared, and Harry slowly opened the envelope.

There was a piece of paper inside - and something else. Something a little thicker and rectangular in shape. Although he was dying to know what it was, he pulled out the paper first and spread it open.

Mr. Potter,

I am relieved to discover that seven years in this institution has instilled something in you, even if it is the art of diplomacy. Either that, or your skills in dissembling have improved considerably. I doubt that there are many in the wizarding world, and certainly none among your peers, who would agree that I honour you in any way through my "consideration".

I suspect that, unless you are considerably denser than I had thought, you have wondered if this is some elaborate prank. It is not, for I despise pranks and would not willingly participate in one. Neither is it an attempt to humiliate you for my own enjoyment. Your performance in my class offers me ample opportunity for that. I am sincere in my desire to assist you in finding your place in the Wizarding world, and to protect you from those who would use you for their own purposes. If you have difficulty reconciling that with what you know of me, please direct your attention to the enclosed item. I believe it will explain my motivations to your satisfaction.

As is customary in this situation, I have arranged for us to meet in the Headmaster's office, Sunday, 8pm. Do not be late, as the Headmaster and I have quite enough to do without waiting about for you. The password is "treacle tarts".

Respectfully,

Severus Snape

Harry couldn't help an amused snort - it was so like Snape to insult him liberally while at the same time pursuing him. He pulled out the enclosed item, took one look at it, and gasped so loudly that everyone at his end of the table turned to stare.

"Harry?" Ron asked, concerned. "All right, there?"
In reply, Harry jumped up and ran out of the Hall, Snape's letter clutched in his hand and quite unaware that he had left Professor Spindley-Worme's letter sitting on the table.

A surprised silence fell over the room, and then excited chatter filled the air. At the Head table, Max gave Snape a smug, triumphant look, and McGonagall leaned over to murmur, "I'm so sorry, Severus. Harry didn't appear to like whatever it is you said."

Snape allowed a slight smile to touch his lips and shrugged slightly. "It doesn't matter, Minerva. I shall persevere."

At the Gryffindor table, Ron and Hermione exchanged a look. "I'd better go after him," Ron said, getting up.

"I'll go with you," Hermione said, picking up the other letter and rose. "Harry forgot these."

They slipped out of the Hall and made their way up to the Gryffindor dormitory, where they found Harry sitting on his bed, staring intently at something. Tear tracks streaked his face, but when they entered he managed a smile and rubbed them away with his sleeve.

"Are you all right?" Hermione asked, sitting down on the end of the bed.

"What in bloody hell did that bastard say to you?" Ron demanded.

In reply, Harry handed him a rectangular card. Ron stared at it in surprise. It was a wizarding postcard, a picture of some kind of ancient ruin on it. As he watched, the picture panned so he could see a grassy hillside, then bright blue water, and finally the laughing face of a young woman with long red hair. He flipped it over and read the writing on the back, then handed it to Hermione. She glanced at the picture, turned it over, and read aloud:

Sev,

You were right - Corfu is amazing. The ocean is so blue and so clear that you can see the bottom, and I actually swam with dolphins yesterday! Can you imagine? And these ruins - I can feel the power in them still, and it makes me feel so incredibly humble. Don't laugh - it can happen.

I imagine you are huddled over your books and cauldron, hardly even noticing that it is summer. Next year, I will drag you with us, no matter how much you protest. Mother says we will visit Egypt, just to tempt you further, and I absolutely refuse to consider it without you, my dearest friend.

Lily

"That's your mum, isn't it, Harry?" Ron asked, sitting down on the bed and gesturing to the card. Harry nodded. "So they were friends, then. Weird."

"You're telling me," Harry said fervently.

"It does explain why he's always looked out for you, in a way," Hermione said slowly. "We thought it was because Dumbledore wanted him to, or because your father saved his life, but maybe it's because he loved your mother."

Ron made a face. "Ew! Wanting to shag Harry because he and Harry's mum were friends - that's just wrong in so many ways."

Hermione gave Ron an exasperated look. "Ron, I didn't mean that kind of love. Even Snape's not that twisted."
"Wanna bet?" Ron muttered.

"Did he say anything about your mother in his letter?" Hermione asked Harry.

He handed her Snape's letter. "Just that the card would explain his motivations."

Hermione scanned the letter, snickering at part of it, then handed it to Ron. "Not exactly a romantic declaration, is it?"

"The Book says they're not allowed to make any romantic overtures until after the first date," Harry pointed out, "although Professor Max's letter comes close. Oh hell!" he said, remembering his flight from the Hall. "I left it on the table."

Hermione held up the letter and the rose. "I brought them up for you. Shall I put the rose in water?"

Harry flushed and rolled his eyes. "Right. I'm a guy, in case you hadn't noticed. Next you'll be suggesting I press it in a book as a keepsake."

Ron, who had plucked the DADA professor's letter out of Hermione's hand to read, tossed it back at Harry. "I dunno, Harry. As one of the 'shining lights' of the Wizarding world, you might want to have it bronzed or something. Could put it in a museum someday. Wait - your 'shy sweetness' wouldn't allow that, would it?"

Harry grabbed his pillow and whacked Ron over the head.

"Professor Snape?"

Snape looked up from the essays he was grading and scowled. "Potter. I don't recall requesting that you remain after class, your poor performance notwithstanding."

"You didn't, sir. I wanted...I needed to talk to you."

Snape sat back in his chair and frowned. "I assume that you are aware that this is expressly against the Rules."

Harry took a couple steps forward, grinning. "Well, you know me and rules..."

Snape snorted at that and crossed his arms. "Very well. Say whatever it is you have to say and get out."

Harry cleared his throat, flushing a little, and took a step closer. "It's about that card. The one in the letter. I just wanted to say...to tell you..." Giving up on words, he leaned closer and quickly kissed Snape's cheek. "Thanks." He beat a hasty retreat towards the door.

"Potter!"

Harry stopped in the doorway, swallowed hard, and looked back at Snape. The tone of voice had been sharp, and the frown on Snape's face was terrifying, but there was something...peculiar in his eyes. Something almost...soft. "Sir?"

"You're welcome. Now get out."

Harry grinned, relieved. "Yes, sir!" He hurried out the door, then stuck his head back in. "Sunday night, 8 sharp, the Headmaster's office. I'll be there, sir."
Snape sat at his desk for a long moment after Harry had left, staring at the empty doorway, then slowly reached up and touched his cheek. "Albus," he murmured, "what in bloody hell have you started?"
Private Moments

McGonagall looked up as Harry hesitated in the doorway to her office. "Mr. Potter, do come in and close the door behind you."

Harry obeyed, although he was puzzled. "I thought I was supposed to meet Professor Spindley-Worme."

"That is correct, but I wanted to meet with you privately first, to make sure you understand what is happening." She gestured towards a chair and, when Harry had seated himself, leaned forward. "Harry, since you were raised by Muggles, you may not be familiar with the traditions invoked through the Erastes Rites. I want you to understand that you are not bound to accept anyone who Courts you, now or after you leave Hogwarts."

Harry was relieved, but couldn't help saying, "Seamus says that they can stalk me, though, and that the offers can go on for years."

McGonagall nodded. "That is correct. Until you agree to a contract or turn twenty, you are eligible to be Courted."

Harry sighed. "Then I don't see that I can not accept someone, unless I want to go into hiding for years."

"Most young men don't have that problem, but because of your fame..." McGonagall sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. Now, do you have any questions about your meeting today?"

"Not really," Harry said, flushing as he said, "Hermione got me a book."

"Good," McGonagall said briskly. "Then you are aware that Max cannot touch you or ask you any intimate questions, and that I will be present the entire time." Harry nodded. "If you are uncomfortable at any time, let me know and I'll end the meeting. Otherwise, it will last one hour."

Harry smiled faintly. "Thanks."

McGonagall's usually stern face softened slightly. "It'll be all right, Harry," she said quietly. "You will see." She stood up and went to the door. "Max, you may come in now."

The DADA professor entered the room quickly, and a smile lit up his face when he saw Harry. Harry had to admit that the older man was good-looking. Not as flashy as Lockhart, of course, but still attractive enough to turn heads. For the first time, he wondered why the professor was interested in him. He was certainly no beauty, not with his ugly glasses and unruly mop of hair. Professor Spindley-Worme could probably have his pick of partners, so why would he want an inexperienced kid hanging around him for three years? Snape he could sort of understand; the man had been watching out for him for years and it was probably a habit by now. But Professor Max?

"Harry!" Max said delightedly, crossing the room with his hands held out. McGonagall cleared her throat and shook her head at him, and he pouted at her. "Surely one brief embrace?"

"It's against the rules," McGonagall said primly.

Max sighed dramatically and looked at Harry, rolling his eyes. Harry couldn't help laughing at that, and Max seemed pleased at that response as he dropped into a seat next to Harry. "Harry, once more, I want to thank you for considering me. I expect this has all been a bit strange, yes?"
"Just a bit," Harry admitted. "Actually, more than a bit. I'm not even sure what we're supposed to be talking about here, Professor."

"Max, please," the DADA professor corrected, smiling at him in a way that made Harry blush. "After all, I hope we're going to become good friends. And what we're supposed to be doing is getting to know each other a little better. So, I know that Quidditch is your game - what do you think about the Richmond Raptors' chances to win their division this year?"

"The Raptors?" Harry asked, snorting in disbelief. "You must be having me on! Their Seeker couldn't catch the snitch if you dropped it in his hands! Now the Birmingham Blizzards..."

Their discussion of the merits of various teams drifted into a debate about the new rules, and from there to improvements in equipment. They were deep into a discussion on various types of racing brooms when Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Time, gentlemen."

Harry blinked, unable to believe that an hour had passed by so quickly. And so enjoyably, too, although Professor - Max probably thought he was a complete idiot, going on about Quidditch when they were supposed to getting to know each other better. He stammered an apology, but Max waved it off.

"It's perfectly fine, Harry," Max assured him, winking as he added, "At least I have no doubt what your interests are."

"But we didn't discuss your interests," Harry protested.

Max shrugged. "We can do that at our next meeting." McGonagall cleared her throat and Max grinned as he leaned forward to say in a stage whisper, "I forgot I'm not supposed to say anything about that." Harry laughed at that and Max, audaciously, grabbed Harry's hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it before McGonagall could intervene.

"Professor Worme!" she said frostily.

Max dropped Harry's hand and backed away, grinning as he said, "I'm going! I'm going! Later, Harry." Whistling jauntily, he headed out the door, leaving a slightly stunned Harry behind him.

At the feast that night, McGonagall paused by Snape's seat at the Head table to murmur, "You've got your work cut out for you," before continuing on to her own seat.

Snape glanced over at the Gryffindor table where Potter and his cohorts had their heads together, obviously discussing his meeting with the Worme earlier that evening. He looked back at Minerva, his eyes narrowing in consideration. Technically, the chaperones weren't supposed to discuss what took place in private with anyone outside of the room, but a true Slytherin never let a technicality stand in the way of a goal. Besides, he happened to know that Minerva had a weakness for Peach Schnapps...

Dumbledore looked up with a warm smile as Harry entered his office. "Harry, my dear boy! Please, sit down. Lemon drop?"

Harry accepted one of the candies, more to have something to do than out of a real desire for it. "I'm not late, am I? I thought Professor Snape would be here already."

"Oh, he'll be along shortly," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling at Harry. "I asked him to give me a few minutes with you first."
Harry frowned. "Professor McGonagall already went over the rules, sir. Is there something else I should know?"

"No, no, just wanted to make sure that you were comfortable with all this."

"Frankly, sir," Harry said. "I'm not. I mean, I hadn't even thought about dating anyone, and suddenly I find out that I'm supposed to pick some guy to spend up to three years of my life with. It's a bit much to take in."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm certain it is. However, you mustn't dwell on the negatives, but rather on the positives. You are unfamiliar with much of the wizarding world, Harry. Having someone show you around, get you started in whatever career you wish to pursue, can be a great benefit."

Harry looked down at his hands. "The thing is, I'm not even sure what I want to do with my life. Other than outlive Voldemort, of course. Hermione and Ron - they have all sorts of plans for after they leave here: getting married, Hermione going for her teaching certificate while Ron enters Auror training. Even Neville's got a position with a herbal research company lined up."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his eyes fixed on Harry. "Most people start with what they like to do, what they do best."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what I do best. Play Quidditch, I suppose. Not to mention fighting off Voldemort and his friends. But I don't know if I'm good enough to play professionally, and..." He looked up at Dumbledore. "I don't want to hurt anybody. Not unless I can't help it."

"I understand," Dumbledore said quietly. "However, you do not need to make any decisions today," he said, his eyes twinkling at Harry again. "This is just an informal getting-to-know-you date."

Harry blinked. "Date?"

"For lack of a better word, yes."

"Oh, God," Harry said faintly. He was on a date with Severus Snape. Sirius was going to kill him when he heard about this.

Dumbledore didn't seem to notice as he had turned his attention to the doorway. "Come in, Severus! Precisely on time, as always."

"Headmaster," Snape said formally, inclining his head to Dumbledore. He turned to look at Harry and saw that the young man was staring at him with a deer-caught-in-the-wandlight expression on his face. He couldn't help smirking. "Potter."

"P-professor," Harry stammered, then flushed as he realized how stupid he sounded.

"Shall we have a cup of tea?" Dumbledore asked, apparently ignoring the fact that this "date" was getting off to a less-than-perfect start.

Harry took his cup thankfully, glad to have something to do with his hands as he settled back in his chair. Snape looked equally relieved to have something to distract him, and for several long minutes there was nothing but the sound of tea being drunk.

"Dear me, I quite forgot!" Dumbledore said suddenly. "Minerva was feeling a bit under the weather earlier - something she ate or drank, I believe - and I promised to check on her." He stood up as he said, "I'll just use the other fireplace to speak with her. I won't be a moment."
Under Harry's dumbfounded gaze, Dumbledore disappeared into the adjoining room, carefully leaving the door open. He looked back at Snape. "Is he supposed to do that?"

Snape snorted. "I've found that Albus generally does what he wishes, never mind the rules." He took a sip of tea and couldn't help adding, "He was a Gryffindor, after all."

Harry snickered. "Can't you just see him, sneaking about the castle after curfew, getting up to mischief?"

"All too easily," Snape said dryly.

Sharing a joint laugh about the Headmaster made Harry feel much more at ease and he said, shyly, "Thank you again for the card. It meant a lot to me. I - I brought it with me today, if you'd like it back."

Snape frowned. "Why would I want it back?"

Harry shrugged. "Well, it was obviously important to you, or you wouldn't have kept it all this time. Were you in love with my mother?" he blurted out. As Snape raised an eyebrow, Harry flushed and said, "Sorry. I know it's none of my business but, well, I wondered."

Snape sighed. "Mr. Potter - "

"Harry."

Snape frowned. "What?"

"If we're dating, shouldn't you call me 'Harry'?" he said patiently.

Snape considered this for a moment. "Very well. You may call me 'Severus', when we are in private. Not 'Sev' and never 'Sevvie'."

Harry grinned at the thought of calling the stern Potions master 'Sevvie'. "Mum called you 'Sev' on the postcard."

Snape's face softened slightly. "Your mother was a very special person."

"So - were you?"

"In love with Lily Evans?" Snape asked. "I loved her, yes. One could hardly help loving Lily. But 'in love' with her?" He shook his head. "Even if my preferences ran in that direction, it would have been hopeless. She was in love with your father from the time we were Fifth Years."

"You don't like redheads?" Harry asked. "What are your preferences, then? Blonds? Brunettes?"

Snape smirked. "My preferences have little to do with colouring, and more to do with gender."

"Oh," Harry said, then realized what Snape had said and his eyes widened. "Oh! But doesn't that make you abnormal?" He flushed. "I didn't mean that you were abnormal, I meant...oh, hell."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Language, Mr. Potter."

Harry sighed. "Seamus said that most wizards settle down with a wife and family after their 'experimentation' phase."

"Loathe though I am to contradict Mr. Finnegan's vast knowledge on the subject, the fact is that a
certain percentage of wizards continue to prefer their own gender, although it is true that very few same-sex marriages exist.

"Phew," Harry said, breathing out a sigh of relief. "I thought there was something wrong with me." He saw Snape's other eyebrow rise and laughed. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Too easy, Mr. Potter. Harry," Snape said, a gleam in his eye that Harry would have sworn was a smile. He laughed again. "I take it that you mean that you feel a preference outside the norm?"

Harry shrugged. "I'd never really thought about it. When I was a Fourth Year, I had a crush on a girl. Cho Chang. But then Voldemort came back, and I've been so busy just trying to stay alive that I haven't had time to pursue anyone."

"Then what makes you so certain?"

Harry flushed and looked down at his hands in his lap. "Hermione got me a book, to help figure out all this. There are some...pictures in the back."

"Ah," Snape said, nodding his head. "The Erastes Rites: What Every Eromenos Should Know. The drawings are rather good."

Harry blinked at him. "You've read it?" he blurted out.

Snape gave him an exasperated look. "Harry, attempt to use your brains for once. I was eromenos myself, twenty years ago."

"You were?" Harry asked, surprised, then flushed. "Oh, of course you were. That's how you know all this stuff. Who - " He broke off, blushing even more, and mumbled, "Sorry, none of my business."

Snape was quiet for a moment. "I thought that one of the faculty members here at Hogwarts would make me an offer, but he did not. Then I thought perhaps he was waiting till I was no longer a student. I was so certain... On the last day of the year, I went to him. He told me that because of his particular position here at Hogwarts, he wasn't allowed to take an eromenos. Ever. I returned home, feeling angry and rejected, that I'd been led on. While I was visiting relatives, Lucius Malfoy introduced me to the man he'd just finished serving as eromenos. This man was - incredible. Attractive, powerful, intelligent, and he was very interested in me. No one had ever been so focused on me. He promised me knowledge and power, and I believed him."

"I hadn't been with Tom Riddle a month when I realized that he had lied."

Harry's eyes widened. "Voldemort?"

Snape nodded. "I was trapped. I had been too intoxicated by his attentions to look out for my self - a very un-Slytherin thing to do - and by the time I thought to read the contract, it was too late. He followed it just enough to ensure that I couldn't dissolve the contract for breach of promise, and made the next three years of my life...difficult."

Harry's eyes darkened. He hated to think of anyone in Voldemort's clutches like that, especially Snape. He blinked and wondered where that thought had come from. "How did you end up here?"

"The day the contract ended, I fled. I didn't know where to go and somehow I ended up here. Albus took me in, gave me work to do, and a home."

"A home," Harry said softly. "I know what it's like to want that."
"I expect that you do," Snape said quietly. He quirked his eyebrow at Harry. "You do realize that we have discussed items that - technically - are out of bounds at this point?"

Harry grinned at him. "Then perhaps it's just as well that the Headmaster had to step away for a few minutes."

Snape chuckled. "I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that he'd planned this."

Harry couldn't reply. He was too busy staring at Snape, stunned at how his face changed when he laughed. He was almost - attractive, in a dark and deeply sexy way. Oh yeah, he thought to himself. *Sirius is going to kill me.*
Somehow, Harry wasn't surprised to receive an owl from Sirius the next day, asking him to come to Hagrid's hut after classes. He sighed, wondering how he was going to explain this situation to his godfather, while at the same time hoping that Sirius would have some practical advice for him - like how to get out of this mess.

Hagrid opened the door and beamed at him. "Harry! Come on in, have a seat. I have tea ready for you, and I baked some cakes earlier." In a loud whisper, he said, "Got something to tend to outside, so I'll let you and Black have a little privacy."

Harry nodded his thanks and hesitantly stepped closer to the fireplace. Sirius was up from his chair in a moment, folding his arms around him in a tight hug, and Harry clung to his godfather for a long moment. It felt so good to have Sirius there, and he was so ready to shift his burdens to someone else for a change.

"Let me take a look at you," Sirius said, holding him out at arm's length. "God, Harry, you've grown so much. Look more like your father every day."

"You look good, too," Harry said. He knew from their infrequent meetings and letters that Sirius was staying with Remus Lupin whenever he wasn't running errands for Dumbledore, and it was apparent that his life agreed with him. He looked more like the man in his parent's wedding picture and less like the desperate escaped criminal every year. "How's Professor Lupin?"

"Very well. Sends his love, and I'll tell him you were asking about him." He turned to the teapot, pouring them each a mug, and sat down in one of the chairs by the fireplace. "Well, Harry, this is a big year for you, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. "I think I'll pass my NEWTS with no problem - Hermione's making Ron and me study every night."

Sirius nodded. "Not only that, but you've got a big decision to make about who to take as your erastes."

Harry spewed his mouthful of tea across the room. "What? You know about that?"

Sirius gave him a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I know about it? Been a tradition for centuries, hasn't it? I was eromenos myself."

"You were?" Harry gasped.

"Of course. Most of the older wizarding families follow the practice. It's tradition, Harry."

"My father?"

"Well, no," Sirius admitted. "But then, he had Lily, didn't he? Being Muggle-born, she wouldn't have quite understood him making her wait three years to get married. And of course Remus couldn't, being a werewolf and all. But Peter did." His face darkened at the mention of his traitorous ex-friend. "He went to MacNair, in the Ministry."

"That's probably how he met Voldemort," Harry said. "MacNair's a Death Eater."

Sirius looked at him in surprise but then, after a moment's thought, nodded. "Wouldn't surprise me.
Always thought the man liked his role of executioner too much."

"What about you?" Harry asked curiously.

A little smile curved Sirius' mouth. "Ah, well, mine was an Auror - not one you'd know. Helped me a lot with my training, things that saved my life a couple times. Those were good years."

"Then you didn't mind the...you know?"

"The sex?" Sirius gave him an amused look. "Harry, I lost my virginity at fifteen and pretty much went after anything on legs. Geoff was a good friend - and a good teacher. I don't regret a moment I spent with him."

"So what happened? If he was such a good friend, why didn't he try to help you when you were arrested?"

Sirius' sighed and sat back in his chair. "He was killed during a Death Eater raid six months before your parents died."

"Oh." Harry didn't know what to say to that.

"I miss him still," Sirius said quietly, the added briskly, "Enough about me. I take it that you've already learned something about the Erastes Rites."

Harry nodded. "Hermione got me a book."


Harry flushed, not sure that he wanted to picture his godfather pouring over the sexually explicit drawings in the back. "Um, yeah."

He could feel Sirius' sharp eyes on him. "Harry, are you a virgin?" Harry nodded, too embarrassed to reply. "Nothing to be ashamed of, my boy. We'll just need to make sure we fix you up with the right sort of man, one who'll know how to take proper care of you."

Harry frowned at that, not sure if he liked the idea of someone 'taking care of him'. On the one hand, it would be nice to share some of his burdens with someone else. On the other hand, he'd been taking care of himself since he was a child and he resented the idea of someone bossing him around. "I've already had two Offers."

Sirius brightened at that. "Two already? I knew you'd be a popular one, Harry. Who are they from?"

"Um, well, the first one of from Professor Spindley-Worme. The Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

Sirius frowned in thought. "Hmm. Well, the Worme family is good enough - goes back to the Conqueror and all that. Don't think much of this hyphenated name business, though. Word is that his grandmother - that'd be Lucinda Spindley - had the old man wrapped so tight that the man couldn't sneeze without her permission. What's the man like?"

Harry shrugged a little. "He's a pretty decent teacher, went to Beauxbaton - "

"That's not what I meant, Harry."

"Oh. Well, I suppose he's good looking, and he seems pretty nice," Harry said vaguely, then added,
"He knows a lot about Quidditch. We had a nice talk the other night."

"Alone?" Sirius asked sharply.

"No, Professor McGonagall chaperoned us."

"Good," Sirius said. "I'll have to check around, see what I can find out about this fellow. In the meantime, make sure he follows the rules. No patty-fingers or snogging until we see what kind of compensation he's prepared to come across with." Harry flushed a little and Sirius said, with a growl, "You haven't been letting him touch you, have you?"

"Not exactly," Harry said quickly. "He kissed my hand, that's all. And Professor McGonagall scolded him for that."

"All right, then."

Harry decided not to tell Sirius about kissing Snape on the cheek; in fact, he hoped that his godfather would forget all about the other suitor. Unfortunately for him, Sirius didn't.

"Who's the second suitor?" Sirius asked. Harry mumbled and Sirius frowned. "Speak up, Harry. I couldn't understand a word you said."

Harry sighed. "Professor Snape."

"What?!" Sirius surged out of his chair, his face livid and his hands clenched. "How dare that greasy bastard lay a hand on you!"

"Um, Sirius, he hasn't," Harry pointed out. "He's Courting me, just like Max."

"Max," Sirius said suspiciously. "Who the bloody hell is Max? I thought you said you had two offers, not three."

"Professor Spindley-Worme," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "That's his first name."

"And who said that you could call him by his first name?"

"He did," Harry said promptly. "In fact, they both said I could call them by their first names."

"I'd like to know where Snape gets off thinking he has the right to Court you, much less ask you to call him by name," Sirius snapped.

"He meets all the qualifications," Harry said. "He knows me, he requested permission properly, and he was a perfect gentleman during our private meeting. The Headmaster was our chaperone." Harry decided not to mention that Dumbledore had been out of the room for at least fifteen minutes. "Hermione says that the Snapes are one of the oldest wizarding families in Britain."

"He's a Dark Wizard and a Death Eater."

"He was a Death Eater," Harry said patiently. "Then he spied for Dumbledore. And he was almost killed two years ago when You-Know-Who came back. He can't even leave Hogwarts now because of that."

Sirius frowned at him. "Harry, it sounds like you like him."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know about that. I mean, he isn't very nice and he certainly isn't fair. But he's very smart, and I think he's a good person." He hesitated. "Sirius, did you know that he was
good friends with my mum?"

Sirius sighed. "Couldn't help but know that. She was Ravenclaw, and they had several classes with Slytherin. Lily and Snape were almost always class partners. Even after she and James started dating in Fifth year, she studied with Snape nearly every night. She always took his side and wouldn't speak to me for a month after - um - "

Tactfully, Harry ignored the reference to the Shrieking Shack incident. "He gave me a post card she sent him from Corfu."

Sirius smiled a little wistfully. "That was the summer after our Sixth year," he recalled. "I remember the letters she sent James, and the pictures."

Harry felt a little pang of sadness for Snape; if that was the Sixth year summer, then he probably didn't get to see Egypt with Lily after all. By the following summer, he was contracted to Voldemort.

"Sirius, you're not going to forbid me to see him, are you?" he asked.

"Can't," Sirius said with a sigh. "Doesn't mean I have to like it, though. And I want to remind you that just because these two are Courting you doesn't mean you have to accept them. I expect you could do much better if you wait till summer when you'll have a wider choice of suitors."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Harry said with a sigh. "A lot of people after me because of what I am - the Boy-That-Lived - and not who I am."

"Harry, it's not like we're talking about the love of your life," Sirius said, a bit taken aback by the sadness in Harry's voice.

Harry snorted. "Right. It's not like I'd be allowed to fall in love with whoever I choose, is it?"

Sirius blinked at Harry and then said, carefully, "Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Harry?"

Harry gave him an uncertain look, then sighed. "I think - no, I'm pretty sure that I like boys better than girls."

"Pretty sure? From what I gather, you haven't tried either so far, so how can you know?"

"Because looking at guys makes me hot and looking at girls doesn't?" Harry said sarcastically.

"Harry, it's not the end of the world," Sirius said, reaching out to hug the young man. "There's not as many wizards who prefer other blokes, but there are some, not to mention Muggles. You're young and I'm sure you'll find someone, so just think about this whole erastes thing as practice."

Harry buried his face in Sirius' shirt and said, "I don't suppose there's a chance I can just forget the whole thing, is there?"

"Not much," Sirius said, reluctantly, "being who you are. But if you want to do that, I'll find a way. I promise."

On the following Saturday morning, gifts starting arriving. Malfoy's gifts, at any rate. Seamus kept them informed of the items as well as a running total, much to Ron's disgust and the amusement of the rest of the Gryffindors, except for Harry. He was too busy trying not to think about what gifts his own suitors would send.

It was during lunch time that Harry caught sight of an owl making its way towards the Gryffindor
table, an oddly familiar looking bundle clutched in its talons. He'd seen one like that when he was a First Year, as a matter of fact. The owl released the package above him and Harry caught it, then set it down on the table.

"Who's it from?" Seamus asked, his eyes scanning along the length of the wrapped broom.

Ron snorted. "As if Snape would send Harry a broom."

Harry found the attached card and read it. "It's from Professor Max. I told you we talked about Quidditch and brooms and stuff, remember? He says that he has a friend who works with one of the manufacturers, and that he thought I'd enjoy this."

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Dean asked impatiently.

Harry grinned and tucked the card in his pocket, then tore open the wrappings. Dead silence fell over their end of the table as everyone stared at the broom lying there.

"I've never seen anything like it," Ron breathed, his eyes running over the broom from the tip of its handle to the sleekly shaped bristles.

"I have," Seamus said reverently. "One of the players on the Ireland team has a custom job, looks just like this. Well, except for that."

_That_ was the place where the logo would normally be. Instead, there was a lightning bolt design bracketed by an "H" and a "P".

"Whoa," Ron said, taking in the full effect. "If I'd known the professor had friends like that, I'd have asked him to Court me."

That made everyone laugh, breaking up the awed tension. "Harry, are you going to try it out?" Neville asked.

"Now _that's_ a bloody brilliant idea," Ron said. "The pitch should be empty right now. Harry?"

Harry could hardly take his eyes off the broom, and suddenly he wanted to try it out more than anything else. He looked up at Ron, grinning. "Let's do it."

The group of Gryffindors headed for the doors, laughing and talking excitedly, leaving behind the wrappings...and Hermione. She had been silent during the uproar over the professor's gift, and there was a thoughtful frown on her face as she watched them leave.

"Miss Granger."

Startled, Hermione looked up to see Professor Snape standing beside the table, looking irritated as if he'd had to repeat her name more than once. Or maybe he was just in his usual foul mood. "Professor Snape! Sorry - I was thinking."

"How unusual," Snape said dryly.

Hermione noticed that the Potions master was holding a box in his hands and she had a sudden horrible feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Are you looking for Harry? He just left..." Her voice trailed off, not wanting to tell Snape that Harry had just hurried off, clutching his rival's gift.

Snape raised an eyebrow at her, and she blushed as she realized he must have seen the whole scene. "I am well aware of that. If it would not be too much trouble, would you give this to Mr. Potter when
Hermione carefully took the box and looked down at it, curiously. It appeared to be full of letters, dozens of them, and she suddenly realized what they must be. She looked up at Snape in surprise, oddly touched by the gesture. "Sir, I'm sure Harry will love this," she said warmly. "It's very kind of you."

Snape sneered at her. "Really, Miss Granger, there is no need to apply such disgusting sentiments. They were merely lying around my chambers. I am relieved to be rid of the clutter."

Hermione bit her lip to keep from grinning. Each letter appeared to be perfectly preserved and dust-free, which meant someone had taken a great deal of care with them. "Of course, Professor," she said stoically. "I'll make sure Harry gets them when he returns."

Snape nodded and strode off toward the Head table, his robes swirling behind him. Hermione watched him speculatively for a few minutes, then took the precious box up to the safety of her room.

Harry entered the Gryffindor common room, grateful for the warmth of the fire. He'd spent the better part of three hours on the pitch, testing out his new broom and letting his friends try it as well. He grinned as he recalled the incandescent look on Ron's face when he offered him the first go on it, and his friend had been nearly speechless when he reluctantly landed to pass it on to the next person. Seamus and Dean had been equally thrilled, and although Neville had declined a ride, he clearly enjoyed watching his friends swooping about. Madam Hooch had joined them at the end as she was getting ready to oversee the Ravenclaw Quidditch practice, and she'd praised the broom highly as well.

It was really splendid of Max - Professor Max - to go to all that trouble for him, he thought. Harry had only a vague idea of what such a thing must cost, based on the price of his two previous brooms, but Seamus had explained that it wasn't just the cost. Getting a broom manufacturer to custom build a broom was nigh on impossible, unless you were a big name Quidditch player who'd get them plenty of free press. He supposed, with a cynicism he'd slowly developed during the past six years, that they'd make some of that up by advertising how they'd supplied the Boy-Who-Lived with a custom broom, but it was still a nice gesture.

"How was it?"

Harry turned around to see Hermione curled up in one of the chairs by the fireplace with a box on her lap. He grinned at her. "It was brilliant! I've never flown so fast, and the way it manoeuvres - I swear it was like it was reading my mind."

"Sounds wonderful," Hermione said. "Didn't the others come back with you?"

"They were frozen solid so they went to the Hall to see if they could get one of the house elves to fetch some cocoa." He gestured towards the box on her lap. "What's that? Another button campaign?"

She held the box out to him. "Professor Snape brought this by for you."

Remembering his other Suitor now, Harry was curious about what Snape would have chosen as a gift for him. Harry carefully leaned his broom against the wall and took the box from Hermione. It was an open box, about as big as a double shoebox, and it appeared to be full of envelopes. He sat down on the floor, the box in his lap, and pulled out the first one. There was a subtle feeling of magic
bound into the parchment and he had a sudden premonition about what he was about to see. With slightly shaking fingers, he unfolded the letter and recognized the flowing script he'd seen on the postcard. The heading of "Dear Sev" and the signature confirmed that the correspondence was, indeed, from his mother to Snape. Carefully, he tucked the letter back into the envelope, to be read later in private, and saw that the outside of each envelope had a date neatly written on it in Snape's distinctive handwriting. Closer inspection confirmed that the dates had been recently added and, as he estimated there were close to fifty letters, the thought of how much time it had taken to sort and label each overwhelmed him.

"They're from your mother, aren't they?" Hermione asked quietly. Harry nodded, biting his lip at the sudden rush of emotion. "He must have really liked her, to go to the trouble of preserving them and keeping them so long."

"He told me he loved her - not in a romantic way, but as a best friend," Harry said quietly, his fingers ruffling through the envelopes. He caught a glimpse of something in the bottom of the box and frowned. "Hang on; there's something else in here." Carefully, he set the letters on the floor beside him and stared, dumbfounded, at what he'd found. It was obviously a wizarding photo from his parents' wedding, this one of his mother with her family. He recognized Aunt Petunia, standing off to one side and scowling at the camera, and couldn't help grinning at the thought of how miserable she must have been. An older couple stood behind his mother, beaming first at the camera and then his mother, and he realized that they must be his Evans grandparents, who had died when he was little. How proud and happy they looked, he thought, and wished he could have known them.

On the other side of his mother stood Snape, Lily's hand tucked in his arm. Harry was stunned at how good Snape looked, not the least bit the ugly, greasy git that his godfather had described. Sure, his features were too harsh to be termed beautiful, but there was something distinctive about that face. And when he looked at Lily, a fond look softened his features and made him almost approachable. Of course, a moment later he glared out of the picture at Harry, scowling as if to say, "What are you staring at, Potter?" and Harry couldn't help snickering.

He glanced at the back of the picture and saw an inscription penned, "To my honorary brother, Severus. May you one day be as happy as I am today." Blinking back sudden tears, he passed the picture on to Hermione and found, to his surprise, that there was still something else in the box.

It was quite obviously a manuscript, "Charms through the Centuries" written across the front of it with "by Lily Evans Potter" written below. Carefully, he lifted the bound pages out and flipped through the manuscript, noting the occasional corrections and comments penned in red ink by Snape. He flipped to the back of the manuscript and found Snape had scrawled, "On the whole, a well-crafted piece of work, and one that will no doubt make your name famous throughout the wizarding world. Congratulations, Lily."

The tears that he'd been fighting wouldn't be held back anymore and one splattered on the cover. He scrubbed his eyes with his sleeve, then carefully wiped the teardrop away before it could smear the ink, although he supposed that Snape had set a preserving spell on this as well.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, a concerned tone in her voice.

"Ever since I came to Hogwarts," Harry said, his voice strained with emotion, "I've heard things about my dad. What a good Quidditch player he was, how well he did in his classes, all about being Head Boy. Sirius talks about him all the time, the things they did together, the jokes and the pranks they got up to. Even the Headmaster tells me about him, but no one ever talks about my mother, except that she was Head Girl and loved my father and me. Aunt Petunia won't even say her name, and I don't even remember my Evans grandparents. I just - I've always wanted...no, I've needed to
know more about her than that she was pretty and smart, and now Snape..." He paused, dragging his sleeve over his eyes again.

"I understand," Hermione said quietly, handing the picture back to him.

Harry put it back in the box on top of the manuscript, then carefully set the letters on top. "I - I'm going up to my room, now. If Ron and the others come back, would you let them know that I need a little private time?"

Hermione nodded, and Harry climbed the stairs to the Seventh Year dorm. He climbed into his bed, closing the curtains and setting a privacy spell around the bed. Carefully, he pulled out the picture and set it on the bed before him, then he found the first letter, dated "Christmas Holidays, 1971" and began getting to know his mother.

Downstairs, in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione contemplated the brand new racing broom, leaning against the wall where Harry had left it, and smiled.
"So, Harry," Seamus said, grinning at him across the breakfast table the next morning. "I expect Professor Max is at the top of your list now, eh?"

Harry shrugged. "It was a nice present."

"Nice?" Dean said. "Nice is your great-aunt giving you hand-knitted socks for Christmas. That broom was incredible!"

"Are you planning on taking it out again today?" Ron asked between a mouthful of toast.

"Maybe later," Harry said. "I've got some reading I want to finish up first." There was dead silence at the table and he looked up to find all the Gryffindors at his end of the table staring at him. "What?"

"You'd rather study than fly?" Ron asked, a stunned look on his face.

Harry grinned at that. "Well, no, but this is important, too. And we've got Quidditch practice this afternoon, so I'll fly it then." Noticing the crestfallen look on Ron's face, he added generously, "You can take it out this morning, if you'd like."

The look Ron gave him was its own reward. "Really?"

"Of course." He looked over at Seamus and Dean. "You can use it, too, but Ron's in charge."

The three of them shot out of the Hall, and Harry didn't even try to suppress the grin on his face. He turned his attention back to his breakfast, his thoughts on the letters he'd read last night. Although he'd stayed up half the night reading them, he felt pretty good this morning. His mother's writing had revealed her to be a warm, kind, and generous friend with a sharp wit and marvellous sense of humour. It was no wonder that Snape had loved her; the wonder was that Snape was in any way interested in her son.

"You were up late last night."

Harry looked up, surprised, to see Neville sitting across from him. "Um, yeah. Didn't mean to keep you awake."

"You didn't. I only noticed because I woke up once and saw the light. It didn't keep me awake, though." There was an awkward silence for a few minutes, then Neville said, "Was it his gift? I suppose he gave you a p-potion book or something."

"No. I mean, yes, it was Professor Snape's gift, but no, it wasn't a potion book. It was letters, from my mother. Oh, and a book, too, one that she wrote. I don't suppose it ever was published, though. I'd have seen it in the library."

Neville nodded. "Any good?"

"Don't know, really. I just glanced at a couple of the pages."

"No, I mean the letters."

"Oh. Yes, they are. They were friends, you see, and she wrote to him during the breaks. He didn't go home during Christmas." Harry paused. "He didn't seem to go anywhere. I mean, you'd think she'd say something about what he'd said in his letter back, but she only talks about him poring over his
books. She was always trying to get him to come with them on their summer trips but he turned her down. Got the feeling that his parents didn't approve of him hanging about with Muggles, you know? Makes me feel a bit sorry for him, actually." He flushed as he realized that he was talking to Neville about the Terror of his existence. "Um, sorry. Didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. We can talk about something else, if you'd like."

"No, that's all right." Neville's mouth quirked up in a smile at the corner. "I like to think he was once human, at any rate."

Harry laughed. "Hasn't changed that much, to go by Mum's letters. She was forever teasing him about his attitude, and the way he ripped up at people. Said he needed her around to keep him even halfway civil."

"I can't imagine talking to Snape like that," Neville said with a slight shudder.

"Neither can I."

"But you do, Harry," Neville said, and he looked squarely at Harry. "You have from the first day of class. You're not afraid to stand up to him, and I think that's why he likes you."

Harry blinked. "You must be daft. Snape doesn't like me. He detests me."

"He detests you so much that he's Courting you, not to mention giving you a present like that?" Neville asked pointedly. With a wistful sigh, he said, "I'd give anything to have something like that from my parents." He thought for a minute then added, "Well, almost anything. I wouldn't date Snape."

"I'm not dating..."

"Mr. Potter."

Harry broke off, flushing red as he realized that the man they'd been discussing was standing behind him. "Sir?"

Snape raised an eyebrow as he looked both of them over. "Whatever have you two been talking about, to look so guilty?" He turned his attention solely to Harry and said, "The Headmaster and I will expect you in his office tonight at eight, for our second meeting. I assume that you have no prior plans?" Wordlessly, Harry shook his head. "Very well." He started to turn away, then looked back at them and said, "I trust that whatever you are plotting will not involve any breaking of school rules? I would dislike having to rearrange my schedule around your detentions, Potter."

A week ago, such a comment would have made Harry blurt out a heated rejoinder, but that was before the letters. Now, he couldn't help but notice that the snarky sarcasm was actually amusing, and he grinned at Snape. "I'll endeavour not to get caught, sir, so as not to ruin your plans."

Snape raised his other eyebrow at that, and Harry could have sworn that the lips twitched in something that might have been a smile. Either that or indigestion. "See that you do, Mr. Potter." He glanced over at Neville. "Mr. Longbottom."

They watched as he went off towards the Head table in a billow of robes, and Harry idly wondered if Snape could teach him that trick. It was impressive as hell. Or maybe you had to be as tall as Snape was to pull it off successfully.

"Harry?"
Harry realized that Neville had been repeating his name and groaned as he covered his face with his hands. "Oh, God, Neville - I'm dating Professor Snape."

Neville gave him a lopsided grin. "About time you noticed."

Harry irritably thought that everyone seemed determined to keep him from returning to his room to finish reading. An owl had arrived from Sirius full of conflicting advice on dealing with his suitors, as well as a offer to get "some of the Order of the Phoenix chaps" to introduce Harry to other suitors. Harry had had to detour to the owdelry to send him a quick reply asking him not to do that. Professor Spindley-Worme had caught up with him on his way back from sending the owl, and had solicited him for a meeting that night at seven-thirty. Draco Malfoy and his cohorts had blocked his escape up the main stairs to taunt him about his suitors, and only the arrival of Professor McGonagall had driven them off. However, his Head of House had then wanted to talk to him about his plans for the future, and it was only by promising faithfully to report to her office at seven that night for a discussion that he was able to get away.

Once back in the Gryffindor dorm, he took out his mother's manuscript and sat looking at it for a few long moments. Part of him wanted to keep it to himself, to selfishly cherish this remnant of his mother, and part of him wanted to make sure that her work received the recognition it deserved. He doubted that Snape would have written that comment on the manuscript if it hadn't been truly good, friends or not, but the fact was the work was almost twenty years old. He had no way of knowing whether the material was outdated or not, but he knew someone who would know. Someone he'd seen working in a quiet corner of the common room as he passed through it. Carefully, he locked the letters back in his truck and took the manuscript down to the common room.

Hermione looked up at him as he approached and she smiled. "Hello, Harry. I thought you'd be out with the others."

Harry sat down at the table. "I need to ask your opinion about something." He set the manuscript down on the table and pushed it across to her. "It was in the box. My mother wrote it."

Hermione looked up at him in surprise, then down at the manuscript. "Professor Flitwick told me once that Lily Evans was one of his best students. Would you like me to read it and tell you what I think?"

"Yes. Please." As she pulled the manuscript closer, Harry felt an irrational impulse to pull it away from her, and he clasped his hands tightly in his lap to resist the urge. "I'd like to see about having it published, although it might need some reworking if the material is outdated. Would you consider helping me edit it? I'd make sure that you receive co-authorship credit, and I can pay you - "

"Harry," Hermione said, interrupting him. "It would be an honour. Thank you for asking." Carefully, she picked up the manuscript and began leafing through the pages. "It's had a preservation spell cast on it. That should protect it against any damage, but I'll be very careful with it."

"Thanks," Harry said. He stood up, reluctant to leave this piece of his mother with anyone but knowing it needed to be done. "I've got to get to practice now."

Hermione nodded, already absorbed in the manuscript. Harry hurried upstairs to grab his winter robes, then hurried outside to join his team-mates.

Professor McGonagall opened her office door and smiled at Harry, gesturing for him to enter. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Potter," she said, gesturing for him to take a seat. To his surprise,
instead of settling into her usual chair behind her desk, she took the seat next to him. He looked at her inquiringly.

"Mr. Potter," she began, then smiled faintly. "Harry. We probably should have had this discussion a while back but..."

Harry gave her a wry smile. "But we weren't sure if I'd survive You-Know-Who, so there wasn't much point in looking into the future. Still might not be, for that matter."

"Well, you can hardly drift through your life, however long or short it is," she said briskly. "Have you had any thought on what you'd like to do once you leave school?"

Harry sighed. "The Headmaster asked me that, too, and I don't have a burning desire to do anything in particular. I like Quidditch but I don't know if I want to spend years as a second string Seeker on a minor league team till a place opens up on a national team. I'm good at Defence Against the Dark Arts, but I don't want to be an Auror, to kill people. I don't have a burning desire to teach, either." He shrugged. "I suppose I'm just...waiting for the right thing to come along."

"The right thing - or the right person?"

Harry looked up, startled, to see that McGonagall was intently studying him. "I'm not expecting some knight in shining armour to come along and make everything easy for me."

"Harry, you have had a hard time, dealing with everyone's expectations about defeating You-Know-Who. It would not be surprising if you wanted someone to take care of everything else for you."

Harry frowned. "So you think I'm buying into this whole Erastes thing because I'm looking for someone to take care of me?"

Carefully, McGonagall said, "I wouldn't blame you if you were, Harry. Everyone needs to know someone cares about him or her. I just want you to be certain that you are thinking with your head, not with other parts of your anatomy." He dropped his eyes, flushing a little at that, and she chuckled. "I meant your heart, Mr. Potter, but yes, you shouldn't think with that other part of your anatomy, either, no matter how tempting it might be."

He lifted his head and fixed his eyes on her. "What do you think I should do, Professor?"

McGonagall sighed. "I'm afraid I can't make that decision for you, Harry. However, don't let anything or anyone, including your friends, rush you into deciding. When the choice is right, you will know it."

Harry nodded, knowing that she was right but also a little disappointed. It seemed that no one, including the Headmaster, Sirius, and Professor McGonagall, was going to help him out in this situation. He was on his own - again.

There was a knock on the door and McGonagall gave him a faint smile. "That will be Professor Spindley-Worme. Are you ready?" Harry nodded again, and she went to the door to let in the DADA instructor.

Harry could see that Professor Max was in high spirits tonight. He greeted McGonagall with enthusiasm, going so far as to bestow a kiss to her cheek that Harry was amused to see made her blush. Then he turned to Harry with equal enthusiasm and, for one horrific moment, Harry was afraid that Max was going to kiss his cheek as well. However Max restrained himself to grasping Harry's hand and kissing the back of it, with a roguish look at McGonagall as he did.
"Well, Harry," Max said, taking the seat next to Harry's but not releasing his hand. "Did you like my present?"

Harry smiled, nodding enthusiastically. "It's incredible - I've never seen anything like it. And the way it flies!"

"You won't see anything like it," Max said, winking at him. "I had it custom made with the latest innovations, some that won't be on the market for years. You'll be able to fly circles around every other Seeker."

"Unfortunately, Mr. Potter won't be able to use that broom as Gryffindor Seeker," McGonagall said. "It would be completely unfair to the other teams, since they can't hope to equal its performance."

"Of course not, but that won't matter in the professional leagues," Max said, waving the hand that wasn't holding Harry's dismissively. He leaned slightly closer to Harry. "That's what I wanted to discuss with you tonight. I've got a number of contacts within the Quidditch leagues, and I've lined up two potential offers. One is with the Cheshire Comets - their Seeker is retiring this year and, since they want to retain their place at the top of their league, they are looking for a top talent to replace her. The other is with England's national team. You'd be reserve Seeker, but there'd be plenty of opportunities for you to fill in, not to mention what you'd learn from playing with top-level players. And the way England's playing, I wouldn't be surprised if they're in the World Cup next year."

Harry blinked, dazed by the unexpectedness of the offers. "Playing professional Quidditch? A World Cup team? Me?"

Max laughed and squeezed his hand. "Oh, Harry! This modesty of yours is really charming. Do you really not know how excellent a player you are?"

Harry flushed and gently extricated his hand. "I thought I might be able to get a place as second string in a minor league, but not in any of the top teams."

"That's not all," Max said, beaming at Harry's bewildered delight. "As your manager, I'll be able to get you the best sporting goods available - robes, padding, practice snitches, anything you need. The endorsements will make you a household name around the wizarding world."

"Harry is already quite well known," McGonagall reminded him.

"For something he did as a baby, Minerva. Harry will be famous now for what he's doing as an adult."

Harry blinked. That had always bothered him, being famous for merely surviving Voldemort's attack. He had felt like a fraud, nearly as bad as Lockhart, as if any moment someone would reveal him to be undeserving of his fame. To earn a real reputation because of something he did, something that didn't require killing anyone, was very tempting.

"And where would Mr. Potter live?" McGonagall asked.

"With me, of course," Max said promptly. "I would need to relinquish my position here at Hogwarts - as Harry's manager, I would be far too busy. I thought perhaps a flat in London," he said, turning his attention back to Harry and smiling. "Of course, you'll be on the road with the team a good part of the time, but everyone needs a home base to come back to."

Harry thought that "home base" sounded less satisfying than "home", but he'd never known a true home and anything had to be better than the Dursleys. That reminded him of something else. "And would you want a traditional erastes/eromenos relationship?"
Max looked a little surprised by the question. "Of course. I would hope that we'd remain friends once the contract was up, but that would be entirely up to you."

"I meant sexually," Harry said bluntly.

Max chuckled. "You are direct, aren't you, Harry? Very well. Yes, we would have the usual sexual relationship. I assume you've read about that?" Harry nodded. "Good. As you will be travelling quite a bit, I believe my requirements of you will be light. And, of course, I will not require your fidelity as long as you are discreet."

"And you wouldn't be faithful to me, either." Max looked at Harry, surprised, and Harry made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I know - that's in the manual, right?"

Max grinned at Harry, looking relieved. "Ah, you are teasing me!" He waggled a finger at Harry. "You have a wicked sense of humour, my boy. I like a show of spirit, but you'll need to watch yourself in public. Wouldn't want to get a reputation for behaving improperly, now, would you?"

"No, I suppose not," Harry murmured.

"Well, then, I suppose it is all settled," Max said, rubbing his hands together delightedly.

Harry looked up in a panic, wondering if he had somehow committed himself to Professor Max without realizing it, and glanced imploringly at Professor McGonagall.

"Now, Max," she said reprovingly.

"I know, Minerva, I know," he returned, and then winked at Harry. He did that a lot, Harry thought, and wondered if the man had some kind of problem with his eye muscles. "The formalities must be observed."

"Harry," McGonagall said, focusing his attention back on her. "Professor Spindley-Worme will draw up a contract stating the specifics of his offer. You'll have a month to negotiate the terms of the contract, during which I will serve as facilitator. You may continue to see each other outside these rooms, but only in public. Private meetings are absolutely forbidden, as is explicit sexual contact. At the end of the month, just before the Easter break, you must accept or decline the contract. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded. "Very well, then. I believe this meeting is over. Harry, you have a meeting with the Headmaster now, don't you?"

Harry nodded and rose quickly. "Thank you, Professor." He gave Max a shy smile. "Professor - Max. Thank you for your time and trouble."

"It's no trouble, Harry," Max said genially. "Perhaps you'll let me walk you to the Headmaster's office?" He guided Harry out of McGonagall's office and, as they entered the quiet hallway, breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief. "By Jupiter, I'm glad that part is over! That woman intimidates the hell out of me. I always feel like a misbehaving First Year when I'm in her office."

Harry snickered at that. "I know what you mean. Makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, too."

"I certainly didn't feel comfortable enough to do this."

Before Harry could do more than squeak in surprise, Max had pulled him into his arms and kissed him. Harry was more than a little stunned at receiving his first kiss from a man, but before he could decide whether he was angry or aroused, Max had released him and was grinning at him roguishly.

"Sorry, Harry, just couldn't resist another moment," Max said, not looking the least bit sorry.
"You might have asked," Harry pointed out a little breathlessly.

"I might have." Max reached out to run a finger along Harry's lips and Harry had the absurd urge to lick it. "May I kiss you, Harry?"

"The Rules -"

"- forbid intercourse, but not kissing or touching." Max held up his hands defensively. "I promise not to molest you unduly."

Harry couldn't help laughing at that. "All right, then. One kiss, no groping or anything like that."

"You are such a prude," Max teased, but he carefully took Harry in his arms and kissed him.

The second time around was better than the first - at least this time he was prepared - and nothing like the one time he'd kissed a girl. For one thing, the body he was pressed against was roughly his own height and didn't have any soft bits to squash against him. For another, the slight scratch of beard stubble against his chin and cheek wasn't anything like a girl's soft skin. He decided that he liked being kissed by a man, liked it a lot, and wondered idly if it would feel the same to kiss Snape or if he liked it because it was Max.

"There," Max said, smiling as he slowly releasing Harry. "Better?"

"Yes." Max looked like he'd like to kiss him again, and while part of Harry decided that sounded just fine, the rest of him was aware that he was going to be late for his meeting with the Headmaster...and Snape. "Um, I've got to go."

Max reluctantly let him go. "I'll see you tomorrow, Harry."

Harry nodded and hurried off towards the Headmaster's office. He had a feeling that he looked like he'd been snogging and hastily tried to smooth down his unruly hair as he rode the stairs up to the door. Both Snape and Dumbledore were there when he entered. He flushed and stammered out an apology for keeping them both waiting.

"It's quite all right, Harry," Dumbledore said genially. "I'm aware that you've had a busy evening. In fact, Severus was just telling me that you missed dinner in the Hall, so I had the house elves bring up some sandwiches."

Harry looked over at the Potions master, startled that Snape had noticed and even more surprised that he'd been concerned enough about it to mention it to the Headmaster. "Thank you, sir."

Snape waved a hand dismissively, an irritated look on his face. "It would disrupt matters considerably if you fainted from hunger."

Harry helped himself to a sandwich and a glass of pumpkin juice. "It's very good," he said around a mouthful of food.

Snape rolled his eyes. "You really are an appalling brat, Potter."

Harry grinned. "Yeah. And it's Harry, remember?"

Snape noticed that Dumbledore was watching them both with interest and said hastily, "I believe you're aware of the purpose behind this second meeting."

Harry nodded and washed down his sandwich before replying. "You're supposed to tell me, in
general terms, what your formal offer will be."

"Exactly." Snape steepled his fingers together, staring at them instead of either Potter or Dumbledore. "I am aware that you have not yet determined what to do with your future, in the unlikely event that you should have one beyond Voldemort's demise."

Harry blinked. "That's bloody cold."

"It is the truth," Snape said. "As ill-prepared as you are, Voldemort will snap you as easily as a twig."

"I've done all right till now," Harry said, bristling.

"You've been lucky till now," Snape said crisply. "You cannot count on such 'luck' to hold out in the future."

"And what damn business is it of yours?" Harry retorted.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "If you accept a contract with me, I think it becomes very much my business. I would dislike being caught in the fall-out should things go pear-shaped."

Harry couldn't help grinning at that. "I expect you would."

"Therefore, I offer to teach you everything I know, everything that will help you defeat Voldemort. And since I have three years' intimate acquaintance with the Dark Lord as his eromenos, I believe you will agree that I know a considerable amount."

Harry glanced quickly at Dumbledore, wondering if he'd known the extent of Snape's involvement with Voldemort. Catching the sorrowful look on the Headmaster's face, a few of the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. No wonder Dumbledore trusted Snape explicitly. No wonder Snape always ended up doing his bidding, no matter how much he bitched about it. If things had been different...

He felt a touch of jealousy at that thought and looked back at Snape. "Well, that might help me survive Voldemort, but it doesn't help me decide what to do with my future, does it?"

"It gives you more time to decide and a place to stay for the duration."

Harry went suddenly still. "You mean I could remain here at Hogwarts?"

Snape gave him a look that was part amusement, part scorn. "This is where I live, is it not? It would be highly inconvenient for me if you lived elsewhere."

"I would live here with you? This would be my home?"

"You would live here, yes. The dungeons are quite large enough to accommodate you as well or, should you prefer, I am certain Albus can arrange accommodations elsewhere in the castle."

"And what about us?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Us, Mr. Potter?"

"The Erastes/Eromenos relationship is usually a sexual one," Harry pointed out.

Dryly, Snape said, "I would hardly require you to sacrifice your virginity on the altar of tradition, Potter."
Harry flushed, wondering how Snape had guessed that he was a virgin, but raised his chin defiantly. "And if I choose to make such a sacrifice?"

Evading the subject, Snape said, "There is one other matter, that of your mother's manuscript." Harry had opened his mouth to continue arguing about their sexual relationship, but he closed it now with an audible snap. "Although the text is somewhat dated, the workmanship is solid. It will take very little to update it." Snape tilted his head slightly, studying Harry as he added, "I believe that Ms. Granger would be willing to assist in the endeavour. Once it is ready, I have connections in the publishing world which I would be willing to use to make certain it is published."

"You would?" Harry asked. He knew his voice sounded unsteady but he didn't care.

"Yes." His eyes locked with Harry's. "It's time that Lily Evans' work was given the credit she deserves. She should be remembered for more than the sacrifice of her life."

Harry winced at that reminder, but for the first time since he'd learned of his mother's death while protecting him, he felt as if he had a way to repay her in part.

"Well, I believe that is enough for tonight," Dumbledore said quickly. "Severus, if you will draw up the contract offer for Harry, I will see that he receives it. Harry, you are aware of the parameters of conduct for both parties from now until the contract is either accepted or declined?" Harry nodded. "Very well, then. As it is drawing close to curfew, perhaps you'd be good enough to escort Mr. Potter to the Gryffindor tower, Severus?"

Snape stood. "Certainly, Albus. Harry?"

Harry started to protest that he could find his own way to the dorm but reconsidered. He doubted that Snape wanted some time alone to snog, as Max had, but Harry wanted a chance to discuss their potential relationship, despite Snape's obvious reluctance.

As the door closed behind them, he said, in a deceptively innocent voice, "Max kissed me tonight."

About to step off onto the moving stairs, Snape suddenly froze. "He did?"

"Twice," Harry said blithely. "It wasn't half-bad, either."

He stepped onto the stairs and was surprised as Snape suddenly swooped down on him. He found himself abruptly pressed up against the wall by a tall, lean body, Snape's face close to his own, and his eyes widened.

"And how, exactly, did 'Max' kiss you?" Snape murmured, his voice low and sultry as he stared down at Harry. The younger wizard was terrified and excited at the same time, unable to reply, but it didn't seem that Snape required an answer. "Did he kiss you softly, gently, chastely, savouring the incandescence of your innocence like this?"

Snape brushed feather-light kisses over Harry's lips, moving so quickly that it was like being kissed by butterfly wings. A lithe tongue swept over his lips and dipped inside his mouth, then out again, as quickly as a hummingbird sipping nectar. It was heady, exciting, and Harry tried to follow that tempting mouth as it pulled away, but Snape had him pinned against the wall and he couldn't move.

"Or did he kiss you like an impatient lover, eager for the taste of your mouth and your skin?"

Snape's mouth was back again, this time kissing him with the ease of an experienced lover, seducing his mouth with clever nips and sucks. Even as Harry responded, opening his mouth for more of these heady kisses, a corner of his mind wondered how many men Snape had kissed, had possessed, and
why he was so determined to reject Harry. A spark of anger flared inside him. When Snape finally released him, he said, a little breathlessly, "Max said he wouldn't require my fidelity as long as I was discreet. Would you be as liberally minded?"

Snape's eyes glittered and he pressed Harry even harder against the wall. "I believe you would find that I am not inclined to share, Mr. Potter. What I take I keep." Once more, Snape's mouth possessed his, but this time with an intensity that lit a fire deep within Harry's belly. A knee insinuated itself between his legs and Harry couldn't help gasping as he felt it rub against his hardening prick. And when had that happened? he wondered dazedly, even as he pressed closer to the body undulating against him. Snape's mouth was devouring him from the outside in, his hands were everywhere, the earth was moving around him, and Harry never wanted it to stop.

The sudden climax of his body took him by surprise, and he sagged in Snape's arms, feeling boneless. That deep voice was murmuring in his ear and he wanted to drown in its velvety tones. "Now do you understand the dangers of playing with fire, little boy?"

Before Harry could coax a reply from his remaining brain cells, Snape was striding off in a flurry of black, leaving Harry propped against the gargoyle with no clear recollection of how he had gotten to the bottom of the stairs. His head was spinning, his mouth felt bruised, his pants were uncomfortably sticky, and he had never felt better in all of his life.
Muddying the Water

Harry was relieved that the robes he wore hid a number of sins. He was even more relieved that the corridors were deserted, as he had a feeling that he looked decidedly dishevelled, something his robes couldn't hide. At the moment he didn't particularly care, as long as he could get safely tucked up in his bed before anyone saw the grin on his face. Tucked up in his bed where he could relive those few moments on the stairs.

Of course, nothing in his life had ever been that easy, and this was no exception. Although the common room was mostly empty, his fellow Gryffindors obviously waiting till the last moment to make curfew, he should have known that one person would already be there. A person with notoriously sharp eyes to boot. Harry sighed.

"Hello, Hermione," he said, resignedly.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Harry! What happened to you? You look like you've been - " Her voice broke off. "Which one of them did it?" she said, an ominous tone to her voice.

Harry gave her a little rueful smile as he sat down on the sofa. "Both."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Both? You're telling me that both Professor Spindley-Worme and Professor Snape assaulted you?"

"No one assaulted me," Harry said. "Max kissed me and I kissed Severus. And then he kissed me back."

Hermione frowned. "Snape kissed you? That seems so unlike him."

"Well, I was teasing him, about Max kissing me. It was revenge, I suppose."

"Now that I can believe," she muttered. "Why were you teasing him?"

"Because he said he wouldn't have sex with me," Harry said, as if it was the most reasonable thing in the universe.

Hermione stared at him, speechless, for a long moment. "Let me see if I understand this. Professor Snape was discussing the terms of his proposed contract with you, correct?" Harry nodded. "And he said that you wouldn't have to have sex with him."

Harry nodded again. "So you jumped him because you want to have sex with him?"

Harry considered that for a moment. "I don't know if I want to have sex with anybody. I just wanted to see if kissing Severus would be the same as kissing Max."

"And was it?" Hermione asked, curiously, then shuddered at the mental image of Snape in a clinch with anyone, especially Harry. "Never mind, I don't think I want to know." She gestured at the book lying on the table in front of her. "I finished your mother's book, Harry. It's very good, actually. It'll need a little bit of updating, though." She paused. "Did you know that Professor Snape made some editing comments in it?"

Harry nodded. "There's a note at the back from him. He said that he would help me get it published."

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes shadowed with worry. "Harry, you're not thinking of accepting him just to get your mother's book published, are you?" Harry was silent, and she sighed. "Oh,
Harry. You are such a Gryffindor."

Harry gave her a wry smile. "The Hat wanted to put me into Slytherin, actually. Said I'd do well there."

Hermione looked surprised for a moment, then amused. "Poor Professor Snape doesn't realize how narrow his escape was."

Harry put on a look of mock-annoyance. "Are you implying that I'm trouble?"

"Implying? No. I'm saying it flat out." They laughed and then Hermione propped her head on her hand as she studied him with the intensity she usually reserved for her books. "Harry, have you thought seriously about what you want to do after you finish school?"

Harry groaned. "Not you, too. Everyone is asking me that: Professor McGonagall, the Headmaster, Sirius. I don't know what I want to do. That's part of the problem."

"You can't solve your problems by letting someone else decide for you," Hermione said practically.

"Why not?" Harry asked, irritated. "Isn't that the whole point of this Erastes thing - to find a mentor who'll guide me into the right profession?"

"Maybe, but it would help if you had an idea what you wanted to do first," Hermione retorted, then sighed. "Harry, this just isn't like you, letting someone else tell you what to do with your life."

"Much you'd know about it," Harry said, and he was surprised at the bitterness in his voice. "I've never had much of a choice, have I? First the Dursleys, trying to keep me hidden and ordering me about. Then I come here and everyone just expects me to take on Voldemort. Why should I bother trying to make any decisions when the Ministry or someone like Dumbledore is just going to choose for me?"

"Because you'll hate it," Hermione said crisply. "You know you will, Harry. A year from now, you'll wake up and find yourself trapped in something that you hate doing, and it will destroy you."

"And maybe I'll like it. Everyone keeps telling me what a wonderful tradition this is, how much good it will do me."

"When have you ever cared so much about tradition?" Hermione countered.

"Maybe I just want someone to care about me!" Harry returned hotly, feeling a bit defensive.

His words rang in the air, and they were both silent for a few long moments. "Oh, Harry," Hermione said sadly. "I had no idea."

Harry stared at the table, unable to meet her eyes. "Why wouldn't I want someone to love me? I deserve it just as much as anyone."

"Yes, of course you do, but..." She reached over to touch his shoulder. "You know this isn't about love, Harry. If you go into it looking for the romance of your life, you could get very hurt."

"All right, so I'll settle for the best sex of my life," Harry said, trying for a light-hearted tone.

Hermione shook her head and sighed. "As if you could ever settle for anything. Be very, very careful, my friend. I don't want to see your heart get broken."

Harry flushed and, pleading the need for a shower and clean clothes, escaped up to his room. Finally
enclosed in the quiet sanctuary of his bed, he lay staring up at the canopy and tried to recapture that heady feeling of being kissed into oblivion, of being wanted, even if just for a few minutes of unbridled lust. His body refused to cooperate, though, and with a frustrated growl he rolled over, pulled the pillow over his head, and tried to go to sleep.

Whoever said that things would look better after a good night's sleep must have been a bloody idiot, Harry thought as he morosely poked at his breakfast. Here it was morning and nothing seemed any clearer in his mind. He was still faced with two suitors and still had no bloody idea what he wanted to do with his life. And hadn't his language taken an abysmal turn for the worst?

He couldn't help a snort of laughter at the idea that he was scolding his own self for bad language, and Ron grinned at him across the table.

"That's better, mate. Thought I was going to have to practice Cheering Charms on you."

"Sorry, Ron," Harry said, sighing as he went back to playing with his eggs. "I've got a lot on my mind this morning."

"Meetings didn't go well, then?" Ron asked, actually looking a little relieved at that thought.

"No, they went all right," Harry said. "Better than I thought, actually. Can't tell you the details till I get the official contracts, of course, but they're pretty interesting. Doesn't mean I'm going to accept," he added hastily, seeing the frown on Ron's face.

"Harry," Ron said with a sigh, "it's all right. I'm not going to throw a wobbly if you accept one of them. It's a little weird to think of you that way with a bloke, but you're my friend." He thought for a moment. "Well, it's more than a little weird to think of you with Snape."

Harry grinned. "Tell me about it." He thought about telling Ron how good a kisser Snape was, then decided his friend wouldn't appreciate that information. It felt good to sit here, talking with Ron like old times, and he wasn't about to spoil it. Lately, his friend had been so absorbed with his new relationship with Hermione that Harry had been feeling quite left out. He missed the old camaraderie and realized with a pang that in just a few short months they'd all be going their separate ways. Hermione was going on to University, Ron had his eye on Auror training, and Harry...

An unfamiliar looking owl dropped an envelope on the table in front of him and he stared at it in trepidation. Surely it was too soon for the contracts to arrive? The owl hooted at him impatiently and, with a murmured apology, he fed it some scraps from his breakfast and then opened the letter.

It was from Sirius, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Harry,

I did a little checking up on your new friend, and he appears to be on the up-and-up. Family well-known and respected, finances sound, some influential friends but none of the Dark variety. Seems to have mostly drifted about since he left school but then, so did Yours Truly. A bit on the flashy side according to some, and likes the fast life. Which does have me a bit puzzled as to why he ended up teaching at Hogwarts, but stranger things have happened. Not saying you couldn't do better, but throwing your lot in with him wouldn't be the worst mistake you could make.

Speaking of which, your other friend is definitely one. A mistake. Word on the street is that he has the life expectancy of a gnat, now that You-Know-Who is back. Seems He wasn't pleased to find out his little spy was double-crossing him. Take my advice and
steer clear of him.

Are you certain you don't want me to see who else I can dig up? A friend of a friend says he can hook you up with some of the hottest wizards in London, if you can just wait till summer.

All my love,

S.

Harry groaned and considered banging his head on the table. Sirius was going to drive him insane before this was over; it was almost enough to make him just grab one of his suitors and have it done with.

"Everything all right?" Ron asked anxiously.

"Fine," Harry said, mindful of listening ears around them. "It's just that friend of mine, the one with the dog? He's going on about my two new friends, wants me to wait till summer when I can make other friends." He slid the letter over to Ron for him to read. "This whole thing is driving me crazy."

"What you need is a break," Ron said firmly. "Forget this whole business for a couple days. Come into Hogsmeade with us this weekend. And Mum wants you to come home with me for Easter break, if the Headmaster will let you."

Harry grinned. He hadn't the slightest idea what he wanted to do with his life, but he wasn't about to waste what time he had left with his friends by moping about the place. "Sounds wonderful. Count me in."
Negotiations

Harry gave the password to the Fat Lady and entered the Gryffindor Common room, still laughing over the joke Ron had just finished telling them. It had been a wonderful day. Spring had arrived early this year, and the air had been alive with the scent of growing things. Ron had been in an especially good mood since he'd had more pocket money than usual to spend, courtesy of his birthday present from the twins whose business was skyrocketing. They had visited all the stores in Hogsmeade and then stopped in at the Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer, and Harry was feeling more content with his life than he had all week.

It had been a particularly trying week. Malfoy had already received his contract offers and was gloating about them, loudly and in public, especially whenever Harry or Ron were around. Harry hadn't received his yet and he didn't know whether to be happy or not. Every time an owl came into the Great Hall, most of the Hogwarts students watched avidly to see if it was for Harry, and he felt as if he was living in a fishbowl, even more so than usual. Professor Max's favouritism of him in Defence Against the Dark Arts class was more blatant than ever, and Harry wanted to hide under his desk in embarrassment. The fact that his fellow Gryffindors were getting tired of his special treatment and glaring at him as Max blithely awarded him house points made it even worse.

Bad as that was, Potions class was even more miserable. Snape didn't snipe at him anymore, but then he didn't talk to him or even look at him. Even when Harry'd accidentally blown up his cauldron and showered half the Gryffindors with a potion that gave them purple hives, Snape hadn't reacted by yelling or removing house points. The Potions master ignored him, completely and totally, as if he was sitting under his invisibility cloak, no matter what he did or said. And since Harry was still dreaming every night about that kiss on the stairs, Snape's attitude was driving him out of his mind.

It didn't help that Ron was totally ignoring anything about the situation, nor that Hermione was watching Harry as if afraid that at any moment he might break into pieces. Today, they had both relaxed and behaved as they usually did, teasing each other and Harry, and he had been grateful for the reprieve. This outing at Hogsmeade had been something they all needed.

"Ron, you are such an idiot," Hermione said with amused affection.

"And yet you love - Professor McGonagall!"

Harry and Hermione turned in surprise at Ron's startled exclamation to see their Head of House standing in the Common room, apparently waiting for them. She raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"I am delighted to know that, Mr. Weasley," she said dryly and Ron turned scarlet as he realized how that had sounded. "However you need not worry; my affections are already bespoken." She turned to Harry holding out a scroll and he could see a large wax seal secured it. "Mr. Potter, this is for you."

Harry swallowed and reached out for the scroll. "From Professor Spindley-Worme?"

She nodded. "You have three weeks before the Easter break to consider his terms. Should you wish to discuss any portion of this contract, please come see me."

Harry nodded and stood looking down at the rolled up parchment in his hand for a long moment after she had left.

"Harry?" He looked up to see Hermione looking at him in concern. "Would you like some time
alone?" He nodded, grateful for her sensitivity, and Hermione grabbed Ron's hand. "Come on, Ron." Ron looked as if he was about to protest, and she kissed him and then tugged him towards the stairs. "Come on."

"Oh!" Ron said, suddenly comprehending, and he let his girlfriend pull him up the stairs after her. "Later, Harry."

Harry looked down at the scroll again and thought about going up to his dorm room to read it, but somehow that just felt...wrong. The Common room was deserted, the rest of his Housemates still out enjoying the day, so he sat down on the couch and broke the seal.

An hour later, after reading it three times, he knew he was in trouble.

Hermione finished reading the scroll through a second time and silently handed it to Ron. Harry, who had been pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace for the past half hour, paused and looked over at her.

"Well?"

Hermione drew in a deep breath and let it out. "It's a pretty good contract," she admitted.

"Pretty good!" Ron blurted out, his eyes rapidly running down the terms. "It's bloody amazing!"

"Almost too good to be true," Hermione added.

Harry ran his hand through his hair, adding to its usual dishevelled state. "You saw Sirius' letter. He checked Max out and says he's on the level."

"A tryout with the England national team for a position as reserve Seeker," Ron read, "or a position with the Cheshire Comets as their starting Seeker without a tryout. A furnished flat in London on the Floo network with a House elf on staff," Ron looked sideways at Hermione at that item, smirking as she frowned. "A Muggle automobile, your choice of style. Body guards. New Quidditch robes every year, courtesy of Quiggles' Quidditch Supplies. A house in the country, complete with a Quidditch practice field, for the off-season. Hosting a weekly talk show on the Wizarding Wireless, interviewing other players - that's sure to be a bloody success. Seems like he's willing to be reasonable about the...other stuff, too. Separate bedrooms, freedom to take lovers as you wish, no ties at the end."

"He wants fifteen percent," Hermione reminded Ron.

"Only of the merchandizing side," Ron pointed out. "That's more than reasonable, seeing as how he's paying for the houses and the staff. Harry's paypacket is his own." He set down the contract. "Take the fifteen percent, Harry, but make sure you stipulate that you have final veto over any merchandize. You wouldn't want your name on anything tacky. Oh, and this bit about you accompanying him to entertainment functions - you need him to specify what kind of functions. Ministry galas, of course, but does he expect to take you out on the town every night? That'd play hell with your training schedule, and you don't want to risk a spot on the team roster because Max likes to party. And no cheesy appearances, like store openings. That's amateur stuff."

Harry couldn't help grinning. "Maybe I should make you my manager," he teased Ron. "Sounds like you have a better handle on contract negotiations than I do."

Ron shrugged. "It's just strategy, mate."
"Are you going to take it, Harry?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"I don't know." Harry said, looking back towards the fireplace to hide the sudden flush in his cheeks. "Snape hasn't sent me his contract proposal yet."

Ron snorted. "I'd like to see Professor-Bloody-Snape come up with anything half as decent." He rolled the contract back up and handed it to Harry. "Still don't know that I approve of this whole business, but it does sound like a good offer. You like Quidditch, you're good at it, and if he can get you a spot on the national team..." Ron shrugged.

"Don't rush into anything." Hermione warned. "If you want to play professional Quidditch, you can get on a team on your own."

"A second string team, yes," Ron pointed out. "Not the nationals. It takes years to work your way onto one of those."

"And maybe it's a good thing for it to take so long," Hermione said. "Professional Quidditch is a lot rougher than school Quidditch. What if Harry gets injured his first year out?"

"He'll still have gotten to play with a pro team."

"He shouldn't have to sleep with someone just to play Quidditch," Hermione objected.

"Hey, I thought you were the one that said this was a wonderful tradition," Ron pointed out. "Now you're objecting to the buggering part of it?"

Hermione flushed. "I just think Harry should think carefully before he makes any kind of decision. He has three weeks, after all."

"Hermione's right," Harry said hastily before they could escalate into one of their famous arguments. "I've got time. I'll think this over carefully, and I'll ask for the changes you suggested, Ron, before I make any final decisions."

*And I'll wait for Snape's offer*, Harry thought. He touched his lips with his fingertips and smiled as he stared into the fire.

Harry sat in the library, doodling on the margins of the scroll in front of him. He was supposed to be working on his final paper for Herbology - which had been due two days ago - but he hadn't been able to concentrate on it. In fact, he hadn't been able to concentrate on *any* of his classes this week. His teachers were uniformly cross with him - except for Max who acted as if he was Merlin-reborn and Snape who was still ignoring him - and he had even managed to annoy Flitwick enough to earn a detention. If only it had been with Snape instead of Filch, he thought longingly. Maybe then the man would actually look at him and see him, instead of staring through him like he did lately. It was driving Harry insane.

And Snape still hadn't sent him a contract.

It had been a week since he'd received Max's offer, and there'd been not even the slightest hint that Snape's offer was on the way. Harry looked up expectantly every time an owl flew into the Hall and jumped every time Snape made a sudden move at the Head table. If this went on much longer, he'd be a candidate for St. Mungo's.

At least that would solve the dilemma of what to do with his future.
"Harry, you're supposed to be writing, not drawing," Hermione said in exasperation as she thumped her books down on the table beside him. "Honestly! How do you expect to pass your NEWTS if you won't study?" She peered down at the paper. "Wasn't that due yesterday?"

"Two days ago," Harry said absently. "Professor Sprout gave me an extension." He touched the drawing with his wand and smiled as the sketch of the Whomping Willow began to thrash its limbs about, just like the real thing.

"Two days - what are you thinking? You know we're on a tight schedule! Get behind on that one, and it pushes back your History paper, which pushes back - "

"It'll be fine," Harry said, sighing. "I'll have plenty of time to catch up over Easter break."

Hermione caught the morose tone in his voice. "Oh, Harry! You can't go to Ron's after all?"

Harry shook his head. "The Headmaster thinks it's too dangerous. You know how Voldemort's always pulling something at the end of the school year. I don't mind risking myself, but not Ron's family." He touched the paper again and the drawing stopped moving, then gave Hermione a crooked smile. "It's all right. I'm used to it."

She sat down beside him and touched his arm companionably. For a moment they sat there in silence, then Hermione said, "Would you like some help on that paper? I'm only a little behind."

Harry smiled slightly. 'Only a little behind' for Hermione translated into only one week ahead of everyone else instead of two. "It's mostly done; I just have to do some editing and work out the rough bits."

"And recopy it," Hermione said critically, noting the doodles that liberally decorated the paper. "Honestly, Harry. You waste more parchment with these things."

"I think you should leave them in," Ron said, joining them and sitting down on Harry's other side. "They're pretty good - much better than the crap you've written."

"Hey!" Harry gave him a friendly elbow in the side. "Thanks a lot!"

"What are friends for?" Ron asked, grinning. "That's a new one. The Whomping Willow?" Harry nodded and animated it again. "Nice."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Would you two boys stop playing? We have work to do."

Harry and Ron exchanged an amused look, and Harry obediently got out a fresh piece of parchment to recopy his work. With Hermione's help, he finished it up before they had to head back to the dorm for the night and even got a start on his History paper. As they packed their bags, Harry felt a lot calmer than he had earlier. Sometime during the evening, he'd made up his mind to corner Snape the next evening and find out what was going on.

He wadded up the draft and tossed it in the rubbish bin, then stuffed the rest of his papers into his bag and followed his friends out of the library.

From out the shadows of the library shelves, a silent figure glided forward. A hand pulled a crumpled piece of parchment out of the rubbish, tucked it into a sleeve, and disappeared back into the shadows.

Snape entered his office, muttering imprecations under his breath as he slammed the door closed behind him. It had been another horrible day in a series of horrible days, the kind of day that drove
even a teetotaller to drink. Imbecilic students staring at him with vacant eyes, asking to be spoon-fed knowledge. Troublesome House members, determined to run right into the arms of the Dark without a moment's thought. Potter's eyes following his every move, making him want to pull the boy out of his seat and ravish him right there on his desk -

He abruptly terminated that thought and dumped the scrolls in his arms onto his desk. Yet another night grading the febrile writings of a singularly unimaginative bunch of Fifth Years who couldn't find an original thought between the lot of them.

Several scrolls tumbled onto the floor and he growled as he bent down to retrieve them. There was another piece of parchment on the floor under his desk and he picked it up as well, then frowned as he looked over it. Another singularly unimaginative essay in an all-too-familiar handwriting - and really, why must Potter scribble so when Snape had evidence that the boy had a decent enough hand when he tried? It had to be a plot by the brat to drive all of his teachers to blind insanity. Not only that, but the whelp had drawn in the margins, cluttering up what should be neat rows of writing. He snorted. Not even Sprout allowed this sort of slack work, he thought, and started to wad it up again.

One of the drawings caught his attention and he smoothed out the page so he could get a closer look. It was a very credible likeness of the Whomping Willow - he couldn't help shuddering a bit as he stared at it - and there was something very lifelike about the sketch, rough as it was. On impulse, he touched the drawing with his wand and smiled as it came to life, thrashing about just like the real one. He stopped the animation and sat down slowly in his chair, holding the paper in his hands as his brow furrowed in thought.

*So Potter has another gift, beside his Quidditch ability and his uncanny knack for getting into trouble.*

He realized that his mind had immediately begun formulating ways to use this new information and, with a mental growl, forced those thoughts away as well. It was no longer any of his concern. He had made his decision and, by all the little gods, he would stick to it.

Folding the drawing, he tossed it into his drawer, pulled out his red ink, and began correcting papers.

The next evening found Snape once more grading essays, this time Second Year papers, and he was about to pull out his hair when he heard the tap on the door to his office. Absently, he shouted for whomever it was to enter.

"A moment later, as he heard a soft voice say, "Professor?" he wished he'd locked and warded it instead."

"What is it, Potter?" he asked without looking up from the essays.

"May I talk to you for a minute?"

"In case it has slipped your notice, you are talking to me. And your minute has expired so kindly leave."

He heard the young man come closer instead. "It's been two weeks, and I haven't received a contract from you."

"As I haven't sent one, I am hardly surprised. Close the door on your way out."

"Does that mean you don't intend to send one?"

Snape lifted his head and sneered at the young man. "I am relieved to learn that you have some brains. Kindly take them elsewhere; I am quite busy at the moment."
"Why?" Harry asked bluntly.

Snape blinked. "Why what?"

"Why aren't you sending me a contract?"

Snape scowled and returned his attention to his grading. "Because I do not wish to. Surely that is simple enough for even you to understand?"

"You wanted to earlier."

Snape sighed. "Potter, you have heard that it is possible for a person to change their mind, haven't you?"

"Was it because of that kiss?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Snape said sarcastically. "It had to have been. One kiss from Famous Harry Potter is enough to move mountains, much less change minds and terrify lesser mortals."

"I think it did terrify you," Harry persisted, a determined tone in his voice. "I think you felt the same thing I did and it frightened you."

Snape threw down his quill and glared at Harry. "What I felt, Mr. Potter, was hormonal. I would have felt the same if I had kissed Neville Longbottom."

A corner of Harry's mouth quirked up. "I don't think so. Neville's not your type."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And you are?" he asked, letting his voice convey his amused incredulity. "I think not."

Harry stepped closer, his eyes tightly focused on Snape's face. "I think you felt something between us, just like I did."

"Once again, Mr. Potter, you've proven that you have failed to do your homework. If you had studied your manual, you would have learned that this is a business relationship, not a romance between two starry-eyed lovers."

"And I think it scared you because you're afraid to risk your heart, afraid to be hurt again."

Snape glared at him and rose from his chair, wrapping his black robes defensively around his body. "Haven't you heard? I don't have a heart."

"I don't believe that."

Snape growled and stalked towards Harry, adopting his most menacing expression. "Have you convinced yourself that I'm a worthy recipient of your innocent longings? Then you are even more foolish than I thought. I am neither a nice man nor a good one. I have done things that would give you nightmares for the rest of your life if I told you even a tenth of them."

He loomed over the younger man, watching the green eyes widen as he glared down at him. "Love is not a word in my vocabulary, Mr. Potter. If I were to offer for you, it would be because I had a use for you, and for no other reason."

Harry raised his chin defiantly, locking eyes with Snape. "I don't believe that. What possible use could I be to you?"

Snape smirked as he slowly looked down Harry's body and back up. "Aside from your obvious
physical charms, surely you know that you have the potential to be a powerful wizard, possibly more powerful than Dumbledore? Who wouldn't want that power under his control?"

Harry snorted. "If you were interested in power, you wouldn't have left Voldemort. And as for my 'obvious physical charms' - you already told me that you weren't interested."

"Perhaps I've changed my mind," Snape purred, stepping closer to Harry. The younger wizard automatically stepped backward and found himself pressed against a wall by Snape for the second time in a month. "Perhaps I like the idea of having Famous Harry Potter as my personal play-toy. The Saviour of the Wizarding World, bound to my bed, committed to servicing my pleasure."

Snape took Harry's face between his hands and leaned closer, almost whispering in his ear. "And I would take my pleasure from you, boy. I would use you in every way possible, as hard as I liked, without the slightest regard for your own comfort or pleasure. And if I damaged you...well, there are healing potions and spells. Three years, Potter, spent on your back, your belly, your knees."

Harry's eyes had slid shut and Snape could feel his heart beating rapidly. At any moment, Harry would push him away and run, run as if the very Devil was on his heels. As, in truth, he was. But once again, the boy surprised him.

"Yes," Harry breathed, leaning forward enough to brush his lips against Snape's. "Please."

Snape pulled back in surprise and took in the flushed look on Harry's face, desire written over every inch of his body. The sudden urge to press forward again, to take that mouth and taste its sweetness again, to take the young body quivering against his, was so strong that he had to force himself to retreat to the other side of the room. He heard a disappointed sigh and put the desk between them so that he wouldn't be tempted to finish what he'd started.

"You are a fool, Potter," he said, trying to sneer at the boy but painfully aware that his voice was shaking. "You don't want this; you don't want me. I manipulated you into trusting me, and the rest is adolescent hormones."

Harry opened his eyes slowly. "Manipulated?"

Snape opened his desk drawer and pulled out the journal Minerva had given him. He returned to Harry, slapping him in the chest with the book. "I suggest that you be more discriminating about what you write down in future. Unscrupulous people will find a way to turn your own thoughts and desires against you."

Harry automatically grabbed the book and looked down at it. A slight smile touched his lips. "My First Year Transfiguration journal?"

"In which you pathetically whinged about not having a real home, not to mention moaned about not knowing your mother," Snape sneered. 

Harry's smile widened into a full grin. "I'm impressed, sir. You must care a great deal to struggle through this drivel. Couldn't stand to read it again, myself."

Snape's eyes narrowed. "I do not care! Dumbledore ordered me to do this!"

Harry nodded. "And you do everything Albus Dumbledore tells you to do. Does he know how much you love him? It's obvious, of course, how much he cares about you."

"This is not about me or Albus!" Snape snapped at him. "It's about us!"
"Ah, so you admit that there is an 'us'?

Snape didn't know whether to bash his own head or Potter's against the wall in frustration. "Idiot! I used your own words, your written desires, to manipulate you into accepting me!"

Harry was still grinning. "How very Slytherin of you, sir."

Potter's head. Definitely. And then his own. "You imbecilic Gryffindor! You are such a naïve, blindly-trusting fool, that anyone could take advantage of you!"

Harry tilted his head slightly as he considered this and then he nodded. "In that case, sir, it might be a good idea to come up with some way to protect me from myself." He pressed against Snape briefly, leaving a light kiss on his lips and the journal in Snape's hands, and then he was gone.

Albus Dumbledore was waiting with the contract when Harry came down to breakfast the next morning.
Seamus almost pounced on him when they got back to the common room. "That's Snape's contract, isn't it? How did you get him to send it? What does it say?"

Hermione glared at Seamus. "Let Harry alone. He hasn't even had a chance to look at it yet."

Harry gave her a grateful smile, noticing that her eyes were troubled as they met his. "Thanks," he said. "I'll, um, just take this upstairs and read it."

Harry hurried up the stairs to his dorm room, closed himself in his bed, and broke the seal on the contract. A smaller piece of parchment fell into his lap and, setting down the contract, he picked it up.

Mr. Potter,

If you were expecting an outpouring of romantic sentiment, you are doomed to disappointment. As I told you, I have no heart to be wooed and won, and I am indifferent to the stirrings of your own. My advice to you would be to ignore that particular part of your anatomy and use your head for a change, although I expect that my words will fall on deaf ears. You are far too prone to follow your heart and, more recently, your prick.

S. Snape

Harry couldn't help grinning as he read the short note. How like Severus to need to have the last word in an argument, he thought with amusement. He set down the note and picked up the contract, quickly scanning it and then going back to read it slowly, word for word.

I, Severus Snape, hereby offer to take Harry James Potter as my eromenos, and pledge to provide the following:

1) Residence at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry for the duration of the contract, in rooms adjoining my own, with the exception of the summer months, during which time Mr. Potter will be freed from his contractual obligations to spend time with friends and family.

2) One cottage, in a location of Mr. Potter's choice, to be used during the year at his discretion. Upon satisfactory termination of the contract, the cottage shall become Mr. Potter's in entirety.

3) Training in Defending against the Dark Arts, such training to be administered by myself and other teachers I deem competent.

4) Clothing, supplies, and other personal items for the duration of the contract. In addition, a monthly stipend will be paid to Mr. Potter to provide for any personal needs.

5) Editing and publication of "Charms through the Centuries" by Lily Evans Potter.

6) Training in the use of his artistic talents by professional artists so that in future Mr. Potter may earn his living through his drawings, should he choose to do so.

As compensation for my time and finances, I will require the following:
1) That Mr. Potter endeavour not to get himself killed through his well-intentioned but inconsiderate actions while he is under my protection

2) No sexual services will be required of Mr. Potter. However, while Mr. Potter is in residence at Hogwarts, no other sexual liaisons may be undertaken.

3) At the end of the contract, there will be complete dissolution of the bonds between us and we will never lay eyes on each other again. Mr. Potter will give his oath to never attempt to contact me in any way. Should Mr. Potter obtain employment at Hogwarts, I will tender my resignation and relocate elsewhere.

I acknowledge that all offers made here are in good faith and within my ability to provide. Should I fail to deliver any item outlined here, I will accept the penalties laid upon me.

Severus Snape

Harry slowly lowered the contract and stared unseeingly at the curtains surrounding his bed. He hadn't been surprised by any of the initial items listed, although the mention of his "artistic talents" had surprised him. Surely Snape wasn't referring to his doodling? They were just scribbles, to amuse himself while he was trying to think, nothing more. Even his best friends weren't impressed with them. How on earth did Snape think that Harry was supposed to earn his living through his scribbles?

The cottage was a pleasant surprise, and it gave Harry a warm feeling to know that he'd have a place other than Hogwarts to call his own, and at a place of his own choosing. He thought he'd like to live near the Weasleys, especially if Ron and Hermione settled in the area as well.

He wasn't particularly worried about the "no sex" rule. He knew that Snape wanted him and had no doubt that he'd be able to break the man down over the next three years. It was also telling that Snape didn't want him getting involved with anyone else while he was at Hogwarts, although he'd been careful to leave a loophole allowing Harry to find a partner during those summers off. Snape's possessive air must mean something, but why was the man so intent on keeping Harry at arm's length?

What disturbed him was that Snape didn't seem to want any thing from him in repayment. And there was that last item, about the two of them separating completely once the contract was over. Snape was obviously so determined on that item that he was even willing to leave Hogwarts himself. But why? Everything Harry had heard and read indicated that the erastes and eromenos usually remained close, friends for life, except in exceptional circumstances. Why would Snape want to go against that tradition in particular? If he disliked Harry that much, he wouldn't want him around for three years to begin with - not that Harry thought that Snape disliked him. Not anymore.

He frowned, staring at the contract as if it would reveal its hidden secrets. Dumbledore, he thought with a decided nod. Dumbledore might know.

Harry went down the stairs and found that Seamus and the others had gone off but Ron and Hermione were waiting for him. He wanted to go straight to Dumbledore and talk this over with him, but his friends had been there for him through this whole thing and he felt that he couldn't ignore them. Silently, he held out the scroll for Hermione to read. Her eyes flicked over it quickly and she frowned as she handed it to Ron.

"Why is he so interested in your sketches?" she asked.
Harry shrugged. "I don't know. It's not like they're anything special."

"Don't know anyone who can draw like that," Ron said, frowning in thought. "Might be a need for it - illustrating textbooks and such. What's this bit at the end, about never seeing each other again? Bit strong, that."

Hermione nodded. "And highly unusual. Most wizards remain friends with their erastes."

"Snape didn't," Harry said reluctantly. "Maybe that's why."

"What are you going to do, Harry?" Hermione asked bluntly.

"I thought I'd talk to the Headmaster about it, since he's Snape's representative," Harry said. "Listen, don't tell anyone else about the details, all right? I don't think Snape would like to be talked about like that."

Ron gave Harry a bewildered look. "Harry, do you like him? I mean, like him, like him."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What are we, in Fourth Year again?"

"If you mean do I love him, I don't know," Harry said slowly. "I find him attractive and interesting, I like being with him, even when he's being a bastard. I know I'd like to be with him that way. So - maybe."

"Well, he's obviously mental," Ron said, handing back the scroll. "He says he doesn't want sex with you, but he doesn't want you having sex with anyone else. He should make up his bloody mind. Probably do him a world of good to get laid."

Harry and Hermione couldn't help laughing at the matter-of-fact tone of Ron's voice. Feeling a little bit better after having talked to his friends, Harry went in search of Dumbledore.

The password was still the same, and the Headmaster didn't look surprised to see Harry as he entered the office. "I don't mean to bother you, sir," Harry said, "but I've just read the contract and, well, I'm a bit confused."

Dumbledore nodded and gestured towards a chair. "May I see the contract?" At Harry's surprised look, he smiled and said, "Severus is not required to show it to me and has chosen not to do so."

Harry handed him the contract and tried not fidget as the Headmaster read over it slowly. "Yes, I can see where you might be a trifle confused."

"A trifle?" Harry said with a snort. "Professor Snape is giving me all of that, and he doesn't want anything from me in return, not even my friendship? There's something seriously wrong!"

Dumbledore looked at Harry over the top of his glasses. "Did Professor Snape tell you about his own experience as an eromenos?"

Harry nodded. "A little. He told me that Voldemort was his erastes, and that it wasn't a pleasant memory."

Dumbledore sighed. "Always the master of the understatement," he said. "I failed him, Harry. First, there was the incident with your godfather. I tried to make it up to him, you know. Private talks, tutoring, dinners. Severus misunderstood my intentions, believed that I was Courting him. When I didn't formally approach him, he came to me and I failed him again. I tried to let him down easily
"but..." He sighed. "When he came back to me, he was so terribly changed. He thought I would turn him over to the Aurors, but I couldn't fail him a third time. I've never asked him about his time with Voldemort; I don't think I could bear to know."

"However," and Dumbledore looked up, his eyes piercing Harry's. "He's never taken an eromenos. Not until now."

"Until you pressured him to take me," Harry said, a touch of bitterness in his voice.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Severus talks a good game, my boy, but the truth is it took little to persuade him. He has always taken your interests to heart, but lately it's become more than that."

"Then why is he making this so bloody difficult?" Harry asked, exasperated.

Dumbledore laughed softly. "He wouldn't be Severus Snape if he didn't take the most difficult path."

Harry sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, agitated. "I can't accept those terms! I can't spend three years with him and then walk away as if they never happened!"

A sudden thought struck him, and his eyes widened as he looked back at Dumbledore. "That's what he expected me to do, isn't it? He thinks what I feel for him is just lust, and when I get it out of my system, I'll just be happy to go on my way and find someone else. So he's pushing me away, rejecting me before I can reject him." Dumbledore nodded. "So what do I do now?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at him. "Why, you do what you do best, Mr. Potter. Listen to your instincts and follow your heart."

Harry didn't return to the Gryffindor tower immediately. Instead, he went outside and walked around the grounds, thinking as he walked. Hagrid and Fang joined him at some point on his walk; he wasn't really sure when, just that he gradually became aware of the silent, supportive presence beside him.

As they approached the castle, Hagrid suddenly said, "You know, Harry, creatures have a funny way of behaving around others of their kind. There's some as gets all soft and friendly-like, and there's some as would snap off yer head if you get too close too soon. Not saying one of them is better 'n the other, only sometimes them as take time to get to know turn out to be more worth the knowing. Tend to be the ones who stick by ya when things aren't pretty, too. Just thought you should know that."

They stopped in front of the owlery and Harry smiled up at him, gratitude and affection welling up inside of him. Hagrid had been his first real friend and he was still there for Harry when he needed him. "Thanks, Hagrid. I'll keep it in mind." He sighed. "I guess I'd better send an owl to Sirius and get it over with."

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**Dear Sirius,**

*I wanted you to know that I have made my decision. I can't tell you what it is yet, not until the other people involved know and have a chance to respond. I hope that you will be happy for me, and accept that this is my decision, because I want you in my life no matter what.***

*Love,*
A week had passed since Snape had given the contract to Dumbledore, and he'd half-expected Potter to approach him again, intent on discussing it despite the rules. He'd caught himself listening for footsteps in the passage outside his office more than once, and at mealtimes he found himself staring at the young man. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice, or if they did they didn't say anything. Unfortunately, staring at Potter didn't seem to do any good as the damned brat was acting as usual, giving no indication of his decision.

As the final week of Choosing came closer, Snape's attention was caught by something else. Draco Malfoy was unusually silent, obviously distracted by his internal musings, and only sheer will-power kept Snape from taking points from Slytherin when Malfoy blew up a cauldron in class for the first time ever. The boy was troubled by something and Snape had the feeling he knew what it was. He would have to act, and act quickly, he decided.

As the Slytherin students headed towards their dormitory after dinner that night, Snape decided that now was the time.

"Mr. Malfoy, a moment of your time?"

Snape watched as the blond Slytherin slowly separated himself from his ever-present bodyguards and approached him. He turned and led the way to his office, closing the door as he gestured for Draco to take a seat. The young man seemed to reluctantly settle into the chair, and Snape frowned as he sat down in his own chair behind his desk.

"Mr. Malfoy, whatever transgressions you are tormenting yourself over, you may rest assured that I haven't found them out. Yet." Draco relaxed slightly, although his expression was still wary. "I asked you here to discuss the situation you currently find yourself in, in regard to the Erastes rites."

Draco scowled slightly. "I fail to see what concern it is of yours, sir."

"You are a member of my House, and I am making it my concern," Snape snapped back and watched the scowl immediately disappear, to be replaced by a carefully blank expression. He sighed, "Draco, whatever resentments you may harbour against me for not Courting you, I assure you that I was well aware that such an offer would not be allowed by your family."

Draco blushed, and Snape idly wondered how long before the boy lost that ability. "Really, sir?"

"Yes," Snape said, meeting Draco's eyes squarely. It wasn't a lie, really, if one considered the possibility of infinite universes, one of which held a Snape who hadn't been betrayed into mind-and-body-scarring servitude by Lucius Malfoy. He supposed that Snape might have felt something for Draco, and allowed the boy to see that possibility.

A smile touched Draco's mouth. "Thank you, sir."

"I don't expect you to trust me, Draco, but I have been in the position you are now in, and I made a mistake which I regretted. I would like to prevent you from making the same kind of mistake."

"Mistake, sir?" Draco asked cautiously.

Snape nodded. "I allowed myself to be dazzled by offers of power and fame, of prestige in my field, and forgot to be Slytherin enough to look for the catch. I was bewitched by exterior attractiveness and failed to see the corruption underneath. I accepted a lie because it was mixed with sweet words, instead of the bitter medicine of the truth."
Draco appeared to digest this for a minute, his brow furrowing. "So what you were promised was false?"

"No, I received what I was promised. However, what I received was what I asked for but not what I truly wanted." He leaned forward on his desk. "Draco, you are one of the few students in this school to actually possess a brain and you have a natural distrust of everything. Use those gifts. Look at each offer and see it for what each truly is, not for what you wish it was. Look beyond the promises of wealth and power and see who has your welfare in mind, not theirs."

"What if the offer I want to take isn't the one my father wants me to take?" Draco said cautiously.

"I understand your wish to please your family, but in the end, you are the one who has to live with the consequences of your choice, not them." He paused and then, quietly, said, "Draco, you are allowed to be happy."

Draco looked up, startled. For a moment, they stared at each other, then Draco seemed to relax just a bit more, and his impudent, arrogant smile returned. "So are you, sir. So are you."

Harry made his way down the staircase, dodging fellow students who were dashing about as they prepared to catch the train home for Easter holidays. He held his new broom carefully against his body so that it wouldn't catch on anything or anyone, and scanned the assembled crowd in the entryway. He hoped he'd catch sight of Professor Max out here rather than have to go into the Great Hall after him, and he was rewarded by a shout of his name.

"Harry, my boy!"

Harry took a deep breath and turned around. "Hello, Professor."

Max came up to him, beaming brightly at him. "Today's the day, eh?" he said, then leaned closer. "Not to pressure you or anything, but have you made a decision yet?"

"Actually, I was coming to see you about that," Harry said. "Is there someplace we can talk?"

"Of course, of course." Max looked back up at the hallway. "We can use one of the classrooms. Come along."

"Just a minute, please," Harry said, catching sight of Ron and Hermione running along the corridor towards him. "I need to say good-bye to my friends."

Max frowned but Harry moved past him. "Off to the train, then?" he asked.

Ron nodded, gesturing at Hermione. "I told her we have plenty of time, but you know Hermione."

Harry grinned. "Yeah. Say hello to your parents for me, and your brothers."

Ron nodded, then gave him a wistful smile. "Wish you were coming with me."

"So do I."

Hermione stepped forward to hug him and kiss his cheek. "We'll see you in a week, Harry."

He nodded and stepped aside as they headed down the stairs, Ron still trying to convince Hermione that they had time for breakfast. He grinned at that and turned to see Max looking at him disapprovingly. "What?"
Max sighed. "Harry, you need to be more careful about who you associate with in future."

He blinked. "They're my friends."

"And it was very good of you to condescend to their friendship while you were in school, but once you take your place in the wizarding world, things must change."

"Condescend!" Harry sputtered.

Max nodded. "The Weasleys may be one of our oldest families but they are hardly among the most illustrious. Arthur Weasley's...fondness for things Muggle has not endeared him to the Ministry, and an association with his son cannot possibly add to your consequence. And as for Miss Granger - she's a bright young lady but her bloodlines..." He made a distasteful gesture.

"Are you saying that you'd choose who my friends would be, should I accept your contract?" Harry demanded.

"For your own good, of course," Max said smoothly. "You will be moving in the first circles of wizarding society, and your friends must move in such circles as well."

"You mean people like the Malfoys?"

"Exactly."

Harry lost his temper. "Are you insane? Don't you know that Lucius Malfoy is a Death Eater?"

"Really, Harry," Max said disapprovingly. "Lucius Malfoy is one of the premiere members of society. His political affiliations are hardly a concern of yours."

"They are when he's trying to kill me!"

Max frowned at him. "And another thing, Harry. This insistence on being at the center of every evil plot - well, it simply won't do. You don't have time for it, what with your training schedule, your social commitments, and your personal appearances. You'll have to give it up."

Harry stared at the DADA professor, stunned. "You're completely barmy," he said. "You think I want every crazy Death Eater out there gunning for me?"

Max tutted. "Muggle phrases as well. We'll have to see about securing a vocal coach as well."

"No, we won't," Harry said firmly. He held out the broom. "I'm very sorry, Professor Spindley-Worme, but I cannot accept your offer. I'd appreciate it if you'd take this back."

Max stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted two heads. "You can't possibly mean it. You're choosing Snape over me?"

"I didn't say that, nor is it really any of your business," Harry said firmly. He pulled a letter out of his pocket and handed it to Max. "I'm sorry, but I really don't think it would work out."

Max took the letter and the broom, still staring at him. "I don't believe this! I wasted two years of my bloody life on you!"

Harry blinked in surprise. "You mean you came here to teach just because of me?"

"Of course," Max snapped. "Do you think I'd waste my time teaching a pack of bloody imbeciles if there wasn't something in it for me?"
Harry glared. "I would think the fact that it was your job would be enough of a reward."

"Not sodding likely." Max ran his hand through his hair, messing up the studied carelessness of his hairstyle. "Now I'll have to come up with another plan."

"Well, I'll leave you to it then, shall I?" Harry said bitingly and turned to leave the room.

"Harry."

Harry turned back to glare at the professor, and then frowned as he saw that Max was holding out the broom.

"Take this." Max gave him a rueful look. "It's of no use to me, after all." Harry hesitated and he said quickly, "No strings of any sort. I would just like you to have something to remember me by."

Harry felt his ire softening a little. "Thanks," he said, taking back the broom. "It is rather nice. And I'm sorry it didn't work out between us. It was an amazing contract offer."

Max smiled wryly. "Not enough to tempt you, though." He gave Harry a mischievous look. "One last kiss, for old times' sake."

Harry laughed, shaking his head. "You're incorrigible." He gave Max a quick kiss, and it was pleasant but there wasn't any of the toe-tingling excitement he'd felt when kissing Snape. "Good luck," he said sincerely and left the room.

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It was the first day of Easter break, and the Great Hall was nearly deserted as students dashed about in last minute preparations to go home over the holiday. Staff members straggled in, taking advantage of the relaxed schedule as well, but Snape hardly noticed any of it. He stared at the letter in his hand, trying to make sense of the single word on it.

A loud, clinking sound startled him and he looked up as Max sat down in the seat next to him. The DADA instructor gestured at the small cloth bag sitting on the table between them. "Go on, take it, man. Fifty galleons, as wagered."

Snape stared at the bag, dumbfounded, then looked at the Worme. "Potter turned you down?"

Max nodded. "Told me so this morning, and even gave the broom back. Of course, I told him to keep it. I can hardly use a broom like that, especially with his initials on it." A reluctant smile touched his lips. "Guess the better man won, eh?"

Snape shook his head, indicating the note in his hand. "Potter turned me down as well."

Max's mouth dropped open. "What is the boy thinking?"

"Perhaps," Snape said slowly, "for the first time in his life, Potter is thinking." Abruptly, he stood up and strode across the Hall, disappearing down the dungeon steps.

Max noticed that he'd left the letter lying on the table. Curious, he picked it up and saw that there was a single word written on it in large, bold writing.

*Unacceptable*

*HP*
Swallow paused at the foot of the stairs. Although the urge to retreat to his rooms to lick his wounds and plot new strategies was strong, he had duties to perform first. The Slytherins going home for the week needed to be sent on their way so they wouldn't miss the train. The ones remaining behind needed to be terrified within an inch of their lives so they wouldn't give him trouble over the break. And he wanted to check on Draco before the boy left for home, to see if he'd listened to Snape's advice.

He entered Slytherin House and was surprised to find that it wasn't in the usual state of departure-chaos. The reason appeared to be because his primary quarry was standing in the common room, arms crossed, glaring at the assembled House members.

"Right then, off to the train with you lot. Wouldn't want the Gryffindors to get the best seats, would you? Crabbe, Goyle, bring up the rear and make sure none of them come running back for a pocket handkerchief or some other such rubbish. Use force, if necessary." There was a general stampede towards the doorway and Snape quickly stepped out of the way. "The rest of you listen up. I don't want any trouble out of you this week. Any of you get points taken away and you'll have to answer to me, so don't get caught. If you don't have enough to keep you busy, I can always find something for you to do. Like cleaning the floor of the common room with your toothbrushes." Draco looked over and saw Snape leaning against the mantle, arms crossed, then turned back to his Housemates. "Off with you, then."

Snape raised an eyebrow as the Slytherins scattered. "Impressive."

Draco smirked at him. "I learned from the best."

"I was under the impression that your father was expecting you home for the break."

Draco shrugged. "My father is probably burning everything I own right now. I turned down the offer he wanted me to take," he explained. "He sent an owl last night telling me I've been disinherited."

Snape looked at Draco closely. The young man didn't appear to be grief-stricken; in fact, there was a bit of a cat-in-the-cream look about him. "Draco, what have you done?" he asked suspiciously.

In response, Draco gestured toward the stairs. Snape turned and frowned as he recognized the young man coming down them, even with the unusual hairstyle and earrings.

"Mr. Weasley, what in bloody hell are you doing here?"

Bill Weasley grinned. "Hello, Professor. Good to see you again." To Draco he said, "Thanks for letting me use your shower. Sand gets in everywhere."

Draco smirked. "Wouldn't want that, would we?"

Snape crossed his arms and glared at them. "You haven't answered my question."

"He Offered for me and I accepted," Draco said blandly, but Snape could see the mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"He what?"

Bill's grin widened and slung a casual arm around Draco's shoulders. "Ron's been telling me stories
about this imp for years. I thought he'd be a natural as a curse-breaker." He turned his grinning face
down to Draco. "Give him a chance to use his powers for Good, so to speak."

Snape gave Draco a stunned look, and Draco shrugged. "Sounded like fun. Besides, Father always
told me to follow the money. Bill works for Gringotts, and I'll be working for them, too."

"Working for them? In fifty years, they'll all be working for you," Snape said dryly.

Draco smiled smugly. "Less, or I'm not a Malfoy. Besides, I can't wait to see Ron Weasley's face
when I turn up with Bill at the next Weasley family gathering."

Bill laughed and squeezed Draco's shoulders. "I'm going to go send off this contract to the Ministry
then visit with the Headmaster for a bit. That should give you plenty of time to terrorize your
housemates until I return." He held out his hand to Snape and said, "Good to see you again,
Professor. I expect we'll be seeing more of each other in future - Harry's an honorary Weasley, you
know."

Snape absently shook Bill's hand, trying to puzzle out that last remark. Draco made a face at the
mention of Harry Potter, but there was a resigned look on his face as well.

"Go on, Professor," he said. "I'll keep an eye on things around here while you take care of business
with Potter."

"There is nothing to take care of," Snape said shortly. "Potter turned me down."

"Then why did I see him going into your rooms earlier?"

Snape didn't have an answer for that. In fact, he didn't know how Harry could have gotten into his
rooms without the password unless...Dumbledore. With a growl, he stormed out of Slytherin house
and down the corridor to his private rooms.

"Potter!" he snapped as he entered his rooms. He had barely shut the door behind him when a solid
weight slammed into him, pinning him to it. As his startled brain laboured to absorb the fact that there
was a warm body pressed against him, Harry kissed him voraciously.

"Harry," he moaned. "What - "

"Shut up, Severus," Harry ordered, his fingers rapidly unbuttoning Snape's outer robes.

"What are you doing here? This is not in the Rules."

"I'm changing the rules," Harry said. The robe slid to the ground and he started on Snape's vest.
"You can just consider this contract negotiations."

"You rejected my contract, Potter."

"Harry. And I said it was unacceptable, but I didn't reject it." Harry unbuttoned Snape's shirt and
began pressing kisses against the bared flesh.

"What - was so - unacceptable?" Snape asked, trying not to moan as Harry found a particularly
sensitive spot on his neck. His hands slid up and down Harry's back and he tried desperately not to
latch onto the firm arse.

"For one thing, that 'no sex' clause? Forget it." Harry had Snape's shirt unbuttoned and eagerly slid
his hands under the material to caress the sleek skin underneath. "I expect you to make full use of my
"You seem very sure of yourself," Snape said, trying to summon enough resolve to push Harry away, which was nearly impossible as Harry was nuzzling his chest, teasing his nipples with his tongue.

Harry unfastened Snape's trousers and pushed a hand into the gap so that he could take Snape's prick in hand. "I'd say I had ample evidence that you want me." Harry's mouth took Snape's again, and he had a moment to marvel that the boy was a bloody quick study before the intensity of the kiss and the warmth of the hand stroking him banished all thoughts completely.

When Snape came back to himself, he realized two things: one, he was lying half-naked on his bed and two, Harry Potter was reclining next to him, a smirk on his face as he looked down into Snape's face. He tried to glare up at the younger wizard but, from the widening smile that appeared on Harry's face, he knew that it wasn't as effective as usual.

"Are you ready to concede on the sex?" Harry asked.

"And if I say no?" Snape asked, chagrined to find that his voice was hoarse.

"Then I suppose I'll have to prove my point again," Harry said, leaning over to nuzzle Snape's chest. "And again."

Snape snorted, even as he let his eyes slide shut so he could concentrate on the pleasure running through his body. "You have an exaggerated opinion of my stamina, Mr. Potter. I am not a teenager."

"Maybe I just have faith in my ability to...inspire you." Harry lifted his head from its work and blew lightly on the damp nipple. He grinned as Snape moaned in pleasure, then he sat up on the bed.

"Now, about the rest of the contract negotiations."

Snape groaned and opened his eyes to glare at the other man. "You have an abominable sense of timing, Potter."

"Harry. And let's just say that I'm learning how to exploit my prey's weaknesses." Harry ignored Snape's snort and reached for a scroll on the night table. "Item one, I will live here at Hogwarts with you, sharing your rooms, not in separate rooms."

He looked over at Snape, grinning. "It'll make the sex so much easier that way. Item two, as soon as it is safe for us to travel, we will both leave Hogwarts during the summer. I want to see some of those places my mother talked about, and you're going to see them, too, if I have to drag you with me. Bill Weasley is expecting us in Egypt as soon as we can come visit." He paused. "Did you know he's taken on Malfoy?"

Snape felt as if he'd fallen through the looking glass that Muggle writer had described into a world that was topsy-turvy. "Draco just told me," he managed to say.

"Until then, we can spend summers at that cottage of ours - I expect Dumbledore can make it safe for us. Christmas and Easter breaks, too. I was thinking of a place near the Weasley's house, but I'm flexible on that as long as we're on the Floo system. Item three, I accept your offer of training and I'd like Professor Lupin to help teach me, but I don't need a stipend or for you to buy my clothes and supplies. My parents left me plenty of money."

Snape crossed his arms and glared at Harry, trying to ignore the thought that it wasn't nearly as effective when his privates were exposed and he was flat on his back. "Anything else?"
"Yes, as a matter of fact." Harry set down the scroll and moved to straddle Snape's thighs, looking down at him soberly. "First of all, I'll try not to get myself killed if you promise to do the same. Sirius says your odds of surviving Voldemort are worse than mine. At least he wants to kill me himself, while every Death Eater out there has a license to kill you. Besides, as my erastes, you're supposed to be a good example to me. I've been doing a lot of reading lately - "

Snape sneered. "My heart may not take the shock of that revelation."

" - and in some of the old Greek traditions, paired erastes and eromenos were assigned military duty together. The backbone of the Spartan army were hoplites, paired lovers. Then there was the Theban Sacred Band, an entire army of male lovers who were formidable because each fought like a demon to protect his lover. They fought, lived, and died together. I want that."

Snape snorted. "Given Voldemort's fondness for both of us, you just might get your wish."

"That's not what I mean," Harry said impatiently. "We're going to survive him - you're too smart to let yourself get killed, and I'm too stubborn to die that easily. What I meant is that I want us to stay together - until we kill each other," he added with a grin.

Snape's jaw dropped. "What did you just say?"

"I said that I want us to stay together: get married, be life-partners, whatever it is that wizards do when they decide to be together for life." Harry stared down at Snape and the look on his face said that he was prepared to prove just how stubborn he could be.

"Why in bloody hell would you want to be tied to me for the rest of your life?" Snape asked, frowning.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I think I love you?"

Snape stared at him, aghast. "You can't possibly love me. You don't even know me!"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do," Harry shot back. "I know what I'm feeling for you, and I don't want to mess about for three years and then walk out of your life forever. And I think you want the same thing."

Snape shoved Harry off and sat up, leaving the bed to stalk over to the fireplace. He wanted a drink, badly, and snarled under his breath at the lack of any alcohol in his rooms. He swung back around and stalked back to the bed, glaring at its sole inhabitant. "How dare you presume to know what I want! You are an impertinent, ill-behaved, and inconsiderate imbecile - why in hell would I want you in my life forever?"

Harry gave him a crooked grin. "Because you think you might love me?" he offered.

Snape snorted. "If you expect me to admit that, then you're a candidate for St. Mungo's."

Harry's grin became affectionate and warm. "I don't expect you to admit anything. Come back to bed, Severus."

Snape sat down on the side of the bed. "Very well," he said, mollified by Harry's reasonable attitude. "If after three years together we haven't managed to kill each other, then we shall discuss bonding."

"No wiggling out of it," Harry warned as he proceeded to wiggle onto Snape's lap. "The only thing we'll discuss is the date and where we're going on the honeymoon."
Snape wrapped his arms around Harry. "As a matter of fact, I already have a destination in mind."

Harry grinned. "I do like a man who plans ahead." He leaned forward to nuzzle Snape's ear. "And the sex?"

Snape sighed dramatically. "I suppose I shall have to give in on that as well."

"Good." Harry handed Snape the scroll and he signed his name with a flourish. It promptly disappeared, and Snape had to admire Harry's ingenuity in linking the contract to a port-key. If Snape had a change of mind, it would be nearly impossible for him to get the contract back now.

Not that he had the slightest inclination to do so.

"Now I believe we have one more bit of business to settle," he said, turning to dump Harry off his lap and onto the bed, then pinning the young man's body to the bed.

Harry gave him a mock-offended glare. "Business? What business?"

Snape nipped at Harry's nose as he unbuttoned Harry's shirt. "As your erastes, it is my duty to introduce you to the pleasures of the flesh."

Harry gave him a teasing look. "According to the manual, the eromenos is supposed to be a passive vessel. Should I adopt the customary bored expression while you bugger me? I could try to nap during it, if you'd like."

Snape took Harry's mouth intently, letting him go to growl, "Impudent brat. Napping will be the last thought on your mind, I promise you. And you'll be too busy screaming with pleasure to be bored."

He proceeded to fulfil his threat, and Harry found himself inundated with pleasure. Snape touched and tasted every inch of his body as if mapping him for future reference. Harry never knew that the spot behind his left knee could make him moan with pleasure, or that sucking the place below his right collarbone could almost make him come. Snape's hands and mouth on Harry's cock felt worlds better than touching it himself, and he would have been embarrassed at the way he desperately bucked in Snape's mouth if he hadn't been too busy screaming and coming. His erastes didn't seem to think that was enough torment for he flipped Harry on his belly and proceeded to explore the back of Harry's body as thoroughly as the front. Harry blushed as Snape's tongue teased and tormented his most private place, then found himself humping the bed and screaming as that talented tongue lanced into his body. He barely noticed the fingers preparing him as he fucked himself on them, and he was so relaxed and desperate for more that the pressure of something larger and hotter than fingers only made him groan with pleasure.

Snape found himself fully sheathed inside his eromenos' body and paused, panting while he tried to control the urge to let go, to pound him into the mattress. Harry wasn't ready for that and, buried deep in the tight warmth, he swore that he wouldn't let anyone - not even himself - hurt Harry. He slowly withdrew and just as slowly thrust back in, and heard a catch in Harry's breathing followed by a low moan. Another thrust, this time combined with a little grind of his hips, and he was rewarded by an inarticulate shout. Harry pushed back to meet him, thrust for thrust, and it was so good, so perfect. It had never been this good before, and Snape lowered his head to taste the back of Harry's neck, to kiss it as he murmured his pleasure, his joy in Harry's response.

Harry shuddered under him, driven to the edge by the velvet voice as it exhorted him to "come, Harry, come now!" With a scream of utter pleasure and relief he did, and the world greyed out around him. Dimly, he was aware of Snape shuddering behind him, of the sharp teeth latching into his shoulder and his erastes thrusting desperately into his body. Then Snape was saying his name in a
way that Harry'd never, ever, imagined hearing, and Harry tumbled into blissful darkness.

When he came to he was lying on a warm, moving pillow, an arm like a steel band wrapped around him. He didn't mind; in fact, he thought he could get quite fond of waking up like this. He grinned at that and pressed a kiss against the firm chest, and heard a soft laugh.

"Awake, are we?"

"Not sure I want to be," Harry said lazily. "Unless that means we can have another go."

Snape snorted. "You'll be the death of me, Harry Potter."

"No," Harry said, lifting his head so that he could meet Snape's eyes. "I'll be the life of you, and you of me."

A smile touched Snape's lips, and he lifted a hand to brush the hair out of Harry's eyes. "I don't recall reading that in the contract."

"It was there," Harry said, laying his head back down with a contented smile. "In the fine print at the bottom."
Hermione opened the window and smiled as she saw the owl tapping at it. "Hello, Hedwig. You have a letter from Harry, then?"

Hedwig surrendered the envelope and scroll in her claws and accepted a tidbit from Hermione, settling down on a nearby perch to eat and rest. Hermione carried the items back to the bed and carefully crawled under the covers, moving a little awkwardly because of her swollen abdomen. She elbowed the lump that had managed to sprawl across the width of the bed in her absence.

"Ron, we've got a letter."

Ron poked his head out from under the covers, his hair looking adorably mussed, and she resisted the urge to kiss him senseless. For now. "From Harry? What does it say?"

Hermione opened the envelope and pulled out a wizarding postcard which she handed to Ron, then unrolled the scroll.

Ron and Hermione,

Mum was right - Corfu is amazing. The ocean is so blue and so clear that you can see the bottom, and we actually swam with dolphins yesterday! Well, I did. Sev sat on the beach and made rude comments about my swimming abilities. Don't worry, I got him back today when I pulled him into the water and - well, you can imagine the rest. If not, tell Ron to look in the book on page 343.

This honeymoon was exactly what we needed after the last few months, what with killing off Voldemort and the wedding and everything. Would you believe that Sirius was trying to stuff pictures of 'eligible wizards' into my hands right up until the ceremony? At least they didn't hex each other during the wedding, which is a positive sign.

Egypt was wonderful, and Bill and Draco were perfect hosts. I don't know if Bill told you, but they've decided to stay together even though the contract is over. You can't imagine how funny it is to see Draco and Bill together. Draco is such a little snot but when Bill tells him to shut up he actually does! Sev says it's a pity Draco didn't get spanked as a child, but he says the same thing about me so we both ignore him. And I can't believe I'm actually agreeing with Draco Malfoy, of all people. Bill wants me to come back next summer and stay longer. He bought a copy of Mum's books, saw my drawings in it, and said they were quite good. Gringotts wants me to catalogue their finds - seems that some of the older treasures are finicky about having their pictures taken. I've received a half dozen other requests for my drawings since the book came out, so I might need a manager after all, Ron. Of course, Sev is impossibly smug about the whole thing, the irritating prat.

We're going to picnic up at the ruins tomorrow for my birthday and I'll send you a postcard.

Love,

Harry

Ron held up the postcard so they could both watch as it panned across the blue ocean, the rough
hills, and tumbled stones. It ended on two figures sitting together on one of the stones, arms wrapped around each other, the taller man's chin resting on the wildly disarrayed dark hair of the other as they looked over the panorama with twin expressions of contentment.

And in the background, Hermione could have sworn she saw the ghostly image of a woman with long red hair watching the pair fondly...

The End
Pictures & Images

Chapter Summary

Images and Artwork for the story

Chapter Notes

This was created for me shortly after the story was posted, and I have lost track of the gifter. (If anyone remembers, let me know so I can credit it.)

“Perhaps I’ve changed my mind. Perhaps I like the idea of having Famous Harry Potter as my personal playtoy. The Saviour of the Wizarding World, bound to my bed, committed to servicing my pleasure. And I would take my pleasure from you, boy. I would use you in every way possible, as hard as I liked, without the slightest regard for your own comfort or pleasure. And if I damaged you... well, there are healing potions and spells. Three years, Potter, spent on your back, your belly, your knees.”
Chapter Summary

Additional artwork from Chinese fans.

Chapter Notes

I welcome translations and pictures, and I would love to share them with other fans. If you have a translation of any of my stories, please feel free to upload them here to Ao3 and link them to my story. Thanks!

Several years ago, Yuexiazhu, a Chinese Harry Potter fan and website admin, wrote to me to ask for permission to translate this story into Chinese, and then later to print it in a 'zine with other stories. I am always glad to let people translate any of my stories - I think it is an incredible compliment - and recently she wrote me again to get permission for a second edition of the 'zine. She also sent me artwork that was done for the 'zine, done by a very gifted artist by the name of Anti. She does more artwork for their website, Cat's Paw, which you might want to check out.
End Notes

Find me on Pillowfort or Dreamwidth or Tumblr or Youtube to follow my work.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!